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Matters

A Journal of Literature
Theory and Culture

No. 15 [2025]

- LANGUAGE TRAFFIC IN THE CITY:
TRANSLATING URBAN SPACE



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LANGUAGE TRAFFIC IN THE CITY: TRANSLATING URBAN SPACE



Sherry Simon

Concordia University, Montreal

 **Krzysztof Majer**

University of Lodz

Always in Motion: Cities, Languages, Histories

The Canadian city of Winnipeg is known for its glacial winters and its quirky arts scene. Both are on display in the recent film *Universal Language* (2024), directed by Matthew Rankin. The premise is outlandish: the mainly English-speaking city of Winnipeg is portrayed as Farsi-speaking. Everyone in Winnipeg communicates in Farsi (Persian), and all the shop signs are exclusively in the Perso-Arabic script. The only exception is a street named after Zamenhof, the inventor of Esperanto—a would-be universal language.

To show the city of Winnipeg, with its endless stretches of snow and brutalist architecture, literally covered in a language which does not match its historical reality is to see the fantasy of a city translated. Viewers experience a shocking incongruity between word and image. Familiarity is replaced by disorientation, which in this case echoes the feelings of the character who has returned “home” only to find his reality altered.

Winnipeg’s oral and visual makeover is inspired by Matthew Rankin’s fascination with Iranian cinema. The film is an homage to the giants of the Iranian screen who have made their cinema a powerhouse of innovation and sensitivity over the last decades. The mood is playful. But while the accents of a Farsi-speaking Winnipeg have a parodic tonality on the plains of the Canadian west, such a reimagining of the urban linguistic landscape will certainly resonate differently elsewhere, particularly in contexts of historical violence. Beyond the unlikely alteration of Winnipeg, the transformed city evokes the many places where language has been forcibly changed through conquest and occupation. Such changeovers,



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consequences of shifts in power, are a prominent feature of modern history. The downfall of empires, following World War I, the shifting of borders after World War II, and the seesaw dominations of successive regime changes have resulted in the re-linguaging of many multilingual and cosmopolitan cities, or rather a reduction to the monolingualism of regional capitals. Shop signs were changed, street names were changed, and the soundscape was changed, too, as the population adapted to the language of the new rulers.

Makeovers and takeovers, forms of forced translation, are always partial, however—leaving behind traces that are reminders of the past. These often appear in the form of “ghost-signs”—physical remnants that emerge unexpectedly from the bricks of a crumbling storefront or the punctures of a wrecker’s ball—shop signs or painted advertisements on walls, for instance. They might be names inscribed on a building left untended in a climate of general neglect after a violent exchange of populations. Cities—as Rafael Schögler reminds us in his review of *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and the City*—are “living spaces” that “continue to host memories of violent transformations” (474).

Episodes of conflict involving language takeovers are the most dramatic illustrations of the translated city. But the city is translational in myriad aspects of its daily life. Indeed, urban language is always in motion. Traffic, circulation, exchange: these are the guiding figures for the translational city. Activities of exchange occur in public and private spaces, both through institutions and in individual conversation. To use translation as a tracking tool is to be attentive to the *direction* of cultural flows (*from* one language *into* another), through changing volumes of *intensity* (when a language becomes culturally and politically relevant), to *spatiality* (the meeting places, the scenes, the symbolic sites where languages come together) and to the *affects* that sustain interactions (whether translation is cool or warm: pure protocol, or an expression of urgency). Translation tracks connections between variously entitled communities—those that have historic claims to the territory of the city and those who seek to establish claims as migrants, refugees, or exiles.

Every city will have its own map of such zones and sites, resulting from the interactions among its various home and migrant languages, and from its spatial organisation—the neighbourhoods, divisions, and contact zones, where languages come together or are kept apart. While some contact zones become inscribed in the mythology of the city (areas where immigrants settle, the cosmopolitan zones around train stations, markets, symbolic public spaces), others exist in a state of tension, their meaning in flux. One of our contributors, Shehr Bano Zaidi, proposes the idea of “semiotic un/belonging” to describe the uncertainty of the meaning

and duration of linguistic ownership of public space. This term could be fruitfully applied to the many cases of tension and indeterminacy which occur in situations of multilingualism.

The articles in this collection constitute a rich contribution to ongoing debates on language and city space. They enlarge the map of reflection—at once the physical map of city sites (from Yaoundé to Calcutta, from Brussels to Chicago, from Venice to Palma) and the array of language practices (from community theatres to airports, from religious and devotional practices to multilingual poetics). They enlarge the definition of translation to include the implicit or intersemiotic variety, modes of connectivity that are not necessarily the recognisable model of page-to-page language transfer. What is more, they show the power of translation to test and reveal the fault lines of urban space.

While each of the contributors adopts a slightly different angle on the relation between language and urban space, these relations can be divided into three broad categories: 1. reading the linguistic landscape of the city as text (e.g., Palma, Yaoundé, Rawalpindi), 2. analysing linguistic practices that arise in connection with the specific language configurations of the city (e.g., Gurugram, Brussels, Calcutta, Edinburgh, Montréal) 3. studying literary texts inspired by the languages of a specific city (Chicago, Glasgow, Venice) or modelled on urban space more generally (Bergvall's soundworks, Rybicki's poems).

In recent years, translation studies scholars interested in language interventions in urban space have turned to the notion of the linguistic landscape. Its mandate is to produce detailed descriptive accounts of written language and how it is featured in the city, i.e. on what kinds of material support (billboards, logos, etc.) and in which neighbourhoods. However, a purely descriptive approach is not sufficient. More than simply creating a repertory of the language that figures on store fronts, office buildings, and other signage, the researcher must ask what the inscriptions on the city's surfaces reveal; to what forces they respond. In some cases the mere presence of a particular language can be a message in favour of a political position; in others, it can be the result of a deliberate effacement and replacing of previous signs. These motivating factors reveal signage to be the result of processes of translation, undertaken for various ends. Consequently, what looks like a simple declarative action turns out to be a more dynamic translational act.

The first three articles in this issue focus on the visual aspects of urban text. How is one to read the proliferation of signs in any urban space—particularly where there is a history of conflict? In his article on Majorca, Richard Mansell shows how important it is to have a deep knowledge of historical memory in order to understand the vestiges of yesterday and the

messages of today. Interpretation is an ongoing process, and must mobilise various levels of interpretation—linguistic, political, ideological. The troubled legacy of the Spanish Civil War and of the subsequent Francoist suppression of the Catalan language continue to have effects on the streets of Palma, interacting now with contemporary issues such as the anti-tourism movement. Mansell convincingly argues that the cultural identity of Majorca is the result of a continuous process of “layering, replacement, addition, and effacement of cultural forms . . . evident throughout the island” (21). Its identity has always been in a state of tension across multiple languages—and this tension becomes the essence of an enduring island consciousness.

In his analysis of Cameroon’s capital, Yaoundé, Theodore Dassé similarly addresses an uneasy relationship between two languages. This study of signage in the city is buttressed by extensive data concerning the situation of official bilingualism in Cameroon and specifically Yaoundé—which puts paid to the illusion of any symmetry between French and English. In fact, Dassé suggests that the extensive presence of unilingual signage points to the siloisation of the two language communities and a lack of desire to translate. His conclusion engages polemically with the idea that their extensive physical presence in proximate spaces suggests translation of sorts. Again, only an insider’s knowledge of this interlingual commerce can determine how the notion of translation is to be applied to the city.

Shehr Bano Zaidi’s presentation of inscriptions in the city of Rawalpindi comes with a different set of questions. These bits of script carved or painted onto historical buildings are not deliberate markings, conveying a need or demand, like street names or advertisements. Rather, they are signs of indifference: they have not been effaced, but left to linger. Zaidi’s ethnographic approach allows her to ask: what do the current owners or users of these buildings make of such writing? As in a few other contributions to this volume (e.g. Dhandhi and Sigroha; Liao, Strani, and Johnstone), ethnography allows the researcher to illuminate practices of meaning-making and translation: informants—“semiotic actants”—offer access to local knowledge about signage left undisturbed since pre-Partition times. Meanings, as Zaidi notes, change over time and are constantly being renewed in the context of political and memorial developments.

The second subsection is devoted to urban practices of language, activities that are linked to specific places in the city. Thus, the focus shifts from a practice of reading what we might call “found” scripts to the analysis of processes of translation. These are framed, promoted, or elicited by places such as neighbourhoods, community centres, theatres, or airports.

The phenomenon of Battala, studied by Pratim Das and Sushmita Pareek, offers something of an overdetermined example—principally

because the name refers both to a specific area in Calcutta and to the kind of literature produced there, often in translation. Battala is important in the cultural history of that colonial city for the role it is now understood to have played: as a counter-model to the relations between Bengali, Sanskrit, and English, which were dominant in the Bengali Renaissance. “[A] vital crossroads for language, culture, and urban identity” (106), it was also—as Das and Pareek show with their analysis of specific literary works—a crucial locus for the work of translation.

In their article, Min-Hsiu Liao, Katerina Strani, and Eilidh Johnstone study a purpose-made space designed as an experimental translation site. Their ethnographic project consists in devising workshops in community centres which will elicit forms of translation. In bringing together groups of immigrants to discuss their relation to translation (through language or drawings), the authors’ activist hope is not only to observe translational attitudes among migrants, but to use the opportunity to challenge the dominant directions of language flow. To speak of the translational city then is to look beyond language practices to the forces that drive them—the political and ideological pressures that determine the boundaries of belonging.

The decision to use ethnographic methods in order to situate and interpret language activities is also what unites a study of multilingual theatre in Brussels (by Elise Denolf) and an article focusing on religious practices in the city of Gurugram (by Muskan Dhandhi and Suman Sigroha). Denolf unravels the strands of history, policy, and personality that explain the current multilingual practices of the Brussels municipal theatre. She shows how the theatre is closely imbricated with the language realities of this exceptionally multilingual city, and how it can contribute, through its language practices, to reinforcing this very multilingualism. Dhandhi and Sigroha’s study of an increasingly forgotten ritual in the cosmopolitan city of Gurugram includes translation as an important player. Beginning with a municipality in India that is remarkable for its rapid industrial growth and residual pre-modern practices, the authors study a ritual which bridges the gap between the rural and the urban, just as it mobilises a variety of languages. It positions women in a paradoxical space between tradition and modernity, at the same time emphasising their creativity in adapting the ritual to modern spaces and idioms. Translation refers both to the languages spoken and the multimodal practices that characterise the ritual.

Our contributors are also interested in the workings of cultural institutions related to translation in a narrower, more traditional sense. Myriam Legault-Beauregard devotes her attention to the Governor General’s Literary Awards, among a handful of distinctions available to translators in Canada, alongside the John Glassco Prize and the Cole Foundation Prize. Probing the dynamics of the publishing sector, Legault-Beauregard

analyses the concentration of translation activity in metropolises such as Toronto, Montréal, and Vancouver. While it is still a common practice for French translations of Canadian literature to originate abroad (with Paris as a pivotal “centre of consecration”), Montréal takes pride of place as the main city where translators, in both language combinations, live and work.

Interest in spatial practices motivates Marcin Michalski's analysis of Naguib Mahfouz's use of the Arabic term *ḥāra*. This term emerges out of the very particular cityscape of Cairo, and its transfer into a variety of other languages reflects the dilemma of translating space-specific terms. Without a real urban layout to work from and a familiarity with the ways in which this urban space is used, narrated, and choreographed, the translation of this aspect of Mahfouz's *Awlād ḥāratinā* risks becoming abstract and conjectural. Michalski's analysis focuses on the extent to which English, Polish, and Spanish translations are able to conjure up the topography of an Egyptian city.

Some of the contributors venture into entirely contemporary spaces. What kind of language is spoken by the airport, asks Marek Wojtaszek, and how does it influence the behaviour of those within it? In his philosophical inquiry into “order-words,” Wojtaszek contrasts the idioms of airport space with the transgressive language of art, using the example of Eve Fowler's *A Universal Shudder* in the Los Angeles airport. Translation is studied here not so much as a link across vernacular tongues, but as a possibility of replying to an overwhelming architecture of control.

And what about the city soundscape—or, more specifically, the neighbourhood soundscape? Such questions, among others, are asked by the authors in the third section. Izabella Kimak offers a study of the Polish-American writer Stuart Dybek's treatment of his Chicago neighbourhood. In focus here is the mix of languages (the mainstream English, the dominant Spanish, and the disappearing Polish), and its evolution as “palimpsestic images of the neighborhood, whereby the past, present, and future orders do not neatly follow one another but rather coexist” (288). A related issue is addressed by Dominika Lewandowska-Rodak in her overview of Glasgow novels translated into Polish. What fuels the fiction of such authors as Douglas Stuart and Alasdair Gray is a language of the city, language which has emerged from a particular urban context. Naturally, translation of such material is not without its very real challenges. The article addresses the double complexity of identifying literary features of the “contemporary Scottish national self” (291) as imagined in Glasgow writing and the relative successes of Polish translational responses to this literature.

Parallels between travel writing and processes of translation are explored in the contributions of Cristina Marinetti and Halise Gülmüş Sirkintı. As Marinetti reminds us, Venice is as much a city of words as it is

a spectacular visual space. Recalling that it has attracted foreign admiration for centuries, she introduces the important category of the “denizen” as creator of words about the city. Contrasting the poet Joseph Brodsky’s classic *Watermark* with interventions by Venice’s contemporary residents, Marinetti shows how the sensory portrait of Venice that emerges from a more aural, language-based community perspective differs from that of a primarily visual commentary. Meanwhile, revisiting Istanbul, that major hub of East/West communication, Sirkinti perceives the city as a dynamic Barthesian “discourse.” Attuned to what she conceives of as the “translator’s voice” in three Istanbul travelogues, she queries the varying degree to which they can be considered examples of *traduction en filigrane*, i.e. narratives in which the interweaving of foreign linguistic, cultural, historical, and social elements produces a resemblance to a translated text.

Spatiality may also be an implied aspect of translation processes. In her translational study of Caroline Bergvall’s experimental soundworks and installations, Sofía Lacasta Millera theorises space as “a semiotic landscape that communicates beyond linguistic boundaries” (263), an environment in which a convergence of voices, representing a heterogeneous world, is made possible. Positioned in closed as well as open settings (e.g., museum spaces and natural landscapes), Bergvall’s works are shown to offer avenues for a creative, decidedly non-prescriptivist approach to translation, dissolving interpretive limits. Translation itself, Lacasta Millera argues, must be reconceived as “an art form with extralinguistic value” (273), underlying communication in more general terms.

Mark Tardi’s contribution stands out in this issue as the only one by a translator assessing his own work. And this is no conventional work: Tardi’s commentary on the peripatetic, multilingual, and irreverent poetry of the Polish “one-person cosmopolis” Robert Rybicki echoes the poet’s own “creative mischief” (315, 327). Wide-ranging and ebullient, the analysis allows us to understand the translator’s close engagement with the energies of the text and its sources of inspiration.

A coda to the issue’s main section is an interview with Jerzy Jarniewicz, renowned Polish poet, translator, and translation scholar. Kaja Gucio, an established practitioner of the craft in her own right, questions him on the new, post-Venuti visibility of translators and on limits to the creative encounter which the practice implies. Jarniewicz—who has rendered into Polish the likes of James Joyce, Adrienne Rich, Ann Quin, and Craig Raine—argues that translation successfully evades definitions, especially those founded on outdated notions of faithfulness and essence. The illusory essence can only pertain to the most banal aspects of the work; it is difference that translation celebrates and that becomes its *raison d’être*. “We translate in order to differ,” argues Jarniewicz, for whom translation becomes an

extension of his poetry: “I discover the potentialities of the target language, I shift its limits. . . . If it isn’t what the so-called original authors are doing when they work on their own texts, then what is it?” (333, 337).

Language traffic—across texts, across avenues, across cities—has much to tell us about the limits and possibilities of communication. The range of sites, texts, and vocabularies invoked in this issue are exciting signs of the fruitful connections between translation and the city—and of the ways in which these connections can create new identities and tell new stories.

*

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Sherry would like to thank Krzysztof for an enriching collaborative experience—and for the good humour, generosity, and efficiency he showed in organising/editing the articles for the issue. Krzysztof thanks Sherry for graciously agreeing to co-edit the issue, attracting a host of brilliant authors, and watching over the contributions’ theoretical consistency with her inimitable kindness.

Sherry Simon is Distinguished Professor Emerita in the French Department at Concordia University. Born in Montreal, she has made this city the inspiration for her writings on translation, cultural history, and multilingual cities. Among her publications are *Translating Montreal: Episodes in the Life of a Divided City* (2006), *Cities in Translation: Intersections of Language and Memory* (2012), and *Translation Sites: A Field Guide* (2019). She has edited or co-edited several collections, including *Translation Effects: The Shaping of Modern Canadian Culture* (2014) (with Kathy Mezei and Luise von Flotow) and *Speaking Memory: How Translation Shapes City Life* (2016). Her most recent essay, in French, is “Promenades polyglottes,” a reflection on Montreal’s Mount Royal Park. She is a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and a member of the Académie des lettres du Québec. Her books have been translated into several languages, including Polish, and most recently Turkish.

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He has edited *Beirut to Carnival City: Reading Rawi Hage* and co-edited, among others, a special issue of the *European Journal of American Studies* (“Obsessions in Melville and Hawthorne,” with Justyna Fruzińska). He serves as editor at *Text Matters* and *Literatura na Świecie*. A literary translator into Polish (e.g., of David Markson, John Barth, Herman Melville, Amy Hempel, Deborah Eisenberg, Abdulrazak Gurnah, the Kerouac-Ginsberg letters), he was a resident at the Banff International Literary Translation Centre. Recently, he has co-translated into English (with Sylvia Söderlind) the post-Holocaust correspondence of Chava Rosenfarb and Zenia Larsson (*Letters from the Afterlife*, edited by Goldie Morgentaler, McGill-Queen’s UP, 2025).

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SURVEYING VISUAL LANDSCAPES



 **Richard Mansell**

University of Exeter

Majorca as a Translational Space: Creating and Questioning Identity through Translation

ABSTRACT

Majorca offers a rare combination of opportunities to develop a study of translation and space. Not only is it a site of rich historical cultural contact, but it is also a present location of contact and tension: between Spanish and Catalan; between distinct forms of Catalan; with the languages spoken by significant economic migrant populations and expatriate communities, and languages represented by large tourist populations. Processes of layering, replacement, addition, and effacement of cultural forms are evident throughout the island, to the point that translation is a condition for creating Majorca's own cultural identity.

In this article I shall develop Sherry Simon's search for translation in the urban environment to identify and analyse translational markers on the Mediterranean island of Majorca and its capital Palma, and seek their effects on the island's communities as well as their sense of identity. I thereby propose "strong" forms of translation to complement the "weak" forms sketched by Simon. These strong forms result from cultural contact to ensure a deeper understanding of cultural identity, and empathy between cultures in our increasingly interconnected world.

Keywords: translational spaces, Majorcan culture, Catalan language and culture, post-translational effects, cultural identity.



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INTRODUCTION

In this article, I shall analyse how translation works as a creative force in building and challenging narratives of identity on the Mediterranean island of Majorca, and especially its capital city, Palma. To achieve this, the article will draw on concepts from the emerging field of post-translation studies (Nergaard and Arduini; Gentzler), focusing not on translation as a transaction between cultures, but rather on how translation affects the space around it, transforming individuals and creating cultures. Thus, the object of study is not limited to translations as representations of texts from another language or culture, but rather offers an enlarged view of translation as the resolution to what Sherry Simon terms linguistic and cultural “tension, interaction, rivalry, or convergence” (Introduction 5). In this framework, translational places are those “whose cultural meanings are shaped by language traffic and by the clash of memories” (Simon, *Translation Sites* 2), and thus linguistic and cultural contact is an intrinsic part of these places’ cultural identity. An aim of this article is not only to show that Majorca is such a place, but to identify the effects of this condition on the people and culture of the island: not just in terms of the “weak” forms of translation that reflect “an active lack of engagement and empathy” (66), but also strong forms that can help to recover and strengthen cultural identity, and ensure empathy between cultures in our increasingly interconnected world.

CONTEXT AND METHOD

Through an extensive list of references, Vidal Claramonte charts the path of scholarly engagement with space from the second half of the 20th century onwards, across philosophy, cultural geography, ideology, health, ethics, and more (26–27). This includes sociology, and the field of linguistic landscapes, “written textual forms as displayed on shop windows, commercial signs, official notes, traffic signs, public signs on government buildings” (32). Indeed, the object of the present study bears many similarities to the study of linguistic landscapes, a field that has developed in parallel to what could be termed a “spatial turn” in translation studies. Yet, like Simon and Vidal Claramonte, I am concerned with beginning to identify the consequences of “reading a city-text in one language or another” (ibid.) where these are “written either in the submerged languages of the past or in the rival languages of the present” (Simon, Introduction 5); I am also interested in how these identities compete. Secondly, I aim (1) to identify the ways in which translation is used and at work in the city/island and the tensions

between the distinct forms, and (2) to identify textual relationships in space, and the ways in which these, too, contribute to identity. Although my procedure is rooted primarily in translation studies, it looks outwards, toward other disciplines. Therefore, this study focuses on the type of process used to present multiple languages and languaged forms, the relationships between these forms, and reads competing forms as translations. In focusing on these processes and relationships, I aim to link this to the wider field of translation, and locate it as a constitutive act of creation. Importantly, in this study I aim to go beyond examples visible in the city, to assess how the same themes and spaces are explored in the city's literary representations.

Majorca offers a rare combination of opportunities to develop this approach. There is a long history of linguistic and cultural contact on the island. As well as evidence of Roman and pre-Roman populations, there are significant physical remains from centuries of Moorish control (902–1229); James I of Aragon conquered the islands in 1229, bringing Christianity and the Catalan language, and the establishment of the Kingdom of Majorca; this came under the control of the Crown of Aragon in 1344; dynastic union between Castile and Aragon in 1479 and defeat in the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14) led to the abolition of Majorca's institutions and imposition of Spanish as the sole language of official use. Catalan language and culture underwent a Romantic revival in the 19th century, when Majorca also hosted European aristocrats and international artists, composers, and writers. Progress towards linguistic and cultural normalisation in the 20th century was brutally interrupted as Spain lurched between democracy and dictatorship, resulting in a fratricidal civil war (1936–39). With the death of the dictator General Francisco Franco in 1975, and the eventual transition to democracy, Catalan could work towards gaining official status alongside Spanish; only then could the Francoist slogan—“[o]ne, great and free” Spain—be challenged.

Currently, Majorca has two co-official languages: Spanish, identified as the official language of the state in the 1978 constitution, and Catalan, first recognised as co-official on the island in the 1983 Statute of Autonomy of the Balearic Islands. Yet there is potential for further tension: the latter law identifies Catalan as the islands' “*llengua pròpia*” (own language),¹ but also recognises the “*modalitats insulars*” (islands' own forms) of the language. Historically, this situation has led to tension with other forms of Catalan, as well as between Catalan and Spanish themselves. There are also significant tourist and expatriate communities on the island (most notably British and German), and migrant communities from South America as well as North and West Africa make up a greater percentage of the population

¹ Throughout the article, all translations are my own.

than elsewhere in Spain, offering a wide variety of distinct relationships between languages and their speakers.

In recent years, the attempted independence referendum in the autonomous community of Catalonia (1 October 2017) and its fallout brought reflections on Catalan cultural identity to the wider Spanish and international stage. As a result, languaged cultural symbols—those “associated with specific tongues at the time of their construction or through subsequent layerings of meaning and memory” (Simon, *Translation Sites* 32)—have taken on new meanings and connotations. At the same time, in the Balearic Islands and Valencia (which also has Spanish and Catalan as co-official languages, although the latter is known there as “Valencian”), the May 2023 regional elections led to governing pacts between the Spanish nationalist right-wing Partido Popular and the far-right VOX, with policies attacking the presence, status, and unity of the Catalan language and culture being enacted.

Contact between these multiple (and competing) identities provides the potential for a much more wide-ranging study of how processes of translation function across the island and the wider Catalan-speaking territories. Here, I shall focus on four specific linguistic modalities (Catalan, Majorcan dialect, Spanish, and English) and how these interact in three distinct fields: firstly, toponyms, and more precisely the visible signage in the urban space; secondly, graffiti and stickers related to the anti-tourism movement and similar concerns; thirdly, the recovery of the island’s democratic memory, and how this is enacted in a case study of selected sites of memory. The aim is to observe and gather evidence of translational markers: where multiple languages or connected cultural forms are used, or where one has replaced another (and whether any remnants of the past can be found, or are recreated through translation). This means looking for instances where languages or connected cultural forms are in contact or compete in space (multilingual labels and signs, monolingual instances of languages in close proximity to each other, competing names for a place, the use of symbols connected to cultural identity), as well as exploring responses to such conflict.

The sites themselves were visited during three periods of intensive fieldwork (June 2023, September 2023, and January 2024). Candidate sites were identified in advance, following the five types proposed by Simon in *Translation Sites*: sites of the architecture of memory,² transit sites,³

² Key museums and sites featuring competing memories, such as Palma Cathedral; Es Baluard museum of modern art; Son Marroig as the museum of the Austro-Hungarian Archduke Ludwig Salvator, presenting his life and legacy on the island; and the former royal palace and monastery of the Cartoixa de Valldemossa, which hosted George Sand, Frédéric Chopin, Rubén Darío, and many other cultural figures in the 19th and 20th centuries.

³ Liminal spaces enabling movement between places, including historically significant hotels such as Gran Hotel, and key thoroughfares such as La Rambla.

crossroads,⁴ thresholds,⁵ and border sites.⁶ These places and surrounding areas were explored on foot and by bicycle, with photographic evidence taken, and the sites were revisited during each occasion to chart changes over time. This resulted in 1433 images,⁷ tagged for location and time; these were then analysed and ordered according to the type of site and initial classifications of the type of translational process at work.

THREE CITIES IN ONE

The translational identity of Palma is evident even in its name: or, indeed, names, since multiple options compete. Should the visitor call it *Palma de Mallorca*, as stated in metres-high lettering on the roof of the island's airport (see Fig. 1)?

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Fig. 1. Palma Airport. Photograph by Wusel007, 17 October 2013. Available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Palma_de_Mallorca_Airport_Terminal_C_Outside, licensed by CC-BY-SA-3.0.

⁴ Points of “colliding voices” (Simon, *Translation Sites* 8): these include significant commercial/socio-economic streets (Sant Miquel, Jaume III, Born, Oms, Sindicat) as well as areas with the highest incidence of immigrant communities (Son Gotleu, La Soledat, and Pere Garau for non-EU migration; and Cala Major, Sant Agustí, El Jonquet, and El Terreno for overall migration, according to data from Palma City Council).

⁵ These are defined as the meeting of the “immediate present and wider universe” (Simon, *Translation Sites* 8), gateways to other spaces and times, such as the translator’s study, libraries, and bookshops. These included the home of English author Robert Graves in Deià, as well as bookshops, where shop windows, displays, and shelves offer a glimpse at how these gateways are constructed.

⁶ Where language is part of surveillance and control. Evidence for this was gathered in and around Palma Airport, one of the principal points of entry to the island.

⁷ 394 in June, 669 in September, and 370 in January.

Or is it *Palma*, as seen in the publicly funded promotional campaigns for the city (see Fig. 2)?

Or is it a name that the average visitor will likely not encounter, although it is used in many Majorcans' vernacular—*Ciutat* (see Fig. 3)?



Fig. 2. Promotional posters for Palma, inside Arrivals, Palma Airport, 4 January 2024. Courtesy of the author.



Fig. 3. Anti-tourism protest sticker in Catalan on a lamppost, plaça Major,⁸ Palma: “*Ciutat* for those who live there, not for those who visit,” 12 September 2023. Courtesy of the author.

⁸ Following Catalan and Spanish conventions, the generic noun in street names (e.g., carrer, calle, etc.) is not capitalised except at the start of a sentence.

The city's official name has been *Palma* since 2016, but the alternative *Palma de Mallorca* was official in the periods of 1983–88, 2006–08, and 2012–16. It is also commonly referred to as *Ciutat*, using the Catalan word for “city” as a toponym—it is not used with the definite article, is written with a capital letter, and is “[e]l nom real i tradicional . . . De fet encara ho és” (“the real and traditional name . . . In fact it still is”) (Coromines 142). Yet this is not a case of names changing over time; rather, they indicate conflict between linguistic and cultural identities. *Ciutat* uses a Catalan word, and its phonology and morphology stand out as *not* Spanish (/s/ rather than /θ/ for the initial “c,” and neither the phoneme /t/ nor the grapheme “t” in final position are possible in Spanish). *Palma* was the name reinstated following the Bourbon victory in the War of the Spanish Succession, reviving the name of the Roman settlement founded on the same site. In between these is the compound name *Palma de Mallorca*. The three periods when this was decreed as official coincide with regional governments led by the Spanish nationalist, right-wing *Partido Popular* (Popular Party).⁹ The name has been considered by sociolinguists as “postís i innecessari, ja que dins els Països Catalans *Palma* és un nom inconfusible” (“artificial and unnecessary, since within the Catalan-speaking territories *Palma* is a name that cannot be confused”) (Bibiloni 30), and in 2011 the Department of Catalan Philology at the University of the Balearic Islands classed it as “inadmissible” (“unacceptable”) (Galán). Thus, *Palma de Mallorca* is seen very much as a name associated with the Spanish language (as opposed to *Palma* or *Ciutat*), and aligned with Spanish national identity. This can also be seen in the fact that in Fig. 1 above the name uses the Spanish “Aeropuerto” and not the Catalan “Aeroport.” This association with Spanish (not Catalan) sometimes extends to *Palma*, too, as seen in a 1979 case recounted by Bibiloni:

Fa pocs dies hem vist a la façana d'un teatre dos grans cartels anunciant uns actes patrocinats per l'Ajuntament, un en espanyol i l'altre en català; el primer era encapçalat per *Ayuntamiento de Palma*, el segon deia “Ajuntament de Ciutat.” (Bibiloni 26)

(A few days ago, I saw on the façade of a theatre two large posters advertising shows supported by the city council, one in Spanish and the other in Catalan; the former said at the top *Palma City Council* [in Spanish], and the latter *Ciutat City Council* [in Catalan].)

⁹ Previously known as *Alianza Popular* (Popular Alliance), it was founded by the former Francoist minister Manuel Fraga in 1976. The formation was in power in the Balearic Islands from the region's creation as an Autonomous Community in 1983 until 1999, and then in the periods of 2003–07 and 2011–15, and most recently since 2023.

This multiplicity of names and their association with identities is not limited to the city. There are other instances of toponymical conflict and potential effects across the island (see Fig. 4):



Fig. 4a, b, and c. On the left, a sign for Port de Pollença on carretera Alcúdia-Port de Pollença. Top right is the detail of “Pollença” in Catalan, and bottom right “Pollensa” in Spanish, 17 September 2023. Courtesy of the author.

On this sign at the entrance to the town of Port de Pollença, on the north of the island, the *c* with a cedilla—a distinctive marker of Catalan versus Spanish—is even highlighted, and the welcome in five languages indicates that this is a principal destination for tourists. Yet multiplicity is indicated by the URL below, *pollensa.com*, using the Spanish spelling (and by extension associating Spanish, as opposed to Catalan, with technology and modernity).

CONFLICT ON THE STREETS

Competing identities play out not only in the name of the city, but on the very streets of Palma, too. The most common street sign is a marble plaque with the name in formal written Catalan (see Fig. 5):



Fig. 5. Street sign for carrer dels Fideus, 7 January 2024. Courtesy of the author.

More recent signs use a sans serif typeface, and those more recent still have exchanged the marble for metal, although the use of formal written Catalan remains (see Fig. 6):



Fig. 6a and b. Street signs for plaça de Miquel Dolç and carrer del Bisbe Simó Bauzà, 13 June 2023. Courtesy of the author.

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Yet there are many examples where multiple versions and naming practices compete. In a small number of places, signs are included in both of the co-official languages. In Fig. 7 below it is interesting not only that the name of the “old port” is in both Catalan and Spanish, but also that the port authority’s name is in both languages:



Fig. 7. Signs for the Moll Vell (Old Port), in Catalan above and in Spanish below, 14 June 2023. Courtesy of the author.

In Fig. 8, the modern sign for the avenue, bottom left, is in Catalan, but the lettering in relief on the wall is in Spanish (both the name of the avenue and the Majorcan king after whom it is named). This indicates that the street was built in the 1950s, in the times of the Francoist dictatorship,

when public use of Catalan was outlawed (although in this instance there are no other Francoist markers).

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Fig. 8. Signs for “James III Avenue,” in Catalan in the bottom left, and in Spanish in relief on the wall, top right, 6 January 2024. Courtesy of the author.

In some places, the division between languages even appears somewhat accidental, or haphazard (see Fig. 9):



Fig. 9. Signs for “Arab baths” in Catalan, pointing right, above a sign for “Cathedral—Centre” in Spanish, pointing left, 10 January 2024.

Courtesy of the author.

Yet other examples provide a much clearer link between language and cultural identity. Throughout the city there are still instances where signage dating back to the Francoist dictatorship remains, with particular

markers aligning the use of Spanish with Francoist times. Many street names were changed then to commemorate Nationalist figures or battles, and one such instance is the current *carrer de Manacor*, which became *calle de los Héroes de Manacor*, commemorating those who fought against Republican forces on the island in August and September 1936. Although this name was changed in 1980, faded remains of the former designation can still be found on buildings, in recognisable black-stencilled capital letters (see Fig. 10).



Fig. 10. Sign for “calle de los Héroes de Manacor,” at the corner with carrer de Son Nadalet, 13 June 2023. Courtesy of the author.

This stencilled typeface is clearer in other examples (see Fig. 11):



Fig. 11. Sign for “calle de Serra de Marina” in Spanish above, and “carrer de can Serra de Marina” in Catalan below, 18 September 2023. Courtesy of the author.

Indeed, in Fig. 11 the Catalan marker “can” (the house of) was removed in Spanish, a general phenomenon under the Francoist dictatorship, also noted by Ferrer in the renaming of the streets of Barcelona (Ferrer). Furthermore, it is not uncommon to find signs in Spanish on public housing built in the 1950s and 60s (see Fig. 12):



Fig. 12. Francoist sign above the door of carrer de Manacor 40, 13 June 2023.
Courtesy of the author.

Here, the yoke-and-arrows symbol of the *Falange*, the sole legal political party under Franco, is clearly visible, linking the use of Spanish in street signage to the Francoist dictatorship—although only for those who question the existence of such symbols in the modern urban fabric.

Yet it is not only the conflict between Spanish and Catalan that exists on the streets. Especially in Palma’s historical centre, the modern marble street sign is often accompanied by a smaller tile embedded in the wall (see Fig. 13):



Fig. 13a, b, and c. Street signs in formal written Catalan and the Majorcan dialect; left, carrer del Forn de la Creu, 13 June 2023; middle, plaça de la Drassana, 14 June 2023; right, carrer del Vi, 5 January 2024.

Courtesy of the author.

In all the three cases above, the older signs are distinguished by the use of the dialectal article *es* and *sa*, marking this as specifically Majorcan instead of the wider standard written form of the Catalan language.¹⁰ Curiously, in some cases there is no difference between the historical and the modern sign—in Fig. 14 the Majorcan Catalan “mar” (sea) takes the article “la” and not “sa,” and so the smaller tile simply stands as a marker of former times.



Fig. 14. Street signs for carrer de la Mar, 10 January 2024.
Courtesy of the author.

In some cases, not only are there differences between the usage of standard and dialectal Catalan, but there is a slight difference in the name of the street as well (see Fig. 15):



Fig. 15a, b, and c. Street signs with slight variation in names between formal written Catalan and the Majorcan dialect; left, passeig del Born/Es Born, 18 September 2023; middle, carrer dels Set Cantons/Es set cantons, 6 January 2024; right, carrer del Deganat/C. de ca's Degà, 10 January 2024. Courtesy of the author.

¹⁰ This form of the article is not exclusive to Majorca: as well as on other Balearic Islands, it can be found in some communities on the Costa Brava and in Alacant. However, in this context its use suggests a Majorcan (or Balearic) identity as opposed to an identity shared with the rest of the linguistic domain as a whole.

In others, the difference relates to an earlier name while using dialectal Catalan, revealing a previous history (see Fig. 16):



Fig. 16. Street signs, “costa de sa Rata” above, and “costa d’en Sintes” below, 6 January 2024. Courtesy of the author.

Fig. 16 above refers to a previous houseowner on the street, whose nickname was “Rata” (Rat), whereas Fig. 17 below refers to previous activity—before it became a general market square, it was where coal (carbó) was weighed and sold.



Fig. 17. Street signs, Pes des Carbó above, and plaça del Mercadal below, 7 January 2024. Courtesy of the author.

Fig. 18 was once known as “Inquisition Hill,” as opposed to its current name, “Theatre Hill,” since the street comprises the steps ascending one side of the city’s main theatre. We shall return to the historical Jewish identity of parts of the city below.



Fig. 18. Street signs, Costa de la Inquisició on the left, and costa del Teatre on the right, 13 June 2023. Courtesy of the author.

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It is these examples especially, as well as the dated design of the smaller tile, that link the use of Majorcan dialect to the past (and formal written Catalan to the present), while also helping to keep visible a previous layer of history. Yet it must be underlined that in terms of spoken language, the Majorcan dialect is still very much current. Thus, it is noteworthy that practices of translation are used in places to reclaim the current (and valid) use of Majorcan dialect, as demonstrated by the graffiti on the modern sign below (see Fig. 19):

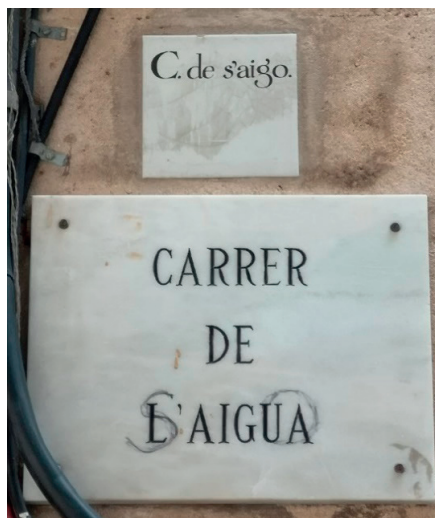


Fig. 19. Two street signs; above, C. de s'aigo in Majorcan dialect; below, carrer de l'Aigua in formal written Catalan, with “l'aigua” overwritten with Majorcan dialect “s'aigo,” 4 January 2024. Courtesy of the author.

It is worth highlighting here that without the graffiti, there are still the two versions (formal written Catalan and Majorcan dialect), but the graffiti is a clear attempt to inscribe Majorcan usage on the modern layer, marking this differential identity. There are even cases where the language is manipulated to avoid any specific markers (see Fig. 20):



Fig. 20a, b, and c. Banners from residents' associations asking for respectful behaviour; left, at the corner of carrer de la Mar and carrer dels Apuntadors, "Silence, Respect, Civility" in Catalan, with the names of the local residents' association in Catalan, 14 June 2023; middle, on carrer de Sant Joan, "Silence, Respect, Civility" in Spanish, with the names of the residents' associations in Catalan, 13 June 2023; right, on carrer dels Guixers, "Silence, Respect, Civility" in Spanish, with the name of the residents' association (and the local area) in Spanish, 13 June 2023. Courtesy of the author.

Note that the article is omitted from the districts *sa Llotja* and *es Born*—ensuring that the sign (or just the name of the residents' association) is written in Catalan, whilst avoiding either including or replacing Majorcan dialectal markers. Fig. 20c is solely written in Spanish: this is uncommon (and it is telling that I could not find a Catalan equivalent for this sign).

ARE TOURISTS WELCOME?

Amongst the plethora of graffiti and stickers visible on the streets of Palma, an increasing number are now associated with the movement showing concern at the island's reliance on tourism and its effects—a movement termed both as "anti-tourism" and against "overtourism," sometimes without a (necessary) difference being made. In terms of language and identity, there are two broad camps. Firstly, English is frequently used in texts that address the tourists themselves directly or indirectly (see Fig. 21):



Fig. 21a and b. Anti-tourist stickers; left, carrer de la Portella, 14 June 2023; right, plaça de la Porta de Santa Catalina, 5 January 2024. Courtesy of the author.

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Some directly raise and address stereotypical “lager lout” behaviour associated with certain tourists (see Fig. 22):



Fig. 22. Humorous sign in English, on passeig del Born, 12 September 2023. Courtesy of the author.

Others are of a more questioning nature, indirectly asking tourists to reflect on their own behaviour (see Fig. 23):



Fig. 23. Improvised sticker, on carrer de Jaume II, 14 September 2023. Courtesy of the author.

Even within this collection of monolingual notices, practices of translation reveal tensions. Some pieces of graffiti are modified, hampering the immediate recognition of the message (see Fig. 24):

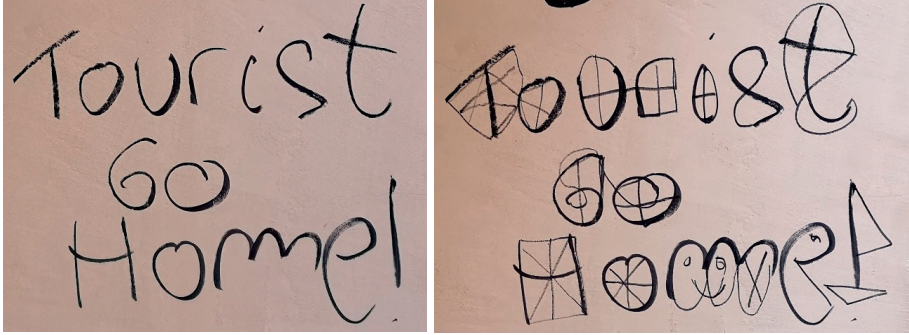


Fig. 24a and b. “Tourist Go Home!” graffiti on pas d’en Quint; on the left is the original text, 14 June 2024, and on the right, the text altered/overlaid with drawings, 5 January 2024. Courtesy of the author.

In other cases, messages are layered one on top of another (see Fig. 25):



Fig. 25. Graffiti, on carrer d’Eccehomo, 12 September 2023.
Courtesy of the author.

Here, the original message in red, “Kill tourists,” has the “Kill” struck through and replaced with “Love” above, and presumably the heart was added at this stage. Later, in black, the “Love” has been struck through, and the original message overwritten with “Kill Bill.”

In Catalan stickers and graffiti, the messages are markedly different (see Fig. 26).



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Fig. 26a and b. On the left is a sticker on a lamppost on plaça Major, “*Ciutat* for those who live there, not for those who visit,” 12 September 2023, and on the right, stencilled graffiti on carrer del Forn del Racó, “For the abolition of tourist apartments,” 14 June 2024. Courtesy of the author.

These are not aimed directly at tourists, but rather question the institutions of local and regional government on the islands (and their policies), and Catalan is the principal language used for this purpose. This is also seen in campaigns such as in Fig. 27.

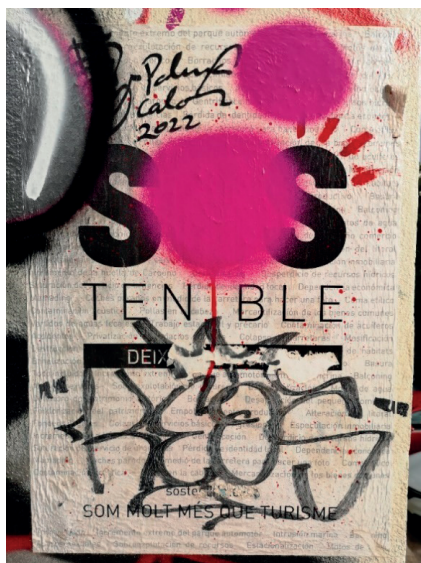


Fig. 27. Poster on carrer dels Gambins, “Sustainable,” 9 January 2024. Courtesy of the author.

This is a response from 2021 by the street artist Abraham Calero to the *SOS Turismo* movement, in which the tourism sector called on local, regional, and national government (in Spanish, not Catalan) to support the tourism sector emerging from lockdown. The answer appears here as *SOStenible*, meaning “sustainable” in both Catalan and Spanish, but the Catalan identity is reaffirmed by the two tag lines in the language: “Deixa’t d’hòsties” (a vulgar phrase roughly equivalent to “Stop f***ing about”) and “Som molt més que turisme” (“We are much more than tourism”). Yet there is language conflict here, too: the movement’s title is in Catalan, but the background text of the poster, stating many negative effects of low-quality and unsustainable tourism, is all in Spanish. That these “terms that name the consequences of overtourism” (Bury) are in Spanish rather than Catalan adds to the idea of Spanish as the language of commerce, and Catalan as a language restricted to a symbolic use by some as a marker of local identity.

Thus, the two languages (English and Catalan) address two different audiences with two different messages. This has been taken a step further: within a context where multilingual messages are commonplace, translation is now used as a tool in the struggle against overtourism. The Majorcan anti-capitalist group *Caterva* has begun a campaign focused on “reclaiming” beaches across the island through posters and seemingly official notices in English and Catalan, where the English advises tourists of dangers (falling rocks, jellyfish), whereas the Catalan reassures locals that all is well. Fig. 28 presents one particularly glaring example:



Fig. 28. Sign saying “Beach closed” in English, and “Platja oberta” (Beach open) in Catalan, 11 August 2023. Courtesy of *Caterva* (@Caterva_mnc).

Of course, this use of translation for sarcastic purposes relies in part on the trust that is necessary for translation to function at all. The inclusion of a putative Catalan source also contributes to the apparent truthfulness of the message. At the same time, beyond the contradictory messages, translation is being used again to reclaim the local identity in response to tourism: the supposed source is in Catalan, not Spanish, since it is implied that Catalan is not only the language which the local audience speaks, but with which it identifies.¹¹

QUESTIONING MEMORY

In 2022 the Spanish parliament passed the *Ley de Memoria Democrática* (*Democratic Memory Law*) (Jefatura del Estado), which was designed to further the 2007 *Ley de Memoria Histórica* (*Historical Memory Law*). Within the former, “democratic memory” is defined as reclaiming and defending democratic rights and freedoms through Spain’s history, and furthering communication between generations. In its article 1.3 it also explicitly condemns the Nationalist coup that began the war and the dictatorship. In addition, its article 3.6 makes explicit reference to Basque, Catalan, and Galician speakers as victims of linguistic and cultural persecution.

As part of the initiatives to recover the democratic memory of Majorca, in December 2022 regional authorities unveiled 60 road signs across the island, labelling the roads that were built there by more than 8,000 political prisoners in the aftermath of the Civil War. These are monolingual, carrying the Catalan phrase “via construïda per presoners republicans” (Road built by Republican prisoners; see Fig. 29a). Almost immediately, they were vandalised. In some cases, layering was used as a process to eradicate the message—some signs were blacked out, and others even painted over with the red and yellow bars of the Spanish flag (Homar), layering Spanish national identity over Majorcan democratic identity, and this carried on through the first half of 2023 (Vicens). Some have even been taken down illegally, effacing the Catalan message entirely (see Fig. 29b), and the current Partido Popular administration has now decided that stolen or vandalised signs will not be replaced (Oñate), further effacing this memory (returning the representation of memory to its previous state).

¹¹ It is, of course, also the language that tourists are less likely to know, but this seems an unlikely cause of choosing Catalan over Spanish, given the mutual intelligibility between the respective words for “open” in Catalan and Spanish, “oberta” and “abierta.” It is also noteworthy that similar campaigns have been carried out in the Canary Islands, using English and Spanish for differing messages.



Fig. 29a and b. A road sign stating “Road built by Republican prisoners” on the left, 15 June 2023, and the same site with the sign removed on the right, 16 September 2023, on carretera es Capdellà-Andratx, Ma-1031, km 8.75.

Courtesy of the author.

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In this instance, processes of translation are used in an attempt to silence one identity. This is, however, not the only process used in such cases. One of the most infamous Nationalist symbols in Majorca is the monument in Palma known as “sa Feixina,” built in 1948 to honour the Nationalist sailors who died in the sinking of the cruiser *Baleares* during the Civil War.



Fig. 30. Sa Feixina in 2006. Photograph by Tresckow, 2006. Available at: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Denkmalbaleares.jpg>, licensed by CC-BY-SA-3.0.

At 20 metres tall, it bore writing in relief: “Mallorca, a los héroes del crucero Baleares. Gloria a la marina nacional. Viva España” (Majorca, to the heroes of the cruiser *Baleares*. Glory to the Nationalist Navy. Long live Spain), below a colossal Francoist coat of arms. This inscription remained

until 2010, when, despite popular demands calling for the monument to be demolished, the city administration decided to remove the coat of arms and writing, in order to repurpose the monument in memory of all victims of the Civil War via the addition of text around it (see Fig. 31).



Fig. 31a and b. Sa Feixina, 13 June 2023. Above is the monument, with the wrought iron surrounding it in the foreground. It bears Spanish writing on the left, Catalan in the centre, and English on the right, with French and German also available around each corner. Below the larger image is a close-up of the central Catalan text. Courtesy of the author.

There are two processes of translation at play here. Firstly, the Nationalist message in Spanish is effaced (although the symbols of the soldiers at the base remain, as does the cross on the back of the monument, reminiscent of the close ties between the Francoist cause and the Catholic Church in Spain). Secondly, the new inscription, added around the base, is in five languages—from left to right: French, Spanish, Catalan, English, and German. The result is that Catalan is central, but the clear intention is that no single language should be identified with the memory that is represented. The English reads: “This monument was built in the year 1948 in memory of the victims of the sinking of the cruiser *Baleares* during the Civil War (1936–1939). Today it is a symbol for the city of the democratic will to never forget the horrors of war and dictatorship. Palma 2010.” It is worth mentioning that whilst the

English uses “war” and “dictatorship” as singular nouns without the article (as mass nouns), the Spanish and Catalan both use plural count nouns (*las guerras y las dictaduras/les guerres i les dictadures*) rather than a singular that could be understood as referring to one specific war and dictatorship.

Although this dilutes the linguistic identity of the symbol, it does not address the powerful cultural and political symbolism of the monument itself. It is still the site of multiple protests—be they in the form of graffiti in Catalan, calling for its demolition (see Fig. 32) or, alternatively, displays of Spanish nationalist and sometimes fascist symbols demonstrating that such sites can be used as “*espais de culte a la memòria del règim franquista*” (“spaces for worshipping the memory of the Francoist regime”) (Isern Ramis 20).

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Fig. 32. Graffiti at sa Feixina: “Get rid of Fascist symbols. Demolition now!”, 13 June 2023. Courtesy of the author.

Significantly, the creation of multilingual representations is not the only resolution of conflicting identities in this field, and a distinct approach was taken with regard to a different memorial. As part of the same drive to recover the democratic memory of the island, in 2011 the authorities created a monument to more than 1,500 Republican victims of Francoist forces during the Civil War, the “*Mur de la memòria*” (“Wall of Memory”). Located at the site of the mass grave for the Republican dead, situated just outside the walls of the city’s cemetery, this combines sculptures, an inscription, and a multi-section iron plaque listing the names and dates. In linguistic terms, it is noteworthy that the whole text is only in Catalan—there are no translations into Spanish, nor any other of the many languages used on the islands. Yet it would be wrong to read this as a monolingual site; one must take into account the other sites of memory located close by. The “*Mur de la memòria*” is outside the cemetery (indeed, it is relatively

hidden around the corner of a side entrance), but contraposed to this, two colossal monuments flank the main entrance to the cemetery. To the left of the main gate is a memorial in Spanish (see Fig. 33):



Fig. 33. Monument to the Nationalist dead in the Spanish Civil War, Palma Cemetery, 13 June 2023. Courtesy of the author.

This was built in 1960, proclaiming “Glory to those fallen from the air” on the Nationalist side in the Spanish Civil War (Isern Ramis 104). To the right of the entrance is another monument of roughly equal height (see Fig. 34):



Fig. 34. Monument to Italian soldiers who died in the Spanish Civil War, Palma Cemetery, 13 June 2023. Courtesy of the author.

This bears an inscription solely in Italian: “To the sailors and airmen of Italy fallen in Spain who rest here. 1936–1939.” It must be remembered that by the end of 1936, the number of Italian troops acting with functional independence of Spanish command meant that “Italy [was] effectively at war with the Spanish Republic” (Preston 49), and this included a force on Mallorca that conducted bombing campaigns against the Republicans on the mainland. In addition to these grandiose monuments, the cemetery hosts countless contemporary inscriptions commemorating individuals who died during the Civil War—but only from the Nationalist side, and only in Spanish:



Fig. 35. A gravestone at Palma Cemetery commemorating Majorcan soldiers who “gloriously died for God and for the fatherland” fighting on the Spanish mainland for the Nationalist side, 13 June 2023. The whole text is in Spanish, and even the soldiers’ first names are in Spanish rather than Catalan.

Courtesy of the author.

It follows that these sites can be read in terms of “competing” interpretations of historical memory. Spanish was the language with which the Nationalist cause identified, and thus it is the language of the monuments to the Nationalist dead; yet linguistic difference is made evident by the Italian monument as well. In the case of the monument to the victims of Francoism, the choice of Catalan is clear in the inscription on the “Mur de la memòria” itself:

Els sediciosos, d’ideologia conservadora i totalitària d’inspiració feixista, emfatitzaren en el seu ideari l’exaltació de la unitat d’Espanya, l’esperit de croada i la uniformització lingüística i cultural.

(The rebels, with their conservative and totalitarian ideology inspired by fascism, emphasised in their mindset the exaltation of the unity of Spain, the spirit of a crusade, and linguistic and cultural uniformity.)

Since Catalan is the island's "own language," and this is the island's own history, there is a strong argument in favour of the monument being inscribed solely in Catalan. Yet this argument is made stronger by its juxtaposition and contraposition to the monuments that have stood for so long, thus translating previous representations—using translation to process and promote better understanding of the conflicting identities in the island's space.

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RECOVERING DISTANT MEMORY

It is not only in the recovery of democratic memory following the Civil War and dictatorship that processes of translation are evident.



Fig. 36. Three street signs, C. del Segell above, carrer de Jaume II in the middle, and C. d'es bastaixos below, 13 June 2023. Courtesy of the author.

At the north-eastern end of *carrer de Jaume II* in Palma, the Catalan street sign is accompanied by two more tiles, embedded in the render (see Fig. 36): *carrer des Bastaixos*, the name before 1863, written in Majorcan

dialect and commemorating the lost manual labour of hauling goods from the port; and *carrer del Segell*, the name when this was Palma's Jewish quarter, before the expulsion of the Jews from the island in the 15th century, signalled by a small menorah in the bottom-right corner of the tile. Yet despite being designed to look like the much older tiles typical of many streets in Palma's old town, the latter tile, and others like it, were only installed in 2008 ("Col.locació de rajoles"), as part of a citizen history initiative. In this case, it is precisely Palma's translational identity that gives rise to this new output. As we have seen before, the layering of multiple street names is already prevalent, whether these are in different languages or language varieties. Here, the tile for *carrer del Segell* is designed to look historical (highlighting that this is a former name of the street), yet standard Catalan is used (highlighting it both as "propi"/"belonging" to the city, in Catalan, and modern, written in the standard). The inclusion of the menorah then highlights the link with the city's Jewish history.

EFFECTS OF MAJORCA AS A TRANSLATION SPACE

For some, the effects of interaction in Majorca create a bleak picture. This is especially so with regard to tourism: Guillem Colom has explored graphic novels that project Majorca as a quasi-apocalyptic territory within the context of overtourism as trauma, where all notion of a distinct Majorcan identity is lost, sacrificed in favour of capitalist gain (Colom-Montero). Sebastià Alzamora is a contemporary author who has also explored these concerns, especially in terms of what Majorca is and will be if it loses its sense of identity. In his 2022 novel *Ràbia* (*Rage*), the protagonist lives in a tourist town where all languages and cultures exist, but none seem to meet. He reflects on the true centre of the island:

. . . no era fantasiós considerar que la veritable capital de de l'illa era l'aeroport, i que Bellavista, les urbanitzacions i la resta de municipis en constituïen la perifèria. Mers annexos de l'aeroport, la segona corona, la conurbació habitada per una població irrellevant, o sobrerà: la verdadera població, la productiva, eren els turistes que entraven i sortien dels terminals. (61)

(. . . it was no fantasy to consider that the true capital of the island was the airport, and that Bellavista, the housing developments and every other district made up its periphery. Mere annexes to the airport, a surrounding ring, the conurbation inhabited by an irrelevant or excess population: the real people, the productive people, were the tourists who arrived and departed from the terminals.)

In interviews, Alzamora has even made explicit reference to both the airport and the island as “non-places” in Marc Augé’s terminology—once Majorca loses its identity, it is nothing (Claret Miranda). However, there are indications in Alzamora’s work that tourism may not be the sole, or even primary, cause of this loss of identity; rather, it may be owing to a failure to come to terms with and process conflict. In the novel, behind the resort there are agricultural lands on which shepherds carry on as they have for centuries, and yet the entire landscape is interspersed with military architecture from the Civil War; when, at the end of the novel, the narrator heads underground to explore this, he cannot find his way out. This leads us to the question: how can Majorca be sure about its own identity in the face of the influx of tourists, and how can it project this identity to them, if it has not even understood and dealt with its own past?

A more positive response comes from another Majorcan writer, Biel Mesquida. Connecting with the recovery of Jewish identity seen in the example of “carrer del Segell,” explored above, in his recent memoir he reclaims historical Jewish identity and much more as part of Majorcan identity—precisely through the naming of streets and the urban fabric. Whilst criticising the “residus franquistes que encara embruten Ciutat” (“Francoist residues that sully Palma”) (*Passes per Palma* 105), he praises “tot aquest enfilall de noms, mallorquins, catalans, àrabs, jueus, cristians, mediterranis, ben nostres, ben híbrids, ben mesclats, ben enigmàtics, ben originals” (“this whole series of names: Majorcan, Catalan, Arabic, Jewish, Christian, Mediterranean, entirely our own, entirely hybrid, entirely mixed, entirely enigmatic, entirely original”) (82). This indicates a path—in contraposition to the “weak” forms identified by Simon (*Translation Sites* 6), such as Alzamora’s contemplation of the airport above—towards strong forms of translation, conceptualised as successful intercultural understanding and an eschewal of ethnocentric discourse, where translation is used as part of identity. This interaction of all cultures in forming Majorcan daily life can be seen in Mesquida’s fiction, too, with examples in his short-story collection *Acrollam*. As suggested by the title—a reversal of the Catalan name for the island, Mallorca—the book aims to hold a mirror to the island’s society for it to question itself. The action of the first story, “Aiguafort al PAC” (“An Etching of a GP Surgery”), takes place in the imaginary town of Salern in central Majorca. Its narrator immediately questions, “encara hi ha pobles al Pla de Mallorca?” (“are there still towns in the middle of Majorca?”) (Mesquida, *Acrollam* 11), away from the coast, where the tourist industry is concentrated. In a little over 600 words, the story references the Arabs, Colombians, and Croats, as well as life-long *salerners* (those who live in Salern), second-home owners, characters from Mali and from Medellín, children with the Spanish diminutive in their

name (Sarita) playing with Majorcan children with the Catalan diminutive (Jaumet), old Republicans who fought in the civil war, Catalan and Spanish politics, and more. Mesquida recognises the richness of cultures that make up Majorcan society, whilst defending the vitality of the Catalan language (and Majorcan vocabulary) in his work.

CONCLUSION

Each of the cases described here offers evidence of practices of translation that are used to question established narratives of identity. These occur across a range of fields, and between distinct linguistic and cultural identities, offering a solid base for extended research to develop a fuller account of how translation acts in building, reinforcing, and challenging identity across the island, whether similar processes are seen in other Catalan-speaking territories, and how this is apparent in representations of the spaces, as well as in the spaces themselves. This can be developed in conjunction with other translational spaces, to see the extent to which similar process are at play, or whether there are supplementary ways in which translation is used in building and maintaining identity, contributing to the growing range of work in the field (Lee). Further development will also benefit scholars in the humanities and beyond whose activity interfaces with how translation functions in society, and how it can be a tool for understanding our own past and present, especially as regards the recovery of democratic memory. There is also the potential for wider societal impact: cases here demonstrate that the island as well as the city is a space of “inequality and asymmetry” (Vidal Claramonte 30), and that translation has the power to address these imbalances. Thus it can help to create an evidence-based approach to value multiculturalism, and will also be an indirect benefit to cultures beyond the Catalan-speaking territories, responding to themes of multiculturalism and migration that are raised almost daily in cities around the world. There is an urgent need to appreciate greater nuance in our standard accounts of the repercussions of cultural contact, which can contribute to greater tolerance between cultures in a range of contexts, and the practices of translation identified here form an initial step on the way.

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University of Yaoundé I

Exploring Yaoundé as a Linguistically Divided Capital City of an English and French Bilingual African Nation

ABSTRACT

This article examines the place of translation in the public space in Yaoundé, the capital city of Cameroon, an African nation with a threefold (German, English, and French) colonial heritage. The collected quantitative and qualitative data consisted of public space literature, i.e. outdoor advertising in the streets and other urban spaces where francophone and anglophone communities interact. Data analysis combined with the theory of translationality proposed by Sherry Simon in 2014 and 2021 revealed that Yaoundé is not a dynamic translation zone, because the translational activity in this urban space is minimal. Instead, Yaoundé is almost distinctively monolingual in French and English, and quasi-untranslated. This quasi-absence of translation-mediated contact between the communities makes Yaoundé a linguistically divided city, where French-speaking and English-speaking citizens live in juxtaposition and co-exist in relative isolation. This adversely impacts the traffic of information and opportunities across linguistic borders.

Keywords: translation, translationality, public space literature, Yaoundé, Cameroon.



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INTRODUCTION

Yaoundé is the second largest city in Cameroon, a country in Central Africa that hosts about 279 indigenous languages (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig). As the political capital city of the country, Yaoundé is the terminus of the centripetal mobility of speakers of most of those languages, and thus a highly multilingual city. Yaoundé is also a bilingual city. As a former mandated territory of Great Britain and France, Cameroon fits Cronin and Simon's 2014 description of former imperial or colonial territories "where the imperial language was not evinced" (121). Indeed, after independence from France in 1960 and from Great Britain in 1961, respectively, East Cameroon and West Cameroon joined to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon in October 1961. The newborn Federal Republic selected English and French as official languages within the framework of its constitutionally enshrined official language bilingualism policy. Since then, English and French as official languages are not just the languages of the administration, but the dominant languages for public affairs in such spaces as parks, streets, sidewalks, footpaths, playgrounds of recreation, marketplaces, roadsides, school campuses, open spaces in hospitals, courts, to name only a few examples in urban areas. From the perspective of official language bilingualism, cities in Cameroon, especially Yaoundé, host French-speaking (francophones) and English-speaking (anglophones) citizens, whose contact zones naturally include the public space.

This article is a study of Yaoundé as a translational city as defined by Cronin and Simon, i.e. one where translation is "a key to understanding the cultural life of cities when it is used to map out movements across language, to reveal the passages created among communities at specific times" (119). I examine the use, organization, and importance of English and French in public space literature, defined here as any textual content written and posted or displayed outdoors in a public space for the consumption of the street user-cum-reader. It is the text found, among other places, on signboards, billboards, banners, walls, menu boards, storefronts, or shopfronts. Public space literature is used to inform public space users (informational content) or to sell to them (marketing content). I proceed from the following central question: is Yaoundé a translated city or an untranslated one? Other questions include: how are English and French used in public space literature in the translational bilingual Yaoundé? What is the dominant hierarchical or organizational pattern of their use, and what forces control it? To what extent is the contact between francophones and anglophones mediated and facilitated by translation? I argue that Yaoundé is essentially an untranslated bilingual city where francophone and anglophone citizens co-exist in relative isolation, at least in the public space, and where access to information and opportunities is controlled by the language one can read.

BACKGROUND

Cameroon has a unique historical relationship with translation, as is evidenced in this short account by Echu:

Historically, Cameroon was founded around 1472 by a Portuguese navigator, Fernando Po, who arrived at the Bight of Biafra and then sailed up the Wouri River in the Coastal region. The navigator was surprised to see shrimps in the river and baptized the river “Rio dos Camarões” (river of shrimps). This name, which was to be associated with the country, became “Kamerun” during the German colonial period and “Cameroon” or “Cameroun” during British and French colonial rule. (20)

Kamerun, a German protectorate from 1884 to 1916, spoke German, at least among the educated. When Germany was defeated during World War I, its protectorate was mandated by the League of Nations to France (80%) and Great Britain (20%). The new masters of the land erased German, replacing it with their languages.

Apart from the various translations of its name and the hegemony of English and French in the linguistic landscape, Cameroon—as already mentioned above—is home to about 279 indigenous languages (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig). Pidgin English and Camfranglais, “a composite language consciously developed by secondary school pupils who have in common several linguistic codes, namely French, English, and a few widespread indigenous languages” (Kouega 23), are also spoken. When East Cameroon and West Cameroon formed a Federal Republic, English and French were not eradicated, but promoted as the Federal Republic’s official languages (Fonlon). They were enshrined in the Constitution and given equal status. As a result, translation instantly became a necessary tool for smooth collaboration in public administration. As I have noted elsewhere (Dassé 126), a translation bureau was created at the Presidency of the Federal Republic as early as 1962, and an advanced school of translators and interpreters was founded in 1985. The government also considered translation a tool for national unity and integration, as contacts between English-speaking and French-speaking Cameroonians were bound to increase outside the administrative environment.

Indeed, federalism and subsequent changes in the form of the State that led to today’s highly centralized Republic of Cameroon have accelerated, over decades, the mobility of anglophones into francophone regions, and conversely. Internal migration for economic and professional motives has led anglophones to settle in francophone regions and cities, and reciprocally. As a result, in addition to civil servants, ordinary individuals (the jobless, peddlers, businesspeople, and students) from both communities settle,

live, and meet in cities of any scale across the country, according to an apparently immersive settlement pattern.

Indeed, in Yaoundé, as in most of the world's cosmopolitan cities, settlement patterns follow ethnic, religious, linguistic, and economic lines. However, these lines are broadly dotted here, especially regarding indigenous languages in general and official languages in particular. There are neither airtight francophone nor anglophone enclaves, although there may be some spots of high concentration of anglophones in this predominantly francophone city. In about all the seven subdivisions of Yaoundé, francophones and anglophones live in the same buildings, use the same public facilities, and hawk at the same markets, to name a few examples. They come, go, sell in the same streets, and are exposed to the same literature in the public space.

One final aspect worth pointing out about Cameroon's relationship to translation is conflict. In fact, the lack of translation into English of a legal instrument, the OHADA Uniform Act, prompted anglophone lawyers to start a strike action in 2016. Anglophone teachers soon joined the chorus, airing their bitterness over the perceived overintegration of French into the anglophone system of education. Before the government could translate the OHADA Uniform Act and find solutions to the other claims being raised, hitherto dormant anglophone secessionist groups had used the strike as a pretext to take control of the situation and start what is referred to as the anglophone crisis. This sociopolitical unrest has since wreaked havoc in the two anglophone regions of Cameroon, claiming the lives of thousands and displacing thousands more internally into francophone regions and externally into neighboring Nigeria.

Prior to the crisis, the social, cultural, and political relations between the two communities in Yaoundé were historically complex, typically marked by both integration and psychological tension. Broadly speaking, anglophones were well-integrated into the city, with many living in neighborhoods around the University of Yaoundé I and working as civil servants or businesspeople. Despite this integration, language barriers persisted, as French often dominated public services and public spaces, creating challenges and frustrations for anglophones. English was highly regarded among francophones as a growing number of francophone parents continued to send their children to anglophone schools—although more to reap the benefits attached to the status of English as an international language than to foster bilingualism and national unity (see Kiwoh). However, francophones continued to use sometimes derogatory terms to describe anglophones and looked down on them as second-class citizens. Anglophones in Yaoundé maintained a strong sense of cultural identity, preserving their languages and traditional practices, especially

through many dynamic cultural associations. Overall, the relationship was multifaceted, with both generally positive interactions and underlying social and political divisions. The influx of internally displaced anglophones to Yaoundé due to the crisis does not seem to have impacted this pre-crisis relationship.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Matt Valler attributes the introduction of the concept of translationality into translation studies to Douglas Robinson, Kobus Marais, and Piotr Blumczynski. According to Valler, “[t]ranslationality . . . might be the condition of the translational, of denoting that translation is present, that there is translation all around” (324). This approach to translationality is rather philosophical as it explores “what counts as translation” (ibid.), challenges the narrow yet common association of the word translation with interlinguistic meaning transfer, narrows down the word to its etymological definition (“carry across”), and then applies it to the study of change/transfer wherever it occurs.

Sherry Simon’s approach to translationality (see *Cities in Translation* and *Translating Montreal*), deployed in this paper, considers translation from a linguistic perspective, focusing on language relations in multilingual environments, especially the city. The approach is historical, archeological, and documentary in outlook as it examines how languages ebb and flow in multilingual spaces and sees translation as a movement, not just of meaning, but also of people as they engage in directional and interactional (self)translation (linguistic and physical) over time, in the face of political and societal dynamics. It explores how hierarchical relationships between languages in multilingual cities are built, maintained, and reversed through various forms of translational activities.

The concepts of “translational city,” “translation spaces/zones,” “self-translation,” and “translational activities/actions/events” are central to the Simon-championed strand of the translationality theory. Translational cities are *de facto* multilingual cities considered from the point of view of hierarchical relationships between the languages that are present or used to be present. They are translational in that they are platforms of translation-mediated linguistic transactions. Translation spaces or zones are where those transactions happen in the city. In the words of Cronin and Simon, translation spaces or zones “more specifically refer to the cultural and geographical spaces that give rise to intense language traffic” (121) in the city. They are “interzones, grey areas, which become home to mixed and

polyglot communities” (ibid.) in multilingual cities divided along linguistic lines rooted in colonialism and immigration, for instance. Self-translation has a double meaning. Firstly, it consists of (a) using the language of the outgroup irrespective of the method: actual translation of one’s text from one’s language (source) to the outgroup’s language (target), (b) using the outgroup’s language when interacting/communicating with the outgroup, (c) writing in the outgroup’s language to the detriment of one’s language for sundry reasons, including voluntary and nonvoluntary economic, political, and ideological ones. Next, self-translation means the physical and the metaphorical/symbolic *move* across the physical, political, or ideological barriers that divide one’s linguistic community in the city to meet the outgroup community, still by suppressing one’s language. Finally, translational activity, event, or action happens in different forms, ranging from traditional translation (source text–target text) through “highly prominent and visible interpreting to everyday self-translation” (Koskinen 186). Montreal is one of those cities where such actions involve (self-)translation.

Simon documents Montreal’s journey from a city divided by languages—English and French—that “has been dominated by the spectre of separateness, and defined by efforts to respect or transgress the boundary between anglophone West and francophone East” (*Translating Montreal* 4) to a “now mixed and cosmopolitan Montreal” (5). She shows how a mix of forms of formal and informal translation and self-translation—linguistic identity shift—that started in contact zones where mixing led to both identity troubles and identity blurring as solid linguistic lines gradually dotted and faded into a *mélange* of linguistic and cultural identities. These identities now contrast with “the politically charged sixties and seventies” when “Montreal’s Anglos were the historic enemies” (xiv) of Montreal francophones.

In *Cities in Translation*, Simon extends her 2006 study to other linguistically divided cities like Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) in India, Habsburg Trieste in Italy, and Barcelona in Spain, where competing languages co-exist(ed). In these translational cities, as in Montreal, translation and translators in what she calls “*puntos suspendidos*” (*Cities in Translation* 1), that is, translation zones, are presented as the kinetic force that drives communication and cultural traffic between the parts of the cities divided along the colonialism-induced geographical, cultural, economic, ethnic, and linguistic lines. In Kolkata, translation from English, the colonial language, into Bengali gave impetus to the latter and contributed to closing the gaps between Europeans and Indians. In Habsburg Trieste, a city “linguistically divided into an Italian zone and German-speaking Austrian zone” (Cariola 119), literary translation from German—the language of prestige—into Italian mediated the connections

and cultural transfers between the linguistic and cultural communities. In Barcelona, Spanish and Catalan entertain a relationship marked by “friction and complicity” (Simon, *Cities in Translation* 90) against the backdrop of the historical political conflict between the Catalonia region and Spain. While there is no geographical separation between Catalan speakers and Spanish speakers in the city, (one way) traffic from Catalan—the language that claims ownership over the city and fights to regain control over its native territory—into Spanish does not happen in grey zones, but through self-translation and language neutralization. Self-translation is typically observed amongst Catalan authors who think in Catalan, their language of lived experiences, but write in Spanish.

Other cities studied using the translationality theory include Antwerp in Belgium (Meylaerts and Gonne), Lviv in Ukraine (Sywenky), Pera in Istanbul, Turkey (Demirkol Ertürk and Paker), and Tampere in Finland (Koskinen). Meylaerts and Gonne explore the role of translators as cultural mediators in Antwerp, a highly polyglot city “during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century,” where “life . . . was profoundly marked by the encounter of Dutch and French and by translation and transfer processes in all possible forms” (135). They focus on two translators-cum-cultural mediators, exploring how they navigated and experienced the transition of Antwerp from a French-Dutch bilingual city to today’s Dutch monolingual city. Sywenky’s study focuses on the role of translators as interpreters of Lviv, a city formerly controlled by Poles, Habsburgs, and Russians. She demonstrates the role of translation and translators in peeling off the successive linguistic layers deposited by the various foreign occupants to better understand the city’s past, present, and future. Demirkol Ertürk and Paker account for the emergence of Pera as a translational city following the reappearance of Kurdish and Armenian after they were suppressed under Kemal Atatürk’s all-Turkish policies. The return of translational activities in the city under the impetus of publishers and translators bears testimony to the reconstruction of the lost multilingual fabric of Istanbul. Koskinen’s study of the Finnish municipality of Tampere as a translation space examines the “historical trajectories of translationality” (186). She concludes that during the period of interest (1809–1917), there was “a sense of parallel existence of languages and mutual accommodation to the linguistic needs of a multilingual community, even in the face of conflicting interests and changing power relations” (ibid.).

Apart from the works reviewed above, many non-translation-oriented multilingualism studies explore language and/or societal issues, focusing on linguistic landscapes. Indeed, since the first decade of the 21st century, public space literature has received appropriate scholarly attention within the framework of linguistic landscape studies. Prominent among the latter are

The Oxford Handbook of Language and Society (2016) and *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Linguistic Landscapes* (2024). In the former, Van Mensel, Vandenbroucke, and Blackwood argue that “the study of the linguistic landscape focuses on the visual representations of language(s) in the public space” (423). Further, they propose the following more explicit definition by Landry and Bourhis: “The language of public road signs, advertising billboards, street names, place names, commercial shop signs, and public signs on government buildings combines to form the linguistic landscape of a given territory, region, or urban agglomeration” (424).

Finally, let me acknowledge five previous studies on urban space literature in Cameroon, namely those by Daniel Anicet Noah Mbede, Venant Eloundou Eloundou, George Echu and Terence Kiwoh, Martin Pütz, and Angéline Djoum Nkwescheu. The first two researchers study the “*écrits dans la ville*” (writings in the city) and “*scripturalité automobile*” (texts on automobiles), that is, very short proverbs or thank-you messages written on their taxis by drivers whom Noah Mbede calls “*taxis-philosophes*” (15). While these studies, grounded in semiostylistics and socio-pragmatics, are not translation-oriented, they point out that the messages on taxis are written in English, French, Cameroon Pidgin English, and even indigenous languages. Each taxi driver writes in the language of their choice. As for Echu and Kiwoh’s examination of the public linguistic landscape in Cameroon, their focus is on the languages of signage. Their results show that French and English dominate the nearly 300 indigenous languages in the landscape. While Pütz’s study shares similarities with that of Echu and Kiwoh, it specifically examines how the frequency and visibility of English and French on public signage reflect and reinforce the ideological conflict between the anglophone minority and the francophone government, highlighting the dominance of French and the marginalization of English in Cameroon’s linguistic landscape.

The last and most relevant study is that of Angéline Djoum Nkwescheu, who studied the language of advertisement in the neighborhoods around the University of Yaoundé I. Her examination of the “plethora of in vivo written productions . . . reveals the pre-eminence of French-English and English-French transcodic markers” (347). Most importantly, both languages appear to coexist peacefully and harmoniously, sharing both physical and symbolic spaces. For example, small notices in French are often posted alongside larger English signs on storefronts owned by anglophones, and the reverse is also true. Sometimes, anglophone business owners incorporate French words and expressions into their signage, while some francophones opt for entirely English displays. This mutual presence highlights the fluid and collaborative use of language in public spaces. Djoum Nkwescheu calls this self-translation phenomenon “total fusion to

or assimilation with English” and argues that it is motivated by “linguistic opportunism” (369). In my study, I am interested in the same data type, but from a translation-oriented perspective. I shall highlight more areas of similarity and difference in the discussion of results.

METHODOLOGY

Data for this study was collected in the Yaoundé VI subdivision, one of the seven subdivisions of Yaoundé. Yaoundé VI sits on 22,200 square meters and is the third most populated subdivision, with about 300,000 inhabitants across 14 neighborhoods. As already pointed out, the settlement of anglophones in Yaoundé follows a somewhat immersive pattern. There is no subdivision/neighborhood for anglophones and no subdivision/neighborhood for francophones in the city. However, anglophones tend to be highly represented in some subdivisions and neighborhoods. Although no statistics are available, it can be inferred from experience that Yaoundé VI and the new neighborhoods in the outskirts of this subdivision harbor most of the anglophone community members in Yaoundé—up to 20,000, i.e. 6.66% of the subdivision’s population. As the city’s most representative potential translation zone, Yaoundé VI was selected as a study site.

Data was collected on 24.5 kilometers along eight major streets, as follows:

No.	Itinerary name	Distance in kilometers
1	Etok Koss—Entrée Simbock	2
2	Entrée Simbock—Carrefour Jouvence	1.5
3	Carrefour Jouvence—Carrefour TKC	3
4	Carrefour TKC—Entrée Simbock	0.5
5	Carrefour TKC—Parc Zoologique	5
6	Carrefour Jouvence—Lycée Biyem-Assi	4
7	Carrefour Jouvence—Shell Nsimeyong	3.5
8	Shell Nsimeyong—GP Obili	5
Total		24.5

Table 1. Data collection itinerary in the Yaoundé VI subdivision.

For collection, we walked along the above-listed major streets, seeking all forms of outdoor advertisement signs and non-advertisement banners. The economy in Yaoundé VI is essentially informal. On the one hand,

thousands of tiny physical shops (e.g., beauty, electronics, hardware, laundry, or dresses), convenience stores, bars, restaurants, schools, financial services providers, health service centers (clinics), petrol stations and similar establishments operate here and use advertising abundantly. On the other hand, thousands of individuals who have services to sell (e.g., home-delivered evening classes or plumbing) also advertise and post on the street. As a result, the streets are covered with illegal advertisement literature written on sheets of paper or metal, pieces of cardboard or plywood, on the ground, on the walls, on utility poles or on buildings, and with legal advertisements on small to jumbo-size signboards and billboards. We calculated that there is, on average, one advertisement per meter; in other words, we found public space literature to be very abundant (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Two utility poles with seven advertisements at Descente Victor Hugo, Yaoundé VI, 2 October 2024. Courtesy of the author.

We counted legal and illegal advertisements on both sides of the streets and took pictures of some for illustration. We counted as many as 13,860 advertisements and reduced the number by 21% because some were repeated up to 21 times. Therefore, a total of 11,184 advertisements were retained for analysis.

DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The collected advertisements were classified into three categories: (1) French-monolingual/English-monolingual, (2) bilingual, and (3) pseudo-bilingual and bilingual with loss in translation. We also considered the spatial cohabitation of monolingual advertisements.

MONOLINGUAL ADVERTISEMENTS IN FRENCH AND ENGLISH

French-monolingual and English-monolingual advertisements were the dominant variety. We also considered monolingual advertisements on two-sided signs (Table 2):

French-Monolingual	English-Monolingual	French two-sided	English two-sided	Total French	Total English	Grand Total
8,702	800	801	59	9,503	859	10,362

Table 2. Distribution of monolingual advertisements in Yaoundé VI.

The above statistics show that 10,362 out of 11,184 advertisements (92.65%) in Yaoundé VI were monolingual in French or English. Thus, French claimed the lion’s share with 9,503 out of 10,362 (91.71%). Only 859 in English were spotted, representing 8.29% of all the monolingual advertisements in the subdivision. Such advertisements were explicitly used to inform about businesses, services, and products relevant to francophones and anglophones. For instance, the signage of all the 22 petrol stations in the subdivision was in French.

Similarly, the signage of most banks, the names of microfinance businesses, and the banking products which they offered were either in French or English, depending on the community from which the owner hailed. The signage of hospitals, private clinics, restaurants, cosmetics and beauty shops, hotels, drugstores, and schools was monolingual in French (dominantly) or English. Advertisements about job opportunities, houses to let, and baby food, among other examples, were also in French or English only, as exemplified in Fig. 2:



Fig. 2. Wall-posted English monolingual restaurant ad at Jouvence, Yaoundé VI, 2 October 2024. Courtesy of the author.

The lack of space to fit two languages did not explain the choice to stick to monolingual advertisements. Noticeably, even with ample space, most

businesses and organizations chose to remain monolingual. For instance, 860 signs (801 in French, 59 in English) were two-sided, presenting an irrefutable opportunity for translation. The Breast Cancer Awareness Month banner in Fig. 3 below is a case in point: the side presented here is identical in content and language to the other side. Some businesses with three to five signboards, including two-sided ones, remained monolingual in French or English.



Fig. 3. Two-sided French monolingual banner at Montée Jouvence, Yaoundé VI, 2 October 2024. Courtesy of the author.

Monolingual advertisements targeted one community and ignored the other. Consequently, only bilinguals and community members of the language used would be informed of the advertised opportunities and would benefit from them. In the case of Fig. 3 above, monolingual anglophones would not be aware of the breast cancer screening opportunity which the advertiser was offering during Pink October.

BILINGUAL ADVERTISEMENTS

We classified as fully bilingual all advertisements with the same amount of information in each language (Table 3):

Bilingual one-sided	Bilingual two-sided	Total	% all advertisements
126	83	209	1.86

Table 3. Distribution of bilingual advertisements in Yaoundé VI.

Table 3 shows that only 209, i.e. 1.86% of all the 11,184 advertisements considered, were fully bilingual. 126 were one-sided, and 83 were two-sided. Sign size did not seem to limit the will of advertisers to communicate in both languages. We found one-sided bilingual advertisements as small as 625 square centimeters. As with monolingual advertisements, bilingual ones informed about businesses, products, and services relevant to all city dwellers, irrespective of their official language.

Unlike monolingual ones, bilingual advertisements made information and opportunities universally available and appealed to francophone and anglophone community members alike. In the case of Fig. 4 below, the use of English and French on this two-sided signboard ensured that both linguistic communities were informed of the learning opportunities offered by the school.



Fig. 4. Two-sided bilingual advertisement at Montée Jouvence, Yaoundé VI, 21 September 2024. Courtesy of the author.

PSEUDO-BILINGUAL ADVERTISEMENTS AND ADVERTISEMENTS WITH LOSS IN TRANSLATION

Under the mass-media and social-media influence of American culture, many francophones in Yaoundé tend to give English names to their businesses (Djoum Nkwescheu 369). As a result, their advertisements look bilingual at first sight, but are in fact monolingual, because only the names of their businesses are in English. This phenomenon in advertisements, which I term pseudo-bilingualism here, was already observed by Kasanga in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) between French and English, and by Androutsopoulos in Germany, between German and English. Examples are provided in Table 4 and Fig. 5 below.

No.	Name in English	Details in French
1	Holiday’s Restaurant	Salon de thé—Cave—Grillades—Prestation de services (location couvert, service traiteurs, décoration)—Livraison à domicile et au bureau
2	Proactive Pressing	Perfection, Priorité, Ponctualité—Services: lavage à sec, blanchisserie, ramassage, lavage artisanal, lavage en kilo, livraison à domicile
3	Exten’s Beauty	Parfumerie—Cosmétique—Extensions de cheveux naturels et gaufrés—Accessoires de beauté

Table 4. Examples of pseudo-bilingual advertisements in Yaoundé VI.



Fig. 5. Pseudo-bilingual ad at Montée Jouvence, Yaoundé VI, 9 August 2024.
Courtesy of the author.

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I counted 377 pseudo-bilingual advertisements with English-looking names and French descriptions, and found none with a French name and English descriptions. Again, the use of English in business names by francophones fulfills the same functions which Kasanga attributed to English in his study in the DRC, namely that of “identity enhancing, ornamentation, brand-name keeping” (197). It is not a form of (self) translation as it does not signal a move to target anglophones in Yaoundé. Similarly, the absence of pseudo-bilingual advertisements with French-induced names and English descriptions indicates the slight influence of French and francophones on anglophones in Yaoundé.

Other types of advertisements needed further translation. Generally, translation in such advertisements was limited to part of the content, the other part being lost in translation. I found 27 such partially translated advertisements. As we can see in the first image of Fig. 6 below, only the name of the church is translated into English. In the second image, only “Laptop included,” “Free WIFI 24/7,” “Internships Guaranteed,” and “Travel to Canada” are translated into French, while the remaining content (about 90%) is in English only.



Fig. 6. Bilingual advertisements with missing content in translation,
22 September 2024. Courtesy of the author.

SPATIAL COHABITATION

As regards the spatial distribution of all the preceding types of advertisements in the study area, it was observed the monolingual ones in French or English were glued or nailed next to one another on the same utility poles, walls, signboards, and billboards. Fig. 7 below shows two French monolingual advertisements that cohabit with one English monolingual advertisement on utility poles.



Fig. 7. French and English monolingual advertisements nailed on the same utility poles 2 October 2024. Courtesy of the author.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

Data analysis revealed that 9,503 advertisements in Yaoundé VI were monolingual in French, while 859 were monolingual in English. Monolingual advertisements amounted to 92.65% of all the public space literature identified in this subdivision.

On the one hand, the sweeping majority of monolingual signage in French matched the fact that Yaoundé is the colonial niche of French and that francophones are by far the majority linguistic community in the city. In her previously mentioned study of advertisements in neighborhoods around the University of Yaoundé I, Djoum Nkwescheu opined that “le pragmatisme linguistique voudrait que l’on vise le plus large public en communiquant dans la langue dominée par la majorité” (356). In other words, linguistic pragmatism accounted for the tendency of advertisers to favor French over English as they preferred to target a larger audience by communicating in the language of the majority. The magnitude of this

choice signaled the generalized absence of translational activity among francophones. They expected anglophones to (self-)translate to join them rather than make French content accessible to anglophones through English translation. Apart from linguistic pragmatism, the unwillingness to incur the costs associated with translation and production of bilingual signage could also explain the tendency to skip translation into English.

On the other hand, the small number of advertisements in English could be correlated to the fact that Yaoundé is not the colonial niche of English and that anglophones are the minority linguistic group in the city. However, anglophone advertisers' dominant (859) use of advertisements that are monolingual in English also pointed to a minimal translational activity within that community. Linguistic pragmatism did not seem to be valid here. Indeed, while anglophones were often expected to (self-)translate in order to tap into the vast pool of francophone prospects, they chose to remain in their linguistic enclave by targeting solely English-speaking prospects.

Fully bilingual, pseudo-bilingual, and loss-in-translation advertisements accounted for a mere 7.35% of all the 11,184 advertisements retained for analysis. This low percentage of instances where French and English met on the same signboards to communicate the same messages, even partially, indicated that inter-community communication mediated by professional translators and self-translators was minimal. In other words, the absence of spatial segregation (see Fig. 7 above; Djoum Nkwescheu 353–57) between French and English advertisements gave a deceptive impression about the contact between both languages and linguistic communities.

Indeed, unlike in Simon's Montreal, where Anne Carson could imagine that she might "automatically move her eyes to the left-hand page when puzzled by some expression" (*Cities in Translation* xv), French and English advertisements do meet on the same signboards, utility poles, or walls in Yaoundé VI, but to tell different stories. Strictly from the perspective of written urban literature, Yaoundé VI is more of a juxtaposition zone than a contact zone, more of a bilingual zone than a translation zone. In the light of this study, it is a juxtaposition zone where francophones and anglophones mingle on the streets, live in the same building, work in the same offices, and yet live linguistically separate lives: they practice linguistic segregation. As Abbas would say, they "see each other every day and yet 'move in different worlds'" (qtd. in Simon, *Cities in Translation* 22). Thus, Yaoundé VI is only a contact/translation zone for the handful of bilinguals who crisscross the communities and have access to all the information and opportunities posted in the urban space. However, this linguistic separation in signage does not mean that francophones and anglophones in Yaoundé VI exist in isolation. As I pointed out in the introduction, there are strong

frequent interactions, shared workplaces, intermarriages, and family ties—often shaped by urban migration and educational experiences—that foster meaningful social and verbal exchanges across language communities.

CONCLUSION

In this article I examined the place of translation in the public space of Yaoundé. Generalizable results from data collected in Yaoundé VI showed that the city is almost distinctively monolingual in French and English, and therefore is (quasi-)untranslated. On the one hand, urban space literature in French dominates the landscape as the language is in its colonial niche and is spoken by the overwhelming majority of the city's inhabitants. The francophone community largely ignores English and anglophones in their signage, making little effort to self-translate or to seek the help of mediators (i.e. professional translators) to make their public space literature available in English. On the other hand, urban literature in English tends to be dominant among anglophones, who also hardly self-translate or seek mediation to appeal to francophones. As a result, the urban space in Yaoundé is linguistically divided: information and ideas flow in separate linguistic channels, with little translation-mediated contact. Anglophone and francophone groups of citizens live in juxtaposition and co-exist in relative isolation, at least in the public space, where the traffic of information and opportunities is regulated by the language that one can read. Despite their juxtaposition and isolation in public space literature, both communities share strong social bonds through workplace interactions, intermarriages, family ties, and educational experiences.

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Urban Un/Belonging: Translating Pre-Partition Spaces in Old Rawalpindi, Pakistan

ABSTRACT

In this article, I propose a transgressive re/inscription of the city spaces of Old Rawalpindi through the lens of Sherry Simon's integrated translational city theory. In the wake of the 1947 partition of the Indian sub-continent into the Muslim-majority Pakistan and the Hindu-majority India, a large number of Hindus, Sikhs, and Jains living in Rawalpindi migrated to India. The numerous houses and other buildings that they left behind have been variously re/purposed, abandoned, and re/occupied by the Muslims arriving from India. The data for this study consists of documentation of these buildings, official websites and studies, interviews with the im/migrants and locals, and the researcher's observations. The in/consistencies between the official versions and those of the current and past residents, crucially highlighted by the digital media, suggest multiple identities and a semiotic un/belonging.

Keywords: city translation, 1947-partition, Rawalpindi, Imperial India, the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent, digital media.



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INTRODUCTION¹

In this research study, I deploy an integrated translational framework for an analysis of the old city of Rawalpindi, a historical district located in the Punjab, the most densely populated province of Pakistan. Although it had one of the largest populations of non-Muslims before the 1947 partition of the Indian subcontinent, only a few thousand remain in the city and the surrounding areas. Rawalpindi's designation as a translational urban space (Simon, "Translational City") is based on linguistic and non-linguistic transactional hierarchies and is supported by notions of resemiotisation as presented by Otsuji and Pennycook. I also draw upon the concept of collective and contentious identities, as problematised by Bourhis, to capture the liminal reality of Rawalpindi: it seems to straddle different temporalities and spaces, as evidenced in its buildings dating back to pre-partition days.

The partition of Imperial India took place at the demand of the Muslims who wanted a separate country (presently Pakistan and Bangladesh) to be formed in Muslim-majority areas. The Hindus, Sikhs, and Jains in the latter territories were given a choice: either continue living in the newly formed Muslim country or move to India. For many non-Muslims, the decision to emigrate was the result of communal riots, which saw neighbours turn against one another, with thousands killed on both sides. While it is not the purpose of this study to dwell on the reasons for this brutality, it must be stated that for many non-Muslims in Rawalpindi the migration was an "involuntary" one (Bharadwaj, Khwaja, and Mian 6). They left behind Hindu temples, Sikh temples, Jain schools, and private residences, many of which sites have been re/occupied by the Muslim immigrants from India. Some have been re/purposed or abandoned. The buildings and structures, mostly in poor condition, entangle the present city in their rich and contentious past.

For context, in the current study, I revisit the broader theorisations of pre-partition spaces in Pakistan that advocate for maintaining and protecting this heritage as it can promote religious tourism (Jatt; Farooqi and Arif; Schaflechner; Kermani; Chawla et al.; Ashraf et al.; Dhaliwal; D'Agostino; Hameed et al.). Foregrounded in them is a notion of collective multiple identities; my study offers a provocation by drawing on the lens of urban translation (Simon, "Translational City"). Zeroing in on the spaces in the old district of Rawalpindi, I subscribe to the view that translations of space entail much more than a straightforward transfer between two or more languages (Jakobson). Spatial translations are inspired by the view that a city is a text (Fritzsche; Remm) that can be read and consequently

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translated. Rawalpindi provides ample opportunity to be reconfigured as an “anomalous translation,” which embodies “transformation and difference” that may even “eclipse the original (the ‘real thing’, if there is one at all) to become more real than real” (Lee 1–2).

A case study approach is used here as it enables the researcher to “construct cases out of naturally occurring social situations” (Hammersley and Gomm 6). As a “semiotic assemblage” (Pennycook 82), the data for this study comprise various meaning-making resources such as pictures, engraved texts on buildings, observations, official websites, and other documents, discussions with present and past residents, as well as information culled from dedicated Facebook pages. The various types of data collection and background reading on the subject have resulted in the following research question: in what ways can Old Rawalpindi space be translated as a transgressive re/inscription?

Rawalpindi, the birthplace of the Sikh religious sect Nirankari (Yasin), has managed to retain the names of marketplaces and neighbourhoods as given by its former residents; for example, Nirankari and Bhabra Bazaars, Aria Mohallah, Amar Pura, Kartar Pura, Hari Pura, Krishan Pura (Hassan). The element of subversion implied in a transgressive re/inscription (“Reinscription”) is particularly useful since the latter practice is designed as an “identity-forming discourse” (Bennett 159) that challenges the current in/visibility of the old city by attempting to re/write its history.

THE TRANSLATIONAL CITY: AN INTEGRATED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The critical concepts adapted from the theory of the translational city (Simon, “Translational City” 16) are: 1) nationalist makeovers; 2) dual cities; 3) migration, presencing, and translanguaging; 4) mediation and mediators. They are consistent with the notions of social identities (Bourhis), rewriting history (Waksman and Shohamy), absent presence (Gergen), and semiotic actants (Otsuji and Pennycook). Thus, it is possible to “radically re/imagine” (Deumert and Makoni 240) the old city space of Rawalpindi as a transgressive re/inscription.

The concept of the nationalist makeover (Simon, “Translational City” 17) has “linguistic nationalism” at its heart. It is enacted by erasing a city’s former non/linguistic signs and replacing them with new meaning-making practices—generally aligned to power sources. A complete erasure is carried out by changing the urban design, alongside linguistic expunging: for example, the Greek city of Salonica (now Thessaloniki), where “[t] races of the Ottoman past and even the street layout of the densely packed

Jewish quarters were wiped out,” resulting in “the realignment in parallel of both linguistic and built heritage” (17). Both of these examples of nationalist makeovers are relevant for Pakistan, a country formed in the name of Islam, which indirectly led to the migration of non-Muslims to the neighbouring Hindu-majority India.

Another of Simon’s tenets is the dual city, i.e. an urban space where “more than one language group feels entitled to the same territory” (18). Although Brussels, Barcelona, and Montreal are called “bilingual” cities, “tensions prevail” due to each language’s sense of entitlement over the city space. This duality may be heavily dependent on “the formative powers of translation in specific language relationships and the inscription of this dialogue onto the physical spaces of the city” (19). It assumes a special importance in the “rewriting” (Waksman and Shohamy 59) of Rawalpindi’s past and present as it focuses on an in/erasable legacy that is shared but contentious—subscribed to by the previous and the current dwellers.

Also useful are Simon’s notions of migration, translanguaging, and presencing, since Rawalpindi has a large number of im/migrants. A translational space is defined by migration when there is “traffic between the place of origin and the diasporic home” (Simon, “Translational City” 19). Translanguaging refers to a situation in which im/migrants “bring and mesh languages together for a range of meaning-making and communication purposes” (Spilioti and Giaxoglou 278). The element of presencing relies on digital media as “[v]irtual presence modifies material presence” (Cronin qtd. in Simon, “Translational City” 19). In my analysis, I also draw upon further conceptualisations of presencing as elaborated by Gergen and Gozzi, both of whom argue that the use of technology creates a present that is “simultaneously rendered absent” (Gergen 230). As evidenced by the following analytical sections, digital media platforms were helpful in understanding different facets of the old city of Rawalpindi.

The last tenet of Simon’s framework concerns mediation and mediators. The latter act as “intermediaries” between cultures as they are expected to have more understanding than a translator, who relies solely on linguistic exchange (Simon, “Translational City” 20). They are the “anonymous heroes” facilitating interaction in urban spaces (de Certeau qtd. in Simon, “Translational City” 20). Their ability to use two or more languages also enables them to “respond to and/or shape political attitudes and nationalist sentiments” (Sywenky 177). Although Sywenky uses the concept in a colonial context, it is well-suited to a city like Rawalpindi since an element of departure, both physical and metaphorical, is involved. This idea is expanded upon by Otsuji and Pennycook (59–60), who go beyond “linguistic boundaries” and focus on “assemblages of people, objects, space, and language”: semiotic actants use all available meaning-making resources.

OLD RAWALPINDI AS A 'TRANSGRESSIVE TRANSLATIONAL SEMIOTIC TEXT'

Employing an adapted version of Simon's urban translational space categories, I explore the past and present life of the old city of Rawalpindi and attempt to build a transgressive account that relies on juxtaposing the linguistic elements with the dilapidated and re/purposed physical space. I demonstrate how the intertwining of the two contributes to a semiotic reading that focuses on shared and contested identities and legacies by relying on aspects related broadly to ideologies, translanguaging, and presencing.

IDEOLOGICALLY-DRIVEN MAKEOVER

As referenced in the previous section, the first category concerns a partial or total erasure of the signs (linguistic or otherwise) to assert the city's new sensibilities. A building complex found in the Nirankari area of the old town has undergone a partial makeover in such a way that aspects of Islam were incorporated without erasing the Sikh religious invocations. Since 1958, the Sikh temple has been repurposed as the Government Simla Islamia High School for Boys. During the interviews which I conducted, some of the area's residents referred to it by its new identity. When I pointed out that it was also a temple, they admitted that this was still present on the premises, thus implicitly accepting the place's hybridity. The picture below illustrates the point:



The closeup of quotes from the Sikh's holy book that adorn the entrance to the building Photos by the writer

Fig. 1. "The closeup of quotes from the Sikh's holy book that adorn the entrance to the building" (Hassan). Courtesy of Shiraz Hassan.

The original carving is in Gurmukhi, the official script of the Indian Punjab; it is a Granth prayer that roughly translates as "Glory, Glory to the Formless one"; many such carvings can still be seen. There is no evidence

of attempts to erase the script. The headmaster, though a Muslim himself, seems to advocate a plurality of religions, and does not wish for any of the signs to be erased (Hassan; Haider). A Muslim declaration of faith (“There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah”) has, however, been carved directly over the Sikh prayer. While this points to the co-existence of the two identities, the superscription of the Muslim prayer can be read as an attempt to assert the religious superiority of the new residents.

A somewhat similar effort at preserving the old identity while projecting a new one is seen in Fig. 2 below. It shows the façade of a palatial house that belongs to a rich Hindu merchant. The place is still used as a private residence, and the new owner has retained the building’s previous identity. He has, however, put up a banner of his name, “Haveli Meer Baba” (“Meer Baba’s Mansion”), along with an Islamic invocation that is used to ward off the evil eye. The place retains the original Hindi carving, “Durga Nivas,” i.e. “The Residence of Durga,” a Hindu goddess.



Fig. 2. Durga Nivas/Haveli Meer Baba, Rawalpindi, 2025.

Courtesy of the author.

THE DUAL CITY AS AN IN/ERASABLE LEGACY

The old city of Rawalpindi can be considered a dual space. This duality is especially noticeable in the articulation of its official stance in its documents and websites, and is challenged by the locals. As already emphasised, even after 77 years, the streets, bazaars, and neighbourhoods are still called by their old names. The original designations of Rawalpindi’s neighbourhoods

exist in some of the official documents, but not on the two official websites (“About Rawalpindi”; “District Rawalpindi”). For example, in an official report prepared by the auditor general of Pakistan (Jehangir), old names such as Ariya Mohallah, Amar Pura, Kartar Pura, Hari Pura, Angat Pura, Bagh, are used. By contrast, in another historical city of Pakistan, Lahore, the official effort to rename neighborhoods was rejected by the locals, who prefer using the old street designations (Mahmood).

While both the official websites of Rawalpindi acknowledge the plural history in general terms, neither makes mention of the languages that were once spoken by the majority, namely Hindi and Gurmukhi. The omission is glaring, since one website lists as many as seven dialects of the Punjabi language currently spoken by 90% of the inhabitants. However, it does not mention the languages of the “other” 10%, which include Sanskrit, Hindi, and Gurmukhi, as there are still Hindus and Sikhs living in the area (“District Rawalpindi”).

The duality of Rawalpindi is further amplified by another in/visibility on the municipal website (“About Rawalpindi”). The screenshot below (Fig. 3) shows pre-Partition Era temples—the Hindu mandirs with brown towers and the Sikh gurdwaras with brown domes—alongside the mosques distinguished by smaller white domes. On the ground, no road signs erected by the municipal authorities point to the presence of the temples; the skyline, however, defies such erasure.

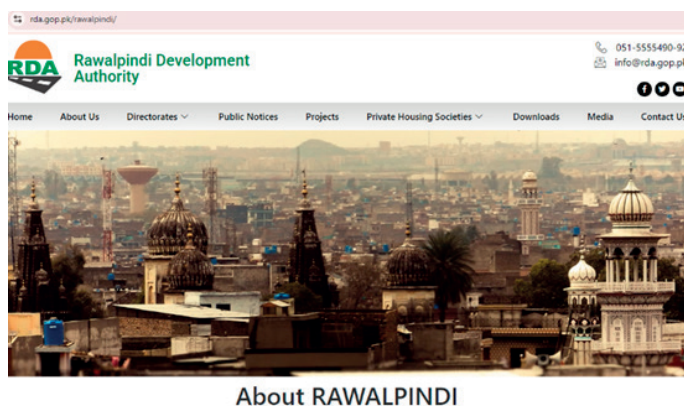


Fig. 3. “About Rawalpindi,” screenshot, 2025. Courtesy of the author.

The names of neighbourhoods and markets—mentioned neither on the official websites nor on the ground, in the form of plaques—are nevertheless present on Google Maps, e.g., Bhabra Bazaar and Kartar Pura, as shown in Fig. 4 below. This points to the crucial role of digital media in re/imagining Rawalpindi.

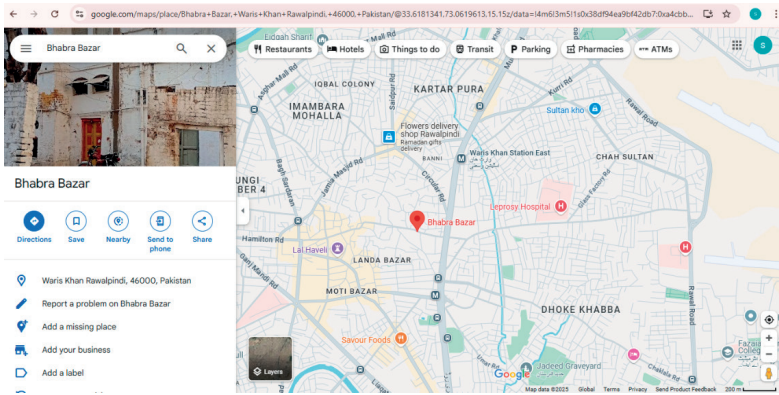


Fig. 4. A Google Map showing old city neighbourhoods, screenshot, 2025.
Courtesy of the author.

IM/MIGRATION, ABSENT-PRESENCE, AND TRANSLANGUAGING

An important aspect of digital media is evident here. On the one hand, a presence can be rendered absent through digital media or technology (Gergen; Gozzi). On the other, a digital presence can compensate for a physical absence (Cronin qtd. in Simon, “Translational City” 19). Meanings thus produced are no longer dependent on language proper, but can also emerge from physical spaces. The three concepts—im/migration, absent-presence, and translanguaging—overlap in the case of Rawalpindi. For example, in the picture below, the engraved Sanskrit word *om* is an invocation in Hinduism and Jainism, “mystically embod[ying] the essence of the entire universe” (“Om”).



Fig. 5. Om, 2025. Courtesy of the author.

As with most Hindu temples—which, unlike the Sikh ones, take up very little space—this particular temple is part of a private residence. Asked about the meaning of the engraved text, the current inhabitant, an elderly immigrant Muslim woman, erroneously replied that it is part of a Hindu peace greeting, *om shanti om*, translated as “peace be upon you,” or “peace to all,” adding that it was similar to the Muslim greeting *asalam-o-alaikum* (“Om”). The implicit point may have been a similarity between Islam and Hinduism, although the reply—hummed in a particular rhythm—evidently also stemmed from a knowledge of Indian (Bollywood) movies: “Om Shanti Om” is a popular Indian song. The respondent’s translanguaging thus points to the digitally fluid borders between India and Pakistan; borders that do not require cumbersome bureaucratic visas.

In comparison, Reena Verma, a 90-year-old former resident of Rawalpindi and a migrant to India, was able to visit her old home in 2022, after 75 years (Noor; “Reena Verma”). She managed to trace her former home through various Facebook pages dedicated to the partition of the Indian sub-continent (e.g., “Pak India Heritage”). In both cases, the absent-presence is evident. The inhabitant of the temple uses digitally available Indian movies to feel close to her former home in India, and in the process moves away from her present. Reena Verma employs social media to render the absence into presence; she can physically visit Rawalpindi courtesy of links and information gathered through Facebook. To some extent, the internet has humanised distances and im/migrations.

MEDIATORS AS SEMIOTIC ACTANTS

The last of the categories of the integrated framework refers to translators who exhibit an intimate knowledge—either physical or digital—of a given place. These need not be professional translators who use two or more languages for a living; rather, they are mediators and semiotic actants (Otsuji and Pennycook) who offer a version that relies on semiotics, including both language and non-language.

For this study, the “anonymous heroes” (de Certeau qtd. in Simon, “Translational City” 20) are the current residents of the old city, including local journalist Haider and my two Indian friends, Abbas Razvi and Gita, who helped verify certain words and phrases. I was also in touch, via Facebook, with the aforementioned Ms. Reena Verma. Whereas my X and Facebook friends could only assist with verifying the translations, Haider helped me on the ground. As someone whose parents migrated to Pakistan, leaving their properties in India in 1947, Haider is committed to preserving the memory of those who left for India. Not only did he provide valuable leads, like pointing out the absence of the names of old neighbourhoods

from the street plaques, but he also demonstrated that even the rudiments of language, when used within a particular space, could prove sufficient for generating a meaningful conversation. For example, the picture below (Fig. 6) is of a school for girls, set up by the Jain community of Rawalpindi. The name of the school is written in the three languages of the area: English, Hindi, and Urdu. Haider pointed out that, rather than restrict the site to members of their own community, the school administration apparently wanted to emphasise inclusivity.



Fig. 6. Sri Jain Kanya Pathshala, Rawalpindi, 2025.
Courtesy of the author.

DISCUSSION AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

Two major motifs emerge in the translational-semiotic re/worlding of the old spaces of Rawalpindi: ambivalence and the power of the internet. These intertwined themes reinforce the “perpetual state of dissonance” to which Simon refers, where “the harmony of the original [is] lost forever” (Simon, “Translational Life” 405). The element of un/certainty that pervades the discourse of the place owes its current re/imagination, in part, to digital media, including both social media apps like Facebook, Instagram, X, and WhatsApp, and digital navigation apps like Google Maps (Gatti and Procentese). They help to problematise the prevailing reality which is assumed to be stable enough to turn the clock back on the disruptions set in motion by the partition 77 years earlier.

The provocative un/settling implied in the current study’s transgressive re/inscription enables a re/writing of identities that arise from the old spaces (Waksman and Shohamy 59). Ambivalence lies at the very core of

how these identities are negotiated digitally and physically. In agreement with Shohamy, Ben-Rafael, and Barni, who argue that, due to the power of the internet, identities in the global world have become “*un ensemble* (one whole)” (xviii), my study also suggests that these identities are fluid and impermanent. The old temple resident’s (false) parallel between Muslim and Hindu greetings; the headmaster’s preserving of Sikh religious invocations with Islamic ones inscribed above them; official websites with im/partial information—all these instances produce a sense of ambivalence, seemingly dependent on the power of social media, and the internet more generally. It is not clear whether the woman who inhabits the temple made the equivalence purposefully; it is difficult to attribute absolute intentions to the headmaster; the Jain school administration may have simply wanted to attract students from all linguistic backgrounds. Such a sense of plurality could also be influenced by access to social media. Similarly, the omission of street names and languages from official websites could be a case of negligence or a deliberate effort to nudge people towards nationalism—as in Lahore, where, despite the local inhabitants’ rejecting the new names, they are in use in certain official documents. Google Maps—reliant on real-life data collected from various sources, including the locals (Lookingbill and Russell)—prefer using names with which the local population is familiar.

My study also points to another kind of ambivalence, one that pervades conventional partition discourse (e.g., Jatt; Farooqi and Arif; Kermani; Hameed et al.), which mostly focuses on reviving religious tourism and the preservation of the pre-partition spaces’ cultural-historical value. This discourse mostly relies on bureaucratic exercises that may or may not come to fruition. Social media, on the other hand, challenges the in/visibility of the decaying structures by allowing the new and old owners to come together, albeit for a short while, to reminisce about the past. While not wholly negating the importance of religious tourism, this study suggests that it should only be a first step in ensuring temporal and spatial justice for the old spaces of Rawalpindi.

This brings the discussion to the limitations of the current study and possible directions for future endeavours. The epistemological nature of the framework used for my research offers a range of perspectives, and conducting in-depth interviews would have resulted in a report-length study rather than a journal article. Undoubtedly, there is potential for more extensive future research, which might entail locating dis/similar discourses in the smaller cities neighbouring Rawalpindi as the area was heavily populated by Hindus and Sikhs before the partition. Yet another direction would be to study Google Maps by focusing on the inconsistencies in data provided by official and local sources, because the app also relies on municipal authorities, whose data may be at odds with those offered by the locals.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, this study re/imagines a semiotic un/belonging of Old Rawalpindi with the help of Sherry Simon's translational city theory, coupled with the notion of the all-encompassing "protagonists," as proposed by Otsuji and Pennycook (70). Drawing from Fritzsche's postulation that the city is a text that can be read and translated, I view the old city of Rawalpindi as re/initiating conversations that are enacted through the collectivity of language, digital media, and concrete spaces. The nexus of these three points leads to an extension of Otsuji and Pennycook's assemblage, adding the internet to "peoples," "languages," and "the extended repertoires of . . . events" (70).

The current re/configuring highlights not just the dilapidated conditions of the pre-partition buildings and the associated ambivalent identities, but sets a direction for future re/workings of similar spaces across the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent. While acknowledging that the richness of the views expressed here are, to a large extent, supplemented by digital media, it should also be pointed out that the internet has an undeniable potential to re/create an alternative, parallel world. The current study demonstrates that the information stored on the internet—presence and absence built digitally—opens up the old spaces of Rawalpindi to constructions that might not have been possible otherwise.

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INVESTIGATING SITES AND PRACTICES



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Translational Dynamics in Urban Space: Exploring Battala's Multilingual Cultural Encounter

ABSTRACT

“Battala” is a Bengali metonym for commercial print culture which gained popularity during the Bengal Renaissance. This print culture became a translational palimpsest, disseminating literary genres and leading to the creation of a site where high and low culture converged. Our paper examines the complex relationship between 19th-century colonial Calcutta and the languages in this fast-developing city. The popular print culture blurred distinctions between cultural forms, transcending geographical and literary boundaries of the colonial cosmopolis.

This paper contributes to the discourse on translating otherness in the city by demonstrating how Battala intricately reflected relationships between language, memory, and urban space within the historical and cultural context of colonial Calcutta. This is done through an analysis of selected works, including *Koutuk Shatak* by Harishchandra Mitra, *Rar Bhar Mithya Katha Tin Loye Kolikata* by Pyarimohan Sen, and *Ki Mojar Koler Gari* by Munsif Azimuddin. Other works that highlight the blurring of cultural spaces include the translation of *The Arabian Nights* by Avinash Chandra Mitra (titled *Sachitra Ekadrik Sahasra Dibas*). Additionally, translations of *Ameer Hamzar Puthi* by Abdun Nabi and Shah Muhammad Saghir's *Yusuf Zuleikha* show significant Urdu and Arabic-Persian influence.

By analyzing Battala's interactions with marketplaces, different communities, and intellectual salons, this study adds to the interdisciplinary discussion on translation and urban space. It examines the city's symbolic representations in popular literature, as well as its geographic location and social significance.

Keywords: transcultural urbanism, print culture, Battala literature, colonial modernity.



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INTRODUCTION: CALCUTTA AS A LIVING TRANSLATION SPACE

This article is divided into five sections. In the first part we discuss the city of Calcutta and its translation practices, while the second section focuses on the rise of Battala as a key publishing space. In the third part we examine how Battala evolved into a “third place,” where different cultures converged. The subsequent section is an inquiry into how the diverse languages and cultures interacted through translation, and how Battala emerged as a prominent urban site for such cultural exchanges. The final part offers reflection on how recent scholarship has overlooked the transformation of Battala into an urban space and an alternative site, distinct from the highbrow culture of Calcutta.

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Calcutta, a city rich in history and culture, has long served as a hub for literary and linguistic exchanges. Its name is the anglicized version of “Kolkata,” with multiple theories regarding its origin. Some scholars trace it to the Kali temple at Kalighat, while others suggest that it evolved from the name “Calicut,” which was familiar to European traders (Sengupta 148). Within this vibrant metropolis, translation acts not only as a bridge between languages, but also as a vital mechanism for cultural mediation. Calcutta’s mix of cultures fosters a dynamic environment where different narratives and experiences intersect and are exchanged across boundaries. This fluidity promoted the emergence of hybrid cultural forms that reflect the complexities of identity in colonial contexts. The significance of translation as a tool for cultural mediation is particularly evident in the works of Bengali writers who engaged with foreign literary traditions, for instance, the translation of *The Arabian Nights* by Avinash Chandra Mitra, titled *Sachitra Ekadhik Sabasra Dibas*. Moreover, translations of Western literary classics into Bengali not only introduced new genres and styles, but also encouraged local writers to experiment with their narratives. The role of translation in the literary evolution of Calcutta cannot be overstated; the city has been a crucible for literary innovation, where translation has played a pivotal role in shaping its literary trajectory (Simon 53). During the colonial period, translating literary works from Europe, Asia, and other regions into Bengali facilitated the introduction of new literary forms, which has had a profound influence on the language’s literary traditions.

The colonial legacy has left an indelible mark on the linguistic landscape, where English emerged as a language of power and prestige, while Bengali and other vernacular languages were often marginalized. Christian missionaries played a significant role in the early translation initiatives in colonial India, particularly in Bengal. Their primary objective was to promote Western education and facilitate religious conversion.

Missionaries such as William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and William Ward—collectively known as the Serampore Trio—established schools and printing presses, notably the Serampore Mission Press, which became a hub for translating educational and religious texts into Indian languages (Gupta, “The Calcutta School-Book Society” 56). The Charter Act of 1813 allowed missionaries to enter India freely, leading to the establishment of several missionary-run schools and translation initiatives. They translated the Bible, textbooks, and European classics into Bengali, Sanskrit, and other Indian languages so as to reach a wider audience. Alexander Duff, a key figure in English education in Bengal, emphasized the importance of English-language instruction while also encouraging vernacular translations to facilitate learning.

The practice of translation became increasingly significant with the establishment of Fort William College in Calcutta in 1800. The institution played a crucial role in promoting translation by commissioning and publishing works in multiple Indian languages, including Arabic, Sanskrit, Bengali, Punjabi, and Hindustani (Raheja 506). This facilitated the development of dictionaries, grammars, and literary texts, contributing to the standardization and modernization of Indian linguistic traditions. Following this, the Calcutta School-Book Society (CSBS), established in 1817, played a crucial role in the production and dissemination of educational materials in colonial Bengal. Unlike many institutions of the time, it prioritized secular education, focusing on subjects like science, arithmetic, and language studies. A key aspect of its activities was translation as it sought to make Western knowledge accessible by converting English textbooks into Bengali and other Indian languages (Kumar 456). Collaborating with presses like the Serampore Mission Press, CSBS published bilingual editions of history, law, and science texts, standardizing curricula and expanding access to European knowledge.

Beyond the educational initiatives, societies promoting language and literature also emerged. One such group was *Banga Bhasanubadak Samaj* (Vernacular Literature Society), founded in 1851 by Bengali intellectuals in colonial Calcutta (Tah 86). However, it is interesting to note that a Bengali zamindar (feudal lord) from Uttarpara—Jaykrishna Mukhopadhyay—played a key role in establishing this society. By promoting translations of English works and funding vernacular publications, he made knowledge more accessible to the Bengali-speaking masses (N. Mukherjee 170).

Similar societies came to be established in Gujarat, Madras, and Bombay during this time. The *Gujarat Vidya Sabha*, or Gujarat Vernacular Society, was established in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, in 1848, by a British administrator named Alexander Kinloch Forbes, along with the Gujarati writer Dalpatram (Isaka 4867). *Maharashtra Granthottejak Sanstha* was

a similar institute: established in 1894, it recognized and awarded works in the Marathi language to encourage writers and publishers (Deshpande 78). This institution was founded by Mahadev Govind Ranade, Sir Ramakrishna Bhandarkar, Hari Narayan Apte, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and twenty-five other visionaries of Maharashtra society. Several other vernacular societies have significantly contributed to the literary sphere of India, promoting their languages and literature: for instance, the Madras School Book and Vernacular Literature Society undertook to translate a large number of prose works from English into Tamil during the colonial period (Venkateswaran 284).

All the books of the Vernacular Literature Society in Kolkata were published as part of a series called *Garbasta Bangla Pustak Sangraha* (Tah 88). The intended readership of this series was not limited to any particular age or class. Thirty six texts of varied tastes were carefully picked based on subject matter and published by the Society. Apart from biographies, science, parable, and historical romance, the Society's publications also featured translations of European classics and travel writings. One of the main promoters of this series was Madhusudan Mukhopadhyay, a prolific translator of the Calcutta Vernacular Literature Society. He translated Hans Christian Andersen's stories, Krylov's Fables and biographies of historical figures. Abhijit Gupta argues that the establishment of the Vernacular Literature Society in Kolkata aimed to promote publications of higher quality, contrasting them with the popular works and genres found in Battala, which were often criticized for their perceived "vulgarity" and "obscenity" ("Household Words" 1).

THE EMERGENCE AND POPULARITY OF BATTALA

The arrival of the printing press transformed colonial Calcutta and aided in its urbanization. During this time, missionary printing presses started translating texts into different languages, thus making literature accessible to a larger audience. Books, newspapers, and magazines became popular, and book markets began to emerge all over the city. One such well-known market was Battala, famous for selling affordable books that entertained the public. With Calcutta's growth as a major colonial city in India, books from Battala attracted a diverse audience, including many readers from rural areas who had recently moved to the city. It played a crucial role in meeting the cultural needs of this growing population. In *Cities in Translation*, Sherry Simon discusses how Battala helped to shape the literary scene in 19th-century Calcutta, using James Long's careful cataloging of Bengali publications, which highlighted Battala as an important center

for the production of vernacular literature (43). It also played an important role in translating and adapting Western literary traditions for Indian readers (50). While colonial accounts such as Long's recognize the importance of book markets like Battala, some of them often downplayed its significance compared to the production of what they considered "high literature."

The word "Battala" itself originates from the Bengali *bat* (banyan tree) and *tala* (space underneath), referring to either a shaded gathering place under a banyan tree or the entire neighborhood (Anwar). While the literal meaning relates to a physical space, its generic use was extended to represent the production of cheap, mass-printed literature and painting, including religious texts, novels, plays, calendars, and manuals—often catering to common audiences. As a result, Battala became synonymous with affordable, vernacular publications, sometimes viewed as vulgar or lowbrow by the elite. Tapti Roy argues that over time, the term came to define a neighborhood in North Calcutta which became a major hub for early Bengali printing and publishing. This transformation was largely influenced by Biswanath Deb, who is regarded as the founder of popular printing in the region. Although there are no clear records of how his first publication performed, his efforts laid the foundation for what later became known as Battala publishing (Roy 60).

With the arrival of Battala print, a shift in both artistic production and public consumption in colonial Bengal can be observed. The transition from large religious or mystical prints to smaller Battala prints, including Kalighat paintings, bears testimony to this shift. Initially, large patas (scroll paintings) depicted mythological and religious themes in a performative setting, used by patuas (scroll painters) to narrate stories. However, as urban centers like Calcutta grew, demand for affordable, mass-produced religious imagery increased. Battala woodcuts, emerging in the 1840s, were block-printed and hand-colored, making them cheaper and more accessible than traditional Kalighat patas or patachitra, which were handcrafted and painted individually (Hirsch 24). While Kalighat paintings retained their artistic refinement, Battala prints embraced popular themes, catering to a broader audience with their bold, mass-produced designs. This shift marked the democratization of visual culture, allowing religious and popular imagery to reach a much wider section of society.

The decline of Battala woodcuts in the 1870s was primarily due to competition from new printing technologies such as lithography and chromolithography, which offered glossy, colorful images that appealed to urban consumers. These techniques democratized art by making high-quality, vibrant prints accessible to a broader audience, thereby shifting consumer preferences. Kamalika Mukherjee draws attention to Walter Benjamin's idea that, with mechanical reproduction, art loses its

“aura” or authenticity; however, she suggests that the glossy appeal of chromolithographs did create a new kind of allure. This change in the popular art market led to the gradual fading of traditional forms like Battala and Kalighat prints, which were unable to compete with the mass production and appeal of the new prints (K. Mukherjee 106).

Battala’s peak popularity can be traced to the period of roughly thirty years from 1840 to 1870. During this time, many small and affordable printing presses emerged. Sukumar Sen described these presses as being “scattered like toadstools,” suggesting that they were widespread but difficult to trace (58). The spatial site of this print phenomenon extended to Nimtala Ghat Street, Biddon Street, and Cornwallis Street. Sen notes that Battala’s reach even included areas like Sobhabazar and Chitpur. An interesting aspect of the Battala book market was its decentralized distribution system. Unlike traditional bookshops, Battala books had the place of receipt written on the cover, often indicating a specific house or residence where the books could be obtained (Bhadra 222). While some records mention other locations, the primary distribution centers were personal homes or offices. Another striking feature was the prominent display of the word “Calcutta” on the covers of Battala books, which served a specific purpose. The large print of “Calcutta” on each cover reflected a desire to appeal to readers outside the city—those in villages, small towns, or semi-urban areas. These readers were eager to engage with the new civic paradigm and modernity that was emerging in Calcutta (Biswas 16). They sought a connection with the city’s vibrant social and cultural life, unavailable in their rural or semi-urban environments. The prominence of Calcutta in these publications signaled the city’s importance as a center of urbanization, modernity, and civic life, which Battala literature sought to share with a wider audience. This appeal was a key factor in the rise of Battala’s influence and its connection to the evolving identity of the city. Battala carved out a distinct space in urban life—existing as the opposite of “highbrow” literature—while still playing a crucial role in popularizing texts that appealed to the masses (Ghosh 109). It produced a wide range of literature, including almanacs, satirical writings, and mythological tales. Another key aspect was the *dobhashi* literature—texts written in a blend of Bengali, Arabic, and Persian—that became popular in Battala in the mid-19th century (Bhadra 260). Additionally, there is a shift from educational to non-educational literature in the late 19th century, marked by the growing popularity of vernacular works based on the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, Islamic legends, and almanacs (Banerjee, *The Parlour* 168). Sumanta Banerjee argues that Battala literature can be seen as an extension of the urban folklore of the 19th century, capturing the spirit and narratives of everyday urban life (*Unish Sataker Kolkata o Saraswatir Itar Santan* 230).

The influence of urban social dynamics, caste tensions, and emerging translation practices on Battala's literary sphere was profound, shaping Bengali literary culture in the late 19th-century Calcutta. Institutions such as the press, the post office, and evolving readership practices, influenced by English, played a key role in structuring Battala's literary landscape (Bhadra 256). This environment facilitated an exploration of translation practices as publishers and authors sought to reinterpret Bengali literature for a broader readership.

BATTALA AS A "THIRD PLACE": A SITE OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

Battala played a pivotal role in translating literature into a form of Bengali known as Gaudiya, which was a popular tongue in Bengal during the 18th and 19th centuries. Influenced by medieval roots, Gaudiya became a bridge for vernacular translations of texts originally written in English, Sanskrit, Persian, and various Indian languages. The efforts of Battala translators marked a significant moment in Bengali literary culture by bringing international and classical Indian works closer to the Bengali public. *Bibek Ratnabali*, published in 1864 by Madhusudan Bandopadhyay, is a prime example of how Sanskrit tales were made accessible to a broader audience through their Bengali translation. Battala's translators not only transferred linguistic content, but adapted style and form, often choosing verse structures resonant with medieval Bengali literary traditions. A notable example of Battala's translation legacy is *Parasya Itihas*, translated in 1846 by Girish Chandra Banerjee and Nilmani Basak. Originally an English text on Persian history, it was transformed into verse, imitating the lyrical form of medieval Bengali texts. This creative approach ensured that readers experienced translated material in a format familiar and accessible to them.

Book markets like Battala are vital third places in urban environments, where diverse communities converge to facilitate cultural exchange and interaction through translation. In these lively settings, translation transcends mere language conversion; it becomes a dynamic process of negotiation and understanding that fosters social cohesion among individuals from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These markets enable the circulation of ideas, goods, and cultural practices, empowering marginalized voices, challenging dominant narratives, and contributing to the formation of cosmopolitan identities within multicultural urban landscapes. Beyond high literature, there is an increasing focus on these third places, defined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg as informal gathering places where people from diverse backgrounds can interact and build

community ties (7). As argued by Simon (256), in urban contexts, such “third spaces” often emerge in culturally diverse neighborhoods, serving as sites of cultural exchange and hybrid identity formation.

In cities like Calcutta, these spaces challenge binary classifications of identity, allowing for the emergence of hybrid identities that reflect the complexities of urban life. They serve as arenas where individuals negotiate their cultural affiliations, fostering a sense of belonging that goes beyond traditional boundaries. Translation practices in urban settings promote citizenship and inclusion by incorporating multiple languages into the public sphere, enhancing social cohesion and facilitating communication among diverse communities. This transforms translation from a mere linguistic act into a vital process of negotiation and understanding. Urban spaces also function as cultural memory, where translation plays a crucial role in preserving and transmitting local histories and identities (Simon 24). The interplay of languages within cities not only reflects historical narratives, but also shapes contemporary cultural expressions, underscoring the significance of translation in the ongoing evolution of urban identities. In the case of Battala, translation gives voice to different cultural groups and helps them assert their urban experience within colonial modernity.

URBAN VOICES: CROSS-CULTURAL EXCHANGES

Battala, a vibrant crossroads of markets, communities, and intellectual salons, reflects the dynamic intersections of urban space and cultural exchange. In *Koutuk Shatak*, this landscape comes alive, linking translation to the city’s symbolic and social fabric. *Koutuk Shatak*, published in 1862, is a notable example of a unique mix of translation, humor, and social commentary found in Battala literature. Edited by Harishchandra Mitra and featuring many jokes written or translated by Durgadas Kar, this book reflects the interests of Bengali civil society while offering a humorous view of the changing urban life in Calcutta. In the introduction, Mitra mentions that many jokes were adapted from English or taken from proverbs, showing how Battala helped introduce Western literary styles into Bengali culture, similar to European jestbooks. The jokes in *Koutuk Shatak* focus on everyday life, featuring characters like English clergymen, doctors, professors, lawyers, and European judges. These characters provide a glimpse into how the Bengali society of that era interacted with colonial institutions. Under the surface of humor, the book critiques the new elite class in Calcutta—known as babus—who often embodied the contradictions and excesses of colonial modernity. By including topics like foreign lands and girls’ schools, *Koutuk Shatak* demonstrates that Battala

publications, though often viewed as lowbrow, played an important role in shaping public conversations and reflecting the complex realities of 19th-century Bengal.

In *Koutuk Shatak*, many jokes are based on everyday events in urban life, providing a satirical look at issues like child marriage and promiscuity while highlighting societal hypocrisies. This collection of sharp jokes comments on the contradictions found in 19th-century Calcutta, particularly among the educated youth. For example, one joke tells of a conversation between two friends, where one asks Ramesh how he could marry off his five-year-old daughter after always opposing child marriage; Ramesh replies that he could not ignore his father's request, revealing the deeper hypocrisy of the so-called progressive and educated youth (Mitra 83). Even those who publicly criticized outdated practices often submitted to familial and societal pressures, exposing the gap between belief and practice; this joke highlights how superficial reformist values could be when faced with the weight of tradition and parental authority. The book also paints a picture of life in Calcutta, showing the mix of different classes and languages. In one instance, a drunk man scolded by his wife gives orders to a doorman in Hindi, even though he is likely Bengali. This scene reflects the interactions among various linguistic communities and showcases the pluralistic nature of colonial Calcutta, where people from different backgrounds lived side by side (77). Such mixing of languages showcases how communication flowed easily in a bustling city which was rapidly growing and attracting people from all over India. Through humor, *Koutuk Shatak* captures everyday social interactions in the colonial metropolis. It reveals that beneath the polished surface of urban life, there were contradictions and a rich blend of cultures shaping daily experiences. The book not only reflects Calcutta's transformation, but also offers a witty take on the contradictions of civil society. Amusing on the surface, the jokes hold a mirror to the deeper issues and tensions present in a changing society. In this way, *Koutuk Shatak* invites readers to consider the complexities of modern life, urban growth, and the push for social reform in 19th-century Bengal.

While *Koutuk Shatak* reflected the transformations within Calcutta's urban and social landscape, a parallel development was taking shape in Battala, where Muslim authors were making significant contributions to Bengali literature. Their writings covered a wide range of topics, from everyday life to religious stories. There was a strong demand for Persian-to-Bengali translations, Urdu-Bengali bilingual texts, and Islamic moral stories, which were widely read across different social groups, including urban migrants, boatmen, and small traders (Gupta, "Chāpā-Puthis" 223). Publishers like Kazi Safiuddin played a key role in bringing popular stories such as *Yūsuf Zuleikhā* and *Gul-i hormuz* to Bengali readers by working

with various printing presses. Despite its popularity, this body of literature was often viewed with skepticism by elite literary circles, who dismissed it as vernacular or philistine (226). However, these works played a crucial part in shaping a distinct Bengali Muslim literary identity, reflecting the tastes and concerns of a broad and diverse readership.

Writers such as Munshi Namdar and Munshi Azimuddin made significant contributions to Battala's print culture, with Azimuddin's play *Ki Mojar Koler Gari* exemplifying how these authors blended domestic and foreign influences. This satire on the British introduction of railways uniquely combined traditional Bengali rhyming forms such as *pāyār* and *tripādi* with elements from Arabic-Persian literary traditions. This fusion not only reflects the rich cultural influences of 19th-century Bengali society, but also highlights the literary innovations within the Muslim community. In the broader context of *dobhashi* literature, as discussed by Sumanta Banerjee, it is evident that Muslim authors in Battala were navigating a complex cultural landscape. Banerjee points out that *dobhashi*—a mix of Bengali, Urdu, Arabic, and Persian—emerged in response to Hindu pundits' efforts to *sanskritize* Bengali (Banerjee, *Power in Print* 45). Similarly, Azimuddin's work, with its genre-blending and linguistic fusion, illustrates the Muslim community's endeavor to preserve and promote its identity amid colonial modernity and linguistic reform efforts.

Furthermore, these Muslim authors were not merely reacting to external pressures, but actively shaping the literary landscape of Battala. Their works catered to a Muslim readership while contributing to the rich tapestry of Bengali literature, often featuring epic tales, moral teachings, and elements of the supernatural. This cultural production was not only a form of resistance, but also a creative engagement with the evolving urban realities of colonial Calcutta. Muslim authors like Azimuddin helped define Battala as a space where diverse voices could coalesce, influencing the broader literary and intellectual currents of the time. Thus, the literary contributions of Muslim authors in Battala illustrate a more nuanced understanding of this market as a site of cultural and religious convergence, where both Hindu and Muslim writers navigated modernity, tradition, and the complexities of colonial society. Battala publications played a significant role in colonial Bengal by presenting a rich diversity of voices that contrasted with the "high" literature favored by the educated *bhadraloks* (gentlefolk/elite). The *bhadralok* were a socially mobile, English-educated elite in colonial Bengal, primarily drawn from the Brahmin, Baidya, and Kayastha castes. Their rise was shaped by wealth, access to English education, and administrative service, forming what came to be seen as a "new aristocracy" (Bandyopadhyay 154). However, the *bhadralok* were largely dismissive of Battala literature, which they often

regarded as vulgar or substandard. The primary promoters and consumers of this popular literary form belonged to a different social group, situated outside the cultural and ideological domain of the colonial elite. As Sumanta Banerjee observes, the language and subjects of Battala literature ranged from “the patois of the Calcutta streets to the slang of the village marketplace,” creating a counterculture that celebrated the vernacular and regional dialects of various communities (*Power in Print* 45).

The presence of Muslim authors in the Battala book market highlights the complex nature of this literary space and challenges the idea that it was solely dominated by Hindu Bengali “babus.” Muslim authors played a key role in the Battala print culture, particularly in the production of *chāpā puthis*, i.e. printed books that retained the style and layout of traditional manuscripts. Writers such as Phakir Garibullah and Saiyad Hamza were instrumental in adapting Persian and Deccan romances, Islamic historical accounts, and religious tales for Bengali readers (Gupta, “Chāpā-Puthis” 209). Initially, many of these works were published by Hindu-owned presses, but by the 1870s, Muslim publishers such as those running the Barkati, Bashiri, Ahmadi, and Kaderiya presses began to make their mark. A significant figure in this movement was Muhammad Naser, whose Hanifi Press was responsible for publishing *Bhābalābh* (1851), considered one of the earliest examples of printed Bengali prose by a Muslim writer (221).

Another prominent example is *Jaiguner Puthi*, written by Syed Hamzah of Udna, Hooghley, in 1797. As the Bangladeshi scholar Wakil Ahmed notes, this text is “one of the finest examples” of puthis composed in Dobhashi Bengali—a register heavily influenced by Persian and Arabic vocabulary (qtd. in “Jaiguner Puthi”). *Jaiguner Puthi* draws on earlier works such as Shah Barid Khan’s *Hanifar Digvijay* (16th century) and Muhammad Khan’s *Hanifar Ladai* (1724). It narrates the tale of Jaigun, the princess of Erem, who first defeats and then marries Hanifa, the male protagonist (“Jaiguner Puthi”). The poem celebrates both martial valor and spiritual triumph, reflecting a vision of Islamic heroism that resonated deeply with Bengali Muslim readers during British colonial rule. In an era when the Muslim community grappled with the loss of political power, such texts reinstated their past heritage and pride at a time of significant political and social change.

In this way, Battala’s vibrant print culture not only showcased Muslim literary voices, but also facilitated the reimagining of Bengali literary culture through the lens of Islamic history and legend. It became a crucial site for the vernacularization of Perso-Arabic narratives, allowing Bengali Muslims to assert their presence in a rapidly transforming literary and social landscape. With the development of print culture in Battala, Muslim writers also increasingly chose to address the everyday realities of colonial modernity,

moving beyond heroic tales and religious epics. Some authors focused on contemporary society and the changing dynamics of rural and urban life under British rule. One such example, Munshi Azimuddin's *Ki Mojar Koler Gari*, presents an interesting glance at how people, especially women, reacted to modern changes brought by colonial rule, particularly with the arrival of the railway. The story focuses on a conversation between a mother-in-law and a grandmother on a train, which symbolizes progress and modernity. This setting provides a perfect backdrop for discussing how the railway changed life in the villages. The narrative reveals that the introduction of trains sparked a mix of excitement and curiosity among the villagers. Showcasing how the railways transformed daily life and personal relationships, the young woman points out that the trains made it easier for husbands, who might have been away for long periods due to work, to return home more often—"once or twice a year" (Azimuddin 282). This convenience was not just about technology; it had deep emotional effects. Wives were no longer distanced from their husbands, leading to a more connected family life. The young woman expresses appreciation for the British, recognizing that their infrastructure allowed these new opportunities (286).

Furthermore, the railway offered women a new level of freedom. The story highlights that wives could now leave their fathers' homes more easily if they were unhappy in their marriages. This shift indicates a significant change in women's roles and independence. The arrival of the train did not just change how people traveled; it also began to reshape social structures, especially regarding marriage and gender roles. Through the dialogue on the train, Azimuddin's text skillfully blends themes of modernity, colonial influence, and gender issues, demonstrating that such technological advancements reached into the very heart of daily life in colonial Bengal. This text serves as a testament to the fact that the effects of colonial modernity were complex and varied, impacting different groups of society in distinct ways.

Pyarimohan Sen's *Rar Bhar Mithya Katha Tin Loye Kolikata* vividly portrays life in 19th-century Calcutta, focusing on the changes occurring in society at the time. The play captures the lives of educated upper-class Bengalis who moved away from old feudal systems and became influential in the British Empire. It not only describes the experiences of the upper class, but also reflects the complex mix of languages spoken in colonial Calcutta. The language used in the play is a blend of Bengali, English, and various regional dialects, highlighting the diverse and cosmopolitan nature of the city. For example, there is a scene where a sage visits a red-light district, and those around him speak different languages—Bengali mixed with English, Hindi, and Persian. This variety of speech illustrates the multicultural and multilingual character of Calcutta, showing how

different social classes and communities interacted in urban life. The characters in the play represent the babu or bhadraloks of Calcutta, who were accustomed to moving between multiple languages and cultures. The mixing of languages in their conversations symbolizes the city's own blend of Western influence and local traditions, which often coexisted or clashed. Overall, *Rar Bhar Mithya Katha Tin Loye Kolikata* serves as a testament to the rich linguistic diversity that defined life in the city.

The trend of writing about urban life, as seen in *Rar Bhar Mithya Katha Tin Loye Kolikata*, is influenced by Western literary traditions. Pyarimohan Sen's work reflects the style and themes present in Western literature, especially in famous works like Lord Byron's *Don Juan* and Samuel Johnson's poem *London*. In these Western texts, authors often explore similar themes of societal decay and moral decline in urban settings. For instance, *Don Juan* presents a satirical look at the flaws and follies of society, focusing on the character's adventures in a world filled with corruption and extravagance. Similarly, *London* portrays the struggles and hardships faced by people living in a city that seems to be sinking into chaos and despair. Both works depict the darker aspects of city life, revealing a sense of disillusionment and moral decline.

In *Rar Bhar Mithya Katha Tin Loye Kolikata*, Sen adopts a similar approach to highlight the grim realities of 19th-century Calcutta. The lewd main character takes the saint through various parts of the city, including areas known for heavy drinking and prostitution. These locations serve as a backdrop for examining the city's underbelly. One of the significant turns in the play is the transformation of the saint: at first devoted to his religious work and living a life of asceticism, in response to the city's harsh realities, he begins to rethink his beliefs. He abandons his strict lifestyle and admits that his life has been a failure until now. This shift in the saint's character symbolizes the broader disillusionment and decline of society in Calcutta during that time. Through this transformation, Sen emphasizes the moral confusion and challenges faced by individuals in an evolving urban landscape, similar to the themes found in Western urban literature.

In his soliloquy, the saint expresses shock and disillusionment at the moral decay of Calcutta, wondering whether it has become a city of absurdities. The line "I had heard in the past that the condition of people goes back to Calcutta, today it was true" reveals his realization that the rumors and tales about the city's moral degradation were indeed accurate (P. Sen 269).¹ The rapid pace of time and change, symbolized by

¹ Adrish Biswas's edited book *Battalar Boi* is written in Bengali. As there is no English translation available, the excerpts quoted from book I in this article have been translated by the authors.

the line “What is the speed of time, nothing can be understood” (270), illustrates the saint’s inability to grasp the shifting values and increasing chaos in the city. He further laments the erosion of religious and ethical practices by remarking, “Dharma Karma has gone” (278). He reflects on the rising prevalence of gambling, theft, cheating, and drunkenness. The saint’s soliloquy also suggests that these developments were inevitable, perhaps even preordained, as the scriptures predicted that such things would come “by the mercy of Kali,” which alludes to the destructive force of time and change as embodied by the goddess (280). This final reflection encapsulates the saint’s despair over the moral and spiritual decline in Calcutta, where religious and ethical practices have been replaced by vice and corruption. His soliloquy not only provides a commentary on the city’s transformation, but also serves as a metaphor for the broader anxieties faced by the society during a time of rapid modernization and colonial influence. The saint’s inner turmoil is thus a powerful vehicle for understanding the complex relationship between urban space, time, and morality in colonial Calcutta.

The language used in three important books—Pyarimohan Sen’s *Rar Bhar Mithya Katha Tin Loye Kolikata*, Munshi Azimuddin’s *Ki Mojar Koler Gari*, and Harishchandra Mitra’s *Koutuk Shatak*—exhibits a fascinating mix of Sanskrit, Hindi, and Persian words, reflecting the diverse languages spoken in 19th-century colonial Calcutta. For example, in P. Sen’s play, the Persian word *yar*, which means friend, appears frequently (276). This demonstrates how Persian vocabulary was integrated into the everyday language of educated Bengalis, even as English and Bengali became more common due to colonial rule. Persian had been an important language in Mughal India, and its influence continued to be felt during this period. The use of such words illustrates the cultural and linguistic blending in Calcutta, where Bengali, Hindi, Persian, and English coexisted. Similarly, *Koutuk Shatak* also showcases this mix of languages by including Sanskrit along with Hindi and Persian. In one scene, the babu imitates a Hindi-speaking porter, saying, “ami bajra hai mangta” (“I just want a Budgerow”), which shows a unique blend of Bengali and Hindi (Mitra 85). Mitra also lampoons the pseudo-intellectuals of the time who often ignored logic and scientific reasoning. For instance, he describes a scholarly meeting in the city where it was debated whether the sun or the moon came first in providing light. This humorous reference captures the intellectual discussions of the period while poking fun at the sometimes ridiculous nature of these debates. Such treatment of these topics serves not only to entertain readers, but also to criticize the pretentiousness of some intellectuals at the time.

Koutuk Shatak also includes jokes translated from English, particularly those involving religious figures and the clergy. One such joke, translated

by Harishchandra Mitra, humorously describes a conversation between a priest and his disciple about drinking. This translation of English jokes highlights the growing influence of European literary forms and content in Bengal, as well as the ways in which local writers adapted these forms for a Bengali audience. The references to the Bible and Christian clergy in these jokes suggest broader cultural exchanges occurring in colonial Calcutta, where Christian missionaries and colonial administrators were significant players in the public and religious life. Furthermore, the inclusion of religious communities beyond the Hinduist—through mentions of Christian clergy and jokes about the Bible—shows how Battala literature engaged with various religious and cultural traditions through translations. While many texts produced in Battala were rooted in Hindu mythology and popular religious narratives, they were also open to incorporating elements from other religious traditions, reflecting the pluralistic nature of Calcutta's society.

REIMAGINING BATTALA: SOME OBSERVATIONS

Extensive research has already been conducted on various aspects of Battala's literary culture, offering insight into its unique contributions to Bengal's social and cultural landscape. One key area of focus has been the appeal of Battala literature to Calcutta's poorer and semi-literate populations, particularly through satirical, comedic, and farcical works that critiqued the excesses of commercialism and materialism in the city. These texts addressed themes like alcoholism, the commodification of relationships, and the pervasive influence of wealth, resonating deeply with marginalized communities (Basu 52).

Recent studies challenge the traditional perception of Battala as merely a hub for cheap and low-quality literature. While often described pejoratively as a place for crude and ephemeral books, Battala played a much more complex role in Bengal's literary and cultural history. The presses in Battala were not limited to sensational or obscene works; they also produced religious texts, almanacs, schoolbooks, and popular poetry (Gupta, "Book History in India" 155). Indeed, in the late 19th century, elite Bengali intellectuals viewed Battala literature as a sign of moral decline, leading to efforts to censor or refine texts like *Bidyasundar*; however, despite these criticisms, Battala significantly contributed to the accessibility of the book, creating a wider reading public beyond the educated elite (Roy 186). Scholars have pointed out that current research on Battala has often grouped all Battala publications under one label, ignoring their diversity and impact (177). Such broad generalization fails to capture its true contribution to our literature

and culture. Battala was not merely a site for lowbrow literature; it carried the legacy of Bengal's evolving print culture, influenced by market demand, technology, and changing social attitudes.

A significant limitation in the research on Battala's history is its tendency to focus on a specific period, resulting in a fragmented and incomplete understanding of its literary and cultural contributions. While elite historians focused on the early period of Battala's print culture, the tradition persisted well into the 20th century, continuing to cater for an evolving reading public with diverse literary tastes (Chakraborti 60). The content of those printed books demands special attention, as discussed by Kamala Sarkar. Her work presents Battala as a space of resistance and cultural commentary in colonial Bengal, highlighting how popular Battala writings responded to the rapid industrialization and socio-economic changes of the time. For instance, she points out how Munshi Abdul Ala's *Kabita Kusummala* (1833) critiques the impact of British machinery on traditional livelihoods, lamenting how industrial progress erased individual identity and labour (208). Similarly, poets used Battala literature to voice skepticism towards British rule, as seen in an 1887 village poet's sarcastic critique of Queen Victoria's Jubilee celebrations, which taxed the poor while epidemics ravaged the land (212). Battala writings not only reflected the anxieties of the urban Bengali middle class, caught between colonial subjugation and aspirations for upward mobility, but it also functioned as a tool for admiration and resistance, shaping 19th-century Calcutta's public discourse (215). Far from being a peripheral space, Battala provides a crucial lens through which we can understand colonial Calcutta, revealing the tensions between elite and popular literary traditions, the impact of colonial modernity, and the evolving reading practices of the Bengali middle class. Not simply a hub of cheap literature, Battala was a crucial space where urban anxieties, social critique, and cultural aspirations intersected.

While existing scholarship touches upon the social and linguistic dynamics of Battala, this paper extends the discussion by analyzing how selected texts reflect the intersection of local and global cultural forces through an examination of how these texts negotiate urban social tensions, caste relations, and emerging print culture. This study highlights the role of Battala literature in engaging with the changing cultural and economic landscape of colonial Calcutta. This focus on the translation and adaptation of themes and ideas from both indigenous and external sources adds a new layer of understanding to the existing body of work.

In conclusion, Battala in the 19th century was a vital crossroads for language, culture, and urban identity in colonial Calcutta. This lively area (both in the literal and the literary sense) brought together various

linguistic traditions, creating a unique environment for sharing ideas and stories. Through works like *Koutuk Shatak*, *Rar Bhar Mithya Katha*, *Tin Loye Kolikata*, and *Ki Mojar Koler Gari*, authors skillfully blended Sanskrit, Hindi, Persian, and English, reflecting the city's developing multicultural society and the changes brought by colonial modernity. As a hub of commercial print culture, Battala demonstrated how literature transcended geographical and linguistic boundaries, highlighting the rich interactions among different communities. It became a site for intellectual engagement and cultural exchange, capturing the complexities of memory and identity in the process.

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Community Centres as Sites of Translation: Placemaking in Edinburgh

ABSTRACT

This article presents a research project comprising a series of community initiatives in Edinburgh, a city which displays a disproportionately English-heavy linguistic profile, despite the cosmopolitan influences of both migration and tourism. Our case study created sites that can be conceptualised as *translation spaces*, where the dominant direction of translation is challenged and critiqued, or even temporarily reversed to reclaim urban space. The research team collaborated with local libraries and community centres to establish several sites of translation. This paper focuses on one key site: a series of art workshops led by refugee artists. Drawing upon the concept of *translation space* from Translation Studies, we explicitly thematised the role of language(s) and language exchange in these microsites, so that language traffic and dynamics could be observed, discussed, and challenged. In this way, this article contributes to the study of translation space in two aspects. Firstly, it demonstrates how contested language spaces can be analysed through translation practices manifested in various material modes, including interpretations (or, oral translations) provided by participants for one another in art workshops, and intersemiotic translation, from feelings through languages to artwork. Secondly, the paper reflects on how creating such microsites of translation can contribute to resisting the dominant direction of translation in the city.

Keywords: translation space, counter-translations, materiality, intersemiotic translation, translation practices.



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TRANSLATION AS SPATIAL, MATERIAL, AND LOCALISED PRACTICE

Cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity is a common feature of international cities shaped by migration and mobility. Languages are always competing for space in multilingual cities (Cronin 68). Translation, often likened to a metaphorical bridge that promotes intercultural communication, can also be manipulated to block communication, or to control how one language occupies the territory. As Simon comments, “[t]ranslation tells which languages count, how they occupy the territory and how they participate in the discussions of the public sphere” (*Translational City* 15). Reacting to this power imbalance, counter-translation—defined as the process of “reclaiming urban spaces through translation” (Marasligil 77)—has been championed as an effective community movement to critique this imposition, reverse the direction of translation, and return voices to minoritised and silenced languages. Against this backdrop, our action research project *Edinburgh: A Translational City* was carried out at various sites, including public libraries and community centres, in collaboration with community partners, in 2023–24. Its aim was to contribute to counter-translating cities both as an emerging research theme in translation studies (Simon, *Translation Sites*) and a community movement (Marasligil). This project draws on Marasligil’s broad conception of the city as “any space where there is human presence: through the architecture, the streets and the people” (78), with its emphasis on the interplay of people, practice, and space, rather than adhering to specific demographic or geographic parameters.

To investigate language practices in urban spaces, our study draws on the concept of the translational city, defined as “a space of heightened language awareness, where exchange is accelerated or blocked, facilitated or forced, questioned or critiqued” (Simon, “Space” 97). This theoretical framework entails two premises. Firstly, it highlights the driving forces behind the direction and the intensity of the circulation and flow of different languages, or language traffic (Simon, *Translation Sites* 5). The power structure in a society assigns the status of source language and target language in a city and pre-determines the direction of translation. For example, in a city with a requirement to present public signs in more than one official language, where the multilingual versions co-exist side by side, it is reasonable to expect one language to be produced first and then translated into other language versions. This means that one language is assigned the status of source language, and the other(s) become target languages, despite their officially equal status.

Language hierarchies are particularly relevant to newcomers to the city who have limited ability to speak the city’s dominant language. The languages

of newcomers are often inaudible or invisible unless they are required by the host society (such as in legal cases when public service interpreters are provided). In *Dangerous Multilingualism*, Blommaert et al. have discussed the minoritising and endangering effects of state glottopolitics and language-ideological processes that are inherent in multilingual countries, cities, or communities. Such power differentials shape not only cities' linguistic landscapes, but also their entire language ecologies, and they affect community relations and social cohesion. In this context, the city's dominant language functions as the source text that newcomers need to translate into their own languages, often through self-translation or intersemiotic translation—broadly understood as translation across different semiotic resources. This can include translation between verbal and non-verbal signs, as well as among non-linguistic signs such as visual, acoustic, and spatial signs (O'Halloran, Tan, and Wignell 199). Building on Cronin's argument that the migrant "condition" is that of "the translated being" (45), the same could be said of any linguistic minority, and thus communication of a minoritised self is in this sense always carried out through a process of translation.

The co-dependence of languages and space, and the practice of intersemiotic translation led to the second premise of the translation city: namely, translation as an embodied experience, anchored and enacted by a city. This shift from a linguistic to a spatial focus in translation studies not only moves the emphasis from intangible "source language space" to tangible physical settings in which translation activities take place; it also moves away from focusing on source text and targets text languages as abstract linguistic systems. Instead, this approach emphasises observable doings in everyday life in which people draw on communicative and material resources to construct their localised practices. This localised and material view of languages is informed by several approaches in applied linguistics and social sciences, such as research into linguistic landscapes (Shohamy, Rafael, and Barni), semiotic landscapes (Jaworski and Thurlow), and metrolingualism (Pennycook and Otsuji).

Studies on translation and language practices in cities often use terms including *spaces*, *places*, *sites*, and *landscapes* to refer to the geographical areas or locations which they examine. While these terms may sometimes be seen as synonyms, they carry distinct meanings that warrant clarification. Broadly speaking, *space* is a more neutral and abstract geographical area. In human geography, it is often seen as the raw material that has the potential to turn into *place* (Tuan): placemaking occurs when we "invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way" (Creswell 16).

A distinction can also be made between *space* and *sites*—the latter typically referring to specific geographical locations used or designed for particular purposes or functions. In her monograph *Translation Sites*, Simon

guides readers through various locations imbued with distinct functions and meanings, such as markets, monuments, museums, bridges, towers, and hotels. Finally, the term (linguistic) *landscapes* is used in research emphasising the visual inscriptions in city space, such as multilingual street signs (Jaworski and Thurlow 2).

Against this backdrop, a translational city approach also takes a new perspective towards the translator's role. Based on the linguistic definition of translation, only professional linguists who had mastered at least two languages were previously considered to be competent translators. However, if we resort to the idea of language as observable, localised, strategic everyday doings (Pennycook), it becomes apparent that translation is an everyday activity, and people who live in this city need to perform the role of translators—regardless of the languages that they speak, and their level of language proficiency. Translation in these cases “does not refer only to texts but is used broadly in the sense of conveying meaning between and across languages” (Strani 30).

Against this theoretical background, with new development in looking at translation and language practices, and with a view of community members as everyday translators, this project, *Edinburgh: A Translational City*, involved a collaboration with several community centres in Edinburgh to create a series of workshops as sites of translation, where language awareness is *heightened* (Simon, “Space” 97) and the traffic of languages in all directions, drawing from a range of semiotic resources, is encouraged. In this paper we evaluate one series of workshops and address three questions: (1) How are translation practices adopted by community members in the created sites of translation? (2) How do these translation practices contribute to their placemaking? (3) How does translation space as a method function as counter-translation that critiques the established structure in a city?

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CREATING TRANSLATION SPACE AS RESEARCH METHOD

To explore how the concept of translation space can be instrumental both as a theoretical concept and as a research method, this section draws on three interrelated subjects to further establish a link between placemaking, the counter-translation act, and the creative workshops.

PLACEMAKING AND LANGUAGE

As defined earlier, when we assign meaning to a space and form an emotional attachment to it, space becomes place. This process of creating a place can be literally understood as *placemaking*. This geographical understanding

of human attachment to a place is reflected in metaphorical language uses such as the phrases “to place someone” and “to know one’s place” (Jaworski and Thurlow 6). Courage emphasises that placemaking should not be confused with urban planning or studies on built environment, which primarily focus on city-wide infrastructure such as buildings and transportation systems (3). In contrast, the essence of placemaking lies in human activities and community. Notably, socially engaged art practice has emerged as both a central theme and a key tool employed in the practice of placemaking (*ibid.*).

Placemaking is the iterative, affective process whereby individuals, in their social, political, and material interactions with physical space, come to understand and experience a particular geographical location not as an indeterminate space, but as a meaningful place (Duff; Pierce, Martin, and Murphy; Ralph and Staeheli). Creswell contends that place is “the raw material for the creative production of identity” (71). Placemaking is therefore fundamentally relational (Pierce, Martin, and Murphy): the meaning of a place, and the potential attachment to it, are not inherent in the physical characteristics of a location but are rather assembled over time by the individuals who inhabit and engage with that space. The foundational premise of this project is that a sense of belonging in place is essential for newcomers to truly establish a home in a new country (Antonsich; Lewicka). Processes of homemaking and placemaking unfold through the everyday practices, including language practices, of individuals within this geographical location. For migrants who do not share the same language as the host country, engaging in bilingual or multilingual practices becomes paramount in their daily routines, often serving as both a crucial element in placemaking and as a barrier to developing a sense of place (see Collins and Slembrouck; Nic Craith).

(COUNTER) TRANSLATION SPACE

While translation is a part of our everyday lives, because of the status associated with each language and its users, translations in some directions or involving some languages are not always observable in the public space. For example, several libraries in Edinburgh organise storytelling sessions in Gaelic, Greek, Polish, or Spanish for pre-school children and their carers. While the sessions are conducted in languages other than English, they are usually brief (around 30 minutes), infrequent (once a week or even a month), and offered in only a few libraries. Therefore, these activities may go unnoticed by those not specifically looking for this information. For researchers, this means that although translations performed by certain groups of language users can be easily observed in public space,

others “come to light only through determined micro-cosmopolitan excavation” (Cronin and Simon 120). As in the above example of libraries, we need to check each library’s information page individually or obtain information from someone within the language community. Although the previous quote referred to cities which had undergone different historical language regimes and where previously spoken languages might therefore only be found buried in old buildings or historical records, the same argument is valid for the situation which interests us: that is, less powerful languages are silenced by more powerful ones in a cosmopolitan city (see Blommaert et al.; Piller).

One notable project that actively challenges the power imbalance in translation space is Marasligil’s *City in Translation*. In this project, Marasligil describes her role of translator as a “*flâneuse*, the female equivalent of *flâneur*” (79, emphasis in the original), as someone who walks, observes, and wanders through the material traces of language created by city dwellers across the urban space (ibid.), such as graffiti, shop signs, and public notices. Her workshops involve participants walking through the city space, photographing “multilingual self-expressions” in different languages and modes of presentation in the public space, and then writing about or discussing this space. Translation is realised in the first encounter with familiar or unfamiliar languages, attempting to interpret the meaning of these linguistic signs in the spatial context, and following creative works (poems, story writings) developed from the visual. Through these determined efforts to foreground languages in space, the project aims at “reclaiming urban spaces through translation” (77).

Similar projects have been carried out to establish a link between immigrants, languages, and space, although the term “translation space” may not be used. “Translanguaging space” is a term that has been used by some (e.g., Bradley et al.; Yoon-Ramirez), and others refer to “multilingual space” (Frimberger). Such terms focus less on the direction and intensity of language traffic when compared to translation space, but these projects share the aim of heightening language awareness. For instance, they provide explicit guidelines for research participants to look for different languages in the streets, or to examine which languages they encounter or use in their lives, and in what ways, highlighting the multidirectional flow of language in urban cities.

CREATING SPACE THROUGH CREATIVE METHODS

Many projects addressing translation cities adopt non-verbal creative methods. Ironically, this is because of translation problems. In a project that involves participants from diverse linguistic backgrounds, one cannot

always expect to find a common language that is equally accessible to all, or that everyone is comfortable using. A community project can target participants from a single linguistic background, which the researcher may share, or an interpreter can be hired for the group. Alternatively, all participants must communicate in the host country's dominant language. These kinds of arrangements, while proven to generate useful data (e.g., Ciribuco; Zhu, Li, and Jankowicz-Pytel), run the risk of, once again, overlooking the translation practices of some groups. That is why in this study on translation practices, we consider translation as a meaning-making approach and adopt creative workshops as methods to allow translation practices to be observed and analysed through a combination of verbal, visual, and other modes. This way, we ensure that those who speak little or none of the language of the researcher or the host country can still fully participate. Regardless of language proficiency, participants may feel too self-conscious to express deep feelings verbally, but may find communication easier when it is mediated through material processes such as choosing craft materials or colours. Brice points out that drawing, for instance, is not just image on a flat paper, but a process that can "open up further spaces of encounter, at bodily, sensory, cultural and political registers" (144–45).

For this project, multiple "sites of translation" were established across Edinburgh from 2023 to 2024, in collaboration with various community hubs including city libraries, community centres, and governmental organisations. A series of activities were organised, including a translated book exhibition, conversations with a literary translator, potluck focus groups, as well as art and craft workshops and exhibitions. This paper's focus is on one specific activity as a case study: participatory art workshops.

THE ART WORKSHOPS

Ten two-hour art workshops were jointly organised with the Edinburgh and Lothians Regional Equality Council (ELREC). The activities included drawing, clay work, and collage. ELREC has long served as a vital hub for immigrants and refugees in the city of Edinburgh, offering regular classes such as ESOL, knitting, and cooking workshops. The workshops started with the organisers introducing ELREC, the research project, and the tools and materials available. Consent forms were obtained from the participants before the activities began. Participants then freely moved around the space, selected materials, and took refreshments. The dynamics among participants varied across

workshops, influenced by factors such as linguistic backgrounds (i.e. whether they had shared languages) and their dispositions, with some participants engaging in lively discussions, while others focused on their artworks. After completing them, participants were invited to provide written descriptions of their drawings, encouraged to write in English and/or their other languages. Several participants who did not provide captions or were unable to do so during the workshop later submitted their captions to us via the group chat. Subsequently, the artworks, accompanied by their captions, were displayed in a local library as an exhibition.

LANGUAGE TRAFFIC AND AWARENESS

The primary question of interest revolves around the extent to which language awareness was heightened within the sites of translation that we established. Despite English serving as the main language of the workshop, used by the researchers in recruitment advertisements and in introducing the activities, multidirectional language traffic was observed among participants representing over 20 different languages. Individuals engaged in translanguaging, a communicative practice in which people use a range of linguistic and non-linguistic resources to communicate with one another. The workshop participants thus actively created a “translanguaging space” (Blackledge and Creese 250), where their distinct personal, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds were brought into encounter. Participants with shared languages naturally formed groups, and sometimes these became heterogeneous groupings of participants with geographically or culturally proximate languages. For example, Cantonese and Mandarin speakers with shared written characters, Indian participants conversing in various national languages, and Arabic speakers from different countries came together in clusters. Despite occasional linguistic misunderstandings and moments of guesswork, their shared cultural background helped to bridge the gaps—whether through humming a familiar song or showing a picture of their favourite food on a phone.

Liao’s sketch of language traffic in one workshop (Fig. 1) illustrates how participants used different languages in the session. This drawing, created as part of the researcher’s fieldnotes during the workshop, can also be viewed as a mapping of translation space—a cartographic translation of the researcher’s embodied experience of moving between participants, listening to their conversations, and looking at their art creations. All of these workshop activities were translated by the researcher into a spatial configuration of lines, dots, arrows, colours, and words.

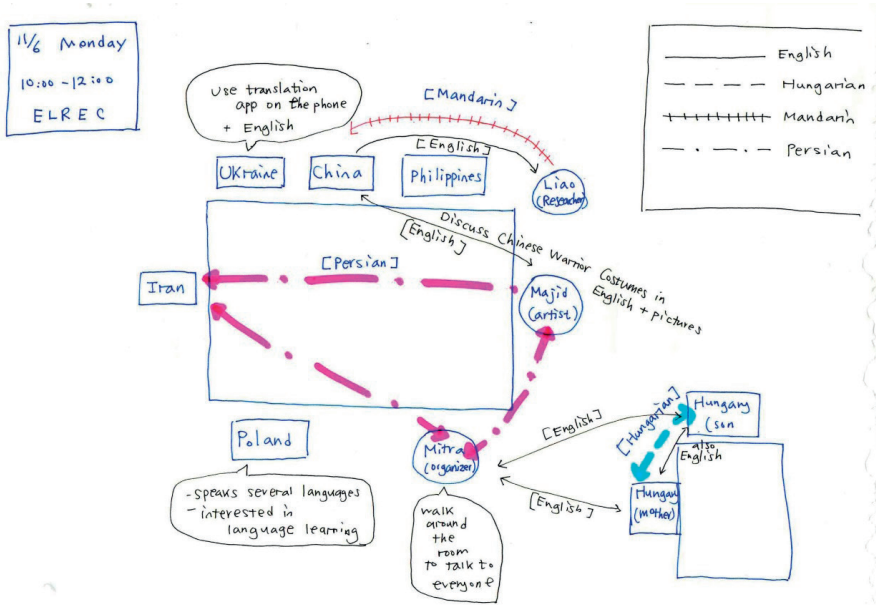


Fig. 1. Liao's map of language traffic at one workshop, 6 November 2023.
Courtesy of the authors.

In this workshop, seated at the main table alongside the two Persian-speaking event facilitators were five participants originally from China, Ukraine, the Philippines, Iran, and Poland, respectively. In addition, a mother and son from Hungary occupied another small table. English predominated at the main table, although the three Iranian participants also conversed in Persian among themselves. The Ukrainian participant, with limited English proficiency, was less engaged in the conversation but made attempts to explain her drawing—the national flower of Ukraine—with the help of a translation app on her phone and assisted her communication with gestures and facial expressions. The researcher (Liao) initially attempted to communicate with the participant from China in Mandarin. However, the participant responded in English, prompting the researcher to shift to English as she sensed that this was the participant's preferred language in the workshop. The Polish participant demonstrated fluency in English and expressed interest in learning other languages. Similarly, the Hungarian boy shared his interest in learning Japanese with the group.

At the small table shared by the Hungarian mother and son, a mix of Hungarian and English was spoken, though the boy said that he preferred to speak in English. His bilingual upbringing and passion for learning new languages was reflected in the caption which he provided for his drawing of

a sword: “Sometimes I choose to pull the sword out, sometimes I choose to leave it there and sometimes it’s hard to pull it out. I want to learn more languages, so it’ll be easier to pull out the sword. I chose the sword (as metaphor) because it represents power and knowing a language gives us power.” Both his drawing and writing strongly convey his view of speaking multiple languages as a source of strength and his “agentive capacity” (Miller) as a language learner—he felt empowered by his ability to choose which language to use in different situations.

A clear indication of heightened language awareness observed in the workshop was the natural emergence of language as a common icebreaker among participants. While group conversations were not deliberately initiated or guided, it was quite common for discussions about languages to naturally spark interaction among participants. When new participants met, they often engaged in conversations about their language backgrounds, discussing the number of languages which they speak, or how they learned languages, for example. The discussion also often revolved around the comparison of languages, including the identification of *false friends*. For instance, the Persian, Hindi, Urdu, and Arabic participants talked about *halwa* as a common food name in their languages, but through their discussions they discovered that the methods of making this food and its appearance in their cultures were different.

INTERSEMIO TIC TRANSLATION: FEELINGS OF THE LANGUAGES OF EDINBURGH

The workshops demonstrated a range of themes in art creation, reflecting participants’ positive feelings towards their first languages,¹ as well as their frustration and struggles with English as the new language. Their positive feelings toward their first languages were often expressed through natural themes like the sun, trees, and mountains, as well as national symbols such as flags and national flowers. In addition, cultural icons also appeared, including the Nile River in a Sudanese drawing, Mount Fuji in a Japanese drawing, and a simple geometric symmetrical diagram in an Iranian drawing. A series of drawings by Majid, the lead artist from the workshop, particularly reflects the social, religious, and mythical themes in Persian culture. Some participants also integrated their first languages into the visual expression—for instance,

¹ The term “first languages” here refers to the languages predominantly used by the participants prior to their relocation to the UK. In the literature they have also been referred to as mother tongues or native languages, but there has been ongoing debate surrounding power dynamics among language users associated with these terms (see O’Rourke and Pujolar). Alternatively, in the context of translation space, they can also be understood as the *source languages* of these participants.

a participant from Hong Kong often added calligraphy beside her paintings. Jaworski and Crispin argue that visual symbols help “transpose images of ‘home’ into the mediated and mediatized spaces in which [migrants] live their diasporic subjectivities” (8).

The imagery of home is a common theme in many participants’ creations, as exemplified in Fig. 2 (left). This painting by an Iranian participant uses pencil with soft colours to portray a simple farmhouse, surrounded by trees, flowers, and animals. The caption provided by the participant reads: “My mother language makes me feel at home.” The “mother language” as referred to in this label is the key to making you feel at “home”—a term that is argued to be the metaphor of a general understanding of place (Creswell 39). Being at home also evokes a sense of security, and several participants also drew castles as a symbol of security and protection in relation to using their first languages. In Fig. 2 (right), a Polish participant wrote: “My language is like an untouchable castle built on strong rocks.”

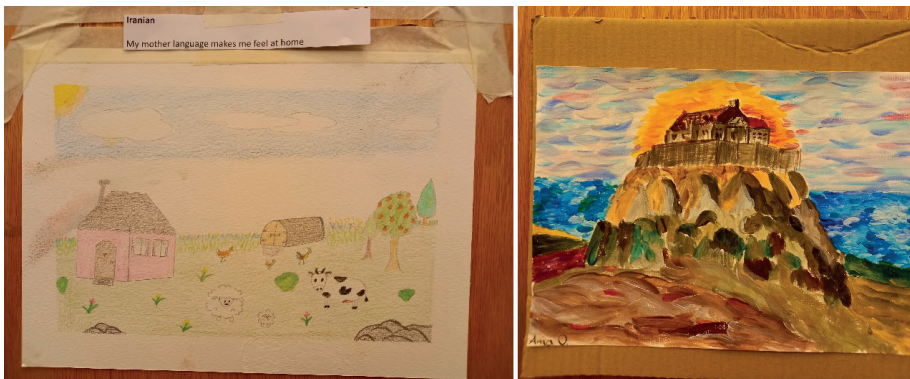


Fig. 2. Drawing of “Home” (left) and “Castle” (right), 8 December 2023.
Courtesy of the authors.

On the other hand, feelings towards the new languages are often expressed in much darker tones. Fig. 3 (left) is a painting by a Ukrainian participant with very limited command of English. Unlike the soft colour and concrete references to the objects in Fig. 2, this drawing takes a more abstract approach, using only shapes and lines, and vibrant, contrasting colours. The caption is simple, “Language barrier—language jail.” This is a deeply provocative creation that communicates linguistic isolation: the immense struggle with the language and the new life that needs to be mediated through it. The other painting by a participant from Pakistan (Fig. 3, right) is also abstract, featuring a black silhouette that appears to be suspended and locked by several chains in the centre, against a dark green

background. The caption states: “I feel more like a leader when thinking of [in] my mother language.” The writing contrasts with the confined figure in the drawing. Both paintings emphasise a sense of helplessness and lack of control. As noted by Blommaert, Creve, and Willaert, immigrants who are fluent in their first language—or languages—often feel language-less and are perceived as illiterate (49) when transitioning from one space to another. In this context, Miller argues that “space is thus neither neutral nor empty” (445).

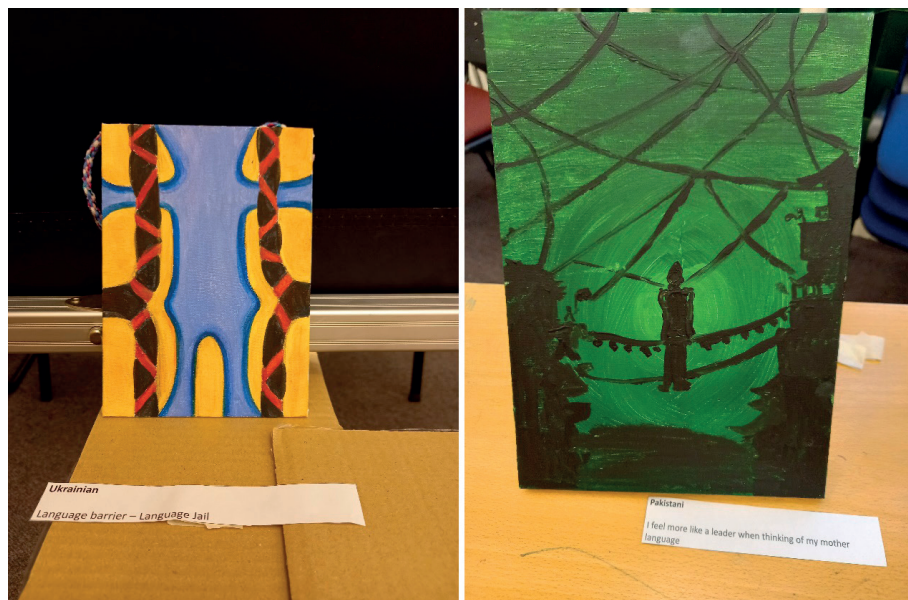


Fig. 3. Drawings of “Language Jail” (left) and “A Figure in Chains” (right), 8 December 2023. Courtesy of the authors.

As discussed earlier, these feelings towards languages may not be easily expressed in words, but they are vividly and creatively communicated through visual modes. This process of translating internal feelings into tangible artwork is illustrated through one Czech-speaking participant, who shared with us how engaging in creative clay work for two hours provided her with a deeper reflection on her experience as a foreigner living in Edinburgh. Initially, she did not have a clear idea about what she wanted to express, but through the embodied experience of using her hands to engage with various materials, her aims became clear. Her experience echoes the argument that drawing is not just “capturing a moment frozen in time,” but “an embodied physical act influenced by the artist’s emotions, perceptions and experiences” (Kearns et al. 116).

PLACEMAKING: LINKING THE PAST TO THE PRESENT

Imagery of home and visual symbols such as non-Latin scripts, national flags, and emblems not only reflect immigrants' nostalgia towards the past; bringing these symbols into new spaces also allows them "to claim these urban spaces as 'their own' —to make the foreign and distant, familiar and present" (Jaworski and Crispin 8). The creative artwork provides us with a rich insight into how participants anchor themselves in this new place through their past. A Cantonese-speaking participant simply drew two tomatoes and wrote that these can be used to make either tomato-and-egg stir-fry or borscht soup. This simple drawing demonstrates how food items and foodways are "vital aspect[s] of material culture for migrants and asylum seekers as [they] can help maintain social and cultural links to their home country and preserve cultural memory" (Todorova 89), that is, linking the past and present.

In Fig. 4, a second-generation British-born participant from an Indian family brought a Hindi textbook from her childhood. She then sketched a bicycle in a garden, decorated with some Hindi characters. In this drawing, the bicycle serves as a means of transportation, carrying the past (represented by the Hindi characters) into the present (her home garden). The Hindi characters in this picture are simultaneously verbal, visual, and affective. As she painted during the workshop, the participant shared amusing stories with us about the challenges she faced while learning characters as a girl, bringing her childhood emotions into the translation space.



Fig. 4. A drawing of "Languages, Garden, and Bicycle," 8 December 2023.
Courtesy of the authors.

The past may also be linked to the present through a historical connection between the home country and the UK, as demonstrated by the creations of several participants from Hong Kong. In one session, we observed how a participant connected the past with the present through football, specifically, his longstanding support for Liverpool FC, dating back to his time in Hong Kong. His caption reads: “As a Hongkonger who was born in the 1960s, Liverpool Club naturally became my favourite team. Liverpool used to be the team that had collected all major trophies in the 1980s & 1990s. . . . For us, Liverpool has a strong link with Hong Kong people.” Football is the vital bridge that connects his past to the present (a similar discussion on how football functions as a complex semiotic system in translating the daily lives of asylum seekers can also be found in Ciribuco). It is noteworthy that this participant, who had received a British education and was immersed in British culture from childhood in Hong Kong, had a higher level of English than other Hong Kong participants attending the workshops regularly. As a result, he served as an interpreter and “spokesperson” for the group.

Overall, the twenty hours of workshops involved more than 50 participants from a range of linguistic backgrounds, engaging in multidirectional language exchanges within the workshop spaces. As a form of intersemiotic translation, their art creations give us insights into their linguistic and placemaking practices.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The *Edinburgh: A Translational City* project contributed to our understanding of translation and counter-translational practices in an agonistic space where languages compete to be heard. To answer the first research question on how *translation practices* are adopted by community members in the created sites of translation, a range of translation practices, in its broadest sense, were observed. The ELREC participants identified their common languages as lingua franca, and some interpreted from and into English for other participants. Communication was also facilitated through mobile translation apps, drawings, and body gestures. Creative examples of intersemiotic translation were noted, including visual artworks that express feelings for languages; food and sports that connect immigrants’ past and present; and material objects like childhood language textbooks that visualise competing languages in the translation space.

The second question was how translation practices contributed to *placemaking*. Creating boundaries is a central aspect of placemaking, and that was evident in the art workshop (Fig. 1), when the researcher (Liao) attempted to speak Mandarin with one participant, but they insisted on

speaking English. For many workshop participants, placemaking implied creating a protected and bounded territory of safe language practices, linguistic freedom, and justice (Van Parijs). Art workshop participants drew castles to illustrate the safety and protection of their first languages, for example. A castle is also a fortress; a military or defence symbol, implying that an enemy threatens those inside it. These participants' drawings, which strongly depict their first language as home or as a protected space, are also an example of setting linguistically constituted boundaries to counter the hegemony of dominant languages and their spaces. By constructing their own, personal linguistic boundaries, which do not conform to the expectations of the host society, the participants establish a space of translation which becomes a place of dynamic, non-conforming, and reclaimed language use.

Affect is another key component of placemaking; bodies are affected by place, but the affective states encountered in a particular place also contribute to how this is conceptualised and experienced in future (Duff). The artworks created within the ELREC project demonstrate that participants experienced their engagement with translation practices as deeply affective. By actively negotiating practices of translation, participants negotiated their affective experience of the translation space, establishing the horizon of possibilities there: and although those possibilities include the sense of being in "language jail" and bound by chains, they also involve connection, creativity, and resistance, as exemplified by the Hungarian boy's sword, which he can choose to use to defend himself. Finally, to answer the third research question on how translation space functions as counter-translation that critiques the established structure in a city, the art workshops created translation spaces that encouraged participants to explore alternative ways of engaging with, and counter-translating, the multilingual city. Rather than simply translating the city from English into their own languages, participants from diverse linguistic backgrounds were invited to use creative methods to break language barriers—through drawing, feeling, and imagining. The various art and craft activities in ELREC, for example, supported participants to incorporate these experiences into their ongoing processes of affective placemaking. This study therefore contributes a multimodal perspective that is often overlooked in literature on translation spaces which relies predominantly on verbal methods.

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A Dramaturgy of Translation: The Brussels City Theatre as a Site of Negotiation between Language Policy and Practice

ABSTRACT

State-funded city theatres play an important role in keeping a finger on the pulse of society. As porous institutions that act as meeting places between artists and citizens, they can present themselves as reflexive or subversive voices. The combination of Brussels' idiosyncratic sociolinguistic situation and its artist-driven performing arts landscape provides an exceptional context for encounter between the wealth of language communities and heterogeneous audiences. In this article, I examine how the Royal Flemish Theatre (KVS) uses this bottom-up dynamic to reflect the city's urban multilingualism both on stage and in its outreach strategies. I consider the institution's exemplary role in structurally embedding a trilingual translation policy, and its latitude in relation to politically conditioned requirements in a city where Dutch is increasingly becoming a minority language. This way, I demonstrate that, far beyond catering for the Flemish minority, KVS's language and translation policy, as well as its principles, align with a future-oriented political project based in actual language practices. Furthermore, I highlight the particular role of the in-house "city dramaturg," who probes the urban fabric and guards the institution's vision while navigating the conditions imposed by funding bodies. It is argued that, by destabilising long-standing linguistic and cultural relations, KVS functions as a translation site, a shared space of debate to negotiate language relations and translation practices.

Keywords: performing arts, translation policy, Brussels, surtitling, translation site, institutional dramaturgy.



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“Spaces can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice.”

(hooks 23)

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Structurally funded by the Flemish government, city theatres in Flanders are entrusted with the task of taking the pulse of society. As they are expected to be porous institutions which function as places of encounter between artists and citizens, they can assert themselves as reflexive or subversive voices. At the same time, the specific artistic ecosystem of the Flemish and Belgian capital, Brussels, is situated in a highly complex sociolinguistic environment. As a consequence of multiple migration waves and the presence of the headquarters of the EU, Brussels is confronted with a fascinating tension between its traditional, official bilingualism and the multilingual urban reality. Although it has moved far beyond the historical Flemish-French duality, the city's bi-communitarian institutional organisation and concomitant language policies, which also govern its cultural institutions, are out of tune with the current sociodemographic reality.

In *Cities in Translation*, Sherry Simon offers tools for how to conceive of cities which have historically housed more than one linguistic community. She investigates the potential for creative interaction between languages in linguistically divided cities, marked by a degree of conflict between competing languages. In contrast with the bi- or multilingual city, her concept of the more dynamic “translational city” emphasises the points of contact and mutual efforts to communicate, rather than the parallel presence of multiple languages in the urban sphere: it considers the “multilingual, multi-ethnic urban space as a translation space, where the focus is not on multiplicity but on interaction” (*Cities* 7). Simon recognises how translation in the form of an encounter between language communities encourages urban cohesion. Translation sites, then, “crystallize language relations in time and space, defining specific moments of exchange or confrontation” (*Translation Sites* 5). Across the divisions present in historically bilingual cities, Simon advocates a uniting view that overcomes the duality in the shape of a polymorphous “third space,” defined as “the urban zones and forms of expression which cut across and destabilize the old divisions” (*Cities* 119). This ultimately “disturbing” and “altering” third space “not only allows for representations of new communities but at the same time modifies the long-standing polarities which have defined the city” (148).

This article argues that the Royal Flemish Theatre (KVS) in Brussels casts itself as such a third space by sensing the pulse of the city and challenging its rigid language-political structures. By examining the role of

KVS in representing language interactions in the urban metropole, it explains how the theatre utilises the artist-driven dynamic of the Flemish performing arts sector to ensure adequate reflection of urban multilingualism on stage as well as in communication and public outreach. An important role is reserved for the theatre's city dramaturg, whose objective it is to explore the urban fabric as well as to secure these artist-driven dynamics. They act as curators of language diversity, while navigating the conditions imposed by funding bodies and the institution's artistic vision. Their role is to encourage the theatre to function as a shared space for every citizen by challenging linguistic hierarchies and promoting the dialogue between languages.

Firstly, the essay demonstrates how the pacification model underlying language legislation in Brussels reveals its limits. Then, the outlines of a political proposal for the promotion of multilingualism in Brussels are discussed. Following this, it is argued that KVS's language and translation policy as well as practice both expand and challenge top-down language management, acting as a counter-current to the monolingual policy imposed on Flemish cultural institutions. An interview with KVS dramaturg Gerardo Salinas sheds light on the incentives behind the institution's artistic and organisational program.

THE LINGUISTICALLY DIVIDED CITY

With almost 180 nationalities represented and, after Dubai, the highest percentage of residents born outside the country, Brussels is considered the second most superdiverse¹ city in the world, resulting in an estimated use of 100 different languages (André et al. 199). However, the present sociolinguistic make-up of Brussels is rooted in a long history of language tensions. While the Brussels-Capital Region (BCR) is officially bilingual (French/Dutch²), the lingua franca is de facto French. The rapid Francisation, since the 1920s, of the originally monolingual Dutch city effectively reduced Dutch to a minority language. The implementation of language legislation that secured the equal status of Dutch resulted in bilingual institutions as well as parallel institutions managed by the Flemish

¹ The concept of "superdiversity" was coined by Steven Vertovec to denote how diversification processes condition social patterns and stratification. As a consequence mostly of migration, social configurations have become more complex than ever before, causing the predictability of sociocultural features among people with migration background to dissolve.

² Note that the term "Dutch" refers to the standard language for the entire Dutch language area, including the Netherlands, Flanders, Suriname, and the Netherlands Antilles. "Flemish," then, refers to the regional variant as spoken in Belgium.

and the French Communities, respectively. The current political model adopted in Brussels to ease the tensions between the two traditional language communities is what sociolinguist Rudi Janssens dubbed the “pacification model” (“Language Policies”). A result of multiple state reforms, it assumes official language use as the central political dividing line.

Jan Blommaert explains how the language-ideological debate in Belgium, as part of a larger democratisation process, resulted in the transformation from bilingualism into juxtaposed monolingualisms, whereby Brussels increasingly formed an “unsolvable problem.” He criticises an institutional sociolinguistic regime that is at odds with sociolinguistic reality. Not only does it deny bilingualism as a social fact, it also selectively rejects forms of linguistic diversity. This intolerance, Blommaert argues, is manifested by systematically presenting the “plebeian” multilingualism of labour migrants as a threat to social cohesion, an obstacle to integration and social mobility to be combated, while commending the “elite” English-other language multilingualism of highly-skilled migrants as a mark of social mobility. The bias towards English as an accepted non-official language in official domains is apparent from the availability of English on the Flemish government’s website, alongside Belgium’s official languages, and the existence of English higher education programmes.

In the 21st century, the number of Dutch speakers in Brussels is still declining. The BRIO language barometer surveys, held in Brussels at regular intervals between 2001 and 2024,³ testify to this trend: compared to the beginning of the century, knowledge of Dutch had halved by 2018 (Saeys). Despite a small growth again by 2024, partly explained by a recent influx of Dutch speakers from the Flemish Region, the latest barometer showed that more respondents reported competence in English than in Dutch (*ibid.*). French, Dutch, and English are considered the city’s contact languages, as they fulfil a significant communicative role regardless of their status as home languages (Janssens, *Meertaligheid* 33). However, the survey revealed that, by 2024, 10.5% percent of the population is not competent in any of these contact languages, a number which has more than tripled since 2001 (Saeys). Even acquiring the two official languages is shown to be an arduous task, hampered by the linguistic organisation of education, which strictly distinguishes French-speaking and Dutch-speaking schools in the city. This arrangement is perceived as a missed opportunity for stimulating bilingual proficiency (Meylaerts, “Bilingual City” 103).

Following Spolsky’s model, language policy takes shape through a triadic interplay of language practices, beliefs, and management. Practices

³ The results are based on a sample of 2,500 respondents. Language competence is measured through self-reporting.

are the observable behaviours and choices that people make; beliefs relate to the values assigned to certain varieties, associated with identification and group belonging; and management is the explicit effort made by an authoritative group to modify the first two elements. Setting out from Spolsky's statement that the effectiveness of language policy depends on its consistency with practices and beliefs, Meylaerts et al. reveal the lack of alignment of official translation policy in Brussels with pertinent and pragmatic community-based translation needs. Contending that language policy and translation policy go hand in hand, Meylaerts finds that monolingual, territory-based language policy and the communitarian separation of institutions in Belgium engenders a discouragement of translation ("Urban Super-Diversity"). Especially in the domain of education, she highlights the fact that Flemish language policy, which insists on the learning of Dutch as a means of integration, endorses a policy of non-translation, effectively forcing pupils into a monolingual mould (464).

Today, the city oscillates between its traditional, official bilingualism and the current multilingual urban reality. It is clear that the institutionalised pacification model underlying both language and translation policy is inconsistent with practices on multiple levels. Belgian language legislation dating back to 1966 causes a fissure between a rigid bilingual (or juxtaposed monolingual) policy and unbounded multilingual practice. Adequate policy is required to accommodate the superdiversity that is increasingly impacting communication in the urban metropole.

THE PROMOTION OF MULTILINGUALISM

Various initiatives to better align policy with practice have been put in place. With over 100 languages distributed over 180 nationalities, Brussels serves as a laboratory for the fostering of tolerance and mutual understanding between cultural communities. In 2019, Sven Gatz was appointed Brussels Minister for the Promotion of Multilingualism, a first for Europe. Gatz made the case that multilingualism was crucial for the success of future generations in the region (3). To this end, he proposed an ambitious mission: by the age of 18, every Brussels citizen should be trilingual (*ibid.*). By extension, he advocated the 3+1 approach, promoting acquisition of the city's three contact languages—Dutch, French, and English—but allowing due recognition for other languages spoken at home. This project fosters the horizontality of language legitimacy and reasserts the expansion of language repertoires as an asset. It is no coincidence that this vision aligns with EU language policy. The EU prioritises the protection of linguistic diversity and, in addition, promotes individual multilingualism, with the goal of each citizen obtaining "practical

knowledge” in at least two languages other than their mother tongue (Vogl). The 3+1 approach as proposed by Gatz aimed to accommodate this two-tier aspiration: multilingualism, considered crucial for social cohesion and mobility, is stimulated, while linguistic diversity is preserved.

Since 2020, Brussels has a Council for Multilingualism. Its mission is to bring “all relevant players to the table in order to develop a clear action plan on multilingualism” by actively contributing to the domains of policy advice, policy support, and information exchange (“Brussels Council for Multilingualism”). It provides concrete (non-binding) recommendations on language policy to the different government levels, calling for both the stimulation of linguistic diversity and the accommodation of translation, with the explicit double objective to better serve a linguistically diverse population, as well as to render the population more multilingual (Brusselse Raad voor Meertaligheid), in line with EU language policy. For example, it is recommended that the Flemish Community should stimulate the use of the home language(s) as a stepping stone to the acquisition of the language of instruction in school (2). The BCR is advised to expand social interpreting services (such as Brussel Onthaal/Bruxelles Accueil) and invest in multilingual public services, encouraging the use of other languages for communication wherever it is deemed useful (4). Furthermore, an explicit call is made to the governments of the Flemish and French Communities for a non-binary culture that supports bi-communal cultural initiatives which defy the current binary structure. These recommendations, based on the EU’s two-fold policy and in accordance with Gatz’s project, seek to mitigate the tension between, on the one hand, stringent communitarian language management that discourages translation and, on the other, the socio-economic needs on the ground.

LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION POLICY AT KVS

The Flemish performing arts are internationally renowned for their organic, bottom-up approach and democratic funding procedures. The particular architecture of the performing arts scene represents an integrated and multi-layered ecosystem with a strong bond between artists and audiences, whose key features are modularisation and decentralisation (Janssens et al.). This artistic ecosystem consists of a finely branched web of infrastructure, created by the interplay between several policy areas, such as heritage and education, and policy levels, such as the Community-level and the local level. The well-developed and networked infrastructure available serves to label Brussels as an “artistic metropolis” with laboratories for artistic research and experimentation, and a strong network of community centres with a social

function, which connect the neighbourhoods with the arts through cultural participation (De Spiegelaere et al.). The Flemish government has nurtured and sustained the scene ever since the first Performing Arts Decree in 1993, through democratic funding procedures that grant maximal freedom to artists and artistic directors, the allocation of which is in the hands of an independent assessment committee consisting of experts in the arts, to ensure that the government interferes minimally with the distribution of this funding. Structural subsidies ensure a continuity of support for companies and arts centres, leaving space for daring experimentation and failure, which grant opportunities to young and emerging new voices in the landscape. This artist-driven approach is embodied by a custom-made attitude enabling structures to be put in place according to the artist's or company's individual needs, rather than imposing normative output standards (Janssens et al. 38–39). The scene serves as a junction thanks to its strong connectivity, accessibility, and rich infrastructure, supported by well-developed internationalisation (207). As a result, the number of international co-productions quadrupled between 2000 and 2016 (48). The consequent touring opportunities reinforce the scene's international visibility and appeal, attracting artists from all over the world, and, in turn, adding to the city's ethno-cultural diversity. The combination of the city's specific sociolinguistic situation and the multi-layered performing arts ecosystem provides an exceptional context for encounter between the wealth of language communities among artists and heterogeneous audiences alike.

KVS uses this bottom-up, artist-driven dynamic to reflect the city's urban multilingualism both on stage and in its outreach strategies. The theatre's current management agreement with the Flemish Community demonstrates its commitment to engaging with this opportunity: "We are a Dutch-language theatre. This is our DNA and our strength. Yet KVS does not shy away from multilingualism, as it is undeniably an enrichment for artists and audiences alike. Moreover, it is the most natural way to connect with our environment" (*Beheersovereenkomst* 4, translation mine). This vision has resulted not only in increasingly multilingual performance texts, but also in systematically trilingual programme brochures and online communication in the city's contact languages since the turn of the millennium. Belgian language legislation prescribes that institutions supported by the Flemish Community should provide full communication in Dutch. Therefore, KVS is legally obliged to offer a Dutch translation if another language is spoken in a production. Moreover, management administrator Moon Shik Vergeylen points out that the provision of surtitles in one or two languages for every in-house production has become part of the theatre's accessibility policy since 2007 (personal interview), as is reflected in the management agreement: "Our language policy is always inclusive, open and welcoming.

Therefore, every performance is subtitled in two languages. It is a service our audience has come to expect from us, which attracts many people with different language backgrounds to KVS and leads many Flemish artists to new (international) audiences" (*Beheersovereenkomst* 4, translation mine).

KVS is required to provide translation into Dutch for every staged performance, not only to comply with language legislation imposed by its Flemish funder, but also with its primary mission of representing the Flemish minority and its heritage. This raises the question of who exactly is implied in this category. The notably small segment of monolingual Dutch speakers in Brussels—only 0.8% of them speak neither French nor English (Saey)—does not constitute a sufficiently viable range of potential visitors. Therefore, KVS's primary target group is assumed to master at least one other contact language in addition to Dutch. Another factor indicating the eroding delineation of this targeted Flemish minority is self-reported group identification. A survey carried out among Brussels citizens reveals a preference for identification with geographical determiners over language-related ones. That is, citizens identify significantly more with attributes such as "Brussels," their local municipality, "Belgium," or "Europe," than with a concept related to one of the traditional language communities (Janssens, "Language Policies" 31–32). Within the latter category, identification with the concept "Dutch speaker" [*Nederlandstalige*] is significantly preferred over "Fleming" [*Vlaming*], a term which has not only cultural, but also specific (nationalistic) political connotations. Indeed, residents whose only original home language is Dutch also identify less and less frequently as "Flemish" (Janssens, *Meertaligheid* 110–11). Due to increased multilingual competence and shifts in indicators of group belonging, the Flemish minority, based on a shared identity and cultural heritage, is increasingly becoming a heterogeneous group, a segment of the population difficult to identify.

Therefore, despite its name and the subsidiary prerequisites, KVS has long ceased appealing predominantly to the Dutch-speaking segment of Brussels. KVS insists on creating theatre in relation with the city, in which the spectator can recognise herself. In doing so, it often explicitly targets youngsters, a generation for whom everyday multilingualism and the use of English are considered a matter of course (Vergeylen). Hence, the choice to add French and English subtitles is for the sake of attracting audiences and for promoting Belgium's international appeal, but is neither imposed nor financially supported by the Flemish funder. Translation into French is not at the request of the city of Brussels, as the institution is only subsidised by the Flemish Community Commission (VGC) in Brussels and the Flemish branches of Brussels funds. At present, the Flemish government confers the responsibility for implementing translation into a language other than Dutch on the theatres themselves.

A HISTORY OF MULTILINGUAL POLICY: INSTITUTIONAL DRAMATURGY

KVS's cultural diversity has not always been as categorical as it is today, and has faced resistance throughout its history. The seeds of the theatre's multilingual communication and translation policy had been sown when theatre collective Dito'Dito merged into the artistic core group of KVS in 2005 under the artistic direction of Jan Goossens. Goossens reformed the city theatre in order to attract many new local audiences. Before his arrival, KVS was experiencing an existential crisis, no longer able to validate its *raison d'être* as the nationalist, conservative monolingual theatre that continually reperformed, or added to, the "national" repertoire. Theatre scholar Peter Boenisch recounts how—since the turn of the millennium, and under the influence of socio-cultural movements that questioned institutional power structures underlying artistic production—several European city and state theatres started to rethink and rebuild their practices from within. Under the heading of "institutional dramaturgy," Boenisch examines the value systems—both aesthetic and ethical—that guided the course of KVS in Brussels. During the theatre's relocation to Bottelarij (1999–2004), a building in the middle of the Molenbeek district, predominantly inhabited by people with a migration background, KVS produced so-called "allochtone theatre" by, with, and for the local uprooted communities. Goossens replaced the permanent ensemble of actors with a more diverse group of performers, not always formally trained (Boenisch 75), who crossed disciplinary boundaries and whose aesthetics were often influenced by urban performance genres. Moreover, he handed the programming over to resident artists, to counter the permeation of institutional conventions. Boenisch captures the changes that KVS underwent during Goossens's tenure as follows: "From promoting Flemish national culture, KVS turned into a postcolonial contact zone that also stimulated wider debates on diversity and global arts within mainstream Flemish theatre" (76). By reorganising the institution from within in a critically self-reflexive manner, as well as by welcoming playwriting and theatre practices from other regions, multilingualism came as an organic consequence. This also resulted in remarkably more heterogeneous audiences. Under Goossens's leadership, from 2001 to 2015, 35% of the audience were eventually non- or non-native Dutch speakers (*ibid.*). In 2016, Michael De Cock succeeded Goossens as artistic director and continued this path unabatedly. An audience survey for the 2021–22 season indicated that, out of the three languages of communication, 60% of visitors primarily engaged with Dutch, a quarter with French, and the remainder with English (Vergeylen).

The shift from a systematically upheld conservation and consecration of a(n illusory) singular and monocultural heritage to promoting cultural plurality attests to the institution's awareness of its own influence, canonical power, and accountability. Through a continual practice of introspection, this institutional dramaturgy functions as a critical lens through which to evaluate and redirect the institutional dynamics accordingly. With a view to epistemological democracy, KVS presents itself as a space for the plurilogical renegotiation of meanings, whereby the theatre audience operates, in the words of Boenisch, as an assembly "to jointly reflect on the present" (79)—one that seeks not only to mirror society, but also to propose imagined alternatives. The theatre thus acts as a laboratory, a testing ground.

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THE POROUS INSTITUTION: CITY DRAMATURGY

Rather than proposing alternative realities, current house dramaturg Gerardo Salinas aims to expose the city fabric and bring it inside the theatre walls, in order to ensure that the programme adequately reflects the socio-ethnic reality *extra muros*. Originally from Argentina, Salinas has been active in the Belgian cultural field for over 20 years. In his early artistic career, as a newly arrived migrant, he was forced into the pigeonholes of "socio-artistic work" and "diversity" (personal interview). Salinas noticed how the wealth of (his) stories and experiences present in the city operated separately from one another, thereby upholding a degree of ethnic and artistic ghettoisation. He contended that if, instead of roots or descent, dramaturgs would foreground the city upon which artists mutually drew, this city would soon be viewed as a shared space used in various ways all at once. In response, he abandoned the imposed label of "diversity" in favour of "urbanity," creating his own tools to define his practice in an attempt to expand the theatre canon with the dynamics already present in the city. This not only implies reshuffling the concept of ethno-cultural diversity, Salinas remarks, but diversity in artistic career paths, too. By promoting the representational distribution of artists that have followed tracks other than the established—and largely academy-based—professional ones, KVS subverts the common understanding of the arts sector as restricted to the registered, usually subsidised corpus of artistic practices, and gives the floor to those from the underground scene. In doing so, it allows for experimentation, and challenges the established frames of reference that dictate what qualifies as art and who can claim the attribute of "artist" (*ibid.*).

The call for dramaturgs to safeguard and stimulate the dynamic exchange between the fabric of the city and the performing arts was already voiced in Marianne Van Kerkhoven's plea to acknowledge that

“the theatre is in the city and the city is in the world and its walls are of skin.” To this end, Salinas started operating under the self-attributed label of “city dramaturg,” a function he currently performs jointly with Dina Dooreman. He contends that it is the city dramaturg’s task to stimulate the dramatic and narrative power of a particular city, secure its pluralism, and ensure that the institution renders itself porous, by giving agency to a variety of groups (“Heeft de stad een dramaturg nodig?”). This practice is locally situated, tailored onto, and arising from the specific urban character. It is actionable, as it unfolds through practice: by responding to its environment, it embeds itself in the urban fabric to which it relates. Consequently, Salinas is wary of any assumptions that a city dramaturg “imposes” alternative realities, attempting to reshape the city rather than echoing it (personal interview). Hence, this dramaturgical body aims to act not so much as a compass, indicating direction, but rather as a monitor, taking the pulse of the city as it is actually composed.

The shift of focus from ethnic diversity in favour of urbanity befits a wider practice of decolonisation of the public space, important aspects of which are language use, selection, and availability. Therefore, it is important to examine whose story is being told in whose language. For example, in the production *Who’s Tupac?* (2021), of which Salinas supervised the dramaturgy, one voice speaks Quechua, while another responds in Yoruba. Salinas explains how a connection between Latin America and Africa is created by making these seemingly unaffiliated languages interact, thus generating an unexpected exchange. Decolonisation is also reflected in the curation. For the *Proximamente* festival, Salinas handed the helm over to curators in Latin America, who were given free rein in composing the programme. Producing and programming linguistically mixed performances,⁴ then, is not so much an aim in itself as an organic consequence of the commitment to stage the underrepresented urban art forms practised by underrepresented urban communities.

The city theatre’s bold attitude and subversive agenda have not been unanimously commended. In 2005, accused of being too diverse and insufficiently Flemish, KVS became the target of a culture war (van der Kris). Clearly, in the wake of Goossens’s cultural policy, KVS could no longer be considered a monolithic Flemish beacon in the centre of the city. Opponents demanded that there be adequate political interference in the institution’s programming,⁵ to ensure its Flemish character. In an

⁴ In the programme brochure of the season 2024–25, 8 out of 22 KVS (co-) productions were performed in a language other than Dutch, French, or English; or were language-labelled as “multi,” which indicates the use of more than two different languages.

⁵ Since 1972, the Cultuurpact prescribes that the executive boards of the subsidised Flemish cultural institutions should adequately reflect the politico-ideological equilibria

open letter, the theatre replied that “KVS is as Flemish as Brussels can be” by proposing a thoroughly urban project which embraces the entire city of Brussels, and makes the institution’s walls as transparent as possible (Goossens et al.). Goossens proclaimed that KVS’s attitude was one of a (Flemish) minority realising that we are all becoming minorities: the city’s dominant French, too, was slowly experiencing pressure from English and Arabic (qtd. in Coussens). This is still reflected in today’s programming. Goossens even went so far as to claim that the government actively sought to sabotage the rapprochement between the Flemish and the French in Brussels (ibid.). This leads us back to the difficult point raised at the beginning: communal politics lags behind when it comes to institutional regulations. The Flemish city theatre, then, casts itself as a conciliator among the many language communities present in Brussels. It does so by offering resistance to a top-down imposed language policy, and by functioning as a site of negotiation between this stringent policy and the state of affairs in practice.

The theatre is no longer a physically or socially separated centre of cultural “bildung,” but aims to be a place for everyone by embracing knowledge of the city and the citizens themselves. This focus on the local has become a central concern for the renewed city theatre project, which “fits within a larger history of the institutionalization of socially engaged art within the public theatre’s curatorial turn, transforming theatres into agents of exchange and mediums of communication for larger societal discussions” (Climenthaga 60), such as that about language. However, performing this socially engaged function runs the risk of turning the institutional dramaturg into a gatekeeper in their own right, who curates urban socio-ethnic (and thus linguistic) representation. Dewinter et al. note that the underlying motivations of such arts intermediaries may have an important impact “upon notions of what, and thereby who, is legitimate, desirable and worthy” (98). Although it is an institution founded for the Flemish minority in Brussels and subsidised by the Flemish government, KVS does not function as a mouthpiece of government ideology. However, the institution must carefully navigate bottom-up interests from the artists, top-down forces informed by policy priorities, and its own socially oriented agenda.

(“7 basisregels”). Political parties may nominate candidates for representation. In 2024, this led to tensions between artistic director Michael De Cock and right-wing conservative politician Filip Brusselmans, who maintained that funding should be revoked from cultural institutions engaging in politics. Although the funding of KVS depends on the Flemish government, the allocation of grants is in the hands of an independent assessment committee consisting of experts in the arts. Therefore, despite political tensions, the institution’s funding should not be jeopardised.

THE THEATRICAL SPACE AS A SITE OF TRANSLATION

The aforementioned dramaturgical approach results in a specific institutional dramaturgy of translation, with the intention of promoting inclusivity. However, translation scholar Louise Ladouceur has highlighted the political implications of using surtitles in minority cultural spaces. She notes how the use of English surtitles in Franco-Canadian theatre, a space traditionally designed to defend the French minority culture, creates an asymmetrical treatment of language in contrast with English-majority theatres that do not provide French surtitles. Although implemented to attract a larger audience, the translation can be viewed as a transgression that undermines the integrity of the cultural experience of those for whom the original work was intended. Accordingly, the provision of French surtitles at KVS may be perceived as contributing to undermining the Dutch language in Brussels.

Similarly, studying theatre practices in Berlin, theatre scholar Ulrike Garde questions whether making multilingualism accessible through surtitles is in fact conducive to an intercultural encounter, or whether it actually encourages the exclusion of certain groups, including non-privileged ones (“Multilingualism”). She points to the “privilege of access” that the use of certain languages and the provision of translation into certain languages may engender, and how this reinforces language hierarchies; some languages enjoy more symbolic capital than others, either in a local context or globally. Elsewhere, she argues that by providing smooth access through surtitles, the “foreign” is effectively absorbed, leading to the assimilation of linguistic diversity (“Unfamiliar Languages”). She maintains that linguistic policy frameworks set by funding agencies and programming institutions are responsible for enforcing maximal linguistic transparency. However, Garde states that, by taking a stance towards such pressure, theatres may serve as soft powers in the negotiation of language relationships and the representation of diverse linguistic communities (*ibid.*). She contends that the apparatus of the theatre-as-soft-power has the objective of shifting conventions and opening up debate, which may in turn challenge established assumptions and nationalist ideologies. When dramaturgical incentives conflict with institutional policy, they may act as subversive forces in this debate. Through its approach towards multilingualism, the theatre venue becomes a physical space of encounter where public discussions about identity and belonging are instigated.

With regard to translation, KVS dramaturg Gerardo Salinas is adamant that the spectator ought to abandon the urge to grasp a performance’s

every word, by accepting a certain level of “non-understanding” (personal interview). This mirrors the experience of strolling through Brussels, where linguistic plurality leaves many utterances obscured. One who does not speak the language, Salinas contends, will extract a different reading of the performance. Hence, not every phrase uttered on stage requires translation. The spectator, Salinas believes, has to accept the fragmentary nature of the city and tie together the loose ends herself to confer meaning upon a performance within her own frame of reference. Since the theatrical space is envisaged as reflective of the city, linguistic diversity is desired not only on stage, but also in the auditorium. A culturally heterogeneous audience may lead the spectator to realise that someone else might understand something that s/he does not. It is key to ensuring a complementarity of understanding among different segments of the audience by means of disparate frames of reference. KVS is strongly aware of the richness of linguistic diversity and is therefore wary of assimilation into the dominant language(s). It seeks to strike a balance between being as accessible as possible and allowing a certain level of opacity in order to preserve a speaker’s identity.

In doing so, the theatre highlights the horizontality of language legitimacy. The provision of access must be warranted in the language of the Flemish community which the theatre primarily serves. However, it must also take into account the fact that language communities are not segregated in this linguistically diverse city, and that spectators often attend performances with companions who may speak, read, or understand languages other than their own. In this way, KVS’s decolonising dramaturgical course challenges dominant conceptions about translation, in favour of a model attending to the cultural heterogeneity inherent to postcolonial societies:

Dominant models . . . see translation as a form of mediation between two monolingual communities, but the multilingualism and cultural hybridity of most postcolonial contexts challenge this assumption. Translation is not simply a meeting of a self and an other, mediated by a translator. Often it is a way for a heterogeneous culture or nation to define itself, to come to know itself, to come to terms with its own hybridity, and to construct a national identity. (Tymoczko 197–98)

By providing translation into the contact languages, KVS establishes itself as a postcolonial contact zone, a translation site allowing for linguistic confrontation and exchange, in order to dismantle the fictitious segregation of language communities, and welcome younger and more ethnoculturally diverse spectators all at once.

CONCLUSION

The Royal Flemish Theatre articulates a multilingual vision by implementing a trilingual communication and translation policy in the city's contact languages while embracing other minority languages. Besides the economical incentive, it does so in compliance with its mission as a city theatre. An institution originally founded to accommodate the project of Flemish emancipation in Brussels, it recognises that the Flemish minority for which it caters is increasingly becoming a heterogeneous group. Therefore, it extends this emancipatory role to the struggle facing other minorities and communities.

To achieve this, it deploys a democratic performing arts ecosystem to monitor and reflect the city's true composition. Urban art forms are brought to the fore in the programme and are accorded a proper place alongside well-established and institutionalised theatre practices. The fragmentary nature of these practices is reflected in the seemingly haphazard way in which languages are mixed on stage. The city theatre welcomes the urban linguistic fabric into its artistic repertoire and leverages its position of power and commensurate budget to amplify the urban artistic breeding grounds. In this way, it functions as a highly permeable third space that disturbs and destabilises long-standing linguistic and cultural relations. This is a translation space where the home language is welcomed as much as—and, through the systematic availability of surtitles, interacts with—the city's contact languages. KVS no longer solely represents the Dutch-speaking segment of Brussels, but aims to be a place for every citizen. By bringing together different perspectives and languages, this actionable city dramaturgy manifests as a dramaturgy of translation solidified in policy. In doing so, it reflects the vision of the future posited by the Brussels Minister for the Promotion of Multilingualism.

Attracting previously disinterested sectors of the urban population to the theatre and involving them in the discussion, KVS acts as a central and active mediator in the translational city. It (cor)responds to the language practices that structure the theatre's sociocultural context, while challenging the incongruous political language management induced by its Flemish funder. In doing so, the theatre functions as a soft power in the debate about language legitimacy and shows how a space, at once physical and conceptual, can be interrupted and transformed.

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Translating Urban/Translating Ritual: An Ethnographic Study of *Dev Uthan Ekadashi*

ABSTRACT

Gurugram—a city located near Delhi, in the state of Haryana—is an important contributor to the country's information technology, finance, and banking sectors. Geographically, it offers a rich amalgamation of the urban and the rural; while the urban is an eclectic mix of regions and religions, the rural is still rooted in folkloric traditions. One such tradition is *Dev Uthan Ekadashi*: celebrated around ten days after *Diwali*, it marks the awakening of Lord Vishnu from his four-month long sleep, which symbolises a fresh beginning to the Hindu wedding season. To mark the occasion, this cosmopolitan city's Haryanvi Hindu women gather to create illustrations, sing folksongs, and perform several rituals.

In this paper we examine Gurugram as a site of translation by analysing data collected through two sessions of ethnographic fieldwork, conducted in November 2021 and November 2022. We investigate the relationship between the ritual and the space, both of which, we argue, undergo translation; furthermore, we posit that the women performing the ritual become cultural agents within a postcolonial space. Thus, our study establishes Gurugram as a translational city, demonstrating resistance where the folkloric tradition is kept alive through cultural meanings shaped by language interaction.

Keywords: translation, urban space, Gurugram, *Dev Uthan Ekadashi*, India, ritual.



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INTRODUCTION: TRANSLATION, CULTURE, CITY

As a field of inquiry, Translation Studies has moved from an initial emphasis on equivalence or faithfulness (to the source text) to a cultural approach in which the focus is on redefining the context and the conditions of the translation process. Such an approach sees translation as a form of rewriting. Analogously, the 1970s and 1980s marked a transition for anthropologists, as they questioned their right to interpret other realities and decide what can/not be represented (Murphy and Dingwall 344–45). As a result, scholars began to perceive ethnography as a translation of sorts. In the early 2000s, influenced by Bourdieu's work, significant research on ethnographic studies in translation was conducted (e.g., Buzelin; Wolf).

There have been various ethnographic approaches to translation: while some studied the agency of the translator (Basalamah), others examined the process in indigenous and postcolonial contexts (Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism*). For instance, in *Translational Justice*, Rafael argues for the role of translation in challenging colonial hierarchies, and encourages adopting decolonial ethics in translation practices (210–19). Indeed, an interdisciplinary approach—combining history, cultural studies, and ethnography—reveals the unequal power dynamics in translation and the role of indigenous communities in this process (210–19). It is the ethnographic aspect of Rafael's scholarship that helps foreground the contribution of language, religion, and cultural exchange to shaping colonial relationships; ethnography is shown as capable of revealing gaps in colonial translations.

Similarly, Michaela Wolf brings together translation studies, cultural sociology, and ethnography ("Introduction" 1–36). She argues for the importance of fieldwork, particularly methods such as archival research, participant observation, and interviews to study translators' lived experiences. Indeed, Wolf demonstrates the influence of several cultural, social, and economic factors on translators' practices, and it is her employment of the ethnographic-historical methods—e.g., examining camp records, survivor accounts, and oral testimonies—that offers a nuanced understanding of translation as a tool of resistance.

In this paper we examine Gurugram, a city in the North Indian state of Haryana, as a site of translation, by analysing data collected through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in November 2021 and again in November 2022. We investigate the relationship between the ritual and the space, both of which, we argue, undergo translation; furthermore, we posit that the women performing the ritual become cultural agents within a postcolonial space. Thus, our study establishes Gurugram as a translational city, demonstrating resistance where the folkloric tradition is kept alive through cultural meanings shaped by language interaction.

We begin by situating Gurugram historically, geographically, and linguistically, and the city remains the focal point throughout. What follows is an overview of the methodology used for data collection and analysis. Next, we apply to Gurugram the concepts introduced by Sherry Simon (“the translational city”) and Emily Apter (“the translation zone”). Subsequently, we position Haryanvi women as cultural agents and mediators by examining their relationship with the ritual and the city.

GURUGRAM: THE CITY

Haryana is an agrarian state in North India that contributes a major portion of the food grains to the country’s public distribution system. Gurugram District is located 30 kilometres south of New Delhi, the National Capital. Since the turn of the 21st century, the city has undergone rapid development and construction. Its excellent connectivity with other states via the Delhi–Jaipur–Ahmedabad broad-gauge rail link and National Highway 8 brings thousands to Gurugram for work, travel, and entertainment (“About District”). The story of its development, industrialisation, and transformation began in the early 1980s, when Japan’s Suzuki Motors collaborated with Maruti Udyog Limited, thus putting the district on the international map. It is one of Delhi’s major satellite cities, part of the National Capital Region, and is within commuting distance via an expressway and the Delhi Metro. The second largest city in Haryana and its industrial/financial centre (“About District”), Gurugram is also India’s second largest information technology hub, and the third largest financial and banking hub. It has the third highest per capita income in India and is the only Indian city to have successfully distributed electricity to all its households. Today, it houses multinational software companies and industry giants, while its architecture features shopping malls and skyscrapers.

Despite the presence of such an industrially and commercially successful city, the state of Haryana is a picture of extremes. With a skewed sex ratio of 830 girls to 1,000 boys as per the 2011 Census data (“Census of India”), it struggles with misogyny, female infanticide, and honour killings. Within Haryanvi society there is resistance to allocating any property rights to women, as that would further reduce the already small holdings, making such land unprofitable; this, in turn, becomes a major reason for the sons-over-daughters preference (Ahlawat 16).

Haryanvi society also observes strict codes regarding marriage as well as familial, caste, and clan honour, and expectations of dowry. As a result of such oppressively patriarchal structures, women are relegated to the peripheries, where they face violence and bias on an everyday basis. *Khap*

Panchayats, or caste councils, are also responsible for controlling the social, moral, and cultural behaviour exhibited by Haryanvi youth. Despite *Khaps* not having any legal authority, they continue to exert patriarchal influence. As British colonial administrator E. A. A. Joseph wrote in *The Customary Law of the Rohtak District* (1911), documenting the local legal customs, “a female, minor or adult is always under guardianship; while single, she is under the guardianship of her father, if he be dead, of other relatives. When married, it is her husband who takes her charge, and when old or if husband dies, her sons take over her” (54–55). Similarly, even married women in Haryana are always expected to adhere to societal rules, also when performing domestic and agrarian roles, and contributing financially to their families. Forced to wear a *ghunghat* (veil), they struggle to survive and be comfortable in public and private spaces. However, various women-centric rituals such as *Sanjhi* (Dhandhi and Sigroha) and *Dev Uthan Ekadashi* offer spaces for self-expression and agency to communicate freely, which is difficult in an otherwise grim setup.

Gurugram—or, as it is still called locally, Gurgaon—is supposed to have ancient roots and to have been in existence since the times of the *Mahabharata*. According to local legend, Yudhishtira—the eldest of the five brothers known in the *Mahabharata* as the Pandavas—gifted the village to his guru, or teacher. Hence the name; both *-gram* and *-gaon* mean “a village,” and point to the importance of the rural. Gurugram was historically inhabited by Hindus and formed a part of an extensive kingdom ruled by Ahirs. With the decline of the Mughal empire, the region was torn between contending powers. By 1803, most of its territory came under British rule, and after the revolt of 1857, its administration was transferred from the North-Western provinces to Punjab. In 1947, Gurgaon became part of the undivided state of Punjab in an independent India, and in 1966, the city came under the administration of the new state of Haryana (“Demography”).

Hindi is one of Gurugram’s main languages, although many also speak English; other common languages are Haryanvi (including its regional dialects) and Punjabi. The city is multicultural, composed of a variety of religious, ethnic, social, and cultural groups; it is diverse in its distribution of rural and urban areas. The respondents whom we interviewed live in an urbanised village, which combines the characteristics of a rural setup and a newer identification with the city. Our goal was to observe how translation occurs in a space thus characterised, especially with regard to a ritual rooted in the folkloric traditions of the state. *Dev Uthan Ekadashi* becomes a worthwhile object of translational study because the women involved grapple with the challenges of the modern while performing the traditional.

METHODOLOGY

Even though we both belong to the same Haryanvi community and share similar cultural roots, we required access to the respondents—women aged 25 to 55—who spoke (the various dialects of) Haryanvi, Hindi, and English. This was facilitated by family members and friends, who thereby acted as gatekeepers. Although we conducted semi-structured interviews, what sets our study apart is our own role as active participant observers. Since translation was one of the commonly practiced and observed activities, we were motivated to study the phenomenon further.

We used the methodology of “thick description.” Introduced by Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), it involves detailed contextualisation of any social action when performed in a cultural context; it emphasises studying the why, when, what, and where of an event (6). Our emic perspective helped us understand how women from our community interpret their actions and behaviour through the ritual. Most of our respondents straddle the rural and the urban—they belong to urban communities, but still actively participate in activities associated with the rural, especially the celebration of the rituals.

Our pilot study demonstrated that, rather than communicating in one language, our respondents relied on (different dialects of) Haryanvi, Hindi, English, or a mixture of all three. In addition, they translated between these languages. Among themselves, they spoke Haryanvi; however, they simultaneously translated for us into Hindi or English since we were not proficient in all the dialects of Haryanvi. In the following sections we illustrate these processes of intersemiotic translation, and demonstrate how, while interacting with us, the respondents enter a translation zone in which they negotiate meanings across Haryanvi, English, and Hindi.

DEV UTHAN EKADASHI

Dev Uthan Ekadashi (or *Prabodhini Ekadashi*, also known locally as *Devotthan Ekadashi* or simply *Devthan*), is celebrated around ten days after *Diwali*, the Hindu festival of lights. It falls on the eleventh lunar day (*ekadashi*) in *Shukla Paksha* (the waxing moon) of the month of *Kartik*, i.e. in October or November. It marks the awakening (*prabodhini*, *-uthan*, *-than*) of Lord Vishnu (*Dev*) from his four-month sleep and connotes the fresh beginnings of the Hindu wedding season. There are visual, aural, and performative elements to the festival: Haryanvi women gather, create images/illustrations representing Lord Vishnu, sing *geets* (folk songs), and perform several rituals.

The ritual begins in the evening, when the women gather in groups to visit the neighbouring houses; however, the festival can also be celebrated individually. In the villages, the drawings were once prepared in the house's cooking area, next to the *chulha* (brick-and-mud cooking stove, which used to be lighted with dung cakes and wood); these days, the drawings are made in the kitchen, on the counter-top and the wall, as can be seen in Fig. 1.



Fig. 1. Visual representations of *Dev Uthan Ekadashi*, November 2021.
Courtesy of the authors.

The figure on the wall represents Lord Vishnu, and the markings on the kitchen countertop represent four pairs of feet. Following the tradition, Haryanvi women draw the feet of their family members, including their children, with *geru* (natural ochre). Our observations show that—especially in the cities—women also use *geru* on chart paper, paste the illustration on the kitchen wall, and then remove it for safekeeping. No other colours or materials are used.

Other symbols in the illustrations represent animals such as the cow (considered holy). During the ritual, women fast for the entire day, and create the drawings at night. They cook *halwa* (pudding of wheat flour or coarser granulated wheat) and cover it with a large deep platter, called a *paraant*. After the family dinner, just before going to sleep, the women sing and ceremoniously uncover the *halwa*, which signifies the awakening of Lord Vishnu. They also call out to the gods to wake up: “*uth uth Dev, uth uth Dev*,” or “*utho mere Devta*.” The ritual is important because, now that the Gods have been awakened, any marriage within the family can be solemnised; it thus marks an end to the four-month pause that begins the day after *bhadaliya navmi* (the ninth day of the waxing moon in *Asaadha*, in June or July), when the Gods are supposed to go into deep slumber.



Fig. 2 and 3. Various visual illustrations of *Dev* (Lord Vishnu), November 2022.
Courtesy of the authors.



Fig. 4 and 5. Left to right: women waking up Lord Vishnu at another respondent's house; women walking across their neighbourhood to wake up Lord Vishnu, November 2022. Courtesy of the authors.

Once the ritual is over, the women use the opportunity to converse, thus creating a feminine space for sharing personal anecdotes, stories, songs, ideas, and problems, and support one another by offering advice and opinions. However, we observed that the ritual is slowly being forgotten or confined to the margins of the culture and society; its contemporary

function is not as pronounced as that of *Aboi Ashtami*, which involves praying for the longevity of children. Moreover, in a modernising urban Haryana, fewer marriages are confined by caste and class; therefore, awakening the Gods to facilitate marriages is diminishing in significance, and the tradition may soon disappear.



Fig. 6 and 7. Left to right: a group of Haryanvi women gathering after the celebration of *Dev Uthan Ekadashi*; *Prasad*, or offerings to Lord Vishnu, November 2022. Courtesy of the authors.

USING ETHNOGRAPHY TO TRANSLATE GURUGRAM

The use of “thick description” meant that we concentrated on participant observation and focused group interviews. We immersed ourselves in watching our participants’ day-to-day routines, activities, and interactions, specifically cultural practices characteristic of Gurugram. As already mentioned above, we also conducted semi-structured interviews to collect and discuss their personal narratives, stories, and perspectives on the ritual.

Our major emphasis was on sensorial experiences: the sounds, smells, and sights. Our emic perspective, which enabled us to interpret our respondents’ behaviours, helped us create a cross-cultural study: dismissing homogeneous ethnocentric descriptions, we focused on the various meanings that rituals can exhibit. Ours was thus an intersemiotic translation of distinct non-linguistic resources.

For example, we posit that when our respondents conversed and walked together in the neighbourhood, wearing their traditional attire (clothes and jewellery), they created a space through which we were able to access various aspects of the city. In observing our respondents and

producing field notes, we translated them and the city in a written semiotic order. Next, performing audio-visual documentation of the ritual against the larger backdrop of the city, we again translated our respondents and the city in a visual and oral semiotic representation system. Hence, through our ethnographic practice of interpretation, we offer an intersemiotic translation of the ritual as well as of the city by accessing and translating the social, cultural, emotional, and geographical spaces which the city allocates to the female respondents.

GURUGRAM AS A TRANSLATIONAL CITY AND A TRANSLATIONAL ZONE

Contemporary space has been examined as one that is constructed by overlapping and irregular structures (Appadurai 46); it is thus “not a smooth, homogeneous, neutral territory, but rather an extremely complex one due to all the differences it embraces, in terms of races, beliefs, ways of life and languages” (Vidal Claramonte 87). Given the diverse nature and the multiplicities that characterise any contemporary urban space, an individual embarks “on an undetermined journeying practice, having constantly to negotiate between home and abroad, native culture and adopted culture . . . between a here, a there, *and* an elsewhere” (Minh-ha 27). In her pathbreaking work, Sherry Simon introduces the concept of the translational city as follows:

There are no monolingual cities. The diversity of urban life always includes the encounter and exchange of languages . . . But urban languages do not simply coexist: they connect, they enter into networks. This means that cities are not only multilingual—they are translational. Translation tells which languages count, how they occupy the territory and how they participate in the discussions of the public sphere. (“The Translational City” 15)

In agreement with Simon, we believe that Gurugram establishes itself as a translational city. Its forms of translation are manifold. Since the city is home to various languages, such as Hindi, Haryanvi, and English, our respondents interact with one another in multiple languages. The ritual is obviously a performance, where—apart from translating for each other and for us—the women also perform through their bodies, thus occasioning intersemiotic translation.

In *Eco-Translation*, Michael Cronin demonstrates affinities between mapping the city and translation. He argues that there “are two potential ways to map a city”—one which “gives you the layout of the streets, the

location of key transport hubs, sites of cultural and historical interests and major public utilities,” and another which is “based not on what routes people might take through a city but what routes they actually do” (110). Following the same approach, documenting the ritual and mapping Gurugram, we witnessed it—through our respondents—as a tapestry of cultures, languages, and experiences.

The responses to our questions were offered in Hindi and Haryanvi. A few younger respondents who had grown up in the city required assistance in understanding Haryanvi, and preferred to communicate in English and Hindi. What caught our attention was non-verbal behaviour, where a respondent entered the house of another, quickly sought out the *Dev*, and rushed to the image without uttering a single word. In fact, some of the respondents did not even greet one another, but merely looked at Lord Vishnu and left; as we discovered later, they wanted to ensure that their own *Dev* was superior in appearance. During the ritual, some respondents created their images in silence, and would browse through their homes for materials that would allow quick makeovers, while others turned to their fellow female respondents for validation of their creativity. These quick, heavy movements, devoid of utterance, exemplify the non-linguistic resources which allow for an intersemiotic translation of the ritual and the city.

Importantly, although English is no longer regarded as foreign or colonial, it is privileged in the linguistic and social hierarchy. In India, not everyone understands or communicates fluently in English. Furthermore, Hindi—despite being the dominant language in Northern India—does not serve as the lingua franca in states like Punjab and Haryana. Haryanvi, on the other hand, remains unrecognised as a language, owing to the absence of a linguistic script. As a result, it is Hindi rather than Haryanvi that Census records classify as the primary language spoken in Haryana. One of the goals of this paper, therefore, is to draw attention to the neglected Haryanvi “language.”

Thus, when translating between these languages, Haryanvi women effectively exhibit the multilingualism of such urban spaces, encouraging the participants to enter, thrive, and learn within a communication network. In spite of our familiarity with the language, we ourselves faced challenges in comprehending the several distinct (sub-)dialects of Haryanvi. Thus, as ethnographers participating in a communication network constructed by our respondents, we learned a new linguistic variant. Consequently, our respondents contributed to maintaining a multilingual urban Gurugram, where various languages coexist and participate in the public discourse.

A translational city, Gurugram can also be situated as a translation zone. The term emerged as analogous to Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of the “contact zone,” defined as a “social [space] where disparate cultures meet, clash, and

grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today” (4). Emily Apter conceives of the zone as a “broad intellectual topography,” a territory of “critical engagement” that is not restricted by the boundary of a nation (5). We thus position Gurugram as a translation zone in Apter’s understanding of the term.

Gurugram’s identity as a translation zone is entrenched in its distinctive socio-cultural history. It began as a rural space where Haryanvi was predominantly spoken, and along with its urbanisation, it was gradually occupied by native and vernacular languages, like the sub-dialects of Haryanvi (e.g., Bagri), Punjabi, and Hindi. With the rapid expansion of the city at the turn of the 21st century, the influx of information technology companies, and the growth of the banking sector, Gurugram rapidly became a globalised, cosmopolitan city, where international languages such as English, French, or German came to be used by professionals and disseminated by educational institutions.

We also established through our ethnographic fieldwork that parts of the city with migrant populations bring their own languages to the mix, such as Gujarati, Punjabi, or Bhojpuri; other parts have a predominance of native population speaking their local languages or dialects, like Haryanvi, while still others are cosmopolitan centres using several international languages, such as French, English, or German. The intersections of these pockets constitute language contact zones. Hence, as a translation zone in a postcolonial environment, Gurugram “offers in conceptual terms a ‘third way’ between on the one hand an idea of the city as the co-existence of linguistic solitudes and on the other, the ‘melting pot’ paradigm of assimilation to dominant host languages” (Cronin, *Translation and Identity* 68). In the urban translation zone created by the Haryanvi women, “the focus is not on multiplicity but on interaction” (Simon, *Cities in Translation* 7). Rather than merely hosting a native population that speaks the local tongues, the city also has a cosmopolitan population with an array of international languages; hence, it is an urban space intersected by multiple social, cultural, and, of course, linguistic boundaries. Such a co-existence of a native and non-native population often gives rise to a one/other, us/them divide; however, multiple binaries of this kind co-exist in Gurugram. Our fieldwork demonstrates that the performance of *Dev Uthan Ekadashi* becomes another such contact zone.

Simon describes two imperatives of research into translating the city:

First, it responds to the need to focus on local practices and specific spatial contexts, breaking with the default reliance on national languages as end terms. In the city, translation takes place across a wide variety of idioms, regional variants and languages which are not necessarily

“foreign” one to the other. They are physically proximate, share common references and in some cases share a common sense of entitlement to the city. Second, the city puts pressure on translation as a clearly bounded concept. Translation becomes a wide category of language exchange that includes translanguaging, multilingual artistic projects, . . . the shifts in individual identity that are forms of self-translation. (“The Translational City” 16).

As we have observed, these two aspects are in evidence during *Dev Uthan Ekadashi* in Gurugram. Firstly, it is a local female-centric socio-cultural tradition which, allocating prominence to the native languages, facilitates an environment in which Haryanvi and its variants often take precedence over Hindi as an official language. Performing the ritual, our respondents not only conversed, but joked and offered sexual innuendos in Haryanvi, and more specifically Bagri (the variant/dialect unique to Gurugram). As ethnographers, we acknowledge Bagri because of its positionality, marking a sort of prerogative to the city: Bagri exists because Gurugram exists.

Secondly, through the ritual, translation occurs as a process of linguistic exchange, in which some speak in Bagri, some in Hindi, while still others try to understand the ritual in the language of their convenience. As we argue in the following section, this playful exchange allows Haryanvi women to undergo a transformation of identity. They emerge as creators, performers, and translators—producing visual likenesses of Lord Vishnu; dancing, singing, and celebrating a day when they are not relegated to the status of homemakers; and, lastly, translating both the ritual and its languages.

HARYANVI WOMEN AS CULTURAL AGENTS/ MEDIATORS

Examining a translational city, it is important to “listen” to it (Simon, *Cities in Translation* 1). Questioned about the relevance of the ritual, Anu Kataria, a postgraduate homemaker, responded: “*Dev Uthan Ekadashi* enables me to exhibit my creativity.” Another participant, Rekha Mehlawat, replied: “The ritual allows me to spend time with my friends, which is not possible otherwise as we all are usually busy in our day-to-day lives.” Asked for details, the respondent clarified: “We sit together once the ritual is over, talk, and catch up with each other.” Communicating across languages and dialects, Haryanvi women emerge as mediators in extant and emergent language networks, controlling communication and thus allowing the language to represent the city. Such translation becomes significant, because, as Simon reminds us,

the city does not exist outside of language, and access to its many worlds is a voyage across tongues. Translations bring into dialogue languages that are states of memory in the history of the city . . . and languages that are vehicles of memory in the present that convey the contemporaneous sometimes-competing narratives of long-standing inhabitants and newcomers alike. Translation points to the dissonance of city life, but also to the possibility of a generalized, public discourse, a space vital to urban citizenship—where the convergence of languages can be a source of new conversations. (*Cities in Translation* 18–19)

Such a reinterpretation of identity can be discerned in responses like that of Kiran Rana, a teacher by profession: “The ritual is a performance for us. It includes *naach-gaana*, *aarti-puja*, *sajana-savarna*” (“dance and song, prayers and offerings, dressing up”). Thus, *Dev Uthan Ekadashi* gives some women an opportunity to recreate their identity as “performers” distinct from their existing social, familial, and cultural identities: they are no longer marginalised domesticated beings, but appear as independent and empowered individuals. Another of our respondents, Sweetie Sejwal, remarked: “On *Dev Uthan Ekadashi*, we no longer seek permission from the men of the house, but rather do as we wish.” Another jokingly added: “We are the housemen on that day, and they [men] are the women.”

Another significant aspect of the ritual is the traditional clothing and jewellery—prized possessions and an integral part of the Haryanvi women’s cultural heritage, in some cases an indication of their socio-economic position. Our fieldwork offered an opportunity to understand the role of these artefacts in establishing Haryanvi women as cultural agents and translators.



Fig. 8. A group of Haryanvi women in traditional attire, urban Gurugram, November 2022. Courtesy of the authors.

In the interviews, the Haryanvi women asserted that the jewellery and clothing worn while performing *Dev Uthan Ekadashi* give them a sense of belonging and empowerment, making them feel special and unique. One of the respondents, Manju Kataria, stated that “it looks very beautiful.” The ritual offers these women an opportunity to honour, cherish, and celebrate their cultural and social identity; as such, they take immense pride in the attendant jewellery or clothing. Since only married women have the privilege to own these, such cultural and material artefacts give them an opportunity to express themselves the way they want in an otherwise oppressive social setting—a patriarchal and misogynistic societal fabric, evident in Haryana’s skewed sex ratio, female foeticide, and honour killings. These appurtenances reflect the respondents’ feminine creativity and inclinations, their will to subvert societal hegemony and to resist the forces which marginalise them.

Some respondents who have relocated to (semi-)urban settings mention dressing up in their traditional Haryanvi attire to showcase their cultural identity; this allows them to forge a distinct identity within a cosmopolitan neighbourhood where women come from different walks of life and diverse cultural (and at times, national) backgrounds. Thus, during *Dev Uthan Ekadashi*, Haryanvi women use language as well as the ritual’s material and cultural appurtenances not only to promote their culture, but also to translate it for others. As a result, they function as cultural agents within a postcolonial space.

Through rituals like *Dev Uthan Ekadashi*, the women reconstruct their identities as independent individuals who, during this day, no longer require permission from their husbands/guardians/fathers(-in-law) to perform their motherly duties or mingle with other women in the neighbourhood. Such events allow them to situate themselves at the centre, to reclaim their spaces as individuals and as women, and—in the case of our respondents—as artists and translators.

Another respondent, Seema Hooda, asserted that at times she felt miserable because of an identity crisis. Simultaneously managing modernity and tradition, a Haryanvi urban woman often tries to justify her culture and traditional roots to her cosmopolitan friends and neighbourhood by establishing herself at the intersection of the two. Seema further explains that her interest in celebrating the ritual in—as she puts it—“the Haryanvi way” is justified when her friends do the same for their festivals. She confesses that her husband does not approve of her Haryanvi clothing and jewellery, which make her look “uncivilised and illiterate.” She therefore wears them mostly in his absence, but also when they attend social events, such as marriages or parties, together; those are the only occasions when her husband agrees to a social demonstration of their cultural and traditional roots.

Like Seema, Anu, Rekha, Kiran, and other respondents, we assert that the ritual is conducive for women, especially when they try to exhibit their cultural roots and exercise their choices as performers, translators, agents, or leaders of social change within this urban context, irrespective of their socio-economic or spatio-temporal positionality. *Dev Uthan Ekadashi* is thus community-driven when it transcends individual ritualistic contexts, and is constructed through social, cultural, and domestic forms of meaning-making. Rituals facilitate the shaping of identity through agents that appropriate or reshape values and ideals (Bell 82, 73), and *Dev Uthan Ekadashi* offers Haryanvi a space in which to resist patriarchy and misogynistic forces.

Thus, by enabling women's creativity, *Dev Uthan Ekadashi* also allows them to challenge and mould socio-cultural values in a patriarchal society. Engaging in the ritual as "agents," they may not necessarily condone, produce, or create the larger community-focused norms (Butler 171–80). As in the case of *Sanjhi*, another Haryanvi ritual which we documented elsewhere (Dhandhi and Sigroha), *Dev Uthan Ekadashi* concerns the "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 179), e.g., performing the prayer, creating the *Dev*, and reciting folksongs. Hence, the rituals offer our respondents a space for "reproduction of and resistance to hegemonic images of female subjectivity" (Hancock 32, 137).

"[T]his is our performance," one of the respondents, Anju Kataria, commented, and it consists of "dance, music, devotion, and grooming ourselves and our *Dev*." She also asserted: "For one day we get enough rest as the men in the family help us in our domestic chores since we are occupied with worshipping Lord Vishnu." Significantly, then, the ritual also becomes a space of subversion in which women (re)create and mould themselves as performers and visual artists. By appropriating these traditions to express themselves as autonomous and independent individuals, possessed of an agency to reflect and react, they subvert the submissive and hegemonic structures around them. Creating their own version of Lord Vishnu is an activity considerably different from their usual domestic responsibilities: they transcend their socially prescribed role of homemakers. Through music, dance, devotion, and creating distinct images of Lord Vishnu, the women reassert their independent identity as visual artists.

Discussing her drive to create *Dev* every year, Anu explains that she does this for herself, for the upcoming generations, and for her children. In contrast with the afore-cited respondent, helped by the male members of her family, she is supported by other women in her household chores. Building a foundation for a strong interpersonal relationship, she maintains a dual identity—a traditional homemaker and a visual artist.

Thus, the ritual offers women an alternate space for interpersonal relationships, often with the women living in the same house, which is otherwise impossible. Every year, women remerge to celebrate the festival, depending on their time constraints and amount of household work. Hence, for the marginalised Haryanvi women, this folkloric practice becomes the only medium of individual expression. Providing space for discussions on all matters and concerns, the ritual offers a socio-culturally accepted release of pent-up feelings.

Hence, through *Dev Uthan Ekadashi*, our respondents—who usually act as unpaid labourers within domestic spaces, possessing no form of cultural, social, or physical presence—produce a visual culture that expresses their individuality as well as offering fulfilment and sisterhood. Furthermore, this event creates an alternative socio-cultural space in both the public and the private domains, where the women are finally seen and heard, and able to exhibit their creativity. Thus, *Dev Uthan Ekadashi* allows our respondents a measure of subversion through female folklore.

CONCLUSION

Through a detailed analysis of the woman-centric ritual, we have demonstrated that Gurugram emerges as a translational city. *Dev Uthan Ekadashi* is here posited as an experience that empowers Haryanvi women, who act as moderators, translators, and performers, and who thus recreate their own identities. They become cultural agents within a postcolonial space where the ritual has survived despite spatio-temporal changes undergone both by the city and by the community. Performing the ritual, the Haryanvi women create a translation zone, where they actively translate their material culture (clothing and jewellery), but also interact in multiple languages and mediate between them. Hence, we assert that Gurugram is a translational site where a folkloric tradition is kept alive through women's interactions within a multicultural and multilingual urban space.

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GG and the City: What Canada's Major Translation Award Reveals about Its Metropolises

ABSTRACT

In this article I consider the predominance of metropolises in the Canadian publishing sector through the lens of award-winning translations. My research is based on a database of information on Canadian literary prizes (gathered through reports and websites of Canadian prize-granting organisations and Aurora, the Library and Archives Canada catalogue which also queries the WorldCat search engine), specifically on the awardees and finalists of the Governor General's Literary Awards (GG) in both Translation categories (English-to-French and French-to-English). Data about the cities and publishers connected with the original books and the translations, as well as about the finalist translators' places of residence, demonstrate that Montréal occupies a central place in this landscape. Indeed, an overwhelming majority (82%) of the finalists in the GG English-to-French Translation category were published in this city; likewise, an appreciable number of books translated from French into English (21% of the finalists in this category, versus 54% for Toronto and 16% for Vancouver). While it is hardly surprising that Toronto and Montréal are, respectively, home to most English and French original publications, Montréal stands out as the main city where translators, in both language combinations, live and work.

Keywords: translation prizes, literary prizes, Canadian literature, literary translation, Canadian cities, Canadian publishers.



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Literary culture in Canada is generally associated with the most populated cities, Toronto and Montréal. Linda Leith indicates that, until the 1960s, Montréal was the “heart of Canada” and the “cradle of contemporary Canadian literature in both English and in French” (17). Eventually, Toronto “emerged as the literary capital of Canada,” whereas Montréal became the literary capital of Quebec, in part because of “rival nationalisms” (21). Each of the “Two Solitudes” (to quote Hugh MacLennan’s famous title) therefore has its own literary headquarters. As Jane Koustas puts it, “Canadian translation practice is frequently blamed for the rift between the two solitudes while simultaneously, and paradoxically, summoned to reconcile them” (124).

Despite the funding mechanisms put in place by Canadian authorities to foster translation between the two main linguistic communities, such as funding by the Canada Council for the Arts, it is still common that Canadian literary works are translated abroad. Indeed, many of English Canada’s biggest literary stars have been translated in France (e.g., Michael Ondaatje and Margaret Atwood, to quote a few examples from Koustas’s *Les Belles étrangères: Canadians in Paris*). After all, Paris—as Pascale Casanova’s works have proved—holds a special power when it comes to literary consecration. It is also true that some of Quebec’s best-known authors, such as Réjean Ducharme, have been published in France. Of course, other “centres of consecration” exist, as Rainier Grutman remarks (7), and Francophone writers can also benefit from having their books translated and published in New York or London. However, being published or translated in another country is not accessible to all, and Canada’s largest cities nowadays boast several publishing houses, whether for original books, or for translations. There are also other Canadian cities where literary activities, including translation, take place, and I intend, in this article, to explore to what extent this is the case.

My objective in this article, then, is to uncover the dynamics between Canada’s major literary centres as regards translation and, specifically, literary awards in that field. Arguably, as Owen Percy explains, literary awards “deserve . . . to be paid heed as cultural forces that can exert significant pressure on literary and actual markets, and that can also even (re)construct the fields that they propose to speak for in their consecrations” (8). For this purpose, I will investigate the places where finalist and award-winning translated books have been published, in their original language, and then in translation. Subsequently, I will consider the places where Canadian award-winning translators are domiciled. As will be seen, my research confirms that while Toronto is indeed predominant when it comes to English-language literature in Canada, Montréal still holds an important position in both languages, especially in the translation sector.

CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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To shed some light on the dynamics between cities where translations are published in Canada, I will use figures from an exhaustive database on Canadian prizes that I have created. The information about laureates was mainly obtained through the reports and websites of Canadian prize-granting organisations, such as the Canada Council for the Arts (henceforth CCA), which administers one of the most prestigious suites of literary prizes in the country, namely the Governor General's Literary Awards (henceforth GG). This set of awards is divided into fourteen categories, seven in English (Fiction, Non-Fiction, Poetry, Drama, Young People's Literature—Text, Young People's Literature—Illustrated Books, and Translation), and their respective equivalents in French. As for the data gathered about the translations of award-winning books, it was mostly collected through Aurora, the Library and Archives Canada catalogue which also queries the WorldCat search engine. My database, divided by literary genres, encompasses the titles of the winning books, the publishing houses, the dates of publication of the originals and of the translations (if any), the names of the authors and translators, as well as some sociodemographic data concerning them, and the cities and countries where the publishers are based. While most of the data relates to prizes won for original books, I have also created a special section for Canadian *translation* prizes in which I worked in the opposite direction: instead of querying whether an award-winning book had been translated, I sought to find information about the original books that had won an award in translation.

Significantly, translation prizes are much rarer than those awarded for original books, and they also obey different principles. As Juan Zapata and Valérie Le Plouhinec put it, “unlike their literary counterparts, which have been largely covered by the media and studied by field theory sociologists, translation prizes have not yet sparked much interest among researchers” (1, translation mine). In Canada, translators can aspire to a few of these distinctions, mainly: 1) the John Glassco Translation Prize, given by the Literary Translators' Association of Canada (henceforth LTAC), which can only be won for a first book-length published translation, from any language; 2) the Cole Foundation Prize for Translation, which “is awarded in even-numbered years to the French translator of a book by an English Quebec author and in odd-numbered years to the English Quebec translator of a book by a French author” (Quebec Writers' Federation); and, 3) most notably, the aforementioned GG Awards in the “Translation” (French-to-English) and “Traduction” (English-to-French) categories, for which all eligible genres are considered.

In the following section, I will take a closer look at the GG awardees and finalists in both categories from the inception of the prize until 2022. My decision to include the finalists is based on the fact that these categories have only existed since 1987: thus, including the finalists provides a more complete picture of the literary landscape in Canada. It is noteworthy that the CCA used to offer a prize for translations from 1973 to 1986, distinct from the GG, but this prize was not considered in this research, since information about it is no longer available. It should also be noted that the CCA “funds activities linked to the translation of Canadian literary works or dramatic works into French, English, an Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit or Métis) language . . . for Canadian publication or presentation” (“Translation”). Indeed, these grants attributed for *Canadian* works have important implications for what gets translated. The Council also organises an annual Fair of Translation Rights, which further emphasises the role which it plays in the industry. Another important point is that it can be misleading to consider the English-to-French and the French-to-English GG categories as symmetrical: on the one hand, the Canadian English-speaking public is far more numerous than the French, and on the other, the numbers of works submitted to the translation prize are somewhat unequal, although they can fluctuate from one year to another (on average, around 25 for French-to-English, and around 40 for English-to-French).

WHERE DO AWARD-WINNING BOOKS GET PUBLISHED?

A. THE ORIGINALS

When we consider the French books translated into English and then nominated for the GG, at the forefront is Montréal publisher Les Éditions du Boréal, with 32 nominations out of 166. It is followed by Leméac, also based in Montréal, with 26 nominations, including 5 translations of books by the prolific, canonised author Michel Tremblay. Three other Montréal publishers (Québec Amérique, XYZ, and VLB, with 8, 8, and 7 nominations, respectively), have also produced several originals. Many more Montréal-based publishers with fewer nominations are also represented in the database, for a total of 130 books (78% of finalists). Québec City comes in second place with 15 original books, from publishers Alto (6 nominations), Les Presses de l'Université Laval (4), L'Instant même (3), and Septentrion (2). Also, six original titles were published in Paris, but mostly within the first ten years of the prize's existence, with only two more recent nominations: Perrine Leblanc's *Malabourg* (2014, Gallimard), translated as *The Lake*

by Lazer Lederhendler, a finalist in 2015, and *Si tu m'entends*, by Pascale Quiviger (2015, Albin Michel), also translated by Lederhendler, who won the prize for his translation, *If You Hear Me*, in 2020.

Perhaps it is a sign of Canada's (or Montréal's) literary vitality that we observe a decrease of award-winning translations of books originally published in France, but a broader comparison of all books published in the country and overseas would be necessary to contextualise these observations further. Considering the 36 laureate titles, 27 books (or 75%) were published in Montréal, three in Paris, two in Québec City, one in Trois-Rivières, one in Moncton, one in Chicoutimi (Saguenay),¹ and one for which the location of the publisher is unknown. Clearly, from the inception of the prize, Montréal has dominated the landscape for the publication of French originals, especially with long-standing houses such as Boréal and Leméac, established in 1963 and 1957, respectively.

However, when it comes to where English originals are published, Toronto predominates. More than a hundred of the 157 titles² nominated for the English-to-French category were originally published in Ontario's metropolis. Identifying the very first publisher and city of publication can pose a problem for books written in English, more so than for French books, as English-language publishers often maintain imprints and divisions based in different cities, with fusions and acquisitions over the years. Furthermore, many books by well-known authors are published (simultaneously or within a few years) in Toronto, New York, and London. For these simultaneous releases, all the places were noted in the database; therefore, to state that more than a hundred titles were published in Toronto can mean that certain titles were, at the same time, published elsewhere.

The most frequently nominated original publishers were Knopf (22 nominations), McClelland & Stewart (16), Harper (12), Random House (12), and House of Anansi (8). When it comes to the laureates, 23 out of 36 (64%) were books published originally in Toronto. The cities where laureate titles were originally published—beside Toronto—were New York (3), Montréal (3), as well as one awardee each from Cambridge, MA (USA), Regina (Saskatchewan), London (UK), Edmonton (Alberta), Washington, DC (USA), and Kentville (Nova Scotia). The total was 35 rather than 36, since Greg MacArthur's play *The Toxic Bus Instrument* was translated by 2011 laureate Maryse Warda from an unpublished document. Interestingly, the overall publication of English-language originals was more frequent in the United States than it was in Montréal. Only three laureate titles (1991,

¹ This publisher now has its office in Montréal.

² The number of finalists is not the same in both categories, since in some years fewer than the usual five were nominated.

2003, and 2004) were published there, out of nine finalists from that city. As for Vancouver, the third-largest metropolitan area of the country, it was home to eight nominated original titles, but no laureates. Hence, Toronto appears to be the main source of books that eventually get translated into French, if we base our knowledge on translations subsequently nominated for the GG. However, if we combine both language categories, we will see that more laureate books were originally published in Montréal (27 in French, and 3 in English) than in Toronto (23, in English only).

B. THE TRANSLATIONS

If we now consider the translations themselves, an overwhelming majority of the finalists in the GG English-to-French category were published in Montréal. Out of the 157 translated books that were finalists from 1987 to 2022, 131 (83%) were released by a publishing house based in Montréal. The percentage is slightly lower (29/36, or 81%) when we consider the laureates only. Québec City comes next, with 19 finalists (12%), including 5 awardees (14%). Hence, Montréal and Québec City are home to 96% of the translated books that have been finalists to this prize, and to 95% of the winning titles. As for the seven other cities or communities where finalists were published, the details of these nominations can be seen in Table 1, below. Bold font indicates that the book won the award.

Table 1 requires some commentary. Firstly, despite being described by most sources as a French writer (she was indeed born in France), Michèle Causse obtained her Canadian nationality in 1992 and some of her books, including this translation, were published by the now-defunct les Éditions Trois, in Laval, Montréal's neighbour island. Marie José Thériault's translation, published by Calmann-Lévy in Paris, is quite exceptional, since most translations published in France are authored by French, and not Canadian, translators, unless we consider co-publishing projects where a French and a Canadian publisher work together (cf. Beaulieu and Buzelin). The year 2020 seemed to be the most diverse in terms of places of publication, and the fact that two of the three jury members lived outside of Quebec can prove instructive. Nonetheless, in recent years we seem to be witnessing a certain diversification in the publishers' headquarters, with six titles published outside of Montréal or Québec City since 2016, compared to only three in the period between 1987 and 2015. The fact that the CCA now insists on (regional) diversity in its guidelines for jurors may suggest an explanation. Verifying all the books submitted to the prize over the years of its existence is beyond the scope of this article, but it would be worthwhile to see how many publishers outside of Montréal and Québec City submit their books, and to check if they are nominated more or less often than their counterparts from bigger cities.

Original title (genre)	Author	Translated title	Translator	Year of the award	Translations' place of publication
<i>Loyalty to the Hunt</i> (poetry)	Dorina Michelutti	<i>Loyale à la chasse</i>	Michèle Causse	1995	Laval
<i>Bear</i> (fiction)	Marian Engel	<i>Ours</i>	Marie José Thériault	1999	Paris
<i>Rock 'n Rail: Ghost Trains and Spitting Slag</i> (drama)	Mansel Robinson	<i>Roc & rail: Trains Fantômes suivi de Slague: histoire d'un mineur</i>	Jean Marc Dalpé	2008	Sudbury
<i>Swim</i> (fiction)	Marianne Apostolides	<i>Elle nage</i>	Madeleine Stratford	2016	Chicoutimi (Saguenay)
<i>The Birth House</i> (fiction)	Ami McKay	<i>L'accoucheuse de Scots Bay</i>	Sonya Malaborza	2020	Sudbury
<i>Ocean</i> (poetry)	Susan Goyette	<i>Océan</i>	Georgette LeBlanc	2020	Moncton
<i>Nobody Cries at Bingo</i> (fiction)	Dawn Dumont	<i>On pleure pas au bingo</i>	Daniel Grenier	2020	Wendake
<i>Rose's Run</i> (fiction)	Dawn Dumont	<i>La course de Rose</i>	Daniel Grenier	2021	Wendake
<i>Through the Sad Wood Our Corpses Will Hang</i> (fiction)	Ava Farmehri	<i>Dans la lugubre forêt nos corps seront suspendus</i>	Benoit Laflamme	2022	Ottawa

Table 1. EN-to-FR GG-Nominated Books Published Outside of Montréal or Québec City.

Let us take a closer look at the publishers. Of all the 157 finalists, as many as 51 translations (32%) were published by the Montréal-based Éditions du Boréal, including 14 of the 36 laureates (39%). The next most often nominated Montréal publishers are Leméac, with 9 nominations (6%), including two laureates (6%), Éditions Québec Amérique, with 9 nominations (6%), including one laureate (3%), and Les Allusifs,³ with 8 nominations (5%), among which were two laureates (6%). As for Québec City, Alto, a publisher founded in 2005, already represents 13 finalists (8%), including 3 laureates (8%).

Whereas Montréal and Québec City alone account for nearly all the English-to-French finalists, with only a few publishers represented on the list, the situation seems, at first glance, to be more triangular for the other language pair, since most of the finalist publishers are distributed between Toronto (89/166, or 54%), Montréal⁴ (35/166, or 21%), and Vancouver (27/166, or 16%). These figures must be put into perspective by considering the actual laureates. Toronto, with 22 of the 36 winning books, holds a higher proportion of laureates (61%), while Montréal's rate of victories is similar to its rate of nominations, with 8 awardees (22%). Vancouver, however, is home to only 3 winning titles (8%), even though it holds an appreciable share of nominations. Only two nominated publishers are based in Vancouver: Talonbooks (with 21 nominations⁵—including 3 laureates) and Douglas & McIntyre (with 6 nominations). If we look at Montréal, a few different publishers appear in the list, but Véhicule Press (with 10 nominations, including 4 laureates) and McGill-Queen's University Press (with 2 laureates among 7 nominated books published in Montréal, or in Montréal and Kingston) have the best record. Toronto's publishers garnering the most nominations are Coach House Books (18 finalists, including 4 awardees), and House of Anansi (17 finalists, including 4 awardees). House of Anansi, founded in 1967, stands out as one of the publishers listed both for originals *and* translations, while bigger publishers are more often associated with originals, and smaller independent publishers (or university presses)—with translations.

There are 11 locations—besides Toronto, Montréal, and Vancouver—where finalist books were published, so the landscape seems more diverse than in French, with 7 cities (other than Montréal and Québec City) where French-language finalist publishers were located. Table 2, below, shows which titles and translators were published outside of the three largest cities in Canada. Again, bold font indicates a laureate.

³ Books published by Les Allusifs are now a part of Leméac's catalogue.

⁴ Included here are two nominations for McGill-Queen's University Press where both Montréal and Kingston (Ontario) are indicated as cities of publication.

⁵ Which makes it the publisher with the highest rate of nominations.

Original title (genre)	Author	Translated title	Translator	Year of the award	Translations' place of publication
<i>Les contes du Sommet-Bleu</i> (youth)	Claude Jasmin	<i>The Dragon and Other Laurentian Tales</i>	Patricia Sillers	1987	Oxford
<i>Deux cents ans de villégiature dans Charlevoix</i> (non-fiction)	Philippe Dubé	<i>Charlevoix: Two Centuries at Murray Bay</i>	Tony Martin-Sperry	1990	Kingston
<i>Chroniques du pays des mères</i> (fiction)	Élisabeth Vonarburg	<i>The Maerlande Chronicles</i>	Jane Brierley	1992	Victoria
<i>La route de Chlifa</i> (youth)	Michèle Marineau	<i>The Road to Chlifa</i>	Susan Ouriou	1995	Red Deer
<i>Litanies de l'Île-aux-Chiens</i> (fiction)	Françoise Enguehard	<i>Tales from Dog Island: St. Pierre et Miquelon</i>	Jo-Anne Elder	2003	St. John's
<i>Vétiver</i> (poetry)	Joël Des Rosiers	<i>Vetiver</i>	Hugh Hazelton	2006	Winnipeg
<i>Au nom de la Torah: une histoire de l'opposition juive au sionisme</i> (non-fiction)	Yakov M. Rabkin	<i>A Threat from Within: A Century of Jewish Opposition to Zionism</i>	Fred A. Reed with Yakov M. Rabkin	2006	Black Point
<i>Béatitudes</i> (poetry)	Herménégilde Chiasson	<i>Beatitudes</i>	Jo-Anne Elder	2008	Fredericton
<i>Seul on est</i> (poetry)	Serge Patrice Thibodeau	<i>One</i>	Jo-Anne Elder	2009	Fredericton

Original title (genre)	Author	Translated title	Translator	Year of the award	'Translations' place of publication
<i>Jacob-Isaac Segal (1896–1954) : un poete yiddish de Montreal et son milieu</i> (non-fiction)	Pierre Anctil	<i>Jacob Isaac Segal: A Montréal Yiddish Poet and His Milieu</i>	Vivian Felsen	2018	Ottawa
<i>Si tu m'entends</i> (fiction)	Pascale Quiviger	<i>If You Hear Me</i>	Lazer Lederhendler	2020	Windsor
<i>L'amant du lac</i> (fiction)	Virginia Pesemapéo Bordeleau	<i>The Lover, the Lake</i>	Susan Ouriou	2021	Calgary
<i>Histoire des Juifs du Québec</i> (non-fiction)	Pierre Anctil	<i>History of the Jews in Quebec</i>	Judith Weisz Woodsworth	2022	Ottawa
<i>On nous appelait les Sauvages: souvenirs et espoirs d'un chef héréditaire algonquin</i> (non-fiction)	Dominique Rankin	<i>They Called Us Savages: A Hereditary Chief's Quest for Truth and Harmony</i>	Ben Vrignon	2022	Winnipeg

Table 2. FR-to-EN GG-Nominated Translations Published Outside of Toronto, Montréal, or Vancouver.

Let us note that there are three laureates on this list, while there was only one for French. The genres are also more diverse, with all categories represented except for drama. It is also interesting that three of the translations published in the Atlantic provinces originate from the same translator, Jo-Anne Elder, who does live in this area, while the ones published in Winnipeg originate from people living in Montréal (Hugh Hazelton) or in Nova Scotia (Ben Vrignon). The case of Susan Ouriou, who lives in Alberta and is the translator of many finalist titles published in that province, is also noteworthy, since she has been nominated for translations published in other Canadian cities, particularly Toronto and Vancouver.

In summary, while most of the translation activity is concentrated in Montréal—especially into French, but into English as well—not that many award-winning English books were *originally* published in Montréal. Toronto, for its part, appears to be the main source of books that are eventually translated into French, and also the place where a little more than half of French-to-English translations get published—although, as the next paragraphs will show, few translators reside in the Ontarian metropolis.

WHERE ARE THE TRANSLATORS BASED?

Information on where the translators live (or have lived) was obtained from biographies, publishers' websites, or other sources, such as archived CCA press releases, the LTAC's directory, and even social media. It was much easier to find biographical information about those translating from French to English than the other way around, in part because many of the Francophone translators seem to have retired earlier than their Anglophone counterparts. English-speaking translators were sometimes still active, or their illustrious literary career meant that their lives are well documented in encyclopaedias or academic sources. They also seem to be more inclined to include their place of residence in their official biographical notices. Another challenge was the fact that some translators had moved in the course of their career, but the exact moment was impossible to pinpoint without reaching out to the translators themselves—a step that was not possible in the context of this research. A distinction must also be made between the number of finalist books and the actual number of people nominated, since many translators have had this honour more than once. The fact that some worked in tandem also needed to be considered.

Among the 66 individual translators who have been finalists in the French-to-English category, 18 cities or towns of residence were represented in total. Most translators were living in urban areas in the provinces of Quebec and Ontario, as shown in Table 3.

City of residence	Number of translators
Montréal (Quebec)	34
Ottawa/Gatineau (Ontario/Quebec)	7
Toronto (Ontario)	5
Québec City (Quebec)	4
Calgary (Alberta)	3
Feltzen South (Nova Scotia)	1
Fredericton (New Brunswick)	1
Guelph (Ontario)	1
Kingston (Ontario)	1
London (UK)	1
North Hatley (Quebec)	1
Paris (France)	1
Peterborough (Ontario)	1
Saint-Lazare (Quebec)	1
St. John’s (Newfoundland)	1
Trois-Rivières (Quebec)	1
Vancouver Island (British Columbia)	1
Waterloo (Ontario)	1

Table 3. City or Town of Residence of FR-to-EN Translators.

It is worth mentioning that among the 34 Montrealer finalists, many were nominated several times, including Sheila Fischman (19 times), Lazer Lederhendler (10 times), David Homel (10 times, including 4 with Fred A. Reed), Fred A. Reed (9 times altogether), Linda Gaboriau (9 times), Rhonda Mullins (7 times), Patricia Claxton (6 times), Donald Winkler (6 times), and others, which means that a large majority of the finalist titles (116 out of 166, or 70%) were translated by someone (or two people) living in Montréal. Most of the finalists who worked in tandem—twelve pairs in total—were living in the same city, usually in Montréal or in the Ottawa/Gatineau region. In an age of digital communication, one could think it has become easier to collaborate across the country, but the only two exceptions were the 2007 finalists Robert Majzels (Vancouver Island) and Erin Mouré (Montréal), as well as the 2021 finalists Helge Dascher (Montréal) and Rob Aspinall (Guelph).

Considering the laureates only, out of the 36 winners of the French-to-English prize, 30 (83%) were from Montréal. Among the remaining six, there is Robert Majzels (awardee in 2000), a long-time Montrealer

now established in British Columbia, and two other translators domiciled in Quebec: Judith Cowan (2002, Trois-Rivières) and D. G. Jones (1993, originally from Ontario, but has lived a long time in the Eastern Townships). Little information is available about 1991 laureate Albert W. Halsall, but archival records indicate that at the time he was a professor at Carleton University, Ottawa. The other two laureates, who live further from Quebec's metropolis, are Susan Ouriou (2009, finalist six more times) from Calgary, Alberta, and Wayne Grady (1989, finalist three more times), from Kingston, Ontario.

None of the laureates—and only a handful of the finalist French-to-English translators—were associated with Toronto: Patricia Sillers (1987), Agnes Whitfield (1992), Bobby Theodore (2000), Liedewy Hawke (2002, 2004, 2008, and 2010) and Vivian Felsen (2018). Among these, Agnes Whitfield had lived for a long time in Montréal before moving to teach at York University, and was likely still living in Ontario in 1992 when she was nominated. This is not to say, however, that Toronto has no translation activity. In *Traverser Toronto*, Nicole Nolette has emphasised the importance of several theatre translators from that city, most notably John Van Burek, a translator of many of Michel Tremblay's plays—not among the GG finalists, however. Nolette also stresses that Bobby Theodore—another Torontonion drama translator, and GG finalist in 2000—was highly influenced by Montréal translators Linda Gaboriau, Maureen Labonté, and Shelley Tepperman, all GG translation prize finalists. Interestingly, theatre (as well as young people's literature) accounts for a small percentage of translations nominated for the GG, in both language pairs.

As regards the places of residence of English-to-French translators, an obvious difference with the other language pair is the number of nominated tandems: 36, i.e. three times more than for French-to-English. Among these, husband-and-wife Paul Gagné and the late Lori Saint-Martin were finalists 23 times, and laureates 4 times. Both used to live in Montréal, like most of the other translators, regardless of the language pair. Indeed, 108 out of 157 books (69%) were translated by at least one person living in Quebec's metropolis, a slightly lower percentage than for French-to-English (70%). Most winning books, too (23 out of 36, i.e. 64%) were translated by someone domiciled in this city; surprisingly, however, that represents a lower number than in the other language combination (with 30, or 83%, of the laureates living in Montréal). 83 individual English-to-French GG finalists were identified, whereas only 66 different French-to-English individual translators were nominated. Not surprisingly, a few more cities or towns (23, compared to 18 for the other language combination) were represented. Most translators lived in Québec City (6) and Ottawa (4)—after Montréal, of course, home to at least 48, not counting those who live in its suburbs.

MONTRÉAL'S HEGEMONIC PRESENCE IN THE TRANSLATION UNIVERSE

Montréal's role in the translation industry is quite understandable, if one takes into account the fact that both Francophone and Anglophone communities have been very active on the literary scene since the foundation of the city. Surely, with several universities teaching literary arts (including translation), a considerable number of publishing houses, an important annual book fair, as well as numerous bookshops, libraries, and other cultural venues, Montréal has the potential to attract and retain translators, whether they work in French or English. As Sherry Simon points out, a third language important to Montréal has been Yiddish (*Villes* 191): its new bridges with the Francophone community, thanks to scholar and translator Pierre Anctil, are amply described by Simon (*Translating* 96–97). Interestingly, many recent GG finalist books touch on matters related to Yiddish, as well as, more broadly, Jewish communities in Montréal. Apart from the works of the aforementioned Anctil (2018 and 2022), examples include poems by A. M. Klein (2007), and Lori Saint-Martin and Paul Gagné's recent retranslations of Mordecai Richler's novels.

As a cosmopolitan city, Montréal is also home to many other languages, and thus conducive to other interactions with the two official language communities. Indeed, according to Daniel Chartier, "migrant literature has become one of the emblems of the end of the 20th century, especially in Quebec" (303, translation mine), and among the most successful literary figures of the province are newcomers whose first language was neither of the main languages (e.g., Kim Thúy with Vietnamese or Caroline Dawson with Spanish), but who decided to write in French, and have subsequently been translated into English—in itself proof of recognition.

Nick Mount states that Montréal has been "the centre of poetry in Canada since the 1920s" (96), but argues that the CanLit boom is actually the "story of how Toronto finally became the cultural capital English Canada never had" (11). The data on translation of award-winning books show, however, that Montréal remains an important hub of this literary activity. Other Francophone cities might become more visible in the future: Québec City, with publisher Alto leading the way, has been gaining ground in the last two decades, with many of its celebrated translators also being well-known authors, such as Catherine Leroux and Dominique Fortier. A few kilometres away, in the Wendake community, the future of Les Éditions Hannenorak, founded in 2010, also looks promising, with author and translator Daniel Grenier (an acclaimed novelist himself) being nominated twice in recent years for translations of Cree writer Dawn Dumont. Indigenous literature is gaining popularity with the public and juries since the last decade, as

awareness related to First People's realities increases. However, Ottawa, the capital, seems to play a modest part in the literary translation publishing industry, despite being situated at the border of Quebec and Ontario, home to many bilingual individuals, and the exact place where the GGs are managed and awarded by the CCA. A few very successful translators, with several nominations each—such as Daniel Poliquin, himself a recognised author—are domiciled there, but not as many as we might expect for such a region. Nevertheless, with Les Éditions L'Interligne's new collection "Vertiges/Traduction," we may see more titles from Ottawa in the coming years, as with Benoit Laflamme in 2022.

180 CONCLUSION

The presented data generally corroborates what has been observed before: original English books are mostly published by bigger houses in Toronto, mostly translated in Montréal, by Montrealers, and then brought out in translation either in Toronto, by smaller presses, or in Montréal, sometimes in Vancouver. As for French books, most of them are published in Montréal, both originally and in translation, also by Montrealers. I have not investigated the places of residence of all the original authors, but just among the finalists we can find several Anglophone authors currently residing in Montréal—some of them, like author and translator David Homel, cumulating two roles. This would then be another relevant set of data to study. Hence, the notion that Montréal is losing ground to Toronto would need to be nuanced by these observations around translation and prizes.

For instance, examining all the submitted books and their provenance would help contextualise these numbers further. Boréal, for example, has been nominated often, but it would be informative to compare its success rates to those of newer publishers, such as Alto. Much could also be gathered from the differences between bigger commercial English language publishers and smaller independent presses. It would also be very helpful to study the respective locations of the jury members who picked these particular finalists and laureates: do the jurors' surroundings influence their tastes, and are they more likely to choose books that relate to life in bigger cities? To what extent does being domiciled in an urban setting influence the number of contracts that a translator can obtain, as there are surely more networking opportunities for city dwellers? And how do translators, mostly living in Montréal, get in touch with publishers, located mostly in Toronto? The role of the Translation Rights Fair, organised every year since 2011 by the CCA, should also be examined further in that regard. Certainly, the fact that, since 2016, the Fair has been held during

the “Salon du livre de Montréal” reinforces the idea that this city plays a central role on the translation scene. Finally, does the fact that many authors and translators live in metropolitan areas mean that award-winning books mostly tell urban stories? A close reading of these books would be an apt way to see which Canadian cities are depicted, and in what manner. That, however, is beyond the scope of this article, which I see as pointing towards possible further research in this exciting field.

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Refiguring and Normalizing Urban Space: Naguib Mahfouz's *Awlād ḥāratinā* and Its English, Polish, and Spanish Translations

ABSTRACT

The Arabic term *ḥāra* denotes a specific topographical unit of the traditional Middle-Eastern, especially Egyptian, city. Various translated into English—e.g., as *lane*, *alley*, but also *quarter*, *district*, *neighbourhood*—it belongs to the category of culture-bound terms. This article presents an analysis of its use in the novel *Awlād ḥāratinā* (1959) by the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz (1911–2006), in which it plays a crucial role, and of how it has been rendered in four translations into English, Polish, and Spanish. The difficulty which the translators had to negotiate when dealing with *ḥāra* lies not only in its cultural specificity, but also in its polysemy: five semantic facets of this term are distinguished in this study (geographic, metonymic, architectural, social, and cultural/economic), of which four can be found in the novel. A number of occurrences of *ḥāra* in these four senses and their equivalents used in the four translations are discussed in terms of their semantics and connotations. Special attention is paid to the non-canonical use of this term to which Mahfouz resorted in order to refigure the topography of the Egyptian city and to give the novel an allegorical dimension. In translation, this meaningful alteration is reverted and literary space normalized back into a conventional shape. The analysis shows how the translators have domesticated the literary representation of urban space to suit Western notions, normalizing it in certain cases, but in some others have opted for foreignizing solutions.

Keywords: Arabic literature, translation, culture-bound terms, Naguib Mahfouz, *Awlād ḥāratinā*, urban space.



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INTRODUCTION

In 1959, Naguib Mahfouz, then an acclaimed Egyptian writer with the well-known Cairo trilogy (1956–57) to his credit, published another novel, serialized in the respected and widely circulated newspaper *Al-Abrām*. The novel, given the innocuous title *Awlād ḥāratinā* (*Children of Our ḥāra*, henceforth: *Awlād*), was soon to turn problematic, because it easily reads as an allegory of Judeo-Christian-Islamic history: the *ḥāra* with its inhabitants stands for the world and the main characters are identifiable with Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, represented as rather mundane, and God, embodied by the community's ancestor, who eventually dies. All of this, combined with the number of the novel's chapters being 114—as many as those in the Quran—made some circles, especially the Islamic al-Azhar University, consider the novel sacrilegious. Mahfouz himself was unwilling to see it republished. Consequently, it did not appear as a book until 1967, in Beirut; however, the author shared neither in its production, nor in the profits (Stewart, “Introduction” xviii).¹ In 1988, when Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature, the book, translated by Philip Stewart into English as *Children of Gebelawi* (1981), was among those cited in the Nobel press release. In Egypt, it was republished in 2006, just months after Mahfouz's death.

The object of our interest here is the Arabic word *ḥāra* used in the novel's title and recurring on nearly every page of this work. It denotes a specific topographical unit of the traditional Middle-Eastern, especially Egyptian, city. Although a number of analyses and commentaries from various perspectives have been devoted to *Awlād* (e.g., Abu-Haidar, El-Gabalawy, el-Ghitany, Roded, Khalifa, Zaki and Mohamed, to name just a few published in English), in none of them was due attention paid to the term *ḥāra* featured in its title. The allegorical value of the *ḥāra* standing for the entire humanity has been well recognized, but the topography of the city represented in the novel has not been adequately analyzed and problems related to the translation of the terms naming its parts raised little interest among scholars.

By way of introduction, let us consider how differently the term *ḥāra* has been translated:²

¹ See Shoair for an account of the history of the book's publication, including how the popular militant Islamist preacher Umar Abd al-Raḥmān (Omar Abdel-Rahman) conflated Mahfouz's case with the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, which led to the assassination attempt against the Egyptian writer in 1994.

² For Arabic quotations, I use one of the standard transcriptions and provide my own translation, leaving the problematic words in their original form.

(1)

- a. *wa-ḥāratunā, ḥārat al-Jabalāwī, aṭwal ḥāra fī l-minṭaqa* (*Awlād* 75)
[and our *ḥāra*, the *ḥāra* of al-Jabalāwī, it the longest *ḥāra* in the area]
- b. *Gebelaawi Alley is the longest in the district* (Stew. 99)
- c. *Our alley, Gabalawi Alley, is the longest in the whole area* (Ther. 93)
- d. *Nasza dzielnica, dzielnica Al-Dżabalawiego, leży przy najdłuższej ulicy w tym rejonie* (*Dzieci* 123)
[Our **neighbourhood**, the **neighbourhood** of Al-Dżabalawi, extends along the longest street in this area]
- e. *Nuestro barrio, el barrio de Gabalaui, es el más largo de los alrededores* (*Hijos* 102)
[Our **neighbourhood**, the **neighbourhood** of Gabalaoui, is the longest in the area]

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In these four translations, two types of equivalents can be distinguished, denoting two different components of built environment: one (English *alley*) refers to a topographical element typically conceptualized as having length, the other (Polish *dzielnica* and Spanish *barrio*, both of which I render as *neighbourhood* in this article) to one normally measured as a surface. In both English translations *ḥāra* is rendered as *alley* and characterizing it as long or longest seems natural. By contrast, length being a distinctive quality of *barrio* used in the Spanish version may sound surprising. In the Polish translation, the message has been modified: *ḥāra* is rendered as *dzielnica*, which itself is not characterized as longest but as extending along the longest street.

That *ḥāra* is a semantically complex term is also evidenced by dictionaries. In most Arabic-English, Arabic-Polish, and Arabic-Spanish dictionaries—to limit the sample to the languages covered by this study—the proposed equivalents of *ḥāra* show this twofold meaning:

Arabic-English dictionaries:

- (i) “1. . . . quarter, district; neighbourhood . . . ; 2. . . . lane; alley . . .”
(Arts 204–05)
- (ii) “quarter, part, section (of a city); . . . lane, alley, side street . . .” (Wehr 212)

Arabic-Polish dictionaries:

- (iii) “1. dzielnica, kwartał 2. zaułek, uliczka . . .” (Danecki and Kozłowska 272)
[1. neighbourhood, quarter 2. narrow passage, alley . . .]
- (iv) “zaułek; uliczka” (Łacina, *Sł. arabsko-polski* 281)
[narrow passage, alley]

Arabic-Spanish dictionaries:

- (v) “barrio . . . ; callejón, calleja” (Corriente and Ferrando 275)
[neighbourhood . . . ; alley, narrow street]
- (vi) “barrio; . . . ; callejón” (Cortés 274)
[neighbourhood; . . . ; alley]

However, when the above-listed English, Polish, and Spanish words meaning “district,” “neighbourhood,” “quarter,” etc., are looked up in current English-, Polish- or Spanish-Arabic dictionaries, what one finds in most of them (e.g., Karmi 351, 856; Baalbaki and Baalbaki 359, 763, 945; Wahba 308, 901, 1197; Arts 1489, 1614; Łacina, *Sł. polsko-arabski* 181) is *ḥayy* or *minṭaqa*, not *ḥāra*; the only exceptions are the dictionary by Reda and that by Karmi, which give *ḥāra* as one of the equivalents of *barrio* (96) and *quarter* (1094), respectively. Similarly, when one consults these dictionaries for the Arabic equivalents of English, Polish, and Spanish words meaning “lane,” “alley,” etc., in most of them one finds *zuqāq* and *darb*, not *ḥāra*, an exception being the dictionary by Łacina, where *zaułek* is translated as *ḥāra* (beside *zuqāq*) (894). This lexical and lexicographic asymmetry, not to say chaos, suggests that in *ḥāra* we encounter a term denoting a specific cultural concept, closely connected with traditional Arabic cities, unknown to the lexical systems of Western languages. This is why some authors writing about this novel, or *ḥāra* in general, decide to leave this term untranslated (e.g., Somekh passim; Abu-Haidar passim). This solution is also adopted in the present article.

To demonstrate the kind of translation problems that the concept of *ḥāra* can generate and the ways in which they were dealt with in the four renditions selected for this study, I start by discussing the semantics of this term. Next, after a brief characterization of the translators and their works, I analyze how *ḥāra*, as used in various senses in the original edition, was rendered into the three languages—when necessary, with a focus on the connotations of its translation equivalents. A special case is that of the term *ḥāra* when used in opposition to *ḥayy*, denoting another topographical unit—a relation which Mahfouz creatively refigured in the novel. Although no statistical examination of particular translation solutions is intended in the present study, some generalizing statements about evident tendencies are ventured.

THE VARIOUS FACES OF ḤĀRA

Descriptive definitions of *ḥāra* help us to clarify the meaning of this term. It was registered by Arabic lexicography as early as the 8th century: in the famous first Arabic language dictionary by al-Ḥalīl ibn Aḥmad al-

Farāhīdī, it is defined as “*kull maḥalla danat min manāzilihim, fa-hum abl ḥāra*” (vol. 1, 378), which can be rendered as: any settlement clustered around people’s dwellings, and they (viz. the inhabitants) are (referred to as) “the people of a (particular) *ḥāra*.” This definition, repeated with modifications in modern Arabic-Arabic dictionaries (e.g., Mas‘ūd 289; ‘Umar, vol. 1, 579 and 593), is as vague as it is laconic (typically of classical Arabic lexicons). A more informative characterization can be found in a modern dictionary of Egyptian culture and traditions:

A *ḥāra* is an area on either side of a major street (*ṣāri‘*) inhabited by a group of people bound together by shared ties. The major street consists of *ḥāras*, or lanes (*darb*), while a *ḥāra* consists of minor lanes (*‘atfa*). The *ḥāra* is a unit of social organization superior to the family, as the family corresponds to one house, while the *ḥāra* is organized as a set of houses or families. The street is where the inhabitants of the *ḥāra* find space for business activities, the mosque, the furnace, and the market.

The residents of a single *ḥāra* are united by strong social bonds. They share funerals and weddings and meet at evening parties. Every person in the *ḥāra* knows the other. In the past, every *ḥāra* used to have a large gate with a watchman. In the middle of the gate, there was a small door that was used if someone arrived at night . . .—all this because of lack of security and the risk of nocturnal assaults. The large gate would normally be locked in order to prevent thieves from entering the *ḥāra*. The *ḥāra* was a source of pride for its residents, who identified with it, saying, “We are the sons/children of *ḥāra* (*awlād al-ḥāra*) so-and-so,” following the ancient tradition of taking pride in one’s tribe. . . . (Amīn 133, translation mine)

Highlighting two aspects—the spatial (area) and the social (unit of social organization)—Amīn’s definition becomes clearer when complemented with the explanation given in the dictionary of Egyptian-Arabic by Badawi and Hinds: “narrow lane, alley (traditionally constituting a small neighbourhood)” (231). In a paper devoted to the concept of *ḥāra*, Al-Messiri Nadim defines it as “a narrow alley, an *‘atfa* as a narrower alley, usually branching from a *ḥāra*, and a *zuqāq* as an offshoot of an *‘atfa*” (321). The term *ḥāra* also denotes “the larger unit” (ibid.), comprising the main alley, the thoroughfare, i.e. the *ḥāra* in the first sense—let us call it architectural—with all its labyrinthine ramifications,³ forming a residential neighbourhood.

³ Sometimes the term *ḥāra* is associated with the maze-like character of these parts of a city and derived from the radical *ḥ-y-r*, meaning “confusion” (the Arabic verb *ḥāra* means “he got confused”). For instance, Abdelmonem claims that it is derived from *hayyara* and *hayra* (in my transcription), which means “confuse” and “confusion,”

In former times, the *ḥāras* were overseen, religiously and administratively, by a *šayḥ al-ḥāra* (“sheikh of the *ḥāra*”) and protected by strongmen called in Egypt *futuwwa*. Calling the *ḥāra* “one of the distinctive features of the Arabic city,” French Arabist Raymond characterizes such entities as follows:

They have a very consistent structure: there is one entrance point, which can be shut by a gate, and if necessary guarded; one main street, on to which alleys and cul-de-sacs are grafted. There are no specialised markets in these districts, only the *suwaykas* [minor markets, translation mine] . . . where the many activities necessary to daily existence take place. The life of the district is that of a community that is quite closed in upon itself; it is open only toward the centre [of the city], where the local inhabitants undertake their activities and towards which the network of roads leads in a hierarchically organised scheme. (“MADĪNA” 552)

It is natural that the term *ḥāra* is used by way of metonymy to refer to all its inhabitants; as such, it connotes a sense of community and solidarity. As Raymond observes, the *ḥāras* “provided dwelling for a population that could hardly have exceeded around a thousand inhabitants (around 200 families), so that they lived there in a familiar environment, akin to a village where everyone knows everyone else” (“Organization” 63). This identificational facet of the notion of *ḥāra* has been signalled above in the quotation from Amīn’s dictionary.

In the social dimension, the word *ḥāra*, not unlike the English expressions *the street* or *outdoors*, denotes public space—understood as one offering free access and charged with various types of shared responsibility—as opposed to private space, home. However, what has primarily shaped the distinction between public and private space in Islamic societies is, in many ways, sex segregation. Public space can thus be perceived as male and private space as female, i.e. one in which women are safe from being seen by strangers, namely males not belonging to the kin group. In addition, Abu-Lughod, to whom I owe the above observation on the “public–male vs. private–female” parallelism, notes that “when it is impossible to achieve the physical and visual separation required between strangers,” the local neighbourhood is considered “an extension of the home and therefore the family” (“Islamic City” 168). In order to capture

respectively, “caused by a lot of people and houses in tight spaces” (120). This explanation, however, is evidently folk etymology. Most probably Arabic *ḥāra* is an old borrowing from Aramaic (Syriac).

this, she proposes a third category—"semi-private space."⁴ There, women can perform their daily tasks without having to "cover themselves as fully as they would have, had they been going into public space" (ibid.). This is, generally, the case with the poorer inhabitants of the city, who are unable to achieve complete gender separation.⁵

Culturally and economically, the *ḥāra* is the part of a city where people live the old, traditional way, where religious and patriarchal values predominate, change is unwelcome, and poverty and ignorance not unusual. As such, these areas are opposed to more central and more modern parts of the city, with a regular grid of wider streets. We can find instances of this semantic facet of *ḥāra* in a book by the Egyptian literary critic Ḡālī Šukrī devoted to Mahfouz, in which one reads phrases such as: "since he was a child in the *ḥāra*" or "the genius of the Egyptian *ḥāra*" (12, 22, translation mine).

One arrives thus at five uses, or meanings, of the term *ḥāra*, obviously overlapping in some contexts, relevant to our considerations: geographic (a neighbourhood), metonymic (its inhabitants), architectural (its main thoroughfare), social (public space), and cultural/economic.⁶

⁴ See also Abu-Lughod "Relevance," especially page 8.

⁵ In an extreme interpretation, based on the criterion of "the manner and form of familiarity with which various intimate activities are carried out in the *harah* passage," El-Messiri Nadim claims it to be evident "that the alley [the *ḥāra*, addition mine] is actually considered by both sexes to be a private domain" (174; see also Abu-Lughod, "Islamic City" 168).

⁶ The meaning of *ḥāra* is, of course, not fixed and absolute, but has changed with time: "[I]ts precise meaning varies with the historical, administrative, socio-cultural, and perceptual frames of reference," observes Al-Messiri Nadim (313). In another passage, however, she mentions *ḥāra* among those urbanism-related terms the meaning of which has "not changed significantly since medieval times" (321). Indeed, Gaber, who in his analysis of how public space is viewed and referred to in Arabic in Egypt after the 2011 revolution observes that "[s]ome of the imported terms are inherited from colonial legacies and administration; others simply fail to map neatly onto the conditions on the ground" (103), gives *ḥāra* and *ḥayy* as examples of terms belonging to "a significantly rich set of meanings and understandings encoded in the words that laypersons use to describe the places in which they live" (104). In his opinion, such terms might well serve the needs of the discourse related to urban social justice and governance provided that they are "translated critically rather than literally" ("alleyway" or "lane" and "neighbourhood" being their respective literal translations) (ibid.). He argues that "[t]heir best translations into English might for instance be found in American slang terms: block or hood, rather than street or neighbourhood. These terms effectively combine the physical configurations in question with a communitarian ethos embodied in these places by the (largely marginalized) communities using the terms" (ibid.). Gaber's observations seem to complement well the analysis presented in this article by showing how, on the one hand, concepts related to urbanism depend on context and, on the other, how some of them resist translation irrespective of historical period.

THE *HĀRA* BETWEEN PARTICULARITY AND UNIVERSALITY

From the discussion in the preceding paragraphs *hāra* emerges as a culture-bound term.⁷ More specifically, it falls into the category of untranslatable *termini technici* referring to local creations of human culture, notions which the target language is incapable of expressing by means of its vocabulary. Such notions, even when explained or described in the target language, do not evoke in the minds of the recipients of the translation the same associations as the recipients of the original text tend to have (Wojtasiewicz 66–67, 71). Faced with such a situation, the translator can opt for some approximate equivalent in the target-language, i.e. an expression sharing some relevant semantic content with the original one and harmonizing with the norms of the target-language and target-culture. This domesticating strategy has been metaphorized by Schleiermacher as leaving the reader in peace as much as possible and moving the writer toward the reader (56), and summarized by Venuti as “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values” (“Strategies” 242). A subtype of the domestication strategy would be what Schreiber describes as a procedure in which the target-language norms are respected more than a norm-violating (“normverletzend”) source text, and which results in the levelling (“Nivellierung”) (294–95), or normalizing, of a text. The outcome is then an adaptation (“Bearbeitung”), not a translation (“Übersetzung”). Domesticating translation is usually a means of achieving fluency, transparency, idiomaticity, readability, or whatever we call it—an ideal extensively discussed and questioned by Venuti in *The Translator’s Invisibility*. Foreignization, the strategy situated at the opposed pole, consists, in simplest terms, in adhering in the translation process to the values of the source-language and source-culture, and making the linguistic and cultural differences visible in the target-text. “Such a translation strategy,” observes Venuti, “can best be called *resistancy*, not merely because it avoids fluency, but because it challenges the target-language culture even as it enacts its own ethnocentric violence on the foreign text” (*Invisibility* 24).

The local colours and flavours present in Mahfouz’s works, exemplified by *hāra*, intersect with this author’s international fame and universal reach which ensued from the Nobel Prize and led to his works being translated into many languages. As observed by Jacquemond, giving the Nobel Prize to Mahfouz, a Third-World author, was a continuation of “the integration of the literatures of the South into the world republic of letters” (126), initiated by the boom in Latin American literature. If there is such a thing

⁷ Culture-bound terms, sometimes referred to as *culturemes*, are “formalized, socially and juridically embedded phenomena that exist in a particular form or function in only one of the two cultures being compared” (Katan 71). See Nord (33–34) for more references.

as world literature, definable, following Damrosch, as “all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (4), Mahfouz’s novels undoubtedly belong to it. How all these Egyptian peculiarities are to be rendered into other languages is an obvious question which Mahfouz’s translators ask themselves: should they be, in one way or another, retained in the target-texts, or, rather, sacrificed at the altar of Mahfouz’s universality? In the subsequent parts of this paper, I will analyze how the authors of the four translations of *Awlād* dealt with *ḥāra* in light of the above observations on untranslatability, particularity, and universality.

Before discussing these issues, however, it seems fitting to briefly outline the translators’ profiles and to evaluate, at least generally, the quality of their work. Philip Stewart (United Kingdom) was the first to translate *Awlād* into a foreign language. He did it in 1962, while in Cairo, as an academic working for a PhD degree (not accepted by the university). Later, he “changed course completely, taking a further honours degree in forestry” (Ffrench) and dedicating himself to the sciences. Although his obituary (he died in 2022), published by his alma mater, states that “[h]is publications ranged from Arabic translations, forestry, economics and ecology to the history of chemistry, and poetry” (ibid.), digital library catalogues do not show literary translations from Arabic other than that of *Awlād*. Whatever the case may be, Stewart devoted a good part of his life to this text. His translation, published in 1981 with a small print run, was based on the 1959 “Al-Ahrām” text (the manuscript, which Mahfouz did not recuperate from the “Al-Ahrām” editors, is considered lost). During his work on *Awlād*, Stewart discussed with the author some more difficult expressions and “words and phrases” missing from this edition (Shoair 63–64). When the book was reissued in the USA, he seized the opportunity to introduce certain improvements. After 1996, when comparing the Beirut edition with the “Al-Ahrām” text, he discovered that certain words or sentences were missing in the former as well. He counted “961 discrepancies between the two texts, (not including the thousands of differences in punctuation. . . . In some two hundred cases the difference is significant even in translation, affecting who does what, with what or to whom” (Stewart, “Introduction” xviii).⁸ From this comparison he concluded that the Beirut edition was based on both the manuscript and the “Al-Ahrām” text, but was still incomplete. On these grounds he argued that his own revised translation into English is arguably “the only version in any language to take full account of both the original sources” (ibid.).

⁸ Over a hundred of the most significant discrepancies are listed in Stewart “*Awlād*.” Nevertheless, they do not affect the issues under examination here.

The second translator of *Awlād* into English, Peter Theroux (USA)—one of the three Theroux brothers, alongside Alexander and Paul—engaged in literary creation himself, and has translated over ten novels from Arabic, some by luminaries such as Elias Khoury (Lebanon) and Abdelrahman Munif (Jordan/Saudi Arabia). Following Mahfouz’s Nobel Prize, the American University in Cairo Press entrusted Theroux with a new translation because they failed to obtain the rights to use the translation by Stewart; the latter “thought that a world-wide re-launch of the book in the wake of the Rushdie affair was potentially dangerous for [himself], for Mahfouz, for [their] families and associates and for Islamic-Western relations” (Stewart, “Children”). Theroux claims, however, that the reasons for commissioning a new translation may have been financial (668). More interestingly at this point, Stewart, whose translation was praised by Theroux as a “perfectly adequate work” (*ibid.*), was very critical of his follower’s accomplishment. Not only did he remark that Theroux’s translation, being based only on the Beirut edition, does not reflect the author’s original intentions, but he also criticized his style (which “often does not sound like English”) and even pointed out that Theroux “reproduces mistakes that [he himself] made in [his] 1981 edition, amounting cumulatively to strong evidence of plagiarism” (Stewart, “Children”).⁹

The author of the Polish translation, Izabela Szybilska-Fiedorowicz, is one of the most competent and prolific translators of modern Arabic literature into Polish, although only occasionally active in this field since 2013. Apart from *Awlād*, her translations from Arabic include four novels, among which three are by Egyptian authors (Salwa Bakr, Miral al-Tahawy, and Alaa Al Aswany); she has also translated books from English dealing with the Arab world. Finally, not much can be said about the five translators of *Awlād* into Spanish, namely D. G. Villaescusa, P. M. Monfort, I. Ligorré, C. de Losada, and E. Abelleira. Apart from *Hijos*, no trace of them can be found in the digital catalogues of Spanish university libraries or in the search engines, which makes one wonder whether these names are real or pseudonymous.

Space constraints preclude discussion of the quality of the translations under analysis or their reception in respective countries. However, summary research reveals that the reviews, at least those available online, have been positive and tended to commend the book’s allegorical and universal nature as well its timelessness.¹⁰ As a rule, the reviews are not

⁹ See Khalifa’s “Violence” for an examination of the disputes between Stewart and Theroux which manifested themselves in various paratexts (including Stewart’s negative review of his rival’s version on Amazon).

¹⁰ The reviews by Czechowicz and Yardley can serve as specimens.

concerned with the issue of faithfulness, which is usually the case when translations from “exotic” languages are discussed in non-specialized publications. At any rate, all of the four texts deserve to be judged as fine in terms of correct language and fidelity.¹¹

It cannot be doubted that the authors of the four translations under analysis were well aware that *ḥāra* is not an unproblematic word. This is illustrated by Stewart’s explicit justification of his decision in his “Translator’s Introduction” to render it as *alley*:

Hara is translated as “alley,” and it is worth insisting on the fact that this is correct. Several learned critics have imagined that it means “quarter” or “district,” and one has even claimed that it is the whole of the old city. Any attentive reader will agree that in this book “alley” is right; it is a single thoroughfare (chapter 67), short enough for someone at one end to follow what goes on at the other (chapter 104), and narrow enough for conversation to take place across it (chapter 97). Its people live in apartments [sic] opening on to the stairways to the central courtyards of tenement-houses. These form two facing terraces, and their flat roofs provide alternative routes from one end of the Alley to the other (chapters 33, 60, 83). (xix)

Something to the contrary can be found in the Introduction which leading Polish Arabist and translator Jolanta Kozłowska wrote for the Polish edition: “The word *ḥāra* used in the title, rendered as *dzielnica* in the Polish translation, denotes in contemporary language a lane, a street, an alley (‘uliczka[a], ulica[a], zaułek’). The author uses this term interchangeably with *ḥayy*, which nowadays means a neighbourhood (‘dzielnica’)” (7, translation mine). This disagreement on terminology results from *ḥāra* being not only a culture-bound term, but a polysemous word as well. In the course of this article, however, it will be shown that this is not where the translator’s problems with *ḥāra* in this novel end. For the time being, let us observe that out of the five meanings of *ḥāra* distinguished above, four (1–4) are actualized in *Awlād*. In the subsequent paragraphs, I will examine how its translators have tried to express these meanings in their languages and how the picture of the Egyptian (and more generally Middle Eastern Arabic, but finally also Mahfouzian) city has been refigured in translation.

¹¹ Minor mistakes, usually induced by (near-)homography (frequent in Arabic script)—but at times made clearly against grammar and logic—do occur, mostly in *Hijos* (see Elhalwany, esp. 118–33). However, they do not affect the overall validity of the translations and in particular those passages in which the term *ḥāra* is used.

GEOGRAPHIC SENSE AND METONYMIC USE

It seems justified to begin the discussion of the equivalents of *ḥāra* in its geographic sense, roughly corresponding to English *neighbourhood* or *district*, with its occurrences in neutral contexts, i.e. those with no reference to its being distributed along a street or being long itself. The regular equivalents in the four versions (also used in the titles—except for Stew.) are *alley* (Stew. and Ther.), *dzielnica* (*Dzieci*), and *barrio* (*Hijos*). These two general ways of conceiving of the *ḥāra*, one as a street-like entity and the other as a neighbourhood-like area, seem to be equally justified. Complications arise whenever the longitudinal shape of the *ḥāra* is referred to, with its beginning, called *maṭlaʿ* (literally: “starting point”), *raʿs* (literally: “head”), or *niḥāya* (literally: “end”), and many ends, or cul-de-sacs. Translating *ḥāra* as *dzielnica* or *barrio* would sound unconvincing in such contexts since neighbourhoods do not tend to have one identifiable beginning. Therefore, the Polish and Spanish translators depart from their regular practice and opt for an equivalent denoting a street, as illustrated in (1) earlier in the article and (2):

(2)

- a. *ašāra ilā l-bayt al-kabīr ‘alā raʿs al-ḥāra* (Awlād 7)
[he pointed to the Great House at the head of the *ḥāra*]
- b. *wskazuje na Posiadłość na końcu ulicy* (*Dzieci* 11)
[he points to the Estate at the end of the *street*]
- c. *señala hacia la Casa Grande, al comienzo del callejón* (*Hijos* 9)
[he points to the Great House, at the beginning of the *alley*]

Sometimes, however, for instance in (3) and (4) below, it is *alley*, the term denoting a street-like entity, that may sound less than fluent or unnatural when taken out of the context of the novel:

(3)

- a. *innanā abnāʿ ḥāra wāḥida, wa-jadd wāḥid* (Awlād 130)
[we are sons of one *ḥāra*, and one ancestor]
- b. *we’re all sons of one Alley and one Ancestor* (Stew. 181)
- c. *we all share one alley and one ancestor* (Ther. 166)

(4)

- a. *a-lā tūjad kūdiya fī l-ḥāra?* (Awlād 168)
[Isn’t there an exorcist in the *ḥāra*?]
- b. *Isn’t there an exorcist down the Alley?* (Stew. 236)
- c. *Couldn’t you find an exorcist in the alley?* (Ther. 216)

In English, Polish, Spanish, and many other languages, it is usual for speakers to identify with a neighbourhood, a district, rather than with a street or an alley. Likewise, one does not expect an alley to be an area large or individuated enough to have its own exorcist. The readers of the English translations, then, have to get used to this identity-creating and individuating potential of the alley as they become acquainted with the universe represented in the novel. It would be difficult to imagine a more vivid example of foreignizing translation as regards *ḥāra* in *Awlād*.

As far as the metonymic use of *ḥāra* to refer to its inhabitants is concerned, the translators consistently resort to the terms which they have adopted for the translation of *ḥāra* in the geographic sense, e.g., “the Alley slept” (Stew. 246), “Dzielnica już spała” [“The neighbourhood slept already”] (*Dzieci* 285) (apart from cases in which they use general terms like English *people* and their Polish and Spanish equivalents: *ludzie* and *gente*). This terminological consistency only corroborates the notional architecture of the city represented in each particular translation.

There is, however, one place in *Awlād* where one of the translators into English—Theroux—departs from the use of *alley* as the equivalent of *ḥāra* in the geographic sense. As a result of a series of internal conflicts, a number of the inhabitants of the *ḥāra* emigrate to create their own settlement, which is also referred to as *ḥāra*, more specifically, *al-ḥāra al-jadīda*, “the new *ḥāra*.” As if feeling that “founding a new alley” would sound somewhat atypical, Theroux domesticates this phrase into “the new neighborhood” (Ther. 330). But even Stewart, rather than being satisfied with the most obvious equivalent (“the new alley”), reads *al-ḥāra al-jadīda* as a proper name—an interpretation not at all suggested by the Arabic fragment, which has no capital letters—and additionally uses quotation marks to present the reader with “the ‘New Alley’” (Stew. 364).

It is a puzzling choice of Theroux’s to render *ḥāra jadīda*, “a new *ḥāra*” in this sense (*Awlād* 253), as “a new civilization” (Ther. 329). One can only guess that he saw—wanted to see?—in this place of the original text the Arabic word *ḥaḍāra* “civilization,” similar to *ḥāra* graphically and phonetically. Admittedly, it makes sense in this context, but does not seem to have been intended by Mahfouz. I mention this case not only as a curiosity, but also as another piece of evidence showing that the renderings of the Arabic term *ḥāra* in the geographic sense are by no means consistent and often hardly reflect the original meaning.

ARCHITECTURAL AND SOCIAL SENSE

As already mentioned above, the thoroughfare along which the *ḥāra* as neighbourhood extends is also referred to as *ḥāra* (alternatively *darb* or *sikka*). In some passages of *ʿAwlād*, even when its longitudinal dimension is not hinted at, it is clear that *ḥāra* denotes not the whole neighbourhood, but this more limited area where, for instance, people can gather. This meaning is clearly reflected in translation equivalents such as English *road* (e.g., Stew. 167) and *street* (e.g., Ther. 153) and their Polish and Spanish correspondents: *ulica* (e.g., *Dzieci* 198) and *calle* (e.g., *Hijos* 174).

Since the area of the *ḥāra* qua street is considered public space, the term itself can be metonymized in this sense, as opposed to private space, home. At this point, it should be remarked that the concept of the *ḥāra* as (extended) (semi-)private/female space introduced by Abu-Lughod does not seem to be instantiated in *ʿAwlād*. This is probably due to the fact that nearly all events depicted in the novel take place within the *ḥāra* qua neighbourhood, with which no outer world (the rest of the city/world)—thus, no public space—contrasts. Instead of being one of the two opposed terms, Mahfouz's *ḥāra* itself can be divided into public space and private space. In the novel, however, the latter is referred to not by means of the usual term *bayt*, "house, home," but rather *rabʿ* (and its plural *rubʿ*), a specifically Cairene term denoting a tenement-house with a shared courtyard. Although this particular type of lodging constituted the majority of the houses in the neighbourhood (*ʿAwlād* 75), it seems that the opposition *ḥāra* vs. *rabʿ* has not been recognized by the translators as relevant, and has often been lost in translation, for instance by way of omission:

(5)

- a. *wa-ḥarajū ilā l-ḥāra wa-l-rubʿ* tatajāwab bi-l-ṣuwāt (*ʿAwlād* 263)
[and they went out into the *ḥāra* while the *rabʿ*'s echoed with clamour]
- b. *and went out into the road or the courtyards* (Stew. 378)
- c. *and went out into the alley and courtyards* (Ther. 342)
- d. *wylegli na ulice i podwórza* (*Dzieci* 429)
[went out into the *streets* and courtyards]
- e. *el griterío atronaba casas y patios* (*Hijos* 376)
[the clamour thundered through houses and courtyards]

In this example, all translations, departing quite far from the Arabic text, fail to convey the original message that even those who remained in the

rab's—i.e. the women, who generally tended to stay indoors (private, female space)—were protesting.

HAYY AND ḤĀRA—A RELATIONSHIP REFIGURED

The term *ḥayy* (plural: *ahyā*) is the commonest Arabic dictionary equivalent of words such as English *neighbourhood/district*, Polish *dzielnica*, and Spanish *barrio*, i.e. those denoting a larger part of a city individuated in some way. The *ḥayy al-Ḥusayn* and *ḥayy Ḥān al-Ḥalīlī* (commonly spelt in English as Khan el-Khalili) are examples of the traditional central *ḥayys* of Cairo (nowadays also tourist attractions). They are composed of a number of *ḥāras* and would never be referred to as *ḥāra* themselves. A topography structured in such a conventional way is the setting of the initial (1–23) chapters of *Awlād*, which narrate events prior to the creation of “our *ḥāra*.” In the Polish and Spanish versions, *ḥayy* in the initial chapters is translated in the same way as *ḥāra* throughout the book: as *dzielnica* and *barrio*, respectively (for example *Dzieci* 33 and *Hijos* 27). Consequently, the distinction between the superordinate *ḥayy* and the subordinate *ḥāra* is lost. This is the result of the decision to generally use the terms *dzielnica* and *barrio* as translations of *ḥāra*. In the English translations, *ḥayy* is rendered as *district* (e.g., Stew. 20) and *neighborhood* (e.g., Ther. 22), which adequately contrasts with *alley* for *ḥāra*: the distinction between the superordinate and subordinate units is clear.

In the topography of the initial chapters, the *ḥayys* are, as is the custom, composed of *ḥāras*. For instance, expelled from the Great House into the outer world, Adham strays into one of the *ḥāras* (*Awlād* 39), perhaps part of his own *ḥayy*. However, this is where the conventional use of the terms *ḥayy* and *ḥāra* ends in the novel. The *ḥāra* founded on a wasteland outside the Great House expands (end of chapter 23) and develops into a world of its own, itself divided into *ḥayys*. The two terms, *ḥāra* and *ḥayy*, are strictly distinguished by Mahfouz (cf. Kozłowska 7), as seen explicitly in the example below:

(6)

- a. *fa-yafriḍ nafsahu futuwwa ‘alā ḥayy min ahyā’ al-ḥāra* (*Awlād* 76)
[and imposes himself as a protector on some *ḥayy* among the *ḥayys* of the *ḥāra*]
- b. *making himself the strongman of one of the sectors of the Alley* (Stew. 100)
- c. *imposing himself as a protector on a neighborhood somewhere in the alley* (Ther. 94)

- d. *uzurpując sobie rolę futuwwy—obroncy któregoś terytorium dzielnicy* (Dzieci 124)
[usurping the role of a *futuwwa*—protector of some **territory** of the **neighbourhood**]
- e. *se nombraba a sí mismo jefe de uno de los sectores del barrio* (Hijos 103)
[proclaiming himself the chief of one of the **sectors** of the **neighbourhood**]

Theroux's decision to render *hayy* as *neighborhood* in (6c) results in the rather awkward idea of "a neighborhood somewhere in the alley." There are also other expressions of this kind: "make the rounds of the alley's neighborhoods" (Ther. 254) or "alley with its feuding neighborhoods" (Ther. 270). All of them make the surprised reader wonder: can an alley have neighbourhoods? In the following section, I will venture the hypothesis that such a surprise might in fact have been Mahfouz's intention.

DISCUSSION

The usual Arabic expression reflecting the hierarchical relationship between the concepts *hāra* and *hayy* is *hārāt al-hayy*¹² ("the *hāras* of the *hayy*"), not *aḥyā' al-hāra* ("the *hayys* of the *hāra*"), as is the case in (6). In *Awlād*, the initial conventional meaning of *hayy* ceases to be actualized at some point, and "our *hāra*," historically part of a *hayy*, now itself divides into *hayys*. The typical urban space is thus refigured into an unfamiliar one, and the topographical labels become semantically altered. This new topographical terminology is too consistently used in the novel to be the result of terminological carelessness on the author's part. It seems that Mahfouz wanted to demonstrate in this way that the ontological status of the *hāra* is not a standard one. As a result, the notion of *hāra* acquires new dimensions—those of a city, of a universe. It is no longer an alley or a small neighbourhood, and the reader of the original text is very often reminded of the fact through such new topographical terminology.

This refiguring of space and alteration of nomenclature invalidates the meticulous terminological adjustments made by the translators when dealing with *hayy* and *hāra* in the novel's initial chapters. The labels have to be rethought. Indeed, in the chapters from 24 onwards, the translators' regular choices for *hayy* as part of the *hāra* are those exemplified in (6): English *sector* (Stewart) and *neighborhood* (Theroux), Polish *terytorium* ("territory"), Spanish *sector*.

¹² With *hawārī l-hayy* being a morphological variant.

Theroux's choice—*neighbourhood*—aside, the remaining solutions seem felicitous inasmuch they do not strike the reader as incongruous. In Venuti's terms, they are fluent: an alley can conceivably be divided into sectors in English, *dzielnica* into *terytoria* in Polish, and a *barrio* into *sectores* or *barriadas* in Spanish. At the same time they are not adequate since they result in a loss of incongruity present in the norm-violating ("normverletzend," to use Schreiber's terminology again) original version. As far as the division of the *ḥāra* is concerned, these three translations offer a picture that has been domesticated, normalized, subjected to *Nivellierung*, or levelling.¹³ Theroux's foreignizing choice is the most felicitous in terms of reflecting the incongruity found in the original text and suggesting that what is being described is not just a conventional alley.

It also seems that the use of terms meaning *neighbourhood* and *street* to render *ḥāra* in its usual sense can be considered in terms of foreignization and domestication. *Dzielnica* (*Dzieci*) and *barrio* (*Hijos*) are instances of domestication, assuming that these terms foreground that aspect of *ḥāra* which secures fluency in the target-texts, i.e. is easily understood and normally used in similar contexts in the Polish and Spanish cultures. The use of *alley*, i.e. the term conveying the meaning of *street*, by Stewart and Theroux, is foreignizing in many contexts, because it has a sense of the foreign, as examples (3) and (4) show. Thus, Stewart's aforementioned explanatory note on *ḥāra/alley* was not only self-defence; it was also meant to help absorb this estranging effect.

CONCLUSION

The initial idea for this article was to also examine the use of the terms *ḥāra* and *ḥayy* and their translation equivalents in other prose works by Mahfouz, such as *Bayn al-Qaṣrayn* (1956; English *Palace Walk*, 1990, by William

¹³ Domestication, or levelling, can also be identified in the manifold ways in which the translators tried to mask the lexical strangeness of the original text presenting *ḥayy* as a meronym of *ḥāra*: omission (e.g., *ahyā' al-ḥāra*, "the *ḥayys* of the *ḥāra*," becoming just "the alley" in Ther. 107), hypernyms (e.g., *ḥayy* becoming "part" in Stew. 276), hyponyms (e.g., *ḥayy* becoming "zaufek" ["backstreet"] in *Dzieci* 142), and metonyms (e.g., *ahyā'* becoming "facciones" ["factions"] in *Hijos* 298). Some of their decisions were rather unsuccessful. When *ahyā'*, referring to the parts of the *ḥāra*—*barrio* in the Spanish version—is translated as *barrios*, the result is the meronym becoming indistinguishable from the holonym. (7b) is bound to create confusion as to the relationship between the *barrios* and the *barrio*.

(7) a. *naḥnu lā nufarriq bayna ḥayy wa-ḥayy, fa-l-ḥāra ḥāratunā* (Awlād 259)
[we don't make any difference between one *ḥayy* and (another) *ḥayy*, the *ḥāra* belongs to (all of) us]

b. *nosotros no hacemos distingos entre barrios; el barrio es nuestro* (*Hijos* 371)
[we don't make any difference between *neighbourhoods*; the *neighbourhood* belongs to us]

Maynard Hutchins and Olive E. Kenny), or the entire Cairo trilogy. This could not be carried out due to space limitations. For the time being, suffice it to say that the use of these terms in the Cairo trilogy, in *Ḥān al-Ḥalīlī* (1945; English *Khan al-Khalili*, 2008, by Roger Allen) and *Zuqāq al-Midaqq* (1947; English *Midaq Alley*, 1966, by Trevor Le Gassick)—to name only the earliest and most famous novels, all set in the traditional Cairene *ḥāras* and *ḥayys*, but in which *ḥāra* and *ḥayy* play no conspicuous part as lexemes—is utterly conventional. The same holds true for the later collection of stories, *Hikāyāt ḥāratinā* (1975, literally: *The Stories of Our Ḥāra*), again featuring “our *ḥāra*” in the title and in the narratives, which is, however, lost in its English translation by Soad Sobhy, Essam Fattouh, and James Kenneson, titled *Fountain and Tomb* (1988). A promising path for further exploration could be an analysis of how the terms *ḥāra* and *ḥayy* have been translated into other languages, with some versions already demonstrating interesting modifications in their titles. For instance, that of the French translation by Jean-Patrick Guillaume, *Les fils de la médina* (*The Sons of the Medina*, 1991), uses a term absent from the novel’s vocabulary: *médina* refers to the old (and touristic) parts of an Arab—but primarily Maghrebi, or even more specifically, Moroccan¹⁴—town or city. As a result of this decision, the reader’s associations gravitate towards the region of the former French colonies in North Africa. Thus, it can be assumed that a study of other language versions of Mahfouz’s novel might not only demonstrate a given translator’s inclination towards conceiving of the *ḥāra* as a street or a neighbourhood, but could perhaps also reveal less expected lexical shifts, resulting in texts that offer a refigured topography of the Middle-Eastern, or Egyptian, city.

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¹⁴ Cf. the two following definitions of *médina* in popular dictionaries of French:

(i) “Dans les pays arabes, et surtout au Maroc, la vieille ville, par opposition aux quartiers neufs” (“In the Arab countries, especially in Morocco, the old town, in contradistinction to the new districts”) (“*médina*,” *Larousse*)

(ii) “Partie ancienne d’une ville, en Afrique du Nord (spécialement au Maroc)” (“Old part of a town in Northern Africa, especially in Morocco”) (“*médina*,” *Le Robert*).

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Between Translation and Translocation: How Art Sensorially Explodes Language in the Airport Space

ABSTRACT

After Bataille, one can argue that, like the “castle, church, temple, or palace” before, nowadays the airport terminal—as elementary architecture of modern urban communication—emerges as a “grand didactic monument.” Erected to manage *landside* movement prior to flight, the air terminal as a techno-capitalist structure axiomatically operates with language, thus training the sensorium. Drawing from Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophical toolbox, in the first part of this essay, I will elucidate how language, spatially deployed in the airport, operates as a system of order-words. In doing so, I will account for how translation moves away from textual experience to become a logistic and increasingly automated procedure, thus contributing a negative understanding of air terminal space as an alienating non-place. Curiously, leading airports are simultaneously incorporating art to create unique and memorable encounters which enhance passenger experience by constructing a sense of place. In the latter part, I will engage with Eve Fowler’s *A Universal Shudder*, exhibited at LAX in 2022, exploring aesthetic manners in which it configures language and/in the air terminal. I propose that this artwork heightens awareness not so much of art as art (in the airport), but rather of the translocating power of language itself, which it sensorially stimulates. Consequently, the pragmatics of translation will be shown to coincide with a political aesthetic of translocation, which explodes the airport regime of order-words, thus yielding a novel mode of experiencing and understanding the air terminal.

Keywords: airport, art, language, translation, translocation.



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“[L]anguage is no longer defined by what it says . . .
but by what causes it to move, to flow, to explode.”
(Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* 145)

INTRODUCTION: WHAT LANGUAGE DOES THE AIRPORT SPEAK?

Even though “[a]ir travel is a quintessential mode of dwelling within the contemporary globalized world,” as John Urry pointed out (31), international air terminals remain notoriously intimidating spaces—alienating and perplexing. This common perception is not only due to their peri-urban geography, the intricate manner in which they are architected and spatially designed to effectively manage flows of travelers and warrant safety, and to their semi-public status, but it also arguably owes a great deal to the highly specific and protocolized language and style of communication that airports develop and deploy, which turns them into a “grand didactic monument”¹ of hypermodernity. An aurally and visually jargon-saturated topography emerges, suffused with signage, screens, protocols, information, instructions, and idioms, plastering the airport space with diverse signs and codes, and thus creating sensory overload, which overstimulates the occupants’ perception and exhausts their brains. Spatially determined by functionalist imperatives and operating procedures addressed to international travelers, structured in compliance with legal requirements of both state and international regulations, as well as fashioned by the commercial interests of consumption-fueled capitalism, airport language ends up universalized and standardized,² subject to a grammar of efficiency and sterilized of anything that might cause miscomprehension or disturbance.

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¹ Georges Bataille observes that the “castle, church, temple, or palace” constitute “a grand didactic monument . . . a monument speaking and proclaiming authority which made the crowd bow” (127, translation mine), thus drawing attention to their aesthetic and political power. I will argue that airport continues this didactic tradition, which I will explore in the following by concentrating specifically on its linguistic dimension.

² This tendency to embrace and implement universal design for both language and spatial communication is part of a placemaking transformation of terminal airspace from alienating *non-lieu* into a pleasant and accessible place, and is nowadays on the rise world-wide. This accompanies the growing social awareness of diverse individual needs and is illustrated by, for instance, the introduction of digital signage and conveyance of messages in sign language alongside captions, tactile paths, typhlographic plans with convex lines representing the walls, paths, symbols and objects, descriptions in Braille and buttons that can be pressed to receive voice messages, as well as sensory rooms designed for neurodivergent travelers (see “Typhlographic Terminals”). These relatively new technological solutions are intended not to make airports different and unique; conversely, they are built and integrated seamlessly into the air terminal space so that everyone has the same experience.

Acknowledging Deleuze's pronouncement that language is "not a homogenous system . . . but a heterogenous assemblage"³ (*Two Regimes* 368), which the airport's space and functioning evidence by implicating and co(d)entangling multifarious languages,⁴ in this paper adapting Deleuzo-Guattarian a-signifying semiotics,⁵ I will analyze airport language and explore its political-aesthetic mode of communication, focusing *not* on what it says, but on what forces it to move beyond the established spatial regime of signification, and thus probing its limits of expressibility. Positing signs as aesthetically and linguistically deterritorialized, a-signifying semiotics permits us to trace and follow their intensive extrapolations and excrescences without falling back on the dominant, representational semiology into which they can be retroactively translated. Bypassing the pitfalls of representation, a-signifying semiotics recreates direct connections to vital forces, thus potentially novel modes of relating to signs and their various assemblages can be constructed and explored. Rather than decode that which has been coded, one is challenged to remain open to aesthetic experimentation in the constructive process of handling multiple and intersecting semiotics. Its point, in Deleuze's words, "is not justification but a different way of feeling, another sensibility" (*Nietzsche* 94). Consequently, a-signifying semiotics is tasked with helping us to discern patterns of

³ Originating in Félix Guattari's psychiatric and psychoanalytic practice and used to replace the notion of "group" which he found too positivistic and inadequate to render the complex nature of desire, "assemblage" refers to enunciation which is never individual or reducible to symbolic or linguistic communication, but expresses intensive non-totalizable multiplicity that immanently engages diverse semiotic systems. In his collaborative work with Deleuze, the term acquires an ontological rendering as an immanent open whole that multiplicities dynamically construct.

⁴ Given the material, objective, as well as philosophical framework of this article, which addresses the linguistic dimension of terminal airspace, it is essential to make a caveat that the critical argumentation and aesthetic speculation developed here are circumscribed by the passenger's perspective, and thus remain limited to the passenger-accessible section of the air terminal. Aviation language and communication are beyond the scope of this examination.

⁵ Originally introduced by Guattari in the late 1960s, a-signifying semiotics was further developed in his collaboration with Gilles Deleuze, particularly in the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, as an immanent and radically materialist proposition removed the furthest from that of linguistic structuralism, which is deemed a repressive apparatus, "a broken machine." Disavowing signification and representation, it explores immanent entanglements between language and real material forces, (capitalist) power, and the social, replacing the semiology of linguistically established meaning with a political ontology of the material sign. Taking cues from Hjelmslev's glossematics and Peirce's semiotics, Deleuze and Guattari construct modes of semiotization which—in pulling down the transcendent(al) edifice of the signifier—immanently affirm and express semiotic pluralism, or a polysemiotics (*A Thousand Plateaus; Anti-Oedipus*).

translocation, namely the mutational potential of a sign or a series thereof in a particular assemblage, and to explore its routes and passages in and between semiotic assemblages and milieus, thus engendering new modes of trans(re)lating (to) language by undoing alienating and deadening redundancies inherent in communication.

In the first part of the essay, the task is to critically consider the entangled relationship between language and the air terminal, thus elucidating how site-specific language contributes to a negative understanding of the airport as an alienating non-place. In arguing that the airport operates language axiomatically, I will harness Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the order-word,⁶ to further examine what language is spoken by the airport, and how this communication is spatially designed and executed in a manner that moves translation away from textual and sensory experience towards becoming a logistic and increasingly automated procedure. Definitive of language *per se*, and unassimilable to an actual word, the order-word captures the social relation of every word and every statement to implicit presuppositions inherent in any kind of enunciation: "the verdict" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 107), which makes of it—regardless of the channel and medium of communication—a form of judgment, an essentially political apparatus. Interpellating travelers into the adventure of flight as passengers,⁷ the airport space will thus be demonstrated to immanently rely on the traffic of order-words and translation as a pedagogical technique of transportation into a habit(at) of self-control and obedience. Unlike translation, translocation⁸—an essentially political process—expresses a Lucretian *clinamen*,⁹ an immanent mode of resistance against that which is regarded as the natural repetition of the established schema and syntax of communication, whereby words, like atoms, commence to self-divide and self-transpose. Immanently merging the two processes of dislocation and transformation, translocation expresses a creative

⁶ They zero in on the concept of the order-word (*mot d'ordre*) in a plateau "November 20, 1923—Postulates of Linguistics" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 75–110).

⁷ David Bissell and Gillian Fuller demonstrate how the passenger is a spatially-discursively produced category of a political nature (8–11).

⁸ Originating from the field of genetics, the term designates a genetic change in which a piece of one chromosome severs and attaches to another chromosome, resulting in unusual rearrangement. For the purposes of this essay, I adapt it to my argument about language's *translocating* power which air terminal space both expresses and operates.

⁹ According to Lucretius, *clinamen* designates an unpredictable and abrupt swerve of atoms which determines free will, characteristic of humans (Inwood). In *Order out of Chaos*, Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers argue that the *clinamen*—the swerve of events—fundamentally determines the creation of new and unpredictable patterns of self-organization in the universe.

mutation, exposing the heterogeneous and dynamic construction of the assemblage that language is. In so doing, translocation deterritorializes the representationally established and meaning-fixated system of language, which—in air terminal space—operates through order-words. Opening it to extra-linguistic and extra-textual ways of relating to verbal communication, the process of translocation thus demonstrates that no symbolic and meaning-governed system of language will ever delimit and exhaust either the modes of organizing social and spatial relations or the singular praxes in translation. Therefore, in the latter section of this essay, harnessing a-signifying semiotics and moving beyond conventionally established meaning, I will consequently speculate an alternative—translocational—experience and understanding of language in the air terminal, fostered by a relatively recent aesthetic tendency of placemaking, observable at international airports, which—both commercially and conceptually—introduce art to revamp what for many decades has been perceived as a generic, tedious, and tiring space into a singular and whimsical venue of wonder and relaxation.

Aside from site-specific examples merely conjuring the feeling of air travel, international airports more and more frequently showcase extraordinary artworks, media art installations, as well as experimenting with artistic design solutions, which profoundly change both the air terminal and our aesthetic experience therein and thereof. Following Deleuze's admonition that art "has nothing to do with communication . . . does not contain the least bit of information" (*Two Regimes* 322), but is fundamentally related to, and expressive of, resistance (323), I will engage with Eve Fowler's *A Universal Shudder*, the media artwork exhibited at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) in 2022. My goal is to explore the political-aesthetic manner in which it immanently reconfigures the relationship between language and/in the air terminal. I will propose that Fowler's artwork heightens awareness not so much of art as art in the airport space, but rather of the translocating, and thus essentially political, power of language itself, which it sensorially stimulates. In laying bare the mechanism of translocation as liberating, I will argue that Fowler's artwork immanently creates loci of linguistic imperceptibility, thus engendering a novel urban and aesthetic ecology of inhabiting air terminal space beyond linguistic habits. Immanently considered, translocation cannot be conceived as a mere dialectical reaction against the translation regime of order-words, but rather as its deterritorialized and more creative expression, with potential for the heterogeneous assemblage of linguistic and spatial communication.

TRANSLATING AIRPORT LANGUAGE

Whereas both language and air terminal space independently have long been systematically and extensively examined, critical and cultural scholarship on their complex relationship barely exists. Spanning a little over two decades, the few sociolinguistic and semiotic analyses have tended to dominate the field, focusing on issues as diverse as the standardization of the signifying semiologies of air transit wayfinding systems (Fuller), the techno-enhancement of border security language (Adey), social signification, stratification, and elite mobilities (Thurlow and Jaworski), the relationship between the semiotic and spatial design of the airport and emotions (Urry et al.), the airport's linguistic landscapes (Woo and Riget), as well as raciolinguistic ideologies at security checkpoints (Sterk). Contributing a groundbreaking, critical-cultural analysis, *Aviopolis* (2004), Fuller and Harley demonstrate how travelers' relationship to the terminal airspace is mediated through alphanumeric and pictographic signs (86), explaining that "[t]he distinction between the building and its signs, between the text and the territory, becomes indistinct through the act of traversal in these complex multidimensional spaces" (88). Reasserting their argument of the performative co-constitution of language and air terminal space and the aesthetically transformative power of transitory position and perspective, I will furthermore concur with Fredric Jameson's relevant observation that the air terminal, especially in its hyper-postmodern version, engenders a feeling of entrapment in a hallucinogenic space, and our experience thereof calls for a new critical language (43). Whilst Fuller and Harley express an urgent "need for a shared conceptual language between media and architecture" (87), Jameson decries the prevailing—descriptive and impartial—language of volume. Instead, he advocates a new political-aesthetic language of immersion, one he finds adequate to this aporetic and depthless space, which—he claims—"has finally succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself" (43–44). It is, indeed, a puzzling space, which in keeping with the ancient Greek origin of the term—paradoxically enough—can be read as aporetic, literally, with no path or passage, no exit: a space enclosed upon itself, upon its own eternal and immersive presence.

The air terminal emerges as an integral infrastructure of what Adey terms a distinctive "aereality" (8), which, premised upon air-mindedness, is shaped, managed, and communicated by means of a specialized language.¹⁰ Deeply anchored in social and transportation infrastructures, airports remain one of the largest and most singular public spaces of our era, which renders them

¹⁰ "Aereality" designates a kind of mobile society, which the aeroplane has instigated, inspired, and determined, and whose essence lies in being on the move and in transit (Adey).

political constructions *par excellence*. They are artefacts of capital and spatial expressions of the dominant mode of production, which are, as Lovell cautions, never “value-free” and always responsive to its concrete tactics and strategies (11). As such, they embody political power as well as a politically fueled desire for techno-efficacy and economic profit. As Hughes puts it, “[b]uilding is the art we live in; it is social art, the carapace of political fantasy, the exoskeleton of one’s economic dreams” (164). Immanently co-creating this immersive environment, air terminal language affects the manner in which we perceive the space and regulates our conduct within it, but it can also distract our travel or shield us from its distractive, spatially deployed procedures. In doing so, it can restrict our consciousness and shrink our field of experience in ways which we can barely discern. It thus generates a sense of existential remoteness, turning us into transients—a peculiar experience of estrangement from oneself and dissolution into this linguistically standardized and protocolized space. As a matter of fact, most airport spaces are designed to dissociate travelers from the building’s linguistic nucleus, and, therefore, it is habitually overlooked. We perceive it indifferently, and yet it has the power to exert impact that—whether we discern this or not—overwhelms us, forcing us to take heed and respond. Immersion dispenses with critical distance, which, far from rendering translation obsolete, automatizes it, so that it becomes a conveyor of order-words, which effectively blocks understanding. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari state, “[l]anguage no longer signifies something that must be believed, it indicates rather what is going to be done, something that the shrewd or the competent are able to decode, to half understand” (272). Designed to manage and coordinate the flows of linguistically diversified passengers, international airports dilute the political essence of language into functionalist and ideological communication, thus effectively camouflaging the underlying narcissistic link between the speaking (act) and that which is spoken (statement), which cements word-orders. As passengers, we subsume ourselves under this regime of redundancy—a compulsively repetitive relation, in which we accept and perversely enjoy being told what to think, say, and do. In consequence, airports emerge as spaces not so much to be understood, but, first and foremost, to be effectively used by following word-orders. Admittedly, if we fail to address the air terminal language, we find ourselves in a depoliticized space, which nevertheless speaks to us and hails us politically.

Whereas nowadays the air terminal space is becoming more expansive and deterritorialized, as evidenced by new airport construction and modernization projects¹¹ and their intensive digitization, the air terminal

¹¹ Among others: Noida International Airport, India; Changi Airport Terminal 5, Singapore; airport expansion projects at JFK in New York City and LAX in Los Angeles; Al Maktoum International Airport expansion, Dubai; Solidarity Transport Hub, Poland.

language falls back on reterritorialization and encapsulation, which, after Bissell and Fuller, I designate in terms of “containering”¹² (8). In consequence, both air terminal language and our perception of air terminal space, which it informs—despite its ostensible porosity, and, not infrequently, its aesthetically ostentatious panache—have become enclosed upon themselves, losing their traditional layout of openness and scale. Put differently, in the context of the air terminal space, spatial and linguistic extension, in Jean-Luc Nancy’s words, has “ceased to be expansive. It’s become intensive” (12, translation mine). Paradoxically enough, contemporary terminal airspace emerges as less a place of passage and crossing, changing into “a point on an immanent map of travel, and a point is without dimensions” (12). Diagnosing contemporary global and totalizing capitalism, Badiou speaks of “worldlessness” to account for this spatial transition into “worlds” of points, which in the social context amounts to *wordlessness*. Words are replaced by pointed order-words; acts of commanding supplant those of comprehension, of which the narcissism-fueled social media environments provide a poignant illustration. The airport is but one of such aporetic—*world-less* and *word-less*—places that contemporary global capitalism produces, which, as Žižek insightfully puts it, establish a regime of “truth without meaning” (181). In being contained by the air terminal space, passengers consent to being deprived of their ways of locating meaning. In becoming a point, the world of the air terminal, consequently, has lost the meaning. Non-passing implicates non-communication. The words, phrases, and syntaxes to which passengers are exposed, moving through the terminal in signage system and voice and messaging communications, have grown formally succinct over time and aesthetically intensive through digitization, increasingly establishing a system of briefly formulated and abbreviated orders, commands, directions, and recommendations.¹³ Subservient to the functional and pragmatic essence of the air terminal, which is erected to prepare travelers for flight, language in this space becomes an instrument of training and instruction for the sensorium. The air terminal thus illustrates how language works axiomatically through the intermediary of order-words.

An axiom is, by definition, a proposition which cannot be proven right or wrong, thus being universally established as self-evidently true, conventionally accepted as the unquestionable fundamental and/or foundational principles, which become a source of morals and governing rules. The logic and logistic

¹² Bissell and Fuller put it thus: “This containment is more than just metaphor; it is a set of techniques and methods for traversing the networked world” (8).

¹³ This expresses the law of redundancy, which in information theory accounts for the degree of efficiency in message transmission. I will address this by reverting to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the order-word.

of such linguistically constructed axioms are expressed in the operation of the terminal airspace and are manifested through both the global nature of the air transportation system, whereby countries set aside their inherent national agendas and adhere to rules that facilitate smooth air travel, as well as the status of English as the *lingua franca* of international aviation and airport communication. As Fuller and Harley argue, “[y]ou may not need to speak the language of the country to get around; but you do need to know the techno-cultural dialect of English—the international language of the airport” (31). The air terminal space appears to effectively implement the cardinal axiom of aviation: “Aviate—Navigate—Communicate,” which institutes a fundamental hierarchy of actions for pilots, namely, to prioritize aircraft control, then navigate to safety, and then communicate. This is borne out by its spatial and linguistic design, which demonstrates that all communication is subordinated to the navigational imperatives which shall be followed in order for passengers to get airborne.¹⁴ The entire experience of air travel bizarrely resembles the five stages of what is universally established as the “natural” human sexual response, that is, desire, arousal, plateau, climax, and resolution. As such, air terminal space and its communication can be shown to axiomatically attend to, and perform, two of them, namely, arousal and plateau,¹⁵ with desire being handled by the global business of marketing and advertising (e.g., airlines, the tourism industry), while the latter two remain in the hands of pilots and the airline onboard crew members who are responsible for taking us to the skies (climax), and providing attention and assistance from take-off through touch-down (resolution).¹⁶ In keeping

¹⁴ Strikingly, this resembles the Christian theology (and logistic) of salvation conditioned by a willful subordination to God and dutiful abidance by his command(ment)s. Only if conscientiously attended to, do they warrant our being taken to the Heavens.

¹⁵ This underlying philosophy of romance seems to be inscribed into recent airport terminal modernization projects which aim to break away from the global airport architectural language by replacing the generic materials and styles with innovative and unprecedented design solutions, stimulating a *wow* factor deliberately intended to romance, seduce, and elate travelers. For instance, Basile Boiffils, managing director of the Paris-based Boiffils Architectures studio—commissioned as the interior design lead for the refurbishing of Terminal 2 at Changi, Singapore—explicitly addresses this shift: “Our idea was to romanticize the airport experience, infusing pleasurable experiences into increasingly stressful travel scenarios through a series of visual, audio and interactive stimuli intended to soothe the mind, body and soul” (James).

¹⁶ Curiously, this linear model of human sexuality has been exposed and critiqued as not only technical and hydraulic, but also reductive, gender-biased, and ideological (purportedly representative of male sexuality, and thus in the service of patriarchal power). Importantly, Luce Irigaray critically conceives this model as “phallogocentric,” thus drawing attention to the co-entanglement of language and communication (logos) and the masculine power over them (which the figure of the phallus symbolizes), which is molded upon, and reflects specifically, male morphology and desire.

with contemporary fulfillment-driven, experiential economy, as Jameson points out, “[t]he anonymous space of airport terminals produces abstract and nonsituated feelings which intensify passengers’ perception” (116).¹⁷ Consequently, it is hardly surprising that air terminal space emerges as a theater of variegated intensities, causative of processes of sensorial stimulating and sustaining, heightening, and enhancing. By creating a safe and seductive locale, which suspends our defensive mechanisms, and thus renders us more sensitive and susceptible to play and fun, the air terminal simultaneously exposes our vulnerability and docility, which in turn easily make us succumb and conform to order-words axiomatically relayed to us.

In the airport context, order-words are configured as conveyors of site-specific ends operated with a view to demarcating and pedagogically circumscribing the passengers’ space of maneuverability, thus warranting their obedience.¹⁸ Instead of delineating or hailing an identity, order-words express series¹⁹ of actions and enfolded relations that expose redundancies²⁰ which structure language. As such, the concept of the order-word designates a relation of serial repetition between the statement and the act. Deleuze and Guattari elucidate as follows:

We call *order-words*, not a particular category of explicit statements (for example, in the imperative), but the relation of every word or every statement to implicit presuppositions. . . . Order-words do not concern

¹⁷ This is also illustrated by a trend that has recently been taking hold in commercial aviation, called “retail-tainment,” which airports have been adopting as a business and a spatial-aesthetic design model. Combining retail with entertainment, it is about transforming a traditional transit space into a wondrous adventure. Passengers are engaged, entertained, and amused, technologically and sensorially titillated to spend money and make memories at the same time.

¹⁸ The most extreme example of this appears when one gets removed by security, arrested, detained, or banned from a flight or terminal for speaking a certain language or uttering specific phrases or words.

¹⁹ In keeping with Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism, a *series* denotes animated variation with little non-mediated difference according to intensities and not identities. As such, a series is expressed through dynamic resonances, fluctuations, or transformations that occur between the repetitions. Intensities come in series and are thus sensorially apprehended.

²⁰ Plucked from information science, *redundancy* denotes the amount of language that is indispensable to convey the actual message. Human language exhibits a high degree of redundancy. The more redundancy there is, the more resistance to entropy. Order-words as redundancies are operative mechanisms of delivering and propagating commands. Deleuze and Guattari further explain: “Redundancy has two forms, *frequency* and *resonance*; the first concerns the significance of information, the second concerns the subjectivity of communication” (79). As redundancies, that is a minimal amount of language to relay a message, order-words connect us with an established aeroreality. Interestingly, this appears to resonate with the Jesuit principle of parsimony, which advocates maximum message with minimum means.

commands only, but every act that is linked to statements by a “social obligation.” Every statement displays this link, directly or indirectly. Questions, promises, are order-words. The only possible definition of language is the set of all order-words, implicit presuppositions. (*A Thousand Plateaus* 79, emphasis in the original)

Whereas “[h]uman language never refers back to itself and always remains open to all other modes of semiotization” (Guattari, *Machinic Unconscious* 27), the system of order-words, as air terminal language evidences, makes it enclose upon itself by establishing a narcissistic link between the speaking and the spoken. All communication here is ordered by a statutory relationship that assumes falling for, and following, that which is spatially established and repetitively relayed. Petrified into structural markers, words as word-orders no longer produce anything—clad in their endowed meaning, their sole performance is death. Deleuze and Guattari pointedly remark: “The word-order is a death sentence, even if it has been considerably softened, becoming symbolic, initiatory, temporary. Order-words bring immediate death to those who receive the order, or potential death if they do not obey” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 107). Insofar as airport language is considered spatial deployment of force, occupants do not decide whether to denounce or appreciate the communication system that is structured by order-words; however, being spatially and sensorially entangled, they have to respond to this, even without being explicitly hailed. As beholden to the air terminal field of forces, which in essence is agrammatical and axiomatic, meaning constructed out of order-words emerges as but a minute effect of axiomatic language, and is thus conducive to understanding. Assuredly, the airport and its language of order-words rely on the understanding which is philosophically established as a legislative faculty that operates by means of recognition. The narcissistic statute demands that we recognize ourselves in air terminal space as passengers and be recognized by it in return, which enforces obedience. Traversing airport space inevitably entails that, *vice versa*, it axiomatically traverses us. We can be said to occupy the space to an extent that we are occupied by it,²¹ for which, importantly, we no longer need to give consent other than by entering and using it.

Operating language axiomatically, air terminal space thus demonstrates that translation is no longer the ability of one language to render another,

²¹ Interestingly, the co-entanglement of language and space is already expressed in the Latin lexeme “loc-/loq-,” constitutive of a plethora of modern words, such as: location, locale, loquacity, interlocutor, eloquence, which indicate a co-expressivity of language and space. Notably, to speak in Latin (i.e. *loqui*) is a curious example of a deponent verb—one that has a passive form, yet an active meaning, which aptly illustrates the double-layeredness of existence in airport space and language.

but the logistic process of conveyance of order-words, which is to secure stabilization between air terminal space and its users. As such, harnessed as an instrument for instituting spatial obedience, translation is neither conducive to interpretation, nor does it invite commentary; conversely, severed from the logocentric context, it accounts for a politically motivated swerve into axiomatic and serialized redundancies. As such, translation expresses a loss of transformational power that accompanies the air terminal use of language. Yet, this simultaneously demonstrates its immanent plasticity and deterritorializing capacity. Can we then view the air terminal beyond the language of redundancies which it speaks to us? Can our experience of and in the air terminal be liberated from this procedure of translation which is no longer a textual relation of identity, but a technological one of redundancy? Cognizant of the fact that air terminal language is a political business of people, immanently trafficking in order-words, can we reconstruct the airport experience in an alternative fashion, irreducible and unassimilable to political-semiological redundancies? Responding to Lawrence Venuti's appeal to "foreignize" and "minoritize" translation, in the final section I will examine its translocating aesthetic power, thus reconfiguring it as an immanent exercise in deterritorializing difference and no longer one of dutiful equivalence.

AIRPORT ART OF TRANSLOCATION

The increasing presence of art in the air terminal paves the way for such an intervention, creating conditions for exploding the dominant language through what I will designate in terms of aesthetic translocation. As Deleuze argues, "[t]here will always be a relation to oneself which resists codes and powers; the relation to oneself is one of the origins of these points of resistance" (*Foucault* 103). It is noteworthy, however, that the thrilling sensation of expectancy associated with flight, which naturally leads to increased sensitivity to sensory stimuli and heightened vigilance, becomes (un)expectedly reduced in air terminal space which, instead, forces travelers to take heed, thus hardening their task-determined perception. Once at the airport, on the one hand, we must accept standardized forms of obeying the spatially written code insinuating itself into the travelling bodies, and, on the other hand, the senses are randomly exposed to media artworks and sensory architectures that refocus our attention and trigger extraordinary sensations. Offering unexpected moments of wonder and reprieve from the preordained march through the air terminal space, art installations and experiential media environments are designed to increase dwell time for the businesses, help reduce stress for the travelers, and

construct a sense of place by bringing in storytelling to the airport,²² thus allowing for both sensorially deepened and augmented an engagement with the terminal. Aside from making passengers linger and thus increasing concessions spending, art also enhances the overall customer experience and well-being both functionally (e.g., enriching intuitive wayfaring), and aesthetically (e.g., creating areas of respite and contemplation, reducing the aural and visual noise), altogether engendering an unobstructed, pleasing, and calming ambiance. Increasingly receding into the very structure of airport space, art aesthetically revamps and reinvents it by replacing the mixed perception of nostalgia and anticipation (Baudrillard) with a more cinematographic and simulative experience, inviting us to stroll through the terminal as though we were in a film (Nouvel qtd. in Baudrillard), psychologically engendering an increasingly surreal and delusive spatial and aesthetic experience.²³

Coming across art and randomly interacting with it while traversing the airport—customarily perceived as suboptimal for experiencing art due to distractions, anxieties, and split attention—deterritorializes the conventional space and language of art and airport. What is thus generated are milieus of aesthetic encounters which—precisely by virtue of their spatially disruptive nature, randomness, and impermanence—yield opportunities for intensive, albeit oftentimes inattentive and inarticulate, experiences with art. The aesthetic process of free association, triggered by these artistic chance happenings, makes us dawdle absent-mindedly, transforming a space of boredom into a milieu of contemplation. By opening us up to non-functional uses and experiences of the airport space and its axiomatic linguistic regime, art triggers an experiential translocation—an odd stationary journey, a foreign language within language, “something which could be either the shout, or silence, or stuttering, and which would be like language’s line of flight” (Deleuze and Parnet 22), allowing us to “speak in our language like a foreigner” (5). Alain de Botton pointedly remarks that “[t]he anticipatory and artistic imaginations omit and compress; they cut away the periods of boredom and direct our attention to critical moments, and thus, without either lying or embellishing, they lend to life a vividness and a coherence that it may lack in the distracting

²² For instance, in the case of Changi Airport in Singapore, these art solutions have been implemented as a response to passenger behavior analysis and statistical reports that reveal that travelers become increasingly keen to arrive at the airport early, three or more hours prior to departure, drop their bags off and linger there, indulging in the mesmerizing and wondrous air terminal space.

²³ The newly refurbished and reopened Terminal 2 at Changi, Singapore, is a case in point. By integrating art into air terminal space, it blurs the boundaries between architecture and natural landscape (“About Terminal 2”).

wooliness of the present” (14–15), where haphazardness couples with rigid order. In what follows, by addressing Eve Fowler’s artwork, which explicitly engages with language and/in the air terminal, I will explore the aesthetic-political—translocational—power of words, and what they can do beyond the air terminal-language axiomatics.

A UNIVERSAL SHUDDER

Deriving inspiration from the writings of the American modernist poet, novelist, and playwright Gertrude Stein, and taking cues from the legendary designs of the LA-based Colby Poster Printing Company (1946–2012),²⁴ this is a series of site-specific murals by Eve Fowler, displayed at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) in 2022 as part of the continuing Art at LAX Exhibition Program.²⁵ The installation was located in Terminal 2 and 3’s baggage reclaim area. Fowler plucks phrases from Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, experimenting with them intensely and intimately. Intended to abandon an otherwise futile quest for meaning, Stein’s Cubism-inspired, geometrical refashioning of language²⁶ is clearly echoed in Fowler’s aesthetic enterprise, wherein themes and motifs are maintained solely to cause us to escape from the redundantly established bounds of language into foreign, infinite wordscapes, thus deterritorializing language into singular yet entangled modes of expressivity. Subjecting language to artistic experimentation, Fowler follows in the footsteps of Stein, disrupting and unsettling the dominant power structures in languages (here these of order-words), which control our *sensus communis*, holding our faculties and our world in check.

A *Universal Shudder*, which could read like a sensorial response to a post-Covid resumption of international air travel—exhibited in the form of a large-format poster—was curiously placed on a wall next to the baggage carousels. The backgrounds, which are highly saturated in bright—pink and yellow—colors, contrast with the black copy. Intended to attract the attention of passengers who await their possessions, the posters dis-tract

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²⁴ The Colby Poster Printing Company is historically renowned for developing and defining a poster aesthetic in Southern California, which is characterized by fluorescent backgrounds and black capital letters written in sans-serif typeface.

²⁵ <https://www.lawa.org/art-program/past-exhibits/2022/a-universal-shudder>

²⁶ Regarded as atrophied by Stein, words were fragmented, hewn, dismembered, mutilated, stripped of their conventional and logical meanings, predicative relationships, analogies, and associations, and once laid bare in their melodic materiality, were repurposed into fresh and heteroclit shapes and protean convergences. All this was done in order to translocate aesthetically the ideas and feelings co-entangled with these words in writing.

them, that is, put them out of their tracks—their routinized, and spatially delineated, airport activities. Far from a negation of attention, dis-traction conversely expresses hypersensitivity to the complex and intensive reality-in-process. Keeping us mentally and perceptually dispersed yet sensorially alert and attuned, it forces us to keep this sensorial field open, thus productive only of simulacra, all the while exposing itself as a political-aesthetic maneuver which detracts from, and disrupts, the representational regime of signification. The choice to exhibit this artwork in the baggage reclaim area seems appropriate; waiting for one's baggage aptly captures the process of waiting for sense to emerge through an aesthetic encounter with series of words, which never reveals one universal meaning. Fowler's engagement with the words of Gertrude Stein illustrates a process of serialization and intensification which proceeds translocationally. Series of words are not only translocated conceptually between Stein's poetic-political writing and Fowler's artistic intervention, but also spatially, into the airport and further co-entangling the passengers' perceptive apparatus. By translocating the short sentences outside the larger body of text and into the air terminal space, and further still into sensory encounters with air travelers, language's lines of flight are being constructed, which disavows redundancy as a mode of existence in the air terminal. As Fowler's portrayed series demonstrates, meaning and translating are but two of a series of vital processes (e.g., feeling, thinking), of which life expresses a complex system, making us remember that every text which we encounter in the air terminal virtually expresses as many meanings as there are singular modes of co-entangling.

The series of two posters—which read thus, one: “in the morning there is meaning,” two: “in the evening there is feeling”—is exhibited on two adjacent walls forming a corner. From the passenger's perspective—given their similar syntax and articulation, as well as vivid colors and a glossy marble flooring underneath, which amplifies the blurring effect—this establishes a mirror effect of ambiguity, engendered by being (trans) located in between, exposed to the intensive power of each word, which is additionally strengthened by directional lighting. When a bare word is exposed to us and no protective shield of metaphor is given, and no translation is expected or imposed, language falls silent and every word reveals itself as a radiating intensity, becoming, indeed, “a slight. a sound. a universal shudder,” making us tremble convulsively. As Deleuze puts it, “[w]ords are genuine intensities within certain aesthetic systems” (*Difference and Repetition* 118). Aesthetically operating through series and by force, words—paradoxically enough—confront us with the beyond of meaning-ful language, thus the unthinkable and the meaning-less imposing upon us from outside, whereby novel mean(der)ings are yet to be made.

No longer signifying (in any redundant, presumptive, transcendent sense), the word itself is reclaimed as a sensory sign and threshold, and as such, as Guattari puts it, “is the site of the metabolism of power” (*Anti-Oedipus Papers* 224), expressing literally and intensively what it is. As a series of powerful signs, *A Universal Shudder* is not for designating or demonstrating anything. Conversely, signifying nothing—as the very title already implies—it is made to sensorially reverberate through language and air terminal space, causing “the sequences to vibrate, to open the word onto unexpected internal intensities—in short, an a-signifying, intensive utilization of language” (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka* 22). Fowler’s Stein-fueled sublime art-wor(d/k) tears down the curtain of the dominant system of order-words governing the air terminal, thus availing us of “all the possibilities of language” (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* xv), whose unspoken infinity is naturally experienced as “silence” (143). As such, Fowler’s installation is capable of translocating us beyond the linguistic rigidity of the airport here and now. This, indeed, is a “slight” to the dominant regime of order-words, causing a sobering “shudder.”

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As an immanent political-aesthetic process, translocation stands neither for translation (metaphor, condensation), nor substitution (metonymy, displacement), for it has done away with representationally established meaning consolidated by the understanding. Conversely, it is the intensive singular modification which—instead of subsuming the word under the abstract, and thus stripping it of its intensive power—logistically stimulates construction of new modes of sensing.²⁷ Afar from transmission or transport (metaphor), it expresses immanent construction, which can be adequately rendered as “transmorphosis”—a middle, transitory, intensive (trans)position which no longer has a point of departure and destination, remaining open to infinite recombination. Constructed immanently out of sensory entanglement, whereby the entangled elements exchange their determinations, translocation—far removed from the representational system of meaning—accounts for our political-aesthetic act of fleeing the linguistic regime of order-words and its dead designations, expressing a stationary flight into a foreign wordscape within one’s language—an imperceptible slip from translation into translocation. Thus viewed, Fowler’s intervention might at first glance appear to further intensify

²⁷ It is worth mentioning that in French “sens” stands for both direction, sense, as well as meaning.

the sense of estrangement correlated with the air terminal. However, by manifestly verbalizing the shudder universally experienced in anticipation of flight, and painting it in bright and cheerful colors, Fowler's art-wor(k/d) transforms the dreary area around the baggage carousel into an aesthetically appealing space. By infinitivizing language within the airport non-place of order-words, *A Universal Shudder* opens it to singular and transmorphic relations to the self-deterritorializing sign-word from which new meanings infinitely emerge. This has both restorative and empowering potential.

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READING TRANSLATIONAL INTERACTIONS



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Translating the “City of the Eye”: Mapping Contemporary Venice between Travel Writing and Residents’ Accounts

ABSTRACT

In this article I explore the “translational city” through the unique lens of contemporary Venice. The multiple cities that have been the subject of work on the “translational city” display different linguistic and cultural relations: from the dual city, through (post)colonial cities, to cosmopolitan cities. While Venice historically shares some of the characteristics of these models, its social, cultural, and linguistic make-up is exceptional in terms of both nature and scale. Progressive hyper-touristification in the last 30 years has led to a complete transformation of Venice as an urban space with the dramatic shrinking of the resident population and their ways of inhabiting the city and has made travel writing central to how its urban spaces are imagined and experienced. This shift calls for a reconsideration of the role of travel writing in shaping our perceptions and our experiences of the city. The article offers a comparative analysis of how the city is imagined, by placing Joseph Brodsky’s influential English travel account, *Watermark*, in conversation with two collections of residents’ narratives; it is also an attempt to map how travel writing, as a form of translation, mediates between the city’s global perceptions and its local realities. The analysis uncovers an important disjuncture between how Venice is imagined by Brodsky as a global citizen and how it is remembered, memorialised, and constructed by Venetian residents as “denizens” seeking to reconstitute a local/minoritised language. The article explores Venice as a specific example of a translational city, while reflecting on a broader set of questions on the politics of language, travel, translation, and community.

Keywords: translational city, contemporary Venice, over-tourism, travel writing, local identities, resident narratives.



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INTRODUCTION

There is a tendency in global representations of Venice to prioritise the voices of outsiders—primarily English-speaking travel writers—who observe and interpret the city from a distance. This perspective is clearly illustrated in a somewhat critical review of Joseph Brodsky's best-selling *Watermark: An Essay On Venice* by John Julius Norwich in the *Literary Review*, where he states:

There are hundreds of ways of writing about Venice. One can be lyrical and high-flown like Ruskin; fastidious and dismissive like Gibbon; melancholy and nostalgic like Proust; ghoulish and disapproving like Dickens; sensitive and almost unbearably precise like Henry James. One can write histories or guidebooks, disquisitions on the painting or the architecture, poems, descriptive essays or novels. *Watermark*, however, is none of these things. (Norwich n.pag.)

Norwich's review serves as a microcosm of this Anglocentric predominance. In his attempt to highlight the uniqueness of Brodsky's perspective, Norwich lists a range of authors whose writings on Venice have shaped the city's literary representation. However, what is striking about his assessment is that the horizon within which these writings are considered remains almost exclusively confined to the English language, with surprising omissions from major works in world literature on Venice—such as Calvino's *Città invisibili* and Goethe's *Italienische Reise*—and only a brief mention of Proust. This approach subtly constructs a frame of reference that establishes a canon of world literature on Venice, one that is largely shaped by Anglophone writers. Such selective recognition reinforces a view that is filtered through the lens of a specific cultural and literary tradition, shaping how Venice is understood and represented on the global stage.

Within this primarily English-language canon, Brodsky's *Watermark* stands out for its distinctive focus on contemporary Venice as the “city of the eye”—a concept that has profoundly impacted how the city is imagined and experienced. Published only a few years after Brodsky was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (1987), and drawing on his 17 years of annual visits to the city, *Watermark* (1992) elevates Venice to the status of a work of art, “the greatest masterpiece of our species” (116). For Brodsky, the picturesque nature of Venice's art and architecture guarantees a benign, enchanting, and uplifting public environment for visitors and citizens—an argument reinforced by the city's enduring attraction over the centuries. Notably, Brodsky suggests that Venice offers a unique way of engaging with time and space, encapsulated in the phrase “water equals time and

provides beauty with its double” (134). The lagoon’s water, which not only surrounds but shapes life in the city, reflects the picturesque quality of the palazzi, offering Venice’s unique beauty twice over.

This emphasis on the visual aspects of Venice as physical objects to behold—its art, architecture, geography, and unique landscapes—has significantly influenced how the city has been appropriated and reimagined by visitors and artists, shaping both its perception and representation in profound ways. This portrayal as a backdrop for introspection and a mirror for global concerns raises important ethical questions about whose voices are heard and whose stories are told. What are the broader implications of these multiple reimaginings? How does the enduring metaphor of the “city of the eye” shape not only the way Venice is envisioned today, but also how it is lived and experienced? And where does this leave the Venetian community of residents when it comes to their right to narrate and imagine their own city?

Travel writing is central to the re-imagining of Venice on a global stage, but it is also fundamental in shaping how tourists and visitors engage with the city’s physical spaces and inhabitants. Like all forms of travel writing, Brodsky’s book also represents an ongoing process of cultural and linguistic translation that defines Venice today. Positioned as authorities on foreign destinations, travel writers translate the images, thoughts, values, and experiences of others into the language of their readers. As Michael Cronin reminds us, there is an important ethical dimension to travel writing that is doubly bound with the practice of “translating others” (Cronin, “Knowing” 334). As representations of the lives and environments of other cultures and languages, travel narratives assume access to knowledge that must account for the necessity of translation and the ethical implications of representing and “speaking for” others (334). In this context, it is crucial to understand how the global story of contemporary Venice and its inhabitants has been largely written *about*, not written *by* Venetians and, as a consequence, the resident population, their stories, memories, experiences, and their right to reimagine their city have been marginalised and silenced. Venice’s duality as both a tourist destination and a living (if increasingly threatened) city highlights its uniqueness and complexity as a translational city, shaped not only by how it is imagined, but also by how it is inhabited and experienced.

As part of this exploration, I offer a comparative analysis of how Venice is represented in Joseph Brodsky’s *Watermark* and in a selection of resident narratives. Chosen not only for its significance as a literary guide to contemporary Venice, but also for the distinct cosmopolitan Anglophone perspectives which it represents, Brodsky’s travel account exemplifies the view of the global citizen who navigates Venice with

the authority of a privileged, erudite observer. His perspective, marked by a knowledgeable yet detached lens, offers a view that, while differing in some respects from John Urry's concept of the "tourist gaze" (176), remains troublingly appropriative.

As a counterpoint to Brodsky's narrative, I also examine how Venetian residents themselves remember, imagine, and recount their city, offering an original and marginalised perspective often overlooked in global discussions about Venice. The analysis focuses on narratives that have emerged over the past 15 years as part of various social movements advocating for residents' rights. It includes two independently and locally published collections of resident accounts, chosen because they cover different phases in the community's journey of self-awareness around the threat to their survival: the initial phase, with a memorialisation of a thriving and now forgotten past (*Quando c'erano i Veneziani*, 2010) and a more urgent and political call to listen to residents' voices about their life in the city today (*Ascolta Venezia*, 2021).

What makes this comparative analysis particularly enriching is that travel accounts and resident stories are rarely read side by side. By bringing them into conversation, I trace how they collectively shape the city's identity, precisely because they speak to different readers and offer divergent views. I argue that these narratives should be understood as integral pieces of the story of contemporary Venice as a translational city, as they not only map different ways of inhabiting it in various languages, but they also illuminate alternative sensory landscapes that are often overlooked. Together, they constitute one of those areas of language traffic, or "translation zones," that characterise the translational city, "where language relations are regulated by the opposing forces of coercion and resistance, of wilful indifference and engaged interconnection" (Cronin and Simon 120).

The asymmetry between these texts also extends to questions of readership. Written in English, *Watermark* is widely circulated, frequently reprinted, and now canonical in travel literature, shaping global imaginaries of Venice. By contrast, the resident narratives, written in Italian and Venetian, are published by local independent presses and are aimed at a regional audience. This linguistic orientation reflects different modes of address: where Brodsky speaks to a broad global Anglophone readership, the resident narratives are grounded in communal knowledge and do not seek translation for an external gaze. Their limited accessibility to outsiders is not incidental, but reflects a choice to prioritise local memory and continuity over global legibility.

By examining how these global and local narratives intersect and diverge in contemporary Venice, the aim is to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics that influence not only this particular city, but also

other cities experiencing similar tensions between global commodification and the preservation of local communities. Through this exploration, the article also reflects broader questions concerning the politics of language, travel, and community.

VENICE AS A UNIQUE TRANSLATIONAL CITY: FORCED TRANSLATION AND THE “TOURIST GAZE”

One of the key advantages of looking at contemporary cities as translational spaces is that it foregrounds the role played by languages and their interaction in imagining, creating, and contesting the make-up of the spaces that we inhabit as citizens. Unlike the multilingual city, which is often perceived as an urban space where different languages coexist independently, the notion of the translational city emphasises “the connection between languages, the conversations that are enabled or impeded . . . but also the tensions and rivalries among them” (Simon, *Cities* 21). In doing so, it highlights how languages are not merely present, but are in constant negotiation, shaping the city’s identity, history, and social fabric.

Such negotiations manifest differently across various urban contexts, with cities exhibiting a variety of linguistic and cultural dynamics (King Lee 3). These range from dual cities, where two dominant languages compete for institutional and political supremacy (Simon, *Translating Montreal*; Pizzi), to colonial and post-colonial cities, which bear the enduring marks of colonial power structures on language and culture (Simon, *Cities*; Suchet and Mekdjian), and cosmopolitan cities, where multiple languages and cultures coexist, weaving a complex tapestry of interactions (Cronin, “Digital”; Koskinen).

Venice’s position as a translational city is deeply rooted in its long history as a principal crossroads between Europe and Asia. Over centuries, it has embodied multiple urban models, functioning as a colonising empire during the “Serenissima” Republic (1100–1715), as a colonial city under Habsburg rule (1798–1866), and as a principally dual city after Italy’s unification, where standard Italian and Venetian existed in a diglossic balance as the vehicular (official) and the vernacular language, respectively (1866–1980s). Today, like many other tourist destinations, Venice is a cosmopolitan tourist hub where a multitude of languages and cultures interact on a daily basis. Yet what truly defines its contemporary social, cultural, and linguistic landscape is the exceptional scale of its touristification. Over the past 30 years, hyper-touristification has led to a mass exodus of residents (Zanardi 1) and an overwhelming increase in tourist accommodations, transforming Venice into an urban space shaped

primarily for international consumption (Bertocchi and Visentin 2). This forced exodus of the resident community has also led to a forced translation of multiple aspects of the city's life and an increasing transformation of the language used to explain and navigate the city, which has gone from Venetian and Italian to English (Tufi 82–88).

John Urry's concept of the "tourist gaze" offers a useful lens for understanding how global tourism interacts with and reshapes a city's identity. He defines the tourist gaze as a socially organised and systematised way of seeing, constructed through travel narratives and tourist experiences (172). This gaze is not a passive observation, but an active, constructed view that shapes and fulfils tourists' expectations. Drawing on Foucault's notion of the "gaze" as a mechanism of surveillance and control (217), Urry argues that the tourist gaze is enmeshed in the power dynamics that structure the relationship between the observer and the observed. In tourist sites, of which contemporary Venice is an unfortunate archetype, visual consumption thus becomes a means of appropriating the physical environment of the city, transforming it into a space designed not for production, labour, or everyday life, but for spectacle and aesthetic consumption (Urry 178).

While Urry's tourist gaze captures the ways in which global tourism transforms cities into spectacles for consumption, Michael Cronin's distinction between "citizens" and "denizens" deepens this analysis by revealing how language and rootedness shape the lived experiences of those who inhabit these urban spaces, highlighting the ethical dimension of encounters between visitors and locals in tourist sites ("Knowing" 335). Global citizens, according to Cronin, often engage with the world from a detached, dominant perspective, navigating different cultures and languages as global actors with the privilege of mobility (338). Reflecting on the relationship between language and place, Cronin reminds us that travel is not just a spatial activity, but also a linguistic one. In travel narratives, language allows meanings to circulate beyond the direct experience of the traveller to other speakers of that language, who at other times and in other places can read about those experiences and navigate those foreign spaces (336). However, both language difference and the very act of partaking in the logic of contemporary cosmopolitan mobility brings a degree of distance and detachment between travellers as global citizens and the places which they visit. This dual distancing—spatial and linguistic—further reinforces the traveller's position as an outsider, shaping their experience of foreign spaces.

In contrast to this privileged and detached perspective, Cronin introduces the view of the "denizen," a term advanced by the organisation Common Ground to refer to individuals embedded in their local environments, equipped with an intimate and adaptable knowledge

of their surroundings (337). The word originates from the Latin *de intus* (from within), emphasising a deep-rooted, internal connection to place. A denizen’s relationship with place is inherently tied to the local language and culture, allowing them to navigate the complexities of their environment with an understanding that is often inaccessible to outsiders (338). Importantly, the notion of the denizen also avoids the pitfalls linked to ideas of “authenticity” and “nativism” (Anderson 22), focusing instead on the lived, active engagement with place rather than a static or exclusive claim to identity. This distinction between global citizens and local denizens echoes Urry’s critique of the tourist gaze as appropriative; however, the critique is extended to emphasise the role of language and local knowledge in resisting the homogenising forces of globalisation.

In contemporary Venice, the tension between global citizens and local denizens becomes especially pronounced. While travellers experience Venice through the lens of the tourist gaze, appropriating its spaces for their own consumption, local residents navigate a city that is increasingly hostile to their daily lives. The residents’ connection to their environment, expressed through their linguistic practices and intimate knowledge of the city, offers a counterpoint to the flattening effect of the tourist gaze. However, it is crucial to recognise that contrasting the mobility of global English with the rootedness of Venetian may mistakenly imply that the local operates beyond the realm of translation. Yet, as Cronin reminds us, the polysemy of the term “denizen” itself reflects a translation act—a trace of contact with other languages and cultures (“Knowing” 338). Even languages that are minoritised or rooted in specific places, such as Venetian, cannot escape the condition of translation. As we shall see in the analysis that follows, this complicates the distinction between global citizens and local denizens, revealing that both global and local perspectives on the city are shaped through acts of translation.

OBSERVING VS. DWELLING: CITIZENS, DENIZENS, AND COMPETING VIEWS OF THE CITY

Although Brodsky visited Venice multiple times over 17 years—a duration suggesting more than just a fleeting, tourist-like engagement—his perspective remains that of an erudite global citizen. His admission that his Italian “wildly oscillat[es] around its firm zero” (61), his complete lack of acknowledgement of Venetian as one of the languages of the city, and the fact that his social interactions were limited to “English-speaking natives and expatriate Americans” (62) indicates a linguistic detachment from the everyday life of the city. This linguistic choice reflects an orientation toward

Venice as a place of intellectual and aesthetic contemplation rather than as a complex, multilingual community. What is striking, however, is that this downplaying of language sits uneasily alongside Brodsky's own work as a self-translator and the profound attention to the importance of linguistic form he demonstrates in his reflections on self-translation (Ishov 14). Paradoxically, as we will see in this section, Brodsky's portrayal of Venice reveals instead a highly visual, appropriative gaze, where the city is not a living, functional space, but one transformed into an object of aesthetic consumption, seen exclusively through a detached and external lens.

Familiarity combined with linguistic detachment places Brodsky within a spectrum of belonging to Venice, neither a mere tourist nor a fully integrated denizen, but a visitor enamoured with the city, yet removed from the rhythms and languages that define it as a lived experience. His account centres on the experience of Venice's unique beauty as a broader reflection on the human condition (Brodsky 85), while rendering Venetians invisible—mere fixtures in the city's landscape, essential only for facilitating the visitor's exploration (16). This universalising, romantic view encourages tourists to take possession of Venice with their eyes, providing the stimulus to visit the city and have the perceived spectacle confirmed for themselves. As Urry notes, "it is the distinctiveness of the visual that gives all sorts of activities a special or unique character" (172), and, in Brodsky's portrayal, it is this visual distinctiveness that drives tourists to claim Venice as a spectacle while disregarding all other aspects of the city's life:

The eye in this city acquires an autonomy similar to that of a tear. The only difference is that it doesn't sever itself from the body but subordinates it totally. After a while—on the third or fourth day here—the body starts to regard itself as merely the eye's carrier, as a kind of submarine to its now dilating, now squinting periscope. (Brodsky 44–45)

Throughout the book, Brodsky emphasises Venice's visual appeal, comparing the city to "painting" (21), a "myth," and a "treasure chest" (12). His descriptions reveal the dominance of the eye in experiencing the city's spaces, which are transformed into objects to be beheld "rather than inhabited or lived in" (Urry 179). In the extract above, this is taken to its extreme as the body itself becomes secondary to the eye's function, reduced to a mere vessel that "subordinates it totally." Brodsky's imagery of the body as a "submarine" for the eye's "now dilating, now squinting periscope" foregrounds Venice's ability to captivate the viewer, silencing the other senses and turning the act of seeing into the central mode of engagement.

This reduction of Venice to a visual spectacle continues in Brodsky’s depiction of the city’s labyrinthine streets. He notes that the “long, coiling lanes and passageways” (45) tempt the visitor to get lost in them, as though the act of seeing these streets were an end in itself. The city then becomes an intricate maze, designed to be visually consumed rather than navigated with purpose. Brodsky’s metaphorical language reinforces this focus on the visual, attributing to the city “a porcelain aspect” (12), and comparing the palazzi facing the Grand Canal to “carved chests with unfathomable treasures” (29). Through these comparisons Venice is rendered a place of myth and fantasy through a lens that strips it of its present-day reality, turning it into an object that serves the viewer’s imaginative and aesthetic needs. What Brodsky terms the “cyclopic” feeling that Venice gives travellers (12) further suggests that the city is seen through a single, dominating perspective where “one’s eye precedes one’s pen” (21), demonstrating the primacy of visual experience in his engagement with Venice. His resolve to let the “pen” follow the eye further emphasises the role of the travel writer as observer who shapes their account of the city on the grounds of their own visual journey, rather than allowing the city to reveal itself organically through engagement with its history, culture, or inhabitants.

While Brodsky’s portrayal reduces Venice to a spectacle for visual consumption, dominated by the “tourist gaze,” Venetian resident narratives reveal a different way of writing the city—one rooted not just in sight, but in a multisensory engagement with its environment and its languages. Much like architectural features, the sounds of a city play a crucial role in shaping its identity and historical narratives. While events, buildings, artifacts, and historical figures are often memorialised, the sounds of a city are inherently ephemeral, leaving few visible traces in the urban landscape. Yet, this impermanence does not diminish their importance (Cronin and Simon 120). Just as tracing the architectural development of a city helps us understand its history, its organisation into neighbourhoods and its social relations, listening to the sounds of the city (which of course includes the languages spoken) introduces the observer to layers of social, economic, and cultural complexity.

The collection *Quando c'erano i Veneziani*, edited by Caterina Falomo, vividly captures residents’ personal memories of Venice in the 1950s and 60s, a time when the city’s residents dominated the urban landscape, shaping its rhythms, sounds, spaces, and everyday life. These accounts provide an intimate view of how Venetians inhabited their city, mapping out a topography intertwined with the local culture, community life, and the Venetian dialect. Unlike the travel narratives that depict Venice as a spectacle for the eye, these resident narratives foreground the practical, lived experience of navigating and interacting with the spaces of the city. This immersive, multisensory

perspective is vividly captured in Luigi Albertotanza's account in the same collection, where the city's canals are described not as picturesque features, but as essential arteries of daily life and labour:

It must be said that the canal, with its *fondamenta*, *Nani-priuli* and *Sangiofoletti*, the church square, the *squero*, etc., had all the characteristics of a small village. The canal, in particular, was in its own way a genuine little harbour, animated by various types of boats, almost exclusively workboats. It was crossed by large cargo transport boats, almost always manoeuvred by two men, each pressing a long and heavy oar against the bottom of the canal on one side, and against their shoulder (vaguely protected by folded rags) on the other side, applying the push by walking heavily along the sides of the boat, which allowed for a slow progression.¹ (16)

In this extract, the canal becomes a well-defined space with clear functions and a sense of community, a place where the complexity of the urban environment is not bewildering, but rather integral to the rhythm of everyday life. The description of how cargo boats were manoeuvred by two men highlights this intimate, active physical engagement with the landscape. The slow, laborious process of moving these boats, driving long oars that scraped the canal bottom while pressing into the men's shoulders with each stroke, reveals a tactile relationship with the environment. Albertotanza recalls how the canal water was used for practical tasks such as washing dishes and cooking polenta (16), illustrating the residents' symbiotic relationship with the lagoon. For the residents, the lagoon and canals were an integral part of daily life, sustaining their everyday routines and practical needs, in stark contrast to Brodsky's symbolic portrayal of the city waterways as a mirror reflecting the city's aesthetic grandeur, timeless and almost otherworldly. The imagery here presents a fundamentally different approach from the more detached gaze of the global citizen, focusing instead on the embodied knowledge required to navigate Venice's unique geography as denizens.

¹ All translations in this article are my own. While translating I felt it was important to leave the Venetian terms in the original and italics to showcase the diglossia inherent in the resident's voices. Here is the original Italian version: "Va detto che il canale con le sue *fondamenta*, *Nani-priuli* e *Sangiofoletti*, il campo della chiesa, lo *squero*, ecc, presentavano tutte le caratteristiche di un 'paese.' Il canale, in particolare, era nel suo piccolo, un autentico porticciolo, animato da vari tipi di imbarcazioni, quasi esclusivamente da lavoro. Era attraversato da grosse imbarcazioni da trasporto merci quasi sempre movimentate da due uomini che puntando, ciascuno, un lungo e pesante remo sul fondo del canale, da una parte, e alla spalla (vagamente protetta da stracci ripiegati) dall'altra imprimevano la spinta, ottenuta spostandosi camminando pesantemente lungo i fianchi della barca che permetteva un lento incedere" (Albertotanza 16).

The residents’ accounts further emphasise how their relationship with the landscapes of the city is characterised by a sensory, embodied connection to the environment which foregrounds the city’s aural landscape, recounting the daily rhythms of sounds that echoed through the city at dawn: “Every day, the same pattern of sounds filled the air at the break of dawn. The clatter of milk cans being unloaded in front of the dairies from *batele* or large *sandoli*. . . And the roar of the first diesel engines starting up on the *burci* boats was especially loud” (16).² These sounds, repeated day after day, were central to the Venetians’ experience of this small corner of the city. This focus on the auditory dimension contrasts with the visual emphasis found in travel writing, offering a more immersive portrayal of life in the city. The sounds of work and commerce, such as the watermelon seller’s distinctive Venetian cries—“*al tajo, al sajo . . . tute rosse*” (17)—root the city in the linguistic reality of daily life, distinct from the picturesque and mythical Venice perceived by travellers. As Cronin and Simon note, drawing on Alain Corbin’s work on the sensory overlays of cities (120), the cries of peddlers and vendors had a signifying function for the auditory landscape of cities because they conveyed information not only about the wares being sold, but also about the geographical origins of the sellers themselves. These cries, embedded in the social fabric of the city, serve as markers of local identity and commerce, creating an aural landscape where the city speaks to them in their own language.

Throughout *Quando c’erano i Veneziani*, the inhabitants’ connection to place is expressed not only through descriptions of daily life, but also through the use of the Venetian dialect, which further connects the narrators to their environment. While most of the narratives are written in standard Italian, they are also peppered with Venetian words and expressions, emphasising the deep-rooted relationship between the residents’ spoken language and the city’s landscapes. Tim Ingold’s concept of “dwelling” emphasises that local knowledge arises from a deep, embodied connection to one’s environment, cultivated through continuous engagement with the surrounding landscape and its material realities (5). In *Quando c’erano i Veneziani*, this form of dwelling is reflected in the Venetians’ use of dialect to describe their world. The Venetian dialect acts here as more than a means of communication; it is a form of rootedness that expresses an intimate knowledge of the city’s spaces, practices, and rhythms of life. Inhabiting the city through the Venetian dialect produces knowledge of

² “Si ripetevano ogni giorno tutta una serie di rumori che si diffondevano alle prime luci dell’alba. Il rumore dei bidoni del latte, scaricati davanti le latterie da *batele* or grandi *sandoli*. . . Rumorosissime erano le messe in moto dei primi motori diesel installati sui *burci*” (16).

the city spaces that is inherently local, adaptive, and “grounded in labour and daily practices” (Ingold 6).

In the resident narratives, Venetian is used to identify places such as *squero*, *fondamenta*, and *rio terà* (Albertotanza 16, 19), terms that reflect the unique history and topography of Venice as a city built on water. The *squero* is a traditional Venetian boatyard where gondolas and other small wooden boats are built and repaired; a *fondamenta* refers to the walkway that runs alongside a canal in Venice; *rio terà* refers to a stretch of land which was once a *rio* (“small canal”) and was claimed back (“interred”—*terà*) during prosperous times when the city’s population was increasing by the thousands. The dialect also names specific types of boats integral to the city’s functioning—*burci*, *batèli*, and *sandoli*—and the types of fish caught only in the lagoon waters—“*I go, le anguee, i gransi*” (16)—which reflect the residents’ intimate connection with its natural resources.

The memories of childhood games and social interactions deepen the depiction of Venice as a vibrant, living community: “We would race around on bicycles and play games like *la ghe* or *piera alta*. The girls would hop on one leg over chalk marks drawn on the ground, and we boys would improvise tracks, drawn on the paving stones with chalk, where we would spin our wooden tops (*cimbani*)”³ (18). These playful moments, narrated through the lens of Venetian dialect (in italics) and intimately connected to the city’s geography—such as *piera alta*, where children avoid being caught by taking refuge on wells, bridges, and stone thresholds—represent how denizens translate the city’s spaces into the language and experiences of local childhood. The word *piera* means “stone” in Venetian, and this particular game was named after Venice’s abundant stone structures. This playground game, known in English as “the floor is lava” and in other parts of Italy as *rialzo*, in Venice becomes shaped by the city’s geography, with its stone streets, bridges, and thresholds influencing how children play. This centuries-old tradition, passed down through generations, reveals a profound local engagement with Venice that, while unimportant for travel narratives, becomes central to the articulation of the residents’ relationship to the spaces of the city. It shows how denizens translate their urban environment into a cultural text through their daily practices, embedding the city’s stones into their play, memory, and language.

Through the resident narratives in *Quando c'erano i Veneziani*, we encounter a Venice that is inhabited, worked, and lived in ways on which travel narratives rarely focus. The residents’ deep connection to the city—

³ “Si scorrazzava in bicicletta e si giocava a *la ghe* o *piera alta*. Le bambine saltavano su una gamba superando i segno per terra fatti col gesso, e noi maschi improvvisavamo piste, diseguate sui masegni col gesso, in cui spingevamo i *cimbani*” (18).

expressed through their use of dialect, their daily routines, and their practical knowledge of the city and its multiple landscapes—paints a picture of a city that is not merely a destination, but a dynamic, interwoven community. By maintaining the diglossic relationship between vehicular and vernacular language, Italian and Venetian, the residents’ stories enable the Venetian dialect to remain a space of alternative expression. In doing so, they offer a counterpoint to the tourist gaze, reminding us that Venice is not just a backdrop for aesthetic pleasure, but a place filled with lived histories, sounds, and rhythms that define a different way of inhabiting the city.

While *Quando c'erano i Veneziani* captures a forgotten Venice defined by the rich, daily sounds of a closely-knit microcosm of the past, *Ascolta Venezia* moves beyond memory to advocate listening as an active, deliberate engagement with the city in the present. Published in 2021, over ten years after *Quando c'erano i Veneziani*, it reflects a new phase in the Venetian community’s journey of self-awareness, responding strategically to the social and political pressures of overtourism and the municipal government’s mismanagement of the city’s urban planning (Zanetti 29–32). By shifting the focus from recollecting a forgotten past to a conscious engagement with the city’s present-day challenges, *Ascolta Venezia* offers the act of “listening” (*ascoltare*) as a form of quiet resistance, as a way to forge and affirm an enduring, resilient connection to place that challenges the reduction of Venice to a visual spectacle.

The force of this gentle resistance is encapsulated in the collection’s trilingual subtitle, “*shemà, ’scolta, ascolta*” (Benzoni 14)—meaning “listen” in Hebrew, Venetian, and Italian. The title subtly evokes Venice’s layered cultural heritage, highlighting the enduring influence of the city’s Jewish community, whose presence has contributed to its linguistic and cultural landscape over centuries. Each language in the title invites a layered mode of listening, with *shemà* bringing a sacred resonance from its association with the prayer *Shemà Yisrael* (“Hear, O Israel”). As Giovanni Benzoni explains in the introduction to the collection, *shemà* resonates beyond its liturgical roots, to daily life, where the verb is commonly used to signify attentive listening between people (14). Similarly, the Venetian term *’scolta* evokes an intimate, communal way of listening, recalling the expression *’scolta che te conto* (“listen, I am about to tell you [a story]”), traditionally used by grandparents when they are about to tell their grandchildren a bedtime story. This choice of words, bridging the sacred and the familiar, invites readers to engage with Venice as a community rather than a backdrop, framing listening as an act of recognition and service. In this sense, the subtitle also adopts a translational logic, inviting readers to dwell within the linguistic textures of the city and to engage with Venice through a mode of understanding grounded in mutual recognition, listening, and the careful negotiation of difference.

Interpreted through the lens of denizenship, these multilingual practices of listening reinforce the notion that Venetian identity, as articulated in these texts, actively counters ideas of origin, authenticity, and ethnicity. Rather than presenting identity as a static, heritage-based claim, this multilingual articulation of voices reflects an inclusive, fluid understanding of belonging rooted in active participation and relational engagement with place. The layering of Hebrew, Venetian, and Italian in the subtitle embodies a denizen's approach to place, where identity is not restricted by birthright or ethnicity, but constructed through a shared, ongoing practice of listening and community connection. By framing listening as central to the experience of Venice, the collection presents a vision of identity that resonates with the denizen's adaptable, dialogic relationship with their surroundings, affirming a sense of belonging grounded in the daily realities of dwelling within the city's complex, multicultural landscape.

In *Ascolta Venezia*, the term *caranto* serves as a powerful metaphor that speaks to the themes of the collection. *Caranto* refers to a prehistoric layer of soil beneath the Venetian Lagoon, formed during the Pleistocene. This dense, compact layer acts as a solid foundation beneath the more recent, softer sediments. By drawing on the concept of *caranto*, the Venetian resident community aligns their voices with this enduring geological layer, suggesting that their narratives are fundamental to the city's history, much like the "stones of Venice" once symbolised the enduring authenticity of its architecture and identity. This act of identification suggests a reimagining of identity as dynamic, shaped by the community's desire to assert its place in a rapidly changing Venice. As Benedict Anderson argues, communities—whether national, regional, or local—are imagined and continually reconfigured in response to social, political, and economic pressures (4). By aligning themselves with the solidity of the *caranto* and simultaneously with their multilingual heritage, Venetian residents are not merely referencing historical continuity, but actively engaging in a discourse of inclusivity, resilience, and resistance, asserting their place and responsibilities amidst the city's transformation into a tourist spectacle.

This sense of community rooted in responsibility lies at the heart of the collection, challenging authors and readers alike to confront their roles in the city's decline. As Benzoni emphasises, memory is not conceived as a neutral or passive act of recollection, but an active, subjective engagement with the past. It is a practice that is inseparable from present-day ethical imperatives: "In this book, the intent to remember is clear. As T'zvetan Todorov says, it does not mean recalling in an indistinct manner, but making a conscious, subjective choice in light of our responsibility toward

the challenges posed by the events we have witnessed” (Benzoni 10).⁴ The collection foregrounds the idea that structural forces such as mass tourism, transnational capital, and policy failures are undeniably responsible for Venice’s commodification. However, they do not fully explain the city’s condition. Instead, the text calls for a form of civic introspection that highlights personal accountability. This is articulated most clearly in the questions posed by Nono: “What have I done for my city? What have I done for my community? Was I thinking about the community or my own personal interest? Did I take care of the spaces in which I moved?” (23).⁵ These are not merely reflective prompts; they function as ethical provocations, demanding that residents reassess the relationship between their everyday practices and the broader processes of overtourism and urban decline.

A sense of profound urgency also runs through the collection, with multiple authors warning that Venice is on the verge of dying—not just physically, due to climate change and the threat of rising sea levels, but also culturally, as a community. As Cantilena poignantly notes, “Venice isn’t dying just from high tides. But who, beyond [us inhabitants of the lagoon], truly realizes that this slow death is coming?” (62).⁶ This reflection on Venice’s slow death draws attention to how the denizen’s life—beyond the tourist gaze—is rarely acknowledged, both in Italy and abroad. The focus on Venice as a place of spectacle has blinded outsiders to the life of its denizens and the existential threats which it faces.

CONCLUSION. RECLAIMING VENICE: TRANSLATION, DWELLING, AND CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

In this article I have explored the unique dynamics of Venice as a translational city, where global narratives and local experiences intersect to produce a space of tension and negotiation. By bringing travel writing and resident narratives into dialogue, I have shown how Venice is

⁴ “In questo libro è esplicito il proposito di fare memoria, come dice Tzvetan Todorov, non significa ricordare in modo indistinto, ma applicare sempre una scelta soggettiva in funzione della nostra responsabilità di fronte alle problematiche poste dagli eventi di cui siamo stati testimoni” (Benzoni 10).

⁵ “Che cosa ho fatto per la mia città? Che cosa ho fatto per la mia comunità? Pensavo alla comunità o al mio interesse personale? Ho avuto cura degli spazi in cui mi muovevo?” (Nono 23).

⁶ “Venezia non muore solo di acqua alta. Ma di questo, di questa morte, chi si rende conto seriamente al di fuori della laguna?” (Cantilena 62).

caught between forces of visual consumption and embodied dwelling, between the language of global tourism and the intimate knowledge of local denizens. The city's identity, often reduced in travel writing to a spectacle for the tourist gaze, is far more complex and is continually negotiated through competing translational acts. Brodsky's portrayal of Venice reflects the detached, highly visual orientation of the global citizen, where language difference is flattened and the city becomes an object of aesthetic contemplation. His erasure of Venetian as a living language, and the transformation of the city's spaces into scenes to be consumed, reveal the risks inherent in travel writing that aestheticises urban complexity.

By contrast, resident narratives foreground Venice not as a painting or spectacle, but as a lived, multisensory environment. Through the sounds of work, the textures of the lagoon, the everyday navigation of canals, and the use of the Venetian dialect, these accounts offer a powerful counterpoint to the tourist gaze. They articulate a different mode of urban belonging: one based on dwelling, local language practices, and the active transmission of memory across generations. As *Quando c'erano i Veneziani* vividly shows, the canals and stones of Venice are not simply aesthetic markers but living elements of community and labour, deeply inscribed with social meanings. The Venetian dialect is presented not as a quaint artifact but as a vibrant, active force through which the inhabitants connect with their city's spaces and histories. In this sense, the Venetian dialect and other languages of the community, such as Hebrew, serve as powerful forms of resistance: a productive diglossia that challenges the homogenising forces of global tourism and commodification.

Ascolta Venezia extends this engagement into the present, proposing listening as a new civic practice. The collection's translational call to "listen" ("*shemà*, '*scolta*, *ascolta*") reframes urban engagement from spectacle to attentive relationality. It positions identity not as a static inheritance, but as an ongoing, dialogic process rooted in a responsibility to place and the recognition of the value of translation as attention to difference. Yet the narratives also pose hard questions, refusing to frame Venice's crisis solely in terms of external forces like mass tourism and globalisation. Instead, they prompt critical reflection on local agency: What have residents done—or failed to do—to preserve the city's social and cultural fabric? In this sense, Venice's survival is tied not only to resisting the external tourist gaze, but also to cultivating ethical practices of care, memory, and shared stewardship.

As Venice continues to serve as a site of cultural and linguistic translation, the challenges which it faces raise broader questions about the ethics of travel writing, the commodification of urban spaces, and the role

of local communities in shaping the future of their cities. In this article I have sought to deepen our understanding of the translational dynamics at work in Venice today—where the politics of language, travel, and community are in constant negotiation. The implications extend beyond Venice, shedding light on how language, travel writing, and local narratives shape perceptions of urban life in an age of global tourism. Central to this discussion is the ethical responsibility of travel writing to recognise the voices which it translates or silences. By giving visibility to local voices and languages, we can move beyond superficial consumption and begin to appreciate Venice—and cities like it—not as static objects of the tourist gaze, but as vibrant, translational spaces where different forms of knowledge, language, and memory converge.

Ultimately, the survival of Venice as a living, thriving community depends on our ability to recognise and protect its local communities amidst the overwhelming pressures of global tourism. This calls for a more nuanced and critically engaged relationship with cities which acknowledges the multiplicity of perspectives that shape their identities. By listening to the voices of its residents, we can begin to appreciate Venice not just as a “city of the eye,” but as a complex, translational space where different forms of knowledge, language, and histories continue to converge.

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Translating Istanbul: Divergent Voices in Travel Writing

ABSTRACT

Intersemiotic research on urban discourse provides a dynamic perspective for interdisciplinary analysis, particularly within the context of Translation Studies. Drawing on Roland Barthes's claim that the city is a "discourse" and Kevin Lynch's notion that the image of the city is dynamic and influenced by the observer's standpoint, in this study I examine three representations of Istanbul. *Constantinople* by Francis Marion Crawford, *Letters from Constantinople* by Georgina Adelaide Müller, and *Constantinople: Old and New* by H. G. Dwight are all treated here as examples of what Sündüz Öztürk Kasar terms *traduction en filigrane* (watermark translation). I also draw on Theo Hermans's concept of "the translator's voice" and adopt Bento's categorization of tourist, traveler, and migrant travel writers to demonstrate how three distinct voices shape evolving interpretations of Istanbul through their authors' unique experiences and backgrounds. Four recurring themes are identified across the travelogues: Galata as a site of cultural and social exchange, everyday life in Istanbul, the city's mosques, and its cemeteries. Each translator leaves concrete "watermark" traces in their attempts to convey culturally embedded concepts to their audience; however, the extent and form of these traces vary depending on the translators' level of cultural familiarity. This is particularly evident in Müller's narrative, where the traces of *traduction en filigrane* are noticeably fewer; as a tourist translator with limited knowledge of the city and its traditions, she has fewer cultural elements to process and integrate into her text, which results in a more surface-level representation of Istanbul.

Keywords: translating cities, Istanbul, city as discourse, *traduction en filigrane*, the translator's voice.



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INTRODUCTION: CITY AS DISCOURSE

Known earlier as Byzantium and Constantinople, this major East-West hub has attracted travelers from around the world, many of whom have documented their impressions in travel writing. However, the interpretation of urban spaces is a subjective process, shaped by individual perspectives; “we are not simply observers” of a city “but we are ourselves a part of it, on the stage with the other participants” (Lynch 2). According to Barthes, the city is a form of “discourse,” or rather “a language” in which “the city speaks to its inhabitants” (92); this perspective has had implications within the field of Translation Studies.¹ Similarly, Greimas describes cities as both transmitters and texts to be deciphered, acting as global utterances that speak to their audience (48). Since “signifieds are transient, signifiers remain” (Barthes 94), the meanings ascribed to urban spaces are dynamic by nature and susceptible to change over time. In this regard, like a text, a city offers endless interpretive possibilities. Sherry Simon’s concept of the “translational city” (*Cities* 15) is consistent with this view, but it is distinguished by framing the city as a site of ongoing translation, where diverse cultures, languages, and histories intersect and influence one another.

Just as urban spaces invite multiple readings shaped by their inhabitants’ perspectives, travel writing is open to interpretation. In travelogues, a city like Istanbul, “which becomes a melting pot of cultural contrasts” (Çelikel 124), is not merely a physical space, but also a symbolic “other,” reimagined through the traveler’s cultural lens. As Ghose asserts, the “other” in travel writing is a textual construction shaped by the writer rather than a direct reflection of reality (2). Thus, travel writing does not document objective observations; instead, it conveys the traveler’s personal interpretation of the city. Thompson reinforces this idea by suggesting that all travel involves an encounter between self and “other,” and travel writing becomes a record of this encounter, shaped by cultural dynamics (10).

A useful framework for understanding different levels of engagement is Bento’s classification of travel writers as tourists, travelers, and migrants. Bento asserts that travel writing inevitably reflects the traveler’s purpose and approach (134). While tourist writers mainly consume experiences designed for visitors who will have limited, transactional interchanges with the locals, traveler writers seek a deeper experience, exploring the city with curiosity, and engaging with the local community. Different still, migrant writers live among the “other” for longer periods and approach their travels with a blend of familiarity and distance (134–35). Each of the

¹ In relation to Istanbul, it has inspired the work of such scholars as Şule Demirkol Ertürk (e.g., *The City and Its Translators*; “Images of Istanbul in Translation”), Saliha Paker, Sema Üstün Külünk, and Safiye Merve Akbaş Korkmaz.

three Istanbul travelogues selected for this study exemplifies one of Bento's traveler types; what is also highlighted, however, is the need to expand this classification to better understand travelers' diverse engagements with the "other." By exploring the relationship between travel writing and translation, I aim to highlight how travelers from diverse backgrounds translate the same aspects of Istanbul.

TRAVEL WRITING AS TRANSLATION

When we consider travelers as "moving between languages, we can view the traveler as a translator" (Cronin, "Between Languages" 294). Both navigate between cultures and perspectives, acting as "cultural nomads" who broaden our understanding by providing insights from different contexts (Cronin, *Across the Lines* 150). These notions are echoed in Bassnett's observation that both "produce versions of a kind of journey"; travel writing is thus a unique form of translation that conveys the complexity of experiencing and interpreting the "other" (70). Simon also emphasizes the unique nature of travel writing by classifying it as one of three forms of implicit translation, alongside self-translation and pseudo-translation (*Translating Montreal* 159). The act of translating foreign cultures is often embedded within this form of writing, rather than being explicitly presented as translation.

A related concept, crucial to the present study, is what Sündüz Öztürk Kasar terms *traduction en filigrane* (watermark translation) ("Traduction de la ville" 267). It refers to a narrative that subtly integrates the linguistic, cultural, historical, and social elements of a foreign context through the author's mental translation process. As a result, elements such as place names, cultural practices, historical figures, daily rituals, social norms, culinary traditions, and architectural landmarks are woven into the narrative like a watermark, reflecting the foreign culture and creating an impression that the text is a translation, even though it is presented as an original work. According to Öztürk Kasar ("Çeviri Göstergebilimi" 4), *traduction en filigrane* serves as the opposite of Gideon Toury's "pseudotranslation" (40), highlighting the contrasting ways in which original and translated texts are presented. Öztürk Kasar categorized *traduction en filigrane*² into two types ("Traduction de la ville"; "Traduire la ville"), importing and exporting, and then proposed a typology for this concept ("Typologie"; "Migration").

² The concept has been applied to the works of writers such as Alexandre Dumas (Tuna); Halide Edib (Öztürk Kasar and Gülmüş Sırkıntı); Julia Pardoe (Öztürk Kasar and Çelik); Joan Kim Erkan (Sancaktaroğlu Bozkurt and Sönmez Dinçkan); and Roberta Rich (Çelik).

Şule Demirkol Ertürk, considering Orhan Pamuk as the “translator” of Istanbul, asserts that as authors select different parts of the city on which to focus in their work, they each create a different “translation” and “image” of that city (201). My analysis aligns with Demirkol Ertürk’s approach, particularly in conceptualizing city writing as a form of translation, where authors assume the role of “translators” who create distinct representations of the city by focusing on different parts. While this approach highlights how translators’ selective focus on specific aspects of a city shapes its interpretation, the current study extends this view by suggesting that even when different travelers focus on the same part of the city, their unique backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives may result in varied “translations.”

From this perspective, I analyze how Istanbul is interpreted in *Constantinople* (1895) by Francis Marion Crawford, *Letters from Constantinople* (1897) by Georgina Adelaide Müller, and *Constantinople: Old and New* (1915) by H. G. Dwight. I consider these narratives as *traduction en filigrane* of Istanbul’s discourse into English, and the authors are henceforth designated as “translators” of Istanbul. As Bassnett argues, such “forms of rewriting” (75) cannot be separated from the perspectives and interpretations of their translators. This makes Hermans’s concept of the “translator’s voice”—i.e. their discursive presence within the translated text—particularly relevant in understanding how Crawford, Müller, and Dwight construct their interpretations of Istanbul.

Hermans emphasizes that the translator’s voice is most discernible in three scenarios: when the source text is deeply embedded in its original cultural context, when the text is characterized by wordplay or commentary, and when the source text’s context and form present significant challenges to translation (“Translator’s Voice” 27–28). The first scenario is particularly relevant when a travelogue is approached through the lens of *traduction en filigrane*. As negotiation and subjective positioning are always inherent to the process of translation, the role of the translator in shaping the message is always traceable and “we can, in fact, discern translators’ value judgements in all translating” (Hermans, “Positioning Translators” 293). Travelogues reflect similar value judgments, since travel writers act as translators, interpreting and representing the city for the reader.

Building on this framework, I examine how each translator interprets these shared aspects of Istanbul, with a particular focus on the voice that emerges in each narrative. For this purpose, the three travelogues have been comprehensively analyzed to identify common themes. Although their relationships with Istanbul are quite different and they come from different backgrounds, Crawford, Müller, and Dwight focus on many

similar aspects of Istanbul. Adopting a descriptive and comparative approach, I analyze how the translators' voices shape these shared themes and how this, in turn, influences *traduction en filigrane*.

TRAVEL WRITERS AS TRANSLATORS: BACKGROUNDS AND MOTIVATIONS

To understand how Crawford, Müller, and Dwight interpret Istanbul in their travelogues, it is essential to consider their personal backgrounds, motivations, and the circumstances of their visits. Georgina Adelaide Grenfell Max Müller, born in England in 1835, travelled to the Ottoman Empire's capital with her husband Friedrich in May 1893 (Berberoğlu). Their trip was motivated by a desire to see their son Wilhelm, who was working as a secretary at the British embassy, as well as by their interest in the city frequently described in his letters (Müller v). The travelogue includes sixteen of those—twelve by Georgina and four by her husband—written during three months. Fueled by positive expectations, Müller's experience aligns with Bento's proposed profile of a tourist translator. Rather than engaging with the city's social life and traditions, Müller's narrative focuses on major attractions: detailed accounts are given of iconic sites such as the Chinili Kiosk (24), the Dolmabahçe Palace (34), and the Beylerbeyi Palace (35). She dedicates two letters almost entirely to the Yıldız Palace and makes extensive references to prominent mosques, including St. Sophia (72–76), Ahmediyeh (78), and Suleymaniyyeh (79).

Another of the authors in question, Harrison Griswold Dwight, was born in Istanbul in 1875. After a local preparatory school, Robert College, he attended Amherst College in Massachusetts, graduating in 1898. For the next eighteen years, Dwight traveled extensively across the Near East and Europe. Inspired by William Dean Howells's *Venetian Life*, he resolved to write his own travelogue (vii). To approach the city with this new purpose in mind, he returned to Istanbul and published *Constantinople Life* in 1914.

Born and raised in the city, Dwight may exemplify the role of a migrant translator and, in some aspects, extend its boundaries. Reflecting his familiarity with Istanbul, Dwight also reveals an awareness of his own status as a foreigner. His efforts in the preface to teach his readers the proper pronunciation of specific Turkish sounds highlight a conversance with the language, further underscoring his position as a migrant translator (x–xi). Also notable is his close observation of coffee houses: he describes in detail their history, the times at which they are most vibrant, and the traditional games played there (28). However, he occasionally distances

himself from the local community, as reflected in the use of we/them distinctions to underscore his position as an informed outsider.

The third of the authors, Francis Marion Crawford, was born in 1854 in Bagna di Lucca, Italy, to American parents. After an education in London, Berlin, and Rome, he returned to the US in the early 1880s to study Sanskrit at Harvard. He mastered around twenty languages, including Turkish (Aladağ 62). Having completed his studies, he traveled extensively across Europe, India, and the Middle East, arriving in Istanbul in 1884 at the invitation of General Lew Wallace, the American minister to Constantinople (Elliot 183). There, he became actively involved in the social and diplomatic circles, interacting with figures such as the British Ambassador Lord Dufferin and the German Ambassador Joseph Maria von Radowitz (184). His time in the city was also personally significant, as he married Elizabeth Christophers Berdan. In his travelogue, Crawford goes beyond superficial descriptions, focusing on specific local practices and spaces, such as the introduction and cultural importance of the fez (15), the tradition of bargaining (35), the functions of the Ottoman postal system (53), and the dynamics of the horse bazaar (56). He explains coffeehouses and the manners observed in these spaces (17, 18, 41). Crawford even visits Turkish cemeteries (68) and attends plays in Kadıköy, the only theater in the city, to experience local performances alongside Istanbul's residents (74). All these observations may be interpreted as illustrations of his role as a traveler translator. Rather than simply consuming experiences, he engages deeply with local life and experiences the "other" first-hand.

Notably, among these three travelogues, only Müller's has been the subject of an analysis within the field of Translation Studies. In it, Avcı Solmaz explores power relations in the Turkish translations of *Letters from Constantinople*, employing the lens of Wang's "rootless/textless back translation," as well as Chittiphalangsri's concepts of the "inside-outside paradox" and "virtuality/virtualization" (819).

SHARED THEMES, DIVERGENT VOICES: INTERPRETING ISTANBUL

In my thorough textual analysis of the three travelogues, I have identified four shared recurring themes. Below, I analyze in detail how Müller, Dwight, and Crawford describe Galata as a site of cultural and social exchange, the everyday culture of Istanbul, the city's mosques, and its cemeteries.

Markedly different perspectives are offered on Galata, "a semi-independent colony of Istanbul where Orientalized Europeans" lived

(Simon, *Cities* 154). Müller, devoting a whole letter to this neighborhood, describes her first experience on its bridge by stating that it “exceeds all that we had imagined!” (11). Her excitement—the superficial astonishment of a tourist—is also obvious when she describes Galata as “the tower of Babel,” where one can “see all the nationalities of the world” (11).

Dwight also mentions the diverse demographics: “the population of Galata is now more Greek, even more Turkish and Hebrew, than European” (156), but not without the historical context: he explains that “Galata existed as a flourishing Genoese city for nearly two hundred years. The coming of the Turks in 1453 put an end to the conditions which had made her independence possible” (156). However, Dwight’s portrayal is less flattering; he describes it as the “humble, despised, dirty, abandoned Galata, with its outlying suburbs” (182). Occupying what might be described as a migrant translator position, he distances himself from both the local and the tourist perspectives, noting that among the Turks “[i]t is not the fashion to speak well of Pera and Galata” and that even “a Perote born pretends not to love his Grande Rue” (148). Tourists, in contrast, merely “watch the Sultan drive to mosque and giggle at the whirling dervishes” (148). Rejecting both views, Dwight asserts: “I belong to none of these categories,” and finds Pera and Galata “a highly superior place of habitation” (148). Positioning himself as an outsider with a deeper connection to the city, he emphasizes a linguistic distinction that Western readers might overlook: “The word Pera the Turks have never adopted. They call the place Bey O’lou—the Son of the Bey” (147). Retaining the local term while offering a translation, he subtly mediates between Ottoman and European notions of the city, and leaves traces of *traduction en filigrane* in his narrative.

Crawford also devotes a chapter to Galata, highlighting its heterogeneous cultural character. He observes that “Pera and Galata are chiefly inhabited by Christians and Jews, many of them being Europeans, and the aspect of the streets is consequently far less Oriental and less interesting” (71). This suggests that, as a traveler, he is particularly interested in what he perceives as oriental and culturally distant. He emphasizes his access to spaces concealed from outsiders’ view, engaging with local customs firsthand. He describes “a quiet spot unknown to most Europeans, where one may sit for hours in undisturbed enjoyment of coffee and cigarettes” (12). His engagement with Istanbul’s everyday life is further exemplified in his depiction of a simple yet culturally significant ritual: drinking coffee. He notes: “Take your seat in the corner nearest the bridge and nearest to Galata, order your cup of coffee ‘shekerli,’ with sugar, or ‘sade’ without—light your cigarette, and begin your observations” (12). He allows his readers to encounter the original expressions, *şekerli* and *sade*, in their natural context while making them accessible.

In portraying Istanbul's everyday culture—clothing, food, beverages, or street life—the voices of the translators also diverge significantly. These differences reflect varying degrees of familiarity with the city's culture, as well as distinct forms of interpretation. Müller's portrayal of this aspect is influenced by her short stay and limited engagement with the locals: a tourist translator, she remains largely on the surface of the portrayed culture. Instead of exploring the city's traditional food culture, she writes mostly about formal dinners to which she was invited. For instance, recounting a dinner hosted by the Sultan, she highlights that “for the special benefit of the Sultan's English guests, Potage Windsor and Ananas à la Victoria” were served, adding that “no dinner where Turks are present could be served without Pilau” (91). Although the word is given in Turkish, no elaboration on this traditional dish follows. Elsewhere, Müller simply notes that “fish and pilau, and chicken were among the dishes” served at the dinner (190), without providing any further details of the cuisine.

A similar superficiality characterizes Müller's portrayal of clothing culture. For instance, she writes that “Turkish, Persian, Greek, and Circassian women vie with each other in the brilliant colours of their misshapen gowns, the so-called ferejehs. Most of them wear yashmaks, or veils” (13). Her description is not intended to convey the cultural, religious, or social significance of these garments in detail; rather, it reflects a tourist's limited understanding based on superficial impressions.

Dwight's approach to cultural aspects is more engaged than Müller's, yet still maintains a certain distance. His discussion of *kahve* exemplifies his role as an informed outsider, blending linguistic awareness with cultural observation. He explains that “[k]ahveh, whence café and coffee, is a slight modification of an Arabic word—literally meaning that which takes away the appetite” (23–24). Although the meaning of this word is debated among scholars, Dwight presents this detail as part of the cultural knowledge acquired through his experience in the city, an engagement with daily life and local discourse. He moves between languages when introducing a traditional Turkish confectionery: “[r]ahat locoum, more familiar to you, perhaps, as Turkish Delight” (26), or baked goods: “sweet simits, which are rings of hard pastry” and “round flaps of hot unleavened bread, called pideh” (266). In both cases, he maintains the original names, *simit* and *pide*, but supplements them with explanatory descriptions. He mediates between languages and cultural references so that his audience can engage with Istanbul's local identity.

When it comes to clothing, however, Dwight simply mentions traditional garments such as the *fez*, *şalvar*, and *yaşmak* without elaboration. Having spent years immersed in the culture, he may have regarded these items as commonplace, assuming that his readers would either recognize them or infer

their significance. He describes “veiled women in their loose street costume” (268), men wearing “fezzes and turbans in the streets” (268), and servants dressed in “fez and shalvars” (273) without providing further explanation.

Compared to Müller’s and Dwight’s, Crawford’s narrative shows a much stronger engagement with the everyday culture of Istanbul. As a traveler who observed local culture closely, Crawford does not merely list what he sees, but often explains and subtly translates it for his readers. Such traces of *traduction en filigrane* are particularly evident in his descriptions of street food vendors, where he integrates Turkish culinary terms while making them accessible. For instance, he notes: “There is the man who sells bread and ‘pide’ and ‘peksemit’—unleavened bread and biscuits” (47). He keeps the original names, while briefly explaining their meaning. *Pide*, flatbread made from leavened dough and often topped with ingredients like eggs, minced meat, or cheese, is a staple of Turkish cuisine; *peksimet* refers to twice-baked, dry, and long-lasting bread. Crawford’s engagement with food translation becomes even more detailed when he describes Turkish kebab: “There is the cook who sells kebaby—little morsels of lamb or mutton broiled on wooden skewers, and pilaf, kept hot in a big, closed tin, or stuffed spring squashes and other vegetables” (47). Here, he does more than name the dish; he explains its preparation method and accompaniments, helping his audience visualize how it is cooked and served. Instead of over-explaining or exoticizing these items, he retains the Turkish term and adds brief, clear explanations in English.

Among other details which he provides about Istanbul’s vibrant street culture, Crawford draws attention to ice cream vendors, noting how their voice “rises loudly above other sounds—dondurma kaimak—frozen cream!” (36). He not only captures their characteristic call to attract customers, but also provides its English translation. In terms of Istanbul’s clothing culture, he provides social and historical context, as when describing Ottoman women’s traditional clothes: “the yashmak or the ferajeh—the clumsily cut overgarment which covers all women in the street from the throat to the inevitable patent leather shoes” (17). As can be seen here, culture-specific terms are paired with short, clarifying descriptions. What stands out in Crawford’s approach is his awareness of how these garments have changed over time. He notes: “But the yashmak is not what it was ten years ago and has almost ceased to hide the face at all,” adding: “Strict as the Sultan’s ordinance is, there is not the slightest pretence of obeying it, and in the great majority of cases a thin white veil barely covers the forehead and is but loosely drawn together under the chin” (17). Through this detailed observation, he captures not only the physical characteristics of the *yashmak*, but also its changing role—another clear example of mediating the foreign without distorting its meaning.

Unsurprisingly, the interest of those unfamiliar with the culture and religion is captivated by the places of worship: all three authors dedicate several pages to descriptions of mosques. Müller's perspective aligns with that of a tourist translator, prioritizing aesthetic fascination and romanticizing external beauty; idealizing expressions like "snow-white minarets" or "glittering cupolas" (5) abound. She highlights their contrast with the dark cypress trees and the bright blue sky without focusing on the buildings' historical or architectural significance (5, 11). Müller also asserts that mosques in Constantinople are either repurposed Christian churches, like "Aya Sophia Jamisi," or direct imitations of the Grand Mosque (72). This statement may reflect the surface-level engagement characteristic of a tourist who primarily seeks familiar points of reference. Müller's use of "Aya Sophia Jamisi" can also be seen as a trace of *traduction en filigrane*, because she blends the building's Byzantine and Ottoman identities through a hybrid transliteration. Similarly, in depicting the Sultan's ceremonial entrance to the mosque, she translates the final phrase of the *ezan* (Islamic call to prayer) into English, adopting an archaic register, with expressions like "thou" in "Remember there is One greater than thou."

Dwight's perspective as a migrant translator is more critical and sophisticated than Müller's. Instead of simply expressing his admiration, he mentions the minarets, domes, and tiles—a crucial element of architectural design. He even offers technical observations, as with the Sultan Ahmed Mosque: "[The architect] put his best tiles there, where they can only be seen at close range. And his best is very good. I have counted twenty-nine varieties of tiles there. . . ." (53). Comparing the Yeni Mosque with the Sultan Ahmed Mosque, he is critical but constructive, noting that the proportions of the former "are also much better and the frescoing is not so bad as that of Sultan Ahmed" (54). Unlike Müller, Dwight directly challenges the notion that Ottoman mosques are mere imitations of Hagia Sophia; he notes that "[t]he easy current dictum that they are merely more or less successful imitations of St. Sophia takes no account of the evolution" (40–41). Instead, he links the central dome's development to earlier mosques in Konya, Bursa, and Edirne. His reference to Sinan's refinement of Byzantine influences into a distinctly Ottoman aesthetic highlights an insider's perspective, shaped by a deeper familiarity with the city's architectural history. Furthermore, his reflections on lesser-known mosques such as "Atik Ali Pasha and . . . Sultan Baiezid," as well as overlooked artistic techniques, such as "frescoing or stencilling of domes" (42), indicate a sensitivity to local artistic traditions often dismissed by foreign travelers. Dwight also praises Turkish calligraphy and architectural inscriptions in mosques, noting that "this art became a means of decoration which we can only envy the Turks" (47). Once again, this highlights an us/them

distinction, and shows his migrant translator stance—deeply familiar with the culture yet still positioned as an outsider.

As for the traces of *traduction en filigrane*, Dwight consistently uses the word “mosque” in his descriptions; however, when referring to specific Ottoman structures, he preserves the local terminology and adopts “jami,” e.g., in “Yeni Jami” and “Sultan Ahmed Jami.” Another telltale aspect is his approach to translating religious and architectural elements. For example, some Turkish terms are retained, but with explanations: *mihrab* is described as “the central object of this open space . . . a niche pointing toward Mecca” and *minber* as “a sort of pulpit,” i.e. the elevated platform from which the imam delivers sermons (39).

Crawford provides another distinct voice as a traveler translator, focusing on the city’s inherent contrast. Like Müller, he mentions the picturesque aspects, noting that “from the Bosphorus one sees little except the architectural outlines of the mosques, interspersed here and there with a little green, or shadowed by the tall plumes of dark cypresses” (41). However, he does not romanticize these places, and he underscores the contrasts between “the brilliant animation of the streets” and “the solemn quiet of the mosques and tombs” (54). Like Müller, Crawford refers to Ottoman mosques as imitations of Hagia Sophia. However, her tone is more appreciative: she highlights the fact that the Ottomans chose to adopt the church as a model, rather than attempt to erase its influence (4). The names of religious places in Crawford’s *traduction en filigrane* reflect his varying translation strategies. While “St. Sophia” (2, 4, 20, 41) aligns with the established Western usage, “Kahriye Mosque” (38) blends an Ottoman place name with an English descriptor, and “Yeni Jami” (53) preserves its original form. Crawford’s firsthand engagement with local religious life further distinguishes him from a tourist translator. Following his discussion of Yeni Jami, he mentions that “it is indeed impossible to spend much time among Mussulmans without acquiring the certainty that they are profoundly in earnest in religious matters” (54). This statement highlights his effort to observe and understand religious devotion as an integral part of everyday life.

Another illustration of how each traveler shapes their social and religious significance through their distinct voice are the varied depictions of Istanbul’s cemeteries. All three travelogues depict Turkish burial traditions, preserving religious terms such as “turban-crowned tombstones” and “türbeh,” explained further within the texts. Müller portrays Turkish cemeteries as disorderly and neglected, emphasizing their irregular arrangements. Observing the “turban-crowned tombstones, standing at any and every angle from the perpendicular, many even fallen down,” she concludes that they collectively give “that general impression

of neglect conveyed by all Turkish cemeteries” (72). Müller’s description reflects an aesthetic judgment shaped by Western notions of order. In terms of Turkish burial traditions, she simply records what she sees without contextualizing the underlying practices or beliefs. Apart from an occasional use of the term “türbeh,” Müller’s observations of cemeteries and tombstones lack further instances of *traduction en filigrane*.

Dwight, on the other hand, integrates cemeteries into the urban and cultural fabric of Istanbul, offering an interpretation that, yet again, reflects his deep familiarity with the city and its culture (8, 141, 219, 334, 483). On Ottoman tombstone inscriptions, he notes “a request for a prayer or a Fatiha—the opening invocation of the Koran—and some such verse as ‘He is the Everlasting, Every soul shall taste death’ or ‘We are God’s and we return to God’” (220–21). While *fatiha* serves as both a prayer and a spiritual invocation for the deceased, other expressions to which Dwight refers are also common epigraphic phrases: “Her canlı ölümü tadacaktır” (“Every soul shall taste death”) and “Allah’tan geldik, Allah’a döneceğiz” (“We are God’s and we return to God”). The phrase “He is the Everlasting” likely corresponds to “O, bâki olandır,” which appears on many Ottoman gravestones to show the eternal nature of God as contrasted with human mortality. Dwight does not mark these expressions with translations or explanatory notes. Instead, he integrates them fluently into his prose. Without reducing cemeteries to burial sites, Dwight shows them as interwoven into the city’s rhythms: even “the principal avenue of Stamboul” is bordered by tombs (8).

As for Crawford, he moves beyond surface-level observation, but still maintains an outsider’s perspective. His engagement with local cultural expressions is seen in his rendering of gravestone inscriptions, for instance: “the dedication to God, ‘the ever abiding One’—and below that, in Turkish, the words: I have come to the garden of this world but have found no kindness” (43). The poetic line that follows, originally “Bu cihân bâğına geldim, bir mürüvvet görmedim”—an epitaph expressing disappointment—was widely used in Ottoman tombstone inscriptions. Crawford does not overtly frame this as an act of translation; instead, he embeds the translated phrases naturally into his narrative to make these cultural and religious expressions accessible. His depiction of Turkish cemeteries as “infinitely more picturesque than the Christian churchyard” (67) suggests a romanticized approach that prioritizes aesthetic qualities over cultural depth. However, unlike Müller, whose engagement remains purely superficial, Crawford demonstrates an awareness of local beliefs, referring to “one of the most deep-rooted of popular Turkish superstitions” and observing that the “fatalistic Mussulman . . . would tremble like a child if obliged to pass through a cemetery at night” (66). Positioned as a traveler

translator, engaged in cultural and social dynamics, he moves beyond visual observation, acquiring knowledge of these superstitions through firsthand interactions.

CONCLUSION

To varying degrees, all three travelogues examined in this study function as examples of *traduction en filigrane*, which mediates between languages and cultures. This process is particularly evident in their encounters with the “other” (Thompson 10) and this encounter leaves traces on the text. While making the unfamiliar accessible, they reshape the representation of the city through their distinct translators’ voices.

This study further highlights how different types of travelers/translators leave distinct imprints on their texts. The mental process of translation is deeply influenced by the translator’s background and familiarity with the culture of the city. As a result, the *traduction en filigrane* takes on different forms and intensities in their narratives. This is particularly evident in Müller’s: as a tourist translator with limited cultural familiarity, she engages in such practices to a noticeably smaller extent than Dwight and Crawford. Lacking deep knowledge of the city and its traditions, she has fewer cultural elements to process and integrate into her narrative. Consequently, traces of *traduction en filigrane* in her text remain minimal, primarily limited to place names, personal names, and occasional references to food and clothing. Even when Müller retains Turkish terms, she rarely provides detailed explanations, leaving many cultural elements unexplored. This contrasts with the more engaged approaches of Dwight and Crawford, who incorporate cultural and historical context alongside linguistic retention.

The comparative analysis of Crawford’s, Müller’s, and Dwight’s voices has highlighted how their roles as tourist, traveler, and migrant translators shape their interpretations of Istanbul. Müller, who spent only three months there visiting her son, embodies the perspective of a short-term tourist, characterized by a predominantly surface-level engagement. Galata elicits mere astonishment at its diversity rather than deeper analysis; Müller’s descriptions of mosques focus on their external beauty rather than their architectural or religious significance, while cemeteries are seen as sites of disorder and strangeness. These observations evidently prioritize admiration over deeper cultural understanding. Dwight, born in Istanbul yet never fully belonging to the city, occupies the position of a migrant translator: his narrative reflects both deep familiarity and a sense of detachment. He demonstrates an insider’s awareness of how

Turks perceive Galata; his engagement with lesser-known mosques and overlooked architectural techniques, along with an emphasis on the historical and religious importance of cemeteries, highlight his extensive knowledge of the city. However, his persistent use of us/them distinctions reinforces his position as an informed outsider. Lastly, Crawford, an Italy-born American polyglot, offers the perspective of a traveler translator. His portrayal of Istanbul focuses largely on less popular sites, emphasizing his distinction from ordinary tourists. He finds Galata less oriental and less interesting due to its diversity yet sets himself apart by seeking out lesser-known spaces. Additionally, he demonstrates an awareness of local traditions and superstitions, reinforcing his engagement with the locals and the city's cultural landscape.

As Simon asserts, “cities are stories” and “each city will tell different stories according to the languages in which these stories are told” (“The Translational City” 24). The identities of the translators who interpret the city in their own language play a crucial role. The unique voices of the translators affect the representations, and the resulting subjective portrayals may reflect not just the city, but also the translators themselves.

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Translation as a Spatial Process: The Linguistic Landscape of Caroline Bergvall's Soundworks and Installations

ABSTRACT

In a constantly evolving, interconnected world, both urban and rural space has become a symbolic site of linguistic and cultural gathering. Thus, translation implies a spatial dimension in which different voices converge to represent a plural, heterogeneous world. Among experimental artist Caroline Bergvall's interlinguistic and multimodal soundworks, the installation *VIA (48 Dante Variations)* and the performance *Ragadawn* highlight the importance of the migration of languages through creative exchange. In this case study, through works that invite a real and figurative journey through language(s), sounds, silence, noise, discourses, and history, I engage with the latest trends in Translation Studies to conceive space as a semiotic landscape that communicates beyond linguistic boundaries. Translating these multimodal works also entails translating a multilingual setting in a creative way, conceiving the environment as a palimpsest (to be) translated, and highlighting the figure of the translator as a cultural agent.

Keywords: language migration, vocal composition, performative translation, multilingual space, Caroline Bergvall.



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INTRODUCTION

With the appearance of innovative, interdisciplinary, and multimodal textual artworks, and taking into account the poststructuralist theories of Roland Barthes (1968) and Michel Foucault (1969), the reader and the spectator acquire new prominence. The work is no longer considered to be completed until it has been interpreted. The space in which the work is (re)produced and (re)interpreted acquires a predominant role. Through this redefinition of the text, the new conception of the discipline implies going beyond words, in the traditional sense, to take into consideration “a social semiotic approach for understanding how distinct modes such as speech, writing, gesture, image, and sound function as semiotic resources in order to facilitate the representation and communication of meanings” (Boria and Tomalin 5).

Considering the complex creative process at the conceptual and formal level of multimodal works that “challenge the word-based model of ‘the reading’” (Apter 149), innovative approaches are making their way into Translation Studies. Translation nourishes, and is nourished by, other disciplines (Bassnett; Bassnett and Johnston), including intersemiotic perspectives that consider multiple sign systems, making translation a transfer not only of linguistic elements, but also of different referents reflected in art (Campbell and Vidal; Ott and Weber; Dot; Pârlog; Boria et al.), such as movement, intonation, staging, or even silence, intermingling the concepts of reader and viewer.

Thus, in this article I aim to explore the translation of multimodal and interdisciplinary experimental literary works. Further, I intend to address the relevance of translation and adaptation, especially as they relate to elements such as text and sound. Starting with the relationship between language and creativity and applying the theories of the Outward Turn, Experiential Translation and Multimodality, I shall offer a translational study of Caroline Bergvall’s works, especially the installation *VIA (48 Dante Variations)* and the performance *Ragadawn*. According to Edmond, Bergvall’s perception of artistic creation “offers an embodied, gestural alternative to models of purely discursive or linguistic iteration. She locates agency . . . in the moment where multiple systems meet in embodied gestural acts. Bergvall investigates various forms of iteration and gesture in writing and performance, especially through the gestural physicality of speech” (111).

THE TRANSLATION OF A MULTILINGUAL LINGUISTIC SOUNDSCAPE

Translation becomes a (re)interpretation intrinsic to any exchange among languages, whether pictorial, musical, or literary (Vidal Claramonte). Considering the multiplicity of artistic media through which these innovative works can be represented, the linguistic and sensory materials explored by theorists such as Campbell and Vidal, make tangible the semiotic process of creating meaning.

Based on this translational approach, any discourse that reinterprets a previous meaning through another code, with the ultimate aim of communicating and regardless of the medium used, will be conceived as translation. This process is therefore considered as a transdisciplinary phenomenon developed in a hybrid space, where “[m]ediation increasingly plays a role in dissemination as a way of making work and directs attention to the translative and transformative aspects of cultural performativity. This broadened yet specific disposition of translation . . . plays out cultural traffic in more ways than one” (Bergvall and Allsopp 3). Considering the performance of the work, there is a clear relationship between “linguistic translation and spatial translation” (Rabourdin 3), especially in those places where, as Sherry Simon states, “languages compose ever-changing palimpsests and where spaces are charged with the tension between here and elsewhere” (*Translation Sites* 2). These places, with a strong linguistic and cultural component, offer a sensory experience, a physical sense of belonging, of closeness and remoteness. Hence, memory plays a fundamental role: “While translation can be an instrument of suppression, counter-translation can bring languages back into circulation” (4), stimulating the “discussion of language and language interactions as a feature of a city’s identity” (Simon, *Cities in Translation* 7).

In this context, individual and collective representation through an artistic intervention acquires ideological nuance, especially in those situations “where translation is seen as a contested zone that negotiates power relations between two or more languages representing different and sometimes conflicting socio-cultural identities” (Lee, “Introduction” 20). Consequently, it is particularly relevant to show that the intermingling of languages in these spaces, identities, and works goes beyond mere overlap. In fact, as Simon states:

Translation sites argue against multilingualism as a simple juxtaposition of languages. Instead of seeing cities as avenues of free-flowing words, they crystallize language relations in time and space, defining specific moments of exchange or confrontation. They focus attention not on the multiplicity of languages but on their interactions and their rival claims. (*Translation Sites* 5)

The emphasis on experience during the process of receiving the work—“more specifically, our own experience that occur[s] in time and space” (Blumczynski 19)—means that, “[i]nstead of providing any definitive answer to the problem of how a translated text can be interpreted in terms of its identity function, [we] seek to expose the ambivalence inherent in such interpretation” (Lee, *Translating* 90). Thus, an interdisciplinary methodology is needed which goes beyond the previous formal pillars of linguistic transfer, broadening the perspective and strategies prevalent in Translation Studies. Specific fields such as digital artistic practices (Dot), as well as the “Outward Turn” (Bassnett and Johnston; Arduini and Nergaard), offer the translator certain tools to go beyond linguistic transfer. Such an epistemological opening requires a broadened understanding of the work *per se* as an open-ended creative process with a plural language (Carter).

Such a theoretical framework allows for a deeper linguistic analysis of Bergvall’s work, the evolution of which is already evident in the title of her academic thesis “Processing Writing: From Text to Textual Interventions” (2000). Beginning with Jakobson’s tripartite division (Jakobson 68–69), Bergvall employs intra- and interlinguistic, as well as intersemiotic practices to obtain a creation which generates “complex intersections of theoretical, historical, sonic, performative, spatial, and visual dimensions. . . . The installation work, often created collaboratively with practitioners in other media, situates language within environments more typically associated with visual or sound productions” (Kinnahan 232–33).

Bergvall’s open-minded conception of language takes on a performative and dynamic character in which the source text, whether visual, aural, or written, is merely an instrument for internal and external interpretation, as highlighted below:

These questions inevitably move the writing process toward types of “locative” or “operatic” works, that are interdisciplinary, collaborative, multivocal, allographic. . . . My installations, my audioworks are in an open traffic with my writing. They inform one another. To install language in a space inevitably opens up the piece to very different questions around perception, readerliness, immersion, obstacles etc. And yes, the work is set up and the audience, the viewers, or listeners [or translators] then find their own way through it. (Kinnahan 245)

As Bergvall explains, and as will be shown in the works selected for analysis, her idea was to give the original text an air of performance. For this purpose, new material was added and the conventional sequence of the elements was altered so as to blur the traditional reading order, keeping in mind the fact that “translation is a response to an address and hence not

fully under our control; that it is situated and interpersonal; that it requires receptiveness and openness to difference, etc. These ideas are in constant circulation themselves" (Blumczynski 60).

FROM WORDS TO PERFORMANCE: BERGVALL'S LINGUISTIC EXPERIMENTATION WITH FORM AND CONTENT

With the aim of designing a more specific study corpus, the works *VIA* (48 *Dante Variations*) (2004) and *Ragadawn*, conceived as part of the *Language Stations* project (2016–), have been selected for analysis. Despite having begun her artistic career with literary works in which she played with language in its multiple forms, "Bergvall is also a multidisciplinary contemporary artist, working in performance, installation, collage, sound, . . . and book works; as an artist working in performance, her body—and more specifically . . . her voice—features as a significant part of her work" (Fournier 105).

From the point of view of both creation and translation, it is important to emphasise the linguistic influence of Bergvall's Franco-Norwegian origins, as well as her personal and professional development in Germany, Switzerland, and the United States. In this respect, as Fournier argues, "Bergvall's lines push against the grammatical and syntactical parameters that so-called proper English sentence exist within; while there are a few grammatically sound fragments, many utterances are glitchy phrases that fail to properly begin, end, or signify clearly" (106).

On this basis, Bergvall builds multimodal and interdisciplinary (often interconnected) works, including performances (*Conference of the Birds*, *Drift*, *Ghost Cargo*, *Language Stations*, *Night & Refuge*, *Noping*, *Ragadawn*, or *Sonoscuro*), installations (*1DJ2Many*, *Crop*, *Drift*, *Middling English*, *Noping*, *Say: Parsley or Via*), soundworks (*Oh My Oh My*, *Up We Get*, *Hafville –submerged voice–*, *O Sis*, *VIA* (48 *Dante Variations*), *Ride*, *After Gysin*, or *Fuses–DJ Rupture Mix–*), drawings (*Together*, *Broadsides*, *Goodolly*, *Gong*, *Drift*, or *Philomela*), books (*Alisoun Sings*, *Drift*, *Meddle English*, *Middling English*, *Ghost Pieces*, *Fig*, *Goan Atom*, *Éclat*, *Flesh Accoeur*, or *Strange Passage*). She also creates films, mostly performative outcomes of some of the works mentioned above, especially in terms of sound and voice—a common element in most of her output:

A recording is an inscription, so it allows the live voice, the speaking, to survive itself and its own liveness. It is editable and recyclable. It can also be a social document of a slice of audio life. It is a form of writing, even if

it demands different tools and approaches to writing as it moves us from reading to listening, from the page to the audio and oral environments. (Kinnahan 244)

In her works, Bergvall plays with sound, space, and visual elements through language, taking “the semantic to be produced both aurally and visually” (Perloff 42). Considering the multiplicity of this type of creations, it is evident that the focus, especially in experimental/experiential literature, and therefore experiential translation (Campbell and Vidal), is no longer on what concept is created through language, but on how this concept is conveyed through interdisciplinary artistic representations and multimodal channels.

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A. VIA (48 DANTE VARIATIONS) (2004)

Perfectly exemplifying the relationship which I seek to establish in this article—that between the emergence of a new type of multimodal, intersemiotic text and translation—*VIA (48 Dante Variations)* (2004) is a variation piece whose bedrock is a selection of 47 English translations of the first tercet of Dante’s *Inferno*. It was composed by Ciaran Maher around a fractal structure, itself based on Bergvall’s 10-minute recorded reading in a neutral voice, but with modulations of intensity and rhythm. It is worth mentioning that the work as an annotated text appears in *Fig* (2004). In fact, Bergvall had offered a 48th translation of Dante’s tercet for a printed version (CHAIN’s *Translucination* issue, Fall 2003, under the joint editorship of Juliana Spahr, Jena Osman, and Thalia Field). In this respect, she stated: “This late addition broke the rule of the task, its chronological cut-off point. I subsequently removed it” (*Via (48 Dante Variations)* in *Fig* 65). Nonetheless, the work, conceived as a sound performance, was exhibited at the Fundació Antoni Tàpies in Barcelona (2004) and the KUMU Museum in Tallinn (2005), although the sound text was first presented at the tEXt02 festival in Exeter (2002). With some elements, such as an audiotext, headphones, and the text itself printed in metallic letters on the wall, the spectator witnesses the performance visually and sonically in an enclosed, specially conditioned space, in a museum hall in which, surprisingly, the work is not open to external agents that could modify it in an unexpected and improvised way.

As the author herself explains in the introduction to the work, “I had started this piece by accident. Stumbling upon Dante’s shadeless souls on my way to other books” (64). Given that Dante is one of the most widely translated authors, it was necessary to start with a criterion for selection.

Thus, Bergvall collected the first lines of the translations from Italian into English, gathered at the British Library up to May 2000. In the same year, the first reading of the variations was carried out together with composer Ciaran Maher, who “unearthed an added line, an imperceptible grain, my voice’s fractals, and we let it run, hardly audible, underneath the structure of the reading voice, . . . magnified shrapnels of interior sound. The 48th variation” (ibid.).

In this respect, it is interesting to consider Goldstein’s observation, as follows:

Via suggests that showing difference and discrepancy is more accurate than an erasure of one text to be replaced by another, or than the construction of an illusion of smooth, flawless meaning according to our preconceived notions of semantic logic. . . . The work also creates new space for a “silent” observer (Bergvall does not contribute a translation of her own) as an important role of both witness and action. With her gesture of rigorous examination of others’ interpretations, and careful consideration of how to perform what she observes, she also manages to achieve equilibrium with readers by delegating part of the responsibility of the reception and interpretation of historical texts. *Via* ultimately provides a space for the reader to consider the obstacles, failures and rewards of crossing and sharing boundaries of language.

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If we analyse the work from a conceptual perspective and take into account Bergvall’s own words, it might seem that her job was merely to select, check, copy, combine, and order a series of translations for the chosen tercet. Bergvall stresses how punctilious she was in this process, checking and correcting possible errors regarding the authorship of the translation or its date of publication. For this reason, it is particularly curious that the Irish writer Seamus Heaney appears on two occasions, specifically as the translator of tercets number 6 and 16, both dating from the same year. Although it is true that this could be a revision of a previous translation or two different versions by the same translator, the translation of the first of these tercets is in fact by the American poet Thomas William Parsons, who translated Dante’s *Divine Comedy* a century earlier, in 1893. Possibly, however, this wink at the recipient calls into question concepts such as authorship.

Furthermore, Bergvall acknowledges the increased complexity of the compositional procedure at later stages. It was no longer just a matter of (re)producing each translation, but of adding her voice and becoming a creator through the voices of others. It is worth highlighting the performative dialogue among translations, because of “the dramatic conversation of texts it has generated. The action of this poem belongs not only to the forty-eight translations, however, but also to Bergvall herself

as reader and performer. . . . Bergvall intervenes with a woman's voice and a creative rearrangement of a predominantly male textual tradition" (Bermann 286–87). Among other examples, the selection of certain translations and the decision to present them in alphabetical rather than chronological order mean that the final result is not a set of copies from the same fragment in various translations, but an entirely new work, which allows Bergvall to

[u]nderstand . . . translation in its erratic seriality. There are ways of acknowledging influence and models, by ingestion, by assimilation, by one's total absorption in the material. To come to an understanding of it by standing in it, by becoming it. Very gradually, this transforms a shoe into a foot, extends copyism into writing, and perhaps writing into being. This whole copying business was turning out to be a hands-down affair. This was an illuminating, if disturbing, development. (Bergvall, *Via* (48 *Dante Variations*) in Fig 65)

This work, which lacks chronological or semantic linearity, does not manifest a sense of progression, but rather gives the reader the opportunity to understand translation as a testimony to the passage of time, showing that the source text always remains unchanged, but that translation, as its own entity, needs to renew itself in order to survive. Based on intra/interlinguistic repetition and variation, questioning notions such as fidelity by offering different interpretations, this work "puts literary translation directly in the spotlight. It presents translation as an ongoing act, a performing that engages reader or audience as much as translators themselves" (Bermann 286). Indeed, it has been (re)translated into Portuguese and Polish. While in the latter case the authorship is unknown, in the former, the project was carried out by Adriano Scandolara, who, following the idea proposed by Bergvall, compiled 17 official translations of the same work into Portuguese, adding an introduction.

The games that this experimental approach enables are potentially endless. Although it is true that a particularly interesting comparative approach would be to copy Bergvall's compositional procedure and compile translations of the same source work into different languages, it is also possible to combine translations of the same tercet in different linguistic combinations, to translate the entire source text by mixing translations by different authors, or even to reorganise the different versions in chronological order. In all cases, the translation would be experimental both in form and content, and would offer a new version of Dante's *Inferno*, while emphasising the importance of translation as a constantly evolving process—which is, after all, the main purpose of the majority of Bergvall's works.

B. LANGUAGE STATIONS: RAGADAWN (2016–)

Language Stations was conceived as a project “that centred on landscapes, time zones, trans-locality and writing in context, and the records of voices of migrant poets, translators, academics and activists, to capture the shifting array of languages in the UK and the EU” (Farinati 34). As Bergvall states, the initial aim of these encounters was to record various language speakers, but the project was subsequently expanded to include debates and workshops regarding artistic exchanges and language migration through “research into old European languages as well as languages spoken by more recently settled communities” (*Language Stations*). Consequently, the collaboration of more than forty poets, translators, and academics integrated approximately eighteen languages and translations into the *Dawn Chorus of Languages*, based on one of the sentences composed as a multilingual refrain: “passengers we are passages we are passengers we are passages we are passengers.” This ongoing project deals with the idea of a “process of revitalizing connections between poetic forms as well as minority or migratory languages active in Europe: anciently rooted languages, as well those present through more recent settlements,” following “a symbolic map of some of the languages involved in early medieval lyric poetry across pre-European territories” (Bergvall, *Language Stations*).

This chorus as a linguistic intervention was performed between 2016 and 2019, in urban and rural, natural and culturally specific enclaves: Romansh in Geneva, Farsi in Copenhagen, Galician in Santiago de Compostela, Ladino and Sicilian in London, Provençal in Aix-en-Provence, Occitan in Toulouse, Welsh in Liverpool, and Icelandic in Manchester, among other scenarios. From 2019 onwards, the new encounters were recorded by Bergvall and Watson, and later turned into a performance by composer Rebecca Horrox. *Dawn Chorus of Languages* represents an ongoing project that has inspired other performances, such as *Conference of the Birds* (2018) or *Nattsong* (2021), a work in collaboration with sound designer Jamie Hamilton, which addresses the constant migration of words in isolated or social contexts. As Farinati argues,

[t]his piece introduces the theme of “night”—*Natt* means night in Norwegian (Bergvall’s native language). Here, poetic fragments, monosyllabic utterances and broken words eventually cluster around puzzling questions: “What shelter shelters? How sheltered are you?” Meanwhile, the medieval etymology of the word “refuge” is traced before it is drowned out by the background noise. In Latin, the word *refugium* means shelter, but it also comes from the verb *refugere*, which means “to run away from.” The complexity of this push/pull reaches

its climax with an overwhelming sound of street protesters, followed by a lament made from a repeated exclamation: “ohmy ohmy ohmy ohmy.” (34)

In a similar vein, yet transcending the linguistic background of these works in conceptual and formal terms, *Ragadawn* is described by Bergvall as

a sunrise vocal performance to be performed outdoors from the last hours of night until the very early morning. A multisensory composition for two voices, multiple recorded languages and electronic drones to accompany and celebrate the slow rising of day. It draws on ancient and contemporary musical and literary sunrise traditions, while also addressing the linguistic territories of the UK and EU. Language and languages, song and speech, sites and sounds, breath patterns, electronic frequencies and passing noise are all at work in this project. *Ragadawn* recalls the large rhythmic patterns that connect all beings both to nature and society, and the awakening of mind and body. It is a powerful and moving voicework performance which fights off contemporary isolation and reconnects audiences to time, place and each other. (*Ragadawn*)

Following the discussion of the relationship between linguistic choice and the location in which the work takes place, each reading offers—as with translation—a culturally specific framework. Moreover, the exceptionality of the moment and the space—in natural settings, such as the northern coast of the Scottish Isles and a southern harbour in France, a mere few days before the lockdown—offered a personal, physical, and sensorial experience:

The change from dark to dusk to light, the transformation of shadows into outlines into shapes, all this brings about a complex range of experience explores [sic] both the celebratory and wondrous rise of day but also the hidden anxieties and rising sorrow it can provoke. *Ragadawn* tunes in to the ambiguity present with the rising of day. The texts written and performed by Caroline Bergvall function as physical and rhythmic connective elements. Spoken lines are created as repetition patterns and vocalised breath rhythms. (ibid.)

This “performance writing” (see Bergvall, “Performance Writing”) can only be based on textual scores “constructed using minimal lines, misspellings, disjointed phonemes, neologisms and lyrical narrative fragments which, when repeated, sung, spoken or whispered, have a profound, incantatory effect on the listener. . . . Far from the conceptualism of concrete poetry, her sound poems vibrate outwards” (Farinati 34). According to Bergvall’s description, this work represents a symbolic, sonorous, linguistic,

geographical, and transhistorical journey that “activate[s] the histories and movements of ancient lyrical poetry” (*Ragadawn*), evidencing the rich influence of Middle Eastern musical and literary forms on European lyrical composition.

In this journey through geographies and languages, spaces and recitals, listening becomes a collaborative and plural action. Thus, “[a]t the heart of each site is an encounter and an unresolved exchange. Like translated texts that display the double realities of which they are composed, they are unsettling, exposing the lineaments of difference” (Simon, *Translation Sites* 2–3), highlighting the semiotic relationship between the work itself and the linguistic landscape in which it is situated.

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CONCLUSIONS OF AN UNFINISHED PROJECT

Attempting to conclude this study can only lead to opening up new approaches to these innovative multimodal texts. Translation of experimental literature in general—and of visual poems and graphic narratives in particular—requires an updating of the critical apparatus in the light of how differently authorship, interpretation, and equivalence are conceptualised.

Caroline Bergvall's textual works, with their inter/intralingual games, have hardly been translated. In addition to the Polish and Portuguese translations previously referenced, Vincent Broqua, Abigail Lang, and Anne Portugal translated into French a set of texts collected in *Meddle English: New and Selected Texts* (2011), and published them under the title *L'Anglais Mêlé* (2018). A comparative study between these versions would be of great interest, because

[p]oetically, multilingual work can provide all sorts of avenues into questions of complex belongings, accents, and idiolects, questions of cultural translation or non-translation. It carries an explicit politicization around language use and cultural exchange. Instead of ease of access, it can be lack of understanding we are faced with. (Kinnahan 239)

These works that approach translation from a formal and conceptual point of view highlight the need to “rethink translation, not as a short-term product or a process, but as a cultural condition underlying communication” (Gentzler 7). Such new multimodal texts make it clear that approaching them through a creative process leads us to conceive translation as an art form with extralinguistic value (Malmkjaer). As with translation, “variations also serve to highlight the uniqueness of each performance or instantiation of the text. The iterations of writing extend

into the iterations of variations: each live or recorded performance, print or online publication constitutes another version” (Edmond 113). In this regard, the uniqueness of each of those versions gives testimony to “the depth and thickness of the language we are speaking right now” (Bergvall qtd. in Nissan).

The works analysed in this article are developed in settings as different as a closed museum and an open urban/natural landscape. Her conceptual poems are the repetition or copying of other translations, as well as a performed reading and staging of their readings in different spaces. As Vidal Claramonte states, “in the eyes of many contemporary philosophers, repetition is more about difference, because . . . repetition involves rewriting stories initially told in other contexts so that they acquire a different perspective. In this sense, repeating is often a political act” (*Translation and Repetition* 15). Indeed, “Bergvall’s use of repetition reflects a much larger contemporary problem: the attempt to recognize the singularity of each person and text while also addressing the systemic causes of the bodily and cultural peril faced by many in our increasingly interconnected but unequal world” (Edmond 171). Translation evolves away from prescriptivist approaches and towards a recognition of creative practice that integrates the multiplicity of social, cultural, and artistic voices, in a process of unlimited interpretations.

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“The city of their fathers”: Urban Space, Memory, and Language in Stuart Dybek’s Short Fiction

ABSTRACT

Stuart Dybek is a writer invariably associated with his neighborhood of Pilsen/Little Village on Chicago’s Lower West Side. Having grown up there as a descendant of immigrants from Poland, Dybek frequently “revisits” his old neighborhood in his writing. His texts showcase the changes of the urban space, narrated through references to the material, social, cultural, and linguistic environment. In this essay, I will analyze two of Dybek’s texts—the sequence “Hot Ice” from his second collection of stories *The Coast of Chicago* and the story “Qué Quieres” from *I Sailed with Magellan*—to probe the palimpsestic construction of urban space, whereby the past, present, and future of urban orders are narrated simultaneously. Both texts illustrate ethnic succession in the neighborhood—from Slavs to Hispanics—which finds its reflection in the linguistic layer of the stories and construes translation as an inevitable element of urban experience.

Keywords: Stuart Dybek, Chicago, literature of neighborhood, memory, multilingual city.



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When in 2023 the Harold Washington Library in Downtown Chicago celebrated the 150th anniversary of the city's public library system, the magnificent building's seventh floor—with holdings of literary texts, mostly—had a small exhibition commemorating the Windy City's most recognized writers. One of them was Stuart Dybek,¹ featured alongside Richard Wright, Nelson Algren, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sandra Cisneros, and Lorraine Hansberry. What is noteworthy about these authors is that in their texts they tend to focus on a particular area of the city, which, after all, is known for its seventy-seven distinct neighborhoods.² Dybek is not an exception to this rule: born in 1942 to a Polish-American family in Pilsen on Chicago's Lower West Side and raised in the nearby Little Village, in his poetry and prose he frequently returns to these neighborhoods that can be claimed to constitute a creative kernel of his work. His writing has been discussed in the context of the "literature of neighborhood," a category defined as "a subset of . . . urban literature," specifically to account for the distinct flavor of Chicago's neighborhoods that would be obfuscated by the discussion of their literary representations in more general terms as simply urban narratives (Rotella, "The Literature of Neighborhood" 57). Given the social realist traits of Dybek's works, the writer can be considered a successor of Nelson Algren, whose *Man with the Golden Arm* in particular earned the author a reputation as a chronicler of the working-class neighborhood back in the 1940s. Like Dybek, Algren found his literary niche in depicting the life of the Polish neighborhood, in his case the so-called Polish Downtown in Chicago's Wicker Park. But while Algren was considered an outsider to the community and criticized for painting an unflattering picture of it—given the profusion of Polish drunks, drug addicts, and criminals in his oeuvre—Dybek as a descendant of Polish immigrants to Chicago was privy to the first-hand experience of what it means to be a Polish American. The latter's interest in Pilsen/Little Village may in turn be understood as antecedent to Sandra Cisneros's work. Cisneros may have set her celebrated *The House on Mango Street* on a fictitious street in Chicago, but her coming-of-age novel portrays life in a Mexican-American barrio in a very realistic manner. In a way, her text may be read as a depiction of the neighborhood in the wake of the Slavs' departure from it, while in Dybek's narratives the Slavs and the Hispanics still live side by side. Interestingly, Dybek never presents the city as static; on the contrary, he narrates the rapid

¹ Dybek's position within American letters was underscored by the *New York Times* reviewer of his last two volumes of short fiction—*Ecstatic Cahoots: Fifty Short Stories* and *Paper Lantern: Love Stories*, released simultaneously in 2014—who hailed Dybek as "not only our [US-American] most relevant writer, but maybe our best" (Strauss).

² See <https://www.choosechicago.com/neighborhoods/>

transformations of the urban space encompassing both built and human environments. As I will argue in this essay, many of the changes to which the urban order is subject are coded through language, which serves to reflect the alterations of the neighborhood's material, cultural, and social structures.³

A text that perhaps best exemplifies Dybek's rendition of urban space is the sequence of stories titled "Hot Ice," included in his second collection *The Coast of Chicago* (1990) and comprised of sections titled "Saints," "Amnesia," "Grief," "Nostalgia," and "Legends." Similarly to Dybek's well-known story "Blight," "Hot Ice" features a group of young men of different ethnicities who come of age in Pilsen/Little Village. The central consciousness in the story is the Polish American Eddie Kapusta, befriended by two Mexican American brothers, Manny and Pancho Santora. The introductory piece, "Saints," reiterates a pattern present in many of Dybek's texts, whereby the young protagonists share memories and stories of what the neighborhood used to be like. In this particular instance, the story precedes their birth and is a tale of a grieving Bohemian father, who freezes the body of his young daughter in his icehouse after she drowns in the Douglas Park lagoon. According to the rumors still circulating in the neighborhood, the father gathered the body of his daughter in his arms and stopped a passing streetcar to be taken directly to the icehouse. The reference to Douglas Park immediately prompts a reflection on the changes to the racial/ethnic composition of the neighborhood: "Douglas Park was a black park now, the lagoon curdled in milky green scum as if it had soured, and Kapusta didn't doubt that were he to go there they'd find his body floating in the lily pads too" (Dybek, *The Coast of Chicago* 123). While part of the previously Slavic neighborhood is now Black and off limits to white ethnics—a change clearly presented in negative terms as evidenced by the diction of the excerpt quoted above⁴—there is still considerable intermingling of Slavs and Hispanics in the protagonist's neighborhood, as illustrated by Eddie's friendship with the Santora brothers.

To fully understand Dybek's depiction of the neighborhood, some historical facts are necessary. Pilsen dates back to the 1860s, "when Irish and Germans first settled there" (Mora-Torres 5). By the early 20th century, the area was populated mostly by Bohemian and Polish immigrants, who

³ This distinction is indebted to Hana Wirth-Nesher's study *City Codes: Reading the Modern Urban Novel*, in which the author offers a certain typology of urban space, dividing it into the natural, built, human, and verbal environment (11–13).

⁴ For a discussion of the reasons for Poles' animosity towards Blacks on the grounds of job competition and strikebreaking, as well as conflict over housing and urban space, see Radzilowski and Gunkel (161–64).

were drawn there by industries demanding unskilled labor, such as “lumber mills, garment finishing sweatshops, and railroad yard jobs” (Gellman 608). The name Pilsen is in itself a testimony to the Slavic history of the area, as it originated with the establishment of a restaurant called “At the City of Plzen” by one Bohemian resident (608), Plzen being a major Czech city. By the 1950s and 1960s, Eastern European immigrants and their descendants were being pushed away from the neighborhood by Mexican Americans, especially after the latter’s relocation from the Near West Side, cleared to expand the University of Chicago campus (608). The nearby neighborhood of Little Village has a similar ethnic and social class composition, resulting in its being called “the Mexican capital of the Midwest.”⁵ The coexistence of various ethnicities in the neighborhood could of course be antagonistic at times. Gladsky argues that the “commingling of Latino and Slav is economic and sociological more than cultural—a product of shifting urban people and resulting neighborhood changes, the result of shared environment and social class” (“Mr. Dybek’s Neighborhood” 134). As my subsequent analysis will show, “Hot Ice” and “Qué Quieres” present two very different pictures of the forced coexistence of Slavs and Hispanics within the same urban space, yet both depictions will emphasize the necessity of translation in this ethnically diverse neighborhood.

Carlo Rotella writes that “Dybek . . . has drawn upon late-twentieth-century Chicago to create a layered, dreamlike city of feeling in which his characters confront haunting survivals of the old city as well as casually surrealistic harbingers of the new” (“Literary Images of Chicago” 488). Dybek’s rendition of the layers of urban orders—arranged for the most part chronologically—is particularly noticeable in the description that opens the second text in the “Hot Ice” sequence, aptly titled “Amnesia.” The excerpt needs to be quoted at length to highlight the succession and overlap of urban layers in Dybek’s prose:

It was hard to believe there ever were streetcars. The city back then, *the city of their fathers*, which was *as far back as a family memory extended*, even the city of their childhoods, seemed as remote to Eddie and Manny as the capital of some foreign country.

The past collapsed about them—*decayed, bulldozed, obliterated*. They walked past block-length gutted factories, past walls of peeling, multicolored doors hammered up around flooded excavation pits, hung out in half-boarded storefronts of groceries that had shut down when they were kids, dusty cans still stacked on the shelves. . . .

⁵ See <https://www.choosechicago.com/neighborhoods/little-village/>

They could vaguely remember something different *before the cranes and wrecking balls gradually moved in*, not order exactly, but rhythms: five-o'clock whistles, air-raid sirens on Tuesdays, Thursdays when the stockyards blew over like a brown wind of boiling hooves and bone . . .

Things were gone they couldn't remember but missed; and things were gone they weren't sure ever were there—the pickle factory by the railroad tracks where a DP with a net worked scooping rats out of the open vats, troughs for ragmen's horses, ragmen and their wooden wagons, knife sharpeners pushing screeching whetstones up alleys hollering "Scissors! Knives!", hermits living in cardboard shacks behind billboards.

At times, walking past the gaps, they felt as if they were no longer quite there themselves, half-lost despite familiar street signs, *shadows of themselves superimposed on the present*, except there was no present—everything either rubbed past or promised future—and they were walking as if floating, getting nowhere as if they'd smoked too much grass. (130–31, emphases mine)

Eddie and Manny's present is marked by the enactment of renewal policies envisioned by urban planners in many post-WWII US cities, including Chicago. Historian Dominic Pacyga writes in *Chicago: A Biography* that "[i]n April 1961, [Mayor Richard J.] Daley unveiled a new five-year capital improvement plan that would cost \$2.1 billion and included public housing, expressways, bridges, viaducts, street improvement, sewers, and other projects" (347). Ostensibly put forward to improve the conditions of life in inner-city areas, as a matter of fact the policies often disregarded the needs of local communities, leading "to massive displacements of minority residents and the destruction of historic neighborhoods" (Fisher 188). Dybek's text is an apt illustration of that claim, making it clear that as "the cranes and wrecking balls gradually moved in," "the past collapsed about them—decayed, bulldozed, obliterated" (Dybek, *The Coast of Chicago* 130–31).⁶

Dybek's city is not one in which processes of change neatly follow one another. On the contrary, due to his writing technique, based on sequences of memories and associations, the city unfolds simultaneously in the past, present, and future, the three planes as if superimposed on one another. As Rotella puts it,

Dybek's characters move through a neighborhood that presents them with "apparitions in broad daylight" of an older city: horse-and-wagon peddlers, bridges and trestles encased in decades of pigeon droppings,

⁶ For another depiction of the policies of urban renewal, see Dybek's short story "Blight" from the same collection *The Coast of Chicago*.

defunct factories and icehouses, and other buildings of increasingly mysterious function, aging relatives from the Old Country imbued with semi-fabulous attributes. But the neighborhood also confronts them with newcomers, new ways of doing things, disorientingly new notions of beauty and efficacy and purpose. ("Stuart Dybek and the New Chicago's Literature of Neighborhood" 405)

Dybek's young characters are frequently *flâneurs* whose walks take them through the least glamorous parts of the city: they roam the postindustrial wastelands filled with abandoned factories, junk cars deserted on side streets, heaps of garbage, and the like. In Grażyna Kozaczka's words, "Dybek's neighborhood spaces are not sanitized as he devotes little time to city spaces which denote economic power and control, but rather elevates the marginal as he recreates the abandoned and wasted environments" ("The Neighborhood of Memory" 53). It is this postindustrial wasteland that provides the budding artists in Dybek's fiction with inspiration and creative material. The juxtaposition between the blight of the present moment and their blithe future artistic undertakings—to use the contrast at the heart of short story "Blight"—is further complicated by the previous order, one to which Dybek's characters have no direct access, except through family lore: "as far back as a family memory extended" (Dybek, *The Coast of Chicago* 130). Remembering—or imagining—neighborhood figures of the distant past, such as peddlers, knife sharpeners, ragmen, etc., Dybek's characters arguably exercise postmemory, which Marianne Hirsch defines as "a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment or creation" (662).⁷ In a magical realist fashion commented upon by several scholars,⁸ Dybek populates Pilsen/Little Village with almost fantastical figures; nevertheless, his depictions of the Chicago of the past are never far removed from reality—as indicated, for example, by the reference, in the excerpt cited above, to the meatpacking industry in the nearby Chicago Union Stockyards.

Moreover, the neighborhood is still home to the older generations who have never adjusted to the US-American way of life and have a tendency to cling to their native traditions and languages. When, towards the end of

⁷ Even though Hirsch developed her theory to account for the experiences of children of Holocaust survivors, she concedes that "it may usefully describe the second-generation memory of other cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences" (662).

⁸ Cf. Rotella "Stuart Dybek and the New Chicago's Literature of Neighborhood" (405); Kozaczka "Writing Poland and America" (71). In an earlier essay, Rotella labels Dybek a "postindustrial magic realist" ("As If to Say 'Jeez!'" 2), and in *October Cities* he posits that "Dybek's true literary godparents might be the Latin American magical realists" (112).

the sequence, Eddie and Manny ramble around the neighborhood—high and drunk—they realize all of a sudden that it is Good Friday, and, without consciously intending to do so, they fall back into their childhood routine of visiting all of the neighborhood churches: “from St. Roman’s to St. Michael’s, a little wooden Franciscan church in an Italian neighborhood; and from there to St. Casimir’s, a towering, mournful church with twin copper-green towers. Then, as if following an invisible trail, they walked north up Twenty-second toward St. Anne’s, St. Puis’s [sic], St. Adalbert’s” (Dybek, *The Coast of Chicago* 152–53).⁹ Already in the first church, Eddie notices “[o]ld ladies, [who] ignoring the new liturgy, chanted a litany in Polish” (152). In the last one, the image of “[o]ld women . . . walking on their knees up the marble aisle to kiss the relics” prompts Eddie’s reflection that “[m]ost everything from that world had changed or disappeared, but the old women had endured—Polish, Bohemian, Spanish, he knew it didn’t matter; they were the same, dressed in black coats and babushkas the way holy statues wore violet, in constant mourning” (154).

The image of old Slavic and Hispanic women sharing the space of the church finds its parallel in the friendship between Eddie Kapusta and the Santora brothers, the bond that is accentuated by the language that the characters use. Although these young men are descendants of immigrants and speak English among themselves, occasionally they resort to the language of their ancestors. For instance, when Eddie and Manny walk along the walls of the prison in the hope that Pancho—incarcerated for drug dealing—will hear them, Manny spontaneously sings a song in Spanish, with Eddie joining in. On their walks, Manny also shares with Eddie a memory of his uncle, who took him fishing on Lake Michigan and spoke Spanish to the fish, “too stubborn to learn English” (149). When Eddie, in turn, thinks of the Spanish word for a pigeon—“*juilota*, which was what Manny called pigeons when they used to hunt them with slingshots under the railroad bridges”—Eddie concludes that it is “a perfect word, . . . one in which he could hear both their cooing and the whistling rush of their wings” (136). Eddie wishes he could reciprocate with a Polish word, but his knowledge is not sufficient: Polish is a language “which his grandma had spoken to him when he was little, and which, Eddie had been told, he could once speak too” (136). Interestingly, Dybek does know the Polish word for pigeon: after all, one of the minor characters in his first collection of stories *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods* (1980), a man who “[r]aises pigeons,” is called “Pan Gowumpe—‘Mr Pidgin’ in English” (30), the name approximating the phonetic rendition of the Polish word *golq̄b*.

⁹ For an analysis of the significance of Catholicism for the American Polonia, see William J. Galush “Polish Americans and Religion” and “Religious Life.”

Dybek's decision not to include the Polish word in Eddie's recollections may be a testimony to the increasing dominance of Spanish in the neighborhood or, simply, an illustration of a lack of equivalence between the three languages, whereby the Spanish word seems the most accurate to render Eddie's childhood memories. Clearly, however, for both young men, Spanish and Polish respectively are languages of emotion, intimacy, and immigrant family history, aspects that are not easily translated into English. Eddie and Manny's distinct cultural and linguistic backgrounds notwithstanding, what seems to matter most to these two men's bond is their shared experience of coming of age in the same poor, ethnic, working-class neighborhood:

Manny could be talking Spanish; I could be talking Polish, Eddie thought. It didn't matter. What meant something was sitting at the table together, wrecked together, still awake watching the rainy light spatter the window, walking out again, to the Prague bakery for bismarcs, past people under dripping umbrellas on their way to church. (Dybek, *The Coast of Chicago* 151)

As Sherry Simon posits in the introduction to the study *Cities in Translation: Intersections of Language and Memory*, "the audible surface of languages, each city's signature blend of dialects and accents, is an equally crucial element of urban reality" (1). In the case of Chicago, it can be argued that each neighborhood has its idiosyncratic mix of heard languages. Simon continues that "[d]espite the sensory evidence of multilingualism in today's cities, the proliferation of scripts on storefronts,¹⁰ the shouted conversations on cellphones, there has been little more than casual reference to language as *a vehicle of urban cultural memory*, or of translation as a key in the creation of meaningful spaces of contact and civic participation" (7, emphasis mine). Dybek's fiction undoubtedly showcases language as "a vehicle of urban cultural memory." While in "Hot Ice" the changes within the neighborhood are narrated mostly through references to the built environment—from streetcars and factories in "the city of their fathers" to the planned tearing down of the legendary icehouse, with the body of the girl presumably still frozen inside—in "Qué Quieres" it is the linguistic layer of the city that changes significantly while the material structures remain, for the most part, intact.

The question "*qué quieres*," Spanish for "what do you want," recurs several times in the story; young Mexican American men direct it at the

¹⁰ This brings to mind an excerpt from Dybek's short story "Orchids" included in *I Sailed with Magellan*: "The street names were in English, but the rest of Twenty-sixth [street] read like a Spanish lesson: *Frutería, Lavadero, Se Habla Español*" (212).

narrator's brother Mick, who—prompted by nostalgia—decides to visit his old neighborhood. The beginning of the story sketches the context for the Polish/Mexican encounter: “My brother, Mick, crossing the country on a Greyhound Ameripass, has stopped in Chicago and stands before the old apartment building on Washtenaw where we grew up” (Dybek, *I Sailed with Magellan* 247).¹¹ Mick is on the way to see his ailing father in Memphis and spontaneously decides to “‘visit other shrines of memory’—his phrase, irony intended” (248). One of the shrines turns out to be of a culinary character: Mick visits his father's favorite butcher shop in their old neighborhood in Chicago to buy Polish sausage—“a kielbasa” (249)—as a gift for his father.¹² Brandishing the sausage as if it were a weapon, Mick visits the family's old home on Washtenaw in Little Village. The encounter with Mexican American kids, “five *chicos*—teenagers wearing gang colors” (247), is far from amicable. Mick tries to explain in Spanish that he used to live in the building and would like to see the backyard, where he and his brother, the story's narrator, would spend time and hide items unacceptable at home: “cigarettes and lighters, pints of muscatel the winos bought for us, dirty playing cards, illegal fireworks” (272). It is clear that Mick, whose rented apartment in New York City has recently burned down, is practically homeless and in search of a sense of belonging; however, as the story demonstrates, he is unlikely to find a sense of home in the family's old neighborhood in Chicago, which is significantly transformed.

Mick is presented as a polyglot, who believes that

the fastest way to learn a language is to live with a woman who speaks it. . . . Besides Spanish he speaks a bit of German, Cambodian, Italian, French, Portuguese, Haitian Creole, Polish, Chinese. Not that he's learned all those from women—our father spoke Polish, and in the restaurants where Mick has been employed for most of his working life English is often a second language. (259)

Dreaming of a career in acting and often complimented on his resemblance to James Dean, Mick is used to breaking the ice with strangers through his linguistic dexterity: “In New York, the surprise of a blond-haired, blue-eyed guy speaking rapid-fire street Spanish usually eases the reflexive hostility. . . . But here, no one smiles back” (262). The exchange with the

¹¹ The fact that Washtenaw is where Dybek himself grew up is one of numerous autobiographical elements to be found in his writing. See the entry on Dybek's family home at https://chicagoliteraryhof.org/literary_chicago_map/landmark/stuart-dybek

¹² For a discussion of food as an important vehicle of ethnic and family tradition in Dybek's writing, see my essay “You Are What You Eat: Narrating Ethnic Identity Through Food in Polish Chicagoan Writing.”

Mexican youngsters turns ever more hostile and culminates in Mick's fleeing the scene. Mick realizes that what he was looking for in his return to the old neighborhood was "the smell of a past that sometimes feels more real than the present, a childhood in which degrees of reality were never a consideration, when reality and the sense of identity that went with it were taken for granted" (270). Before escaping, he is also made aware of the linguistic blunder that he has unwittingly committed: "*Está hablando español boricua chingau. Aquí es un barrio Mexicano,*" the heavyset guy says: You talk like a fucking PR" (272). Mick's accent is indeed Puerto Rican, a linguistic remnant of his recently failed romantic relationship, and that clearly aggravates the hostility of the Mexican kids. Mick's failure to navigate the multiple languages of his neighborhood can be read as a testimony to his uprootedness and alienation. At this moment he seems a perfect illustration of the claim made by Thomas S. Gladsky regarding Dybek's characters:

Demographic shifts, urban blight and renewal, the rejection of the past have produced anxiety and doubt. His [Dybek's] "Poles," unable to resist these changes and yet part of them, sense that something has vanished: the old neighborhood, cultural promises, the assurance of heritage. Alienation, exile, and anonymity, new passwords for ethnicity, govern the[ir] lives. (*Princes, Peasants, and Other Polish Selves* 259)

As Dobozy argues, in Dybek's narratives of return to the old neighborhood, return constitutes "an experience in which the apparently organic unity of self and cultural origin is broken, and selfhood emerges as irreducibly social, derived from political and cultural circumstance, and in which culture becomes contextual rather than definitive" (191).

While the dominant language of the neighborhood has clearly changed, reflecting the processes of ethnic succession, the material structures—Mick's family home and backyard—remain. Fleeing from the increasingly hostile Mexican American youth, Mick runs

past the defunct 3 V's Birdseed Factory, whose windows once broadcast the cries of caged exotic birds. Its walls are spray-painted in the style of Siqueiros. The peeling murals make the factory appear to be disintegrating along with its superimposed bandoliered angels and peons who ride rearing Quetzalcoatl's auraed in fire, its mariachi whose guitars gush at their center holes into rivers of blood and orchids, and its olive-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe. (Dybek, *I Sailed with Magellan* 274–75)

Although the reference to a defunct factory may bring to mind depictions of urban blight in "Hot Ice," in "Qué Quieres" Dybek is more interested

in rendering urban change through linguistic and cultural references. The peeling mural on the factory's wall is a testimony to the dominance of Mexican culture in the neighborhood, as made clear by the abundant allusions to Mexican painting and mythology. Still, the mural does not alter the character of the building's material structure, but is rather superimposed on it, illustrating perhaps the changeability of urban orders, whereby one group of inhabitants occupies an area for a while and is promptly replaced by another, in the very same fashion as one graffiti artist may paint over another's work.¹³

To conclude, the two stories analyzed in this essay are representative of Stuart Dybek's larger literary project of chronicling the ethnic neighborhood in which he grew up. Both texts showcase change as an inevitable component of urban reality by creating palimpsestic images of the neighborhood, whereby the past, present, and future orders do not neatly follow one another but rather coexist, reflective of the narratives' fusion of the protagonists' current experiences, past memories, and future plans. "Hot Ice" problematizes urban change mostly through demonstrating the demolition of material structures in the context of post-WWII urban renewal. "Qué Quieres," in turn, is built on linguistic and cultural referents to render the hostility of ethnic groups forced by their social class and ethnicity to share the same urban space. The usage of several languages in the neighborhood—Polish, Spanish, and English—construes Chicago as a multicultural metropolis, while at the same time pointing to the hierarchical character of the multilingual city. Even though translation is a necessary tool of communication in ethnically diverse communities, in and of itself it does not overturn the hierarchical linguistic structure of the neighborhood—with its mainstream English, dominant Spanish, and disappearing Polish.

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¹³ As a matter of fact, Pilsen/Little Village is well-known for its street art; as Gellman writes, the "ethnic shift [from Slavs to Hispanics] spurred cultural changes in Pilsen, as Mexican artists decorated the neighborhood with colorful murals and mosaics" (608).

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“A small and great city”: On Translating Contemporary Glasgow

ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to explore contemporary literary depictions of Glasgow as material for translation into Polish. Urban literature constitutes both a challenge and an opportunity for translators, due to the paradoxical nature of the modern Western city—on the one hand, culture-specific, and on the other, generic, resembling all the other Western cities. As such, urban space epitomises the ambiguous nature of contemporary Western cultures themselves, a fact that is made especially evident in translation, a process/product of cultural interaction through which matters of locality and globality unavoidably come to the fore. This analogy between urban space and culture, while universal, seems particularly relevant to discussions of *non-canonical* cities, with Glasgow being a prominent example. Since the 1980s and 90s, Scotland’s largest city has been a crucial spot on the country’s literary map, a territory where globalised urbanism converges with a continued quest for a distinct national, cultural, and linguistic selfhood. Drawing on works by such authors as Alasdair Gray, James Kelman, Denise Mina, and Douglas Stuart, this article explores the image(s) of Glasgow conceived in Scottish fiction of the late 20th and 21st centuries, and examines the city’s renditions in Polish. By doing so, I hope to illuminate the complexities of the contemporary Scottish national self as reflected in Glasgow writing, to investigate how they have been—and can be—approached in translation, and, in the process, to shed some light on the Polish translational handling of cultural and linguistic markedness.

Keywords: Glasgow, contemporary Scottish fiction, the new Scottish renaissance of the 1980s and 90s, city in translation, cultural markedness, linguistic markedness.



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INTRODUCTION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CITY

Although literary scholarship increasingly directs its attention towards the natural world, a shift stemming from the growing consciousness of the reality and implications of the Anthropocene, we cannot escape the fact that at the beginning of the 21st century—specifically in 2005, according to Deyan Sudjic (5–6)—the world’s population became predominantly urban, with more people living in cities than outside of them. Consequently, the city continues to remain a central, defining presence in the life of most societies, although one which is simultaneously becoming increasingly pluralised—as Sudjic observes, “‘City’ is a word used to describe almost anything” (1). It is also, arguably, a space which perfectly encapsulates the often contradictory currents and forces that define contemporary life in the age of globalisation, transnational mobility, and, at the same time, cultural and linguistic difference, as well as differentiation.

The city is culture in concentrated form, that paradoxical space where the distinct and unique organically function alongside, and as part of, the universal. When first experienced, a foreign city, especially one belonging to the same *Kulturkreis* as our own, is going to seem new and strange, but at the same time familiar, following certain patterns recognisable from our knowledge of our own cities, filled with analogous structures, and, finally, home to the same activities as any other urban centre. This duality of our urban experience is reinforced by the fact that, to use Marc Augé’s terms, a contemporary city constitutes a mixture of anthropological places (specific, historically and culturally charged) and non-places (anonymous, generic, universal). As such, cities both shape and mirror the contradictory nature of our cultures. Consequently, and inescapably, they remain a crucial point of reference for many contemporary writers. In this article, I seek to explore how and why one particular city, Glasgow, figures in late 20th- and 21st-century literary negotiations of Scottish identities, and how the significance of this urban landscape translates into Polish.

GLASGOW AND THE NEW SCOTTISH RENAISSANCE OF THE 1980S AND 90S

The city—as a physical, material space that is also a space of history, politics, society, and culture—certainly lies at the very heart of contemporary Scottish literature. In fact, most major Scottish novels of the late 20th and 21st centuries can be classified as urban fiction, and then, within that category, a particularly prominent position is held by Glasgow writing.

The literary importance of this city goes back to Alasdair Gray, writer and artist, and the novel *Lanark: A Life in Four Books*, his ambitious 1981 debut and magnum opus, which took almost thirty years to complete, and which, in his own words, was meant to contain everything he knew ("The Art of Fiction"). The text, whose publication marks the beginning of the so-called new Scottish renaissance, a pre-devolution, politically-engaged revival of Scottish literature—is made up of two parts. One is a semi-autobiographical bildungsroman, based on Gray's own childhood and youth, and carrying echoes of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; the other is a dark dystopian fantasy portraying a hellish alternative version of the protagonist's city, where he arrives having no memory of who he is, following his apparent suicide. Above all, however, it is a novel of and about Glasgow, Gray's home city, which evolves throughout the narrative, along with the changing perspective of the main character. First shown just before the outbreak of WWII, when Duncan Thaw—the protagonist—is a five-year-old boy, it subsequently becomes the primary subject for his intense imagination, as he grows into a teenager and then a young, tortured artist, consumed by his creative vision.

If one were to identify the most famous passage from *Lanark*, it would have to be the fragment in which Gray—via his protagonist—offers a self-mocking diagnosis on why no one notices that "Glasgow is a magnificent city"; the reason is that "nobody imagines living [there]," argues Duncan and then explains further: "if a city hasn't been used by an artist not even its inhabitants live there imaginatively" (*Lanark* 243). This excerpt is so widely quoted in Scottish studies that it has perhaps become slightly trite, but the very overuse is also a testament to its validity and enduring impact, as well as to Glasgow's critical significance for *Lanark* and for Scottish literature at large. In the novel, the city is not just a setting—it is the subject and the vehicle of a profoundly socially-minded treatise on the state of the country. At the same time, through *Lanark*'s evocative rendition of the urban landscape, Gray did single-handedly rediscover Glasgow and place it on the literary map.

Furthermore, as previously noted, *Lanark* is also the starting point of a crucial period in Scottish writing: the new Scottish renaissance, marked by profound explorations of the question of identity¹—national, cultural, linguistic—as well as significant social and political engagement of its writers in the period leading up to devolution. This (trans)formative role of late 20th-century Scottish prose has been confirmed by numerous scholars

¹ While we obviously cannot propose such a notion as a singular, universal Scottish identity, I am using this phrase (as well as the analogous Scottish self) as an umbrella term, meant to encompass all the different versions of what it may mean to be Scottish.

(Craig; Brown and Riach; Hames; and others). What I postulate and hope to demonstrate, however, is that the status of this new renaissance fiction as mostly urban, conjoining the city and the Scottish self, is by no means coincidental.² The argument is certainly reinforced when one considers the work of another seminal author of this literary period, and Gray's friend, James Kelman.

For a long time, Kelman was the only Scot to have won the Booker Prize. He received the award in 1994, for *How Late It Was, How Late*, the story of Sammy Samuels, a working-class but mostly unemployed Glaswegian who wakes up in the street after a bout of heavy drinking, with no memory of what happened. Soon, he loses his eyesight after a beating by plainclothes police officers (whom he deliberately provokes). As a result, he has to get his bearings in this new situation and rediscover the previously familiar city now suddenly made strange, all the while making his way through a Kafkaesque world of absurd bureaucracy as he tries to register his disability. Crucially, Kelman's novel takes the form of an interior monologue, happening in the mind, and in the voice, of its blind protagonist. This narrative technique merges urban space with language, exploring the fundamental link between the two.

Thus, Kelman reaffirms the city as a linguistic space as much as a material one, which ties in with the fact that, to him, it is language that constitutes the primary vehicle of identity—of the self and the nation. This sentiment is evocatively expressed in his essay "Elitism and English Literature, Speaking as a Writer," where he details his early experiences with literature and his failure to find protagonists who sounded like him. Consequently, as a writer, Kelman unrelentingly strives for the authenticity of his working-class voice, seeking to redress the balance of power between Scotland and England.

Obviously, Kelman's is but one take on the link between the Scottish voice, or rather voices, and Glasgow. While it has certainly been formative, with numerous authors citing him as an inspiration and a precursor (including Douglas Stuart, another writer explored in this article), the city has different voices and different faces, many of which have come to the fore through its literature since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament at the turn of the 21st century. These include Suhayl Saadi, whose 2003 novel *Psychoraag*, using the voice trope and taking a Scots-Pakistani radio host for a protagonist, mixes Glaswegian with elements of Urdu, Arabic, and Gaelic; or Anne Donovan, whose *Buddha Da* (2003) is written in Scots, but also features the voices of an Indian family.

² I offer a broader discussion of such intersections in my article "The Self and the City in Modern Scottish Fiction."

What emerges from these works is a multilingual and multicultural urban landscape, aligning the Glasgow novel with the prevalent discourse on the linguistic nature of large, globalised metropolitan centres. However, while in no way discounting the importance of that side of the city, what I seek to argue and focus on is that, already at its core, Glasgow is linguistically complicated, fluid, and contradictory. This naturally has to do with Scotland's linguistic make-up. Even when we subtract Gaelic, which has a limited presence in the city, being mostly restricted to the Western Isles,³ we are left with a continuum which has Standard Scottish English at one end and Scots at the other. There are three problems here that destabilise the Scottish sense of (linguistic) identity. One is that it can be unclear, even for its speakers, if Scots is actually a language or rather a dialect of English.⁴ Another is that Scottish speakers are not only widely dispersed along the spectrum, but also tend to move around, shifting their position depending on the situation or environment in which they find themselves. The city is certainly a territory where such linguistic fluidity is bound to occur in concentrated form compared to rural areas, simply by virtue of the greater variety of social and professional contexts which it offers. The third problem has to do with English—while remaining Scotland's main language, it is also one that many Scots reject, turning it into a site of tension. This makes for a complex predicament that is, again, perhaps best reflected by the country's literature, with novelists often writing *against* the language they write *in*.

MOVING FORWARD, LOOKING BACK— THE GLASGOW NOVEL IN THE 21ST CENTURY

In the wake of devolution and the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, the sense of literary commitment to "the Scottish cause" may be said to have waned somewhat, and the writing, including the Glasgow novel, has begun to evolve in different and varied directions. Nevertheless, the influence of Gray and Kelman is an enduring one, and some Glaswegian writers can be seen to follow the path connected to the tradition of the

³ According to Claire Nance, Glasgow is home to 10% of Scotland's 65,000 Gaelic-speaking population (qtd. in "Evolution of 'Glasgow Gaelic'"). While Nance notes that it is "the highest concentration of speakers of the language outside the Western Isles" (ibid.), it is still a very modest number when compared to over 635,000 people living in Glasgow City ("GCHSCP Demographics and Needs Profile").

⁴ While Scots is officially recognised as a language, its similarity to English and the lack of a written standard cause many to dispute this categorisation. For a discussion of the arguments offered by both sides, see for instance McArthur.

pre-devolution revival. Of those, two prominent examples are Denise Mina and Douglas Stuart.

In general, when discussing the kind of Glasgow writing that can be linked to Gray's and Kelman's perspectives, it could be argued that 21st-century urban explorations of national and cultural selfhood tend to follow two main (distinct but often converging) trajectories. On the one hand, we have the focus on the material make-up of the city—an attempt to render in writing the actual urban space, showing materiality to be a physical manifestation and determinant of history, politics, society, and culture. On the other, we have the preoccupation with Glasgow as a linguistic territory. The task of recording the city as both a setting and a spatial manifestation of the realities of contemporary Scottish urban life has been perhaps most prominently undertaken by the writers of so-called Tartan Noir, i.e. crime fiction focused on gauging the “state of the nation” through narratives that seek to shed the tag of strictly popular writing and be classified as literature proper. The genre, while sharing affinities with Gray's mapping of the city, in fact goes further back, to William McIlvanney and his 1977 novel *Laidlaw*—set, (not) coincidentally, in Glasgow—and it has been a prominent literary presence ever since. It is considered by many, including some of its authors, to be the quintessential Scottish genre of today—the kind of writing that best grasps what being an (urban) Scot is about. Tartan Noir boasts a wide range of authors, such as Ian Rankin, Val McDermid, and Chris Brookmyre. However, in the specific context of Glasgow writing, the author to focus on is Denise Mina. She is one of the most significant contemporary writers of Scottish “literary” crime fiction, but—as demonstrated by her Garnethill, Paddy Meehan, and Alex Morrow series, along with her intriguing true crime offering *The Long Drop*—she is primarily a writer of Glasgow (as indicated by the first series actually being named after a Glasgow area). All of Mina's Glaswegian narratives draw an evocative picture of the urban landscape, mapping its different parts and, perhaps most importantly, showing how they are inextricably linked with the social and cultural dynamics defining the lives of their inhabitants.

Regarding the literary descendants to Kelman's language-oriented perspective on the urban, one prominent figure to discuss is Douglas Stuart, who himself identifies *How Late It Was, How Late* as a direct inspiration for his own work (“Interview”), and who has also followed in Kelman's footsteps by becoming the only other Scot to win the Booker Prize, which he received in 2020 for *Shuggie Bain*. The novel is a poignant portrait of the titular character, a sensitive gay boy, and his family—but again, just as importantly, of 1980s Glasgow. For Stuart, as for Kelman, the life and identity of the city are predominantly about the voice, or, in

the former's case, voices, as Shuggie's journey from young childhood to early teenage years corresponds with moving through the city's different areas and accompanying vernaculars. Stuart conceptualises the spoken language as both a social marker and a tool of selfhood, with Shuggie's mother, Agnes, the crucial formative figure in the protagonist's life, instilling in her youngest child the importance of speaking "correctly," as representative of, and conducive to, a higher standing. This notion is eloquently evoked by the scene in which Agnes admonishes her son for improper pronunciation:

"Howse aboots some light entertainment?" he asked, mimicking some nonsense from the telly. Agnes flinched. With her painted nails she cupped his face and squeezed his dimples gently. She pushed until the boy's bottom lip protruded. "Ab-oww-t," she corrected. "Ab-OU-t." He liked the feeling of her hands on his face, and he cocked his head slightly and baited her. "Ab-ooo-t." Agnes frowned. She took her index finger and pushed it into his mouth, hooking his lower teeth. She gently pulled his jaw open, and held it down. "There's no need to sink to their level, Hugh. Try it again." With her finger in his mouth, Shuggie pronounced it correctly if not clearly. It had the round, proper oww sound that she liked. Agnes nodded her approval and let go of his lip. (Stuart, *Shuggie* 51–52)

It is not just the correcting itself that is indicative of what is at work here—Agnes's actions are powerfully reinforced by her rhetoric of "sinking to their level," "them" being the low social stratum of Glaswegians. This concept of language as a crucial social determinant is further emphasised when Agnes and her children are moved by Shug, Shuggie's father, from the house of Agnes's parents and then abandoned by him in Pithead, a poverty-stricken mining area. Upon meeting her new neighbours, Agnes immediately distances herself from them verbally:

"Ye movin' in?" said a woman from the door beyond her own. The woman's blond hair curled back on dark brown roots. It made her look like she had on a child's wig.

"Yes."

"All of yeese?" asked the woman.

"Yes. My family and I," corrected Agnes. She introduced herself and held out her hand. (100)

This demeanour is met with mockery, which intensifies when Shuggie makes a comment in front of the new neighbours and is promptly labelled "Liberace" because of his way of speaking (100). Language thus becomes a source of, and a stage for, social tensions and conflict.

What all the above-discussed novels reveal is a notion of Glasgow as a site which encapsulates the essence of Scottish selfhood not only by showing itself to be its natural receptacle (as any urban centre is for its society), but also by being affected by the same mechanisms, shifts, and dissonances. In this way, the largest city in Scotland, known to be a multicultural, globalised area, paradoxically proves to be also highly local, and consequently “small.” In the inherent ambiguity of this metropolitan space, the Scottish national and cultural *I*, with all its internal conflict and troubled relationship with England and English (the language of the other and, concurrently, of the self), finds its reflection, and its home, making the city the natural site for what Scott Hames calls “the staging of ‘Scottishness’” (2). The linguistic predicament which we witness here seems to add a new, meaningful dimension to Sherry Simon’s “sensation of living among competing codes” (*Montreal* 218). Cronin and Simon rightly deem all cities “multilingual” and “translational” (Simon, *Cities in Translation*; Cronin and Simon), but in the case of Glasgow, apart from the natural and obvious presence of immigrant communities, the notion of linguistic plurality takes on another meaning, involving many versions of one language. This inevitably has important implications for its translation.

GLASGOW AS A “TRANSLATION ZONE”— THE URBAN AND THE POSTCOLONIAL

Having tentatively established what Glasgow is to its writers, it is time to explore how this image and idea of the city translates into other languages, and specifically into Polish. Scottish fiction hardly matches the status of English writing in terms of presence and visibility on the Polish market—this is perhaps best exemplified by the fact that *Lanark*, widely considered the most important Scottish novel of the 20th century, remains unpublished in Poland, despite having been translated into German, French, Spanish, Catalan, Italian, Portuguese, Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish, Czech, Lithuanian, Bulgarian, Romanian, Turkish, and Russian. Nevertheless, the last two decades have seen some Polish interest in Scottish fiction, extending to the works of several authors invoked in this article: McIlvanney, Rankin, McDermid, and—crucially for our purposes—Kelman, Mina, and Stuart.

How much, then, does this culture- and language-infused urban landscape that we find in the novels of the latter three retain and reveal of itself in translation? A particularly interesting point of reference here seems to be Maria Tymoczko’s exploration of postcolonial writing as analogous to, or even synonymous with, translation. With Tymoczko’s research on the subject relying heavily on Irish literature, it is arguably not

much of a leap to extend her line of reasoning to the Scottish context. The issue of viewing Scotland through a postcolonial lens has been repeatedly addressed by scholars (Gardiner; Gardiner, MacDonald, and O'Gallagher; Schoene; Lehner; Connell; Homberg-Schramm), who generally conclude that the country cannot be regarded as postcolonial since it was not invaded by England and was in fact complicit in actual colonisation as part of the British Empire. However, if we consider the problem not in historical or political terms, but purely as a characteristic of a certain cultural dynamic that Ireland and Scotland seem to share—a matter of striving for a distinct sense of self against the common dominant other—this becomes a very useful framework for a discussion of Scottish literature. It seems worthwhile to go by the sentiments of the authors themselves, and these certainly encourage employing postcolonial discourse. One example would be the famous quote from Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*, in which Renton proclaims that "[Scots] are colonised by wankers" (78); another—the rhetoric habitually employed by Kelman, who argues that "[o]ne shorthand definition of assimilation is somebody who denies their culture. And a shorthand definition of Britain is Greater England; somebody who is content to be labelled a 'Brit' is a Greater Englander" ("Elitism" 59).

In her article "Postcolonial Writing and Literary Translation," Tymoczko explores the parallels between translation and postcolonial fiction, demonstrating that the two types of literary production are shaped by the same preconceptions and mechanisms. Thus, both are subject to intercultural and interlingual mediation; both translate entire cultures, but must also be selective and decide which cultural elements to convey and which to forgo; both face the choice of whether to bring the text closer to the target reader or bring them closer to the text; both are shaped by norms and patronage; both are often annotated with peritextual commentary and employ innovative and experimental measures. Then, in "Translations of Themselves: The Contours of Postcolonial Fictions," Tymoczko argues that postcolonial texts *are* in fact a form of translation and, using the example of Joyce, offers a broad discussion of their inherent bilingualism. "As 'translations,'" Tymoczko posits, "postcolonial texts are communicative agents with powerful resonances, having the capacity to mediate between languages and cultures in radical and empowering ways" ("Translations" 148).

How do these intersections figure into the discussion of Glasgow as a quintessential Scottish territory, a site where the country's complex cultural and linguistic situation comes to light? It would appear that (much of) what Tymoczko says about the nature of postcolonial literature and/as translation is equally applicable to the space of the city as a site of culture, language, and national selfhood. The city—this city—becomes

another version of a “translation zone” (Cronin and Simon), where the Scottish self constantly negotiates its own identity, being not “either-or,” but always both—both distinct and non-distinct, both part (culturally, linguistically) of “Greater England,” and not. Concurrently, it is also a translation zone, since the way it opens itself up to, and simultaneously resists, comprehension (in the way any foreign city does) mirrors the very mechanisms of translation. Furthermore, seeing and reading it in translational terms allows us to capture its essence through “border’ and ‘in-between thinking” (Bachmann-Medick 187). Tymoczko states that she draws her parallels and analogies because these produce meaningful insights into postcolonial writing and interlingual translation. Arguably, this dyad could be expanded into a triad, with all three components—the city, Scottish selfhood, and translation—converging and shedding light on one another.

DENISE MINA’S GLASGOW NOIR BY HANNA PAWLIKOWSKA-GANNON AND MACIEJ ŚWIERKOCKI

Of Mina’s many Glasgow novels, only the three-part Paddy Meehan series, comprising *The Field of Blood*, *The Dead Hour*, and *The Last Breath*, has been rendered in Polish, with the first book translated by Hanna Pawlikowska-Gannon and the other two by Maciej Świerkocki. Set in the 1980s and 90s,⁵ the novels revolve around Paddy Meehan, a young woman from an impoverished Irish-Catholic family trying to become an investigative journalist (and subsequently being one). With her, we explore the width and breadth of Glasgow, from the seedy corners to the glossy parts. The way Mina depicts the materiality of the city appears to mirror its contrary internal dynamics.

On the one hand, then, she fills her narratives with names of streets, buildings, institutions, and areas in a way that simultaneously materialises the space of the city and closes it off to readers unfamiliar with that landscape. Let us consider the following passage from *The Field of Blood*: “They passed through the Gorbals and the blazing lights of the damp Hutchie E housing scheme, past the edge of Glasgow Green and Shawfield Stadium dog track and on through Rutherglen. By the time they arrived at Eastfield the snow was at least an inch deep” (71). This bare listing of place names, which Pawlikowska-Gannon preserves in her translation,

⁵ This certainly seems to reinforce the notion of Mina and Stuart following the new renaissance tradition—both writers actually set their works in that very period.

offering no contextualisation (*Pole* 74–75), renders the described route in cartographic detail without telling us anything about it.

On the other hand, however, Mina just as often contextualises the urban space in a manner that does let the foreign reader in. This is mostly achieved in two ways: the first has to do with evocative renditions of the described locations that speak to the imagination and allow us to see the landscape, as in this passage: "The Drygate flats looked like lost American tourists. Painted and peeling Miami pink, they were topped with jaunty little Frank Lloyd Wright hats and banded with balconies. The designer had overlooked the setting: a brutally windy Glaswegian hillside facing the Great Eastern Hotel, a soot-blackened doss house for drunk men" (*Field* 153). The other way, in turn, puts Mina's novels firmly in Tymoczko's "translations-of-themselves" territory, by offering contextualisation that would be redundant to a local. For instance, in *The Dead Hour*, we learn that Paddy and her driver "were in Bearsden, a wealthy suburb to the north of the city, all leafy roads and large houses with grass moats to keep the neighbors distant" (1). Interestingly, Świerkocki goes a little further with the contextualisation, calling Bearsden "zamożn[e] miasteczko, a właściwie północn[e] przedmieście Glasgow" ("a wealthy town or, to be more precise, a northern suburb of Glasgow," translation mine; *Godzina* 9).

In general, Hanna Pawlikowska-Gannon and Świerkocki both seem to follow Mina's lead, sometimes keeping the depicted landscape closed off, other times bringing it closer to the target reader. In the *hermetic* passages—due to our general shared knowledge of the city as a universal concept, based on common urban principles and denominators—when an unfamiliar street name is invoked, we can visualise a street, but not the street in question. When the novels list buildings, institutions, or neighbourhoods, none of them are alien to the point of inconceivability, but none are familiar, either. This is precisely the dynamic of experiencing a foreign city, reflected in the translation.

Pawlikowska-Gannon further evokes this in-betweenness by varying her translation choices. For instance, she uses literal translation to render "Saltmarket" as "Rynek Solny" (*Pole* 62) or "Kennedy Street"—in one instance—as "Ulic[a] Kennedy'ego" (63), but then retains it as "Kennedy Street" in other places (155, 161, 163), as well as preserving "the Clyde" as just that, "Clyde" (63, 203), with no indication that it is a river rather than, say, a district of Glasgow. Nor—as previously noted—does she offer any contextualisation when dealing with other place names, such as Eastfield or Rutherglen, leaving other street names untranslated: Gallowflat Street, Queen Street, etc. Świerkocki clearly favours transference, preserving "Glasgow Benevolent Society" (*Godzina* 84) or the recurrent "Easterhouse Law Centre," and "Rutherglen Main Street," but he does translate "the

Clyde” into “rzeka Clyde” (“the River Clyde”) in those places where Mina herself omits the word “river.”

As for the language of her characters, Mina uses dialectal markings sparingly—so sparingly that at first glance, and especially compared to the works of Kelman or Stuart, her writing may actually seem linguistically neutral. In fact, however, when these markings do occur, their presence is highly ideological. The novels certainly engage with the social dimensions of language, especially in the context of belonging to a certain community and the conjunction of voice and identity. Paddy Meehan often reads people not so much based on what they say as on how they say it, and she herself adopts certain linguistic poses to stress her social and cultural background or, conversely, to hide it. These dialectal shifts, together with the consistent use of typical Scots words such as “aye,” “ye,” “wee,” or “lassie,” are foundational in terms of what and who these novels are about.

In this context, both Polish translators resort primarily to neutralisation and occasional colloquialisation.⁶ Thus, most of the “ayes” become standard “yeses” (with the exception of Świerkocki’s rather subversive use of “owszem,” a more formal word that would translate back into “indeed”); the “wees” are consistently rendered as “mały/a,” a standard word for “small,” which, arguably, largely misses the point of the Scottish “wee-ness” and often simply does not work in the target text; the “lassies” become the unmarked “dziewczyn[y]” (“girls”) (with the exception of Pawlikowska-Gannon’s surprising use of “dziewucha” [*Pole* 16]—a markedly pejorative term), while “Ya wee bissom!” (*Breath* 77) turns into a standardised “Ach, ty mały łobuziak!” (“You little rascal!”, translation mine; *Tchmienie* 97). That said, the culture-specific items in these novels are so numerous—and these *are* preserved in the translations—that both translators likely decided that the Scottishness carries across regardless of what was or was not done with the linguistic marking. While understandable, the problem with such a perspective is that it erases the whole fundamental concept of Scottish voice as Scottish identity.

JAMES KELMAN’S VOICE OF GLASGOW BY JOLANTA KOZAK

Even though, as previously indicated, Kelman’s *How Late It Was, How Late* won the 1994 Booker Prize (which typically entails swift translation into several languages, including Polish), it took no fewer than seventeen years

⁶ I am drawing here on Leszek Berezowski’s classification of strategies used in the translation of dialects.

for the novel to be published in Poland. The translation, by the prominent and celebrated Jolanta Kozak, received very little attention in the press or from readers, and the few reviews that were published focused more on Kozak's skill in rendering the colloquial, working-class vernacular of Sammy Samuels than on the fact that Kelman's work is, by many accounts, one of the most important Glasgow novels of the 20th century.

The narrative, imbued with the voice of its protagonist, perfectly epitomises what Cronin and Simon call "the sensory landscape" of the city, as by removing the one sense that most consider primary in the context of experiencing an urban landscape, namely sight, Sammy, and the reader with him, is left with experiencing it through the remaining senses, especially touch and hearing. The former is evocatively rendered in a passage in which we suddenly return to the very elementary materiality of the urban space, as the now blind protagonist first rediscovers the suddenly estranged streets as tangible structures and textures:

There was the steps. He poked his foot forwards to the right and to the left jesu christ man that's fine, to the right and to the left, okay, fucking doing it ye're doing it; okay; down the steps sideways and turning right, his hands along the wall, step by step, reminding ye of that patacake game ye play when ye're a wean, slapping yer hands on top of each other then speeding it up. (Kelman, *How Late* 33)

This *sense* of the city naturally lends itself to translation, as Sammy's experience is highly uncanny, but at the same time just as conceivable through its elementality, and may not seem culture- or place-specific. As an auditory landscape, too, the city becomes a compilation of various familiar sounds—the "roaring" traffic (54), which becomes "ogłuszający" ("deafening") in the translation (*Jak późno* 62), the "mutter mutter" (*How Late* 41, 54) of passersby, effectively rendered in Polish as an onomatopoeic "mrumrumru" (*Jak późno* 48, 62), "the punt of a football" (*How Late* 77) being kicked by local boys, translated into "odgłos kopania piłki" ("the sound of a football being kicked," translation mine; *Jak późno* 85)—all of which, arguably, can be heard just as well by the target reader.

The same can be said of the social dimension of Sammy's urban experience, as the absurdity of the protagonist's encounters with "the system" when he is trying to register his disability is something a Polish target reader may easily grasp. While the institutions that Kelman seeks to critique are obviously Scottish, their failings may be viewed as a relatively universal phenomenon. Moreover, although Sammy faces some complications that have to do with his language, the issue is with the register, which is again something that can be successfully conveyed

in the target text. This is demonstrated by the following passage, in which Sammy is interviewed by the police and the officer taking his statement demands: “Don’t use the word ‘cunts’ again, it doesn’t fit in the computer” (*How Late* 160). Kozak renders this in Polish as “Proszę nie używać więcej słowa ‘chuj’, komputer je odrzuca” (“Sir, don’t use the word ‘dick’ again, the computer rejects it,” translation mine; *Jak późno* 160), which may not be quite as amusing as the word not fitting in the computer, but preserves the general linguistic dynamic and politics of the scene.

However, there is the matter of Sammy’s Glaswegian vernacular, which, as previously established, is of primary significance to Kelman himself, and, arguably, of primary significance for this novel’s rendition of Glasgow—after all, *this* is the main sound of the city, both for the protagonist, whose urban experience is filtered through and rendered in his (mostly inner) voice, and, naturally, for the reader. Thus, while the narrative’s depiction of this urban space universalises it and gives us a sense of the city that is stripped down to its basics, at the same time, through the vehicle of Sammy’s voice, this account takes us back to the specificity of the place, which, despite or in its elementality, also becomes completely personal. Let us consider the following passage: “He was near the centre of the town; that was where he was. He was alright. Just a couple of more roads. This first yin then the next yin and maybe another yin, afore the big yin, the bridge, and once over the bridge, / that was him” (*How Late* 55). The depiction of Sammy’s route is both general in its omission of any actual street names, and specific, due to his Glaswegian vernacular. In Kozak’s translation, however, Sammy speaks in highly colloquial and vulgar Polish (thus matching the source text),⁷ but one which is dialectally and phonetically unmarked. Consequently, the elementality filtered through his distinctly Scottish consciousness and voice goes back to being just elemental, the experience of Glasgow becoming an experience of a city, as the abovementioned couple of streets become the non-specific and standard “ta pierwsza, następna i następna, i może jeszcze jedna przed tamtą główną. . .” (*Jak późno* 62).

The translation met with approval from Aniela Korzeniowska, a scholar specialising in Scottish literature, including Kelman’s oeuvre. In her article on the subject, Korzeniowska concluded that Kozak had made the right choice by not attempting to account for the Scottishness of Kelman’s speech. Indeed, although the decision does erase the dialectal specificity of the novel, it can be justified on an ideological level: after all, Kelman’s novel makes Sammy’s Glaswegian voice the predominant one—this is

⁷ This particular journey, for instance, is called “a fucking nightmare” (*How Late* 55), which Kozak translates into “najgorszy kurwa koszmar” (*Jak późno* 63).

nearly the only voice we hear. As such, it occupies a position of power—no longer the other, it has been relocated to the centre. Consequently, it could be argued that Kozak's decision was not due to a lack of better options, but actually a deliberate move. If, following Kelman's own reasoning, his vernacular is to be recognised as equal in standing to standard English, then it only makes sense to translate it as you would any *standard* language. The problem with this interpretation, however, is that Kelman advocates for the Scottish voice to be both made equal *and* recognised as distinct. Here, this latter aspect clearly gets lost in (the) translation.

Overall, then, although Kelman's narrative is, in obvious ways, vastly different from Mina's novels, they do prove to share the same space—not just the same city, but the same set of concerns: the actual lived experience of the urban, the social entanglements, and the city as language. Moreover, these intersections seem to confirm the meaningful interplay of Glasgow, Scottish selfhood, and translation, with the latter here, too, revealing an urban landscape that both lends itself to, and resists, transfer into another culture.

DOUGLAS STUART'S LANGUAGE MAP BY KRZYSZTOF CIEŚLIK

As we have established, for Stuart, as for Kelman, the portrayal of his home city is all—or at least primarily—about the authentic Glaswegian voice(s). Unlike *How Late It Was, How Late*, however, *Shuggie Bain* boasts an array of speakers whose diversity testifies not only to their individual identities, but also, as previously indicated by the excerpts featuring Shuggie's mother, their social status and interrelations. This dialectal differentiation, especially when restricted to dialogue and contrasted with standard-English narration, could hardly have been left unaccounted for in translation. Indeed, Krzysztof Cieślik put considerable effort into conveying the markedness of the novel's voices. Additionally, and helpfully, he contextualised his choices via an epitext (Genette) in the form of an extensive interview, in which he discussed his approach and process. Thus, we learn that the translator sees the novel's characters as speaking differently depending on which part of Glasgow they are from and how poor they are; he also notes that, for instance, the language, or languages, of Agnes, Shuggie's mother, are conditioned by "how drunk she is, whom she is talking to, and whether she is furious" ("jak bardzo jest pijana, z kim rozmawia i czy jest wściekła," translation mine; Cieślik).

Cieślik chooses to render this plurality in highly colloquial Polish embellished with lexical, syntactical, and phonetic regionalisms, but not

belonging to any specific dialect. That said, the translation does rely more on Silesian than any other variety, which Cieřlik justifies by pointing out that much of the novel involves a mining community, and Silesia is the mining region of Poland. By his own admission, his general aim is to offer a credible, convincing mix, created intuitively rather than methodically, and one that represents what the book would sound like if it had originally been written in Polish (Cieřlik). It should be noted, however, that this mix does not amount to a total, comprehensive linguistic vision, but deals more in signalling the markedness.

Thus, the voice of Mr Darling—the first character with whom Shuggie interacts in the novel, and who in the source text uses the Glasgow vernacular, saying: “Ah jist chapped to see if ye were around the day?” (Stuart, *Shuggie* 13)—in Cieřlik’s rendition reads as “vaguely rural”: “Tak ęem włařnie zapukał, coby sprawdzić, czyřs dzisiej na miejscu” (*Shuggie* [translated by Cieřlik] 21), with “ęem,” “coby,” and “dzisiej” all testifying to its regional character. As the narrative progresses, we encounter inhabitants of various parts of the city whose voices range from standard English to Scots, as in the case of the cab driver Shug’s passenger asking: “Dae ye ken the Rangers bar on Duke Street?,” which he then follows up with another question: “Did ye see the game the day, son?” (*Shuggie* 40). In the translation, both utterances contain Silesian markers: “Znasz ty bar Rangersów przy Duke Street?” (*Shuggie* [translated by Cieřlik] 52) and “Mecz ęeřs dziřs widzioł, synek?” (53).

What seems curious is that Cieřlik’s reliance on Silesian, while potentially understandable in the “Pithead” part of the narrative, set in a fictional mining scheme, is in fact apparent throughout the novel. This is especially striking in the “East End” section, the East End being where Agnes and Shuggie move in an attempt to leave behind their life among the mining community and start afresh. When Shuggie goes to his new school and a teacher, who by Stuart’s own description “spoke with a very loud Glaswegian accent,” says in the original: “Right, shut yer faces, youse lot. Let’s go fur the record and then youse kin all get back to talking aboot earrings and perms an’ that” (*Shuggie* 378), in the translation that teacher, too, speaks Silesian: “Dobra, zawręć mi tu gymby, ale juę. Przelecimy listę, a potem se możecie na powrót goďać o kolczykach, trwałych i takich tam” (*Shuggie* [translated by Cieřlik] 458).

Beyond the consistent recurrence of these markers, Cieřlik holds true to his proclaimed agenda, offering a heterogeneous rendering of the novel’s voices, sometimes neutralising them, sometimes introducing dialectal markers where there are none in the source text. On the one hand, such deliberate variation on the translator’s part likely makes the narrative more readable than it would have been had Cieřlik committed to a consistent

linguistic vision. On the other, it means that we are reading this language, or languages, as if in inverted commas, unable to immerse ourselves in the novel's voices completely.

Finally, all these voices are inherently linked with specific parts of the city, evocatively rendered by both Stuart and Cieřlik. Stuart paints a detailed picture of these different landscapes, occasionally offering specific topographical information, but predominantly relying on creating a sense of place through vivid imagery. As such, from Shug's night shift in his cab, we learn that the drive from Sighthill

. . . was like a descent into the heart of the Victorian darkness. The closer you got to the river, the lowest part of the city, the more the real Glasgow opened up to you. There were hidden nightclubs tucked under shadowy railway arches, and blacked-out windowless pubs where old men and women sat on sunny days in a sweaty, pungent purgatory. (*Shuggie* 38)

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Pithead, in turn, is shown to be made up of "three or four streets that . . . branched horizontally off th[e] main road. Low-roofed houses, square and squat, huddled in neat rows," accompanied by "identical patchy garden[s] . . . dissected by the identical criss-crossing of white washing lines and grey washing poles" and "surrounded by the peaty marshland," some of it "blackened and slagged in the search for coal" (94). Then, "after the isolation of the slag hills," the East End is pictured as "a thriving hub of life," "lined with thick sandstone buildings" and filled with all sorts of shops and other amenities (373). Such views, visually and emotionally evocative yet unladen with hermetic cultural or historical detail, carry naturally into Polish, offering the target reader a sense of the different topographies of 1980s Glasgow.

Overall, what we find in Cieřlik's rendition is a vivid portrayal of the city within which, arguably, the primary role is played by its linguistic make-up, one that is strongly marked, sometimes unpredictable, somewhat familiar, but certainly not recognisable as specifically Scottish, nor necessarily urban. The effect is curious, as it appears to subvert the very concepts of domestication and foreignisation by showing them to be deeply subjective. Whether we consider Stuart's Glasgow domesticated in the translation because of Cieřlik's use of a mixture of existing Polish vernaculars, or whether we view it as foreignised because these familiar elements are made strange by their unexpected juxtaposition and recontextualisation in an urban setting seems very much a matter of one's personal response to the translated voices. While in the source text, the city and the language are inextricably and naturally conjoined—a conjunction that forms their shared identity—translation complicates this connection, yet also proves that it is necessary. If we are to *see* this landscape and read it as Glasgow, we

must accept the voices of its inhabitants as representative of that particular space. And perhaps, against the odds, we just might—by virtue of their being validated by the Glasgow setting.

CONCLUSION

It would seem that translating Glasgow, this “small and great city” (McIlvanney 197), is very much like the entity in question—complex, layered, partly familiar, partly strange, allowing us to understand and, at the same time, setting strict limits to that understanding. In that, it evocatively reveals the fundamental paradox of Scottish selfhood (in all its plurality) as viewed in the context of the country’s cultural relationship with England. Cronin and Simon postulate that “translation can be considered a key to understanding urban life” (119). What, hopefully, emerges from this discussion is that depictions of urban—Glaswegian—life can also be the key to understanding Scotland and the mechanisms of its translation.

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Lumpenbroletariat among the Polystyrene Butterflies: On Robert Rybicki's *The Squatters' Gift* (*Dar Meneli*) as Poetic Travelogue

ABSTRACT

Dar Meneli (*The Squatters' Gift*)—a collection by Polish poet Robert Rybicki, a self-proclaimed *happener*—is a poetic travelogue through numerous languages and locales, both real and imaginary. His peripatetic poems pass through—and sometimes squat in—numerous, often industrial cities, including Gliwice, Wrocław, Poznań, Prague, Vienna, Bratislava, Rybnik, Kraków, Warsaw, Toruń, Gdańsk, Świnoujście, and Lublin. Written over a five-year period in which Rybicki was intermittently squatting or engaging in collective action, *Dar Meneli* excavates syllable and song, mind and muck, to invent a transnational dialogic poetry pointedly unapologetic, where Greek mythology intersects with 1980s Polish punk music, poetic string theory, time travel, and psychedelic dumpster diving. An inheritor of 20th-century European avant-garde poets Miron Białoszewski, Paul Celan, and Tristan Tzara, Rybicki works at the border between performance and (language) disruptions. Understandably, his poetry presents an array of translational challenges, ranging from acrobatic multilingualism to implosive neologisms. Drawing from my own experiences as a translator of Robert Rybicki's work, this article has three aims: first, to outline Joan Retallack's concept of "the poethical wager"; secondly, to consider how Retallack's "poethics" can open a pathway to transposing poetics to a translation practice (and to translating Rybicki in particular), a practice modeled after what Jerzy Jarniewicz has termed the "legislator-translator"; and thirdly, to demonstrate that what Sherry Simon terms the "translation zone" is a distinguishing feature of Rybicki's multilingual poetics in his collection *The Squatters' Gift*.

Keywords: Polish poetry, translation studies, travelogue, contemporary poetry.



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RADICALLY ALTERED GEOMETRIES OF ATTENTION

In her book *The Poethical Wager*, Joan Retallack asks: "What is implied about the forms with which we attempt to make meaning of our experience?" (82). Drawing from my own experiences (and implications) as a translator of Robert Rybicki's work, this article has three aims: first, to outline the concept of "the poethical wager"; secondly, to consider how Retallack's "poethics" can open a pathway to transposing poetics to a translation practice, and to translating Rybicki in particular; and thirdly, to demonstrate that what Sherry Simon terms the "translation zone" is a distinguishing feature of Rybicki's multilingual poetics in his collection *The Squatters' Gift*.

Across a decades-long career, Joan Retallack has found both creative fuel and renewal in what she describes as the "swerves [of life]—sometimes gentle, often violent out-of-the-blue motions that cut obliquely across material and conceptual logics" (1). These "swerves" constitute part of a broader theoretical framework that Retallack has termed "the poethical wager." This concept grows out of John Cage's pioneering work on aleatoric operations—the myriad ways in which chance and unpredictability can result in innovative creative output—and is based playfully on the hedging of Pascal's famous wager: the existence of God and an afterlife is here substituted with the existence of readers, publishers, and a connection with other people. The term "poethics," which combines *poetics* with *ethics* and *ethos*, is understood here as a moral imperative. After all, "[e]very poetics is a consequential form of life. Any making of forms out of language (*poesis*) is a practice with a discernible character (*ethos*) [and] values are an inextricable dimension of all human behavior" (Retallack 11). While Retallack's poethics looks to embrace unpredictability as a matter of principle, she also cautions against systemic rigidity: "Ethical analysis that foregrounds isolated acts of individual will always fail when real life floods in and muddies the logic" (24). For Retallack, innovators such as John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, Galileo, Benoit Mandelbrot, or Gertrude Stein are enlivening not only because of their desire to push their respective fields forward, but precisely because they offer "new ways of conceiving the relation between the discipline and the extradisciplinary experience, new recognitions of the degree to which these projects are complicated by their positions in multiple intersecting and overlapping sociopolitical and cultural constellations" (27). As will be discussed later, these "intersecting and overlapping sociopolitical and cultural constellations" are similarly applicable to Sherry Simon's "translation zone" and Robert Rybicki's poetics.

Embracing the uncertainty of life, the risks and lurches of new experiences or forms of expression, can—as Retallack notes—provoke “an unsettling transfiguration of once-familiar terrain [which tends] to produce disorientation, even estrangement, by radically altering geometries of attention” (1). However, engaging in the act or process of translation can also be seen as a “geometr[y] of attention,” and, in the case of Robert Rybicki’s poetry, an attention “radically alter[ed].” Thus, Retallack’s “poethics” offered me a helpful way of embracing the difficulty inherent in Rybicki’s poetry.

When John O’Brien, the founder of Dalkey Archive Press, approached me with a keen interest in publishing a contemporary Polish writer in my translation, I did not have a ready project, nor an immediate book or writer in mind. It was only after a series of conversations that we agreed that translating Rybicki’s *Dar Meneli* was a fitting project for the press’s catalogue. Those conversations highlighted various aspects of Rybicki’s poetics: his unwillingness to adhere to any particular poetic style, mode, or form; his penchant for flouting literary politeness; and his restless multilingual desire to acrobatically shift registers or languages, sometimes operating between half a dozen languages within a few lines. My unfamiliarity with more than half the languages that Rybicki can casually deploy, along with the dizzying formal variety, left me far outside my comfort zone. Yet Retallack’s poethics provided me equal parts insight and encouragement to embrace translating Rybicki: “Complexity—the network of indeterminacies it spawns—is the condition of our freedom. That freedom, insofar as it is exercised as imaginative agency, thrives in long-term projects . . . that reconfigure patterns of thought and imagination” (82). In other words, from the point of view of translation, the fact that Rybicki’s work is highly resistant to a prescriptive methodology can be a liberating force for unpredictable creativity rather than an obstacle. The knowledge that the translator is certain to encounter what Retallack would call “many swerves” which must be navigated “with as much responsible awareness as possible” (3) meant approaching each poem in Rybicki’s book with openness, relinquishing preconceived ideas about how a poem or translation might operate. The translator—like any reader of Rybicki—unavoidably confronts the unknown, be it through different languages, registers, or modes of discourse, such as deformed syntax or flurries of neologisms, as well as the realities of the publishing market. The “poetical wager” which I had to make as a translator of Rybicki was that—given the myriad difficulties of the numerous languages, some of which are unknown to me and far outside my previous translational experiences, plus the forms he deploys—I could even arrive at creating effective (primarily) English-language versions of his poetry, which could then find support in the Anglophone publishing sphere.

A JOURNEY AROUND THE STATION(S)

Born in Rybnik, Poland in 1976, Robert “Ryba” Rybicki is a one-person cosmopolis and, over the past two decades, his status within his native Poland has grown to near-mythic proportions. A self-described “happener,” Rybicki creates poetic events as he works at the intersection of performance and disruption, theatricality and confrontation, a practice that harks back to figures such as Rolf Brinkmann, Tadeusz Kantor, and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (“Witkacy”). The prolific Rybicki’s *Dar Meneli* (*The Squatters’ Gift*) can be described as a poetic travelogue through numerous languages and locales, both real and imaginary. Like poetic pioneers Miron Białoszewski, Paul Celan, and Tristan Tzara, Rybicki excavates syllable and song, mind and muck, to invent a transnational poetry that is attuned to the history of the European avant-garde poetics of the previous century and the affects of radical deformations of syntax. In fact, Rybicki explicitly acknowledges that his work is indebted to—or, in fact, extends—these traditions, as witness his well-known 2016 essay “Awangarda Poetycka w Polsce 100 lat po dadzie Tzary” (“The Poetic Avant-garde in Poland 100 Years after Tzara’s Dada”) and the title of one of the sections in *The Squatters’ Gift*, i.e. “Immediate Opening: A New Tristan Tzara.”

Like Rybicki himself, the poems in *The Squatters’ Gift* are peripatetic, passing through—and sometimes conscientiously squatting in—cities such as Gliwice, Wrocław, Poznań, Prague, Vienna, Bratislava, Rybnik, Kraków, Warsaw, Toruń, Gdańsk, Świnoujście, and Lublin. Just as the speakers shift locales, so do the poems’ subjects and forms, and while Rybicki writes primarily in Polish (albeit a Polish buttressed with many neologisms or idiosyncratic syntax), throughout the book he freely uses Czech, English, French, German, Spanish, Slovak, and Silesian. Moreover, it is worth considering the unique origins of Rybicki’s volume. The first edition of his book was not, as one might expect, published in Poland, but in the Czech Republic—as the dually-titled and bilingual *Dar lůzrů/ Dar Meneli*—by Protimluv, an Ostrava-based publishing house, in 2014. The first (primarily) Polish edition of the book did not appear until 2017, although it was expanded in comparison to the original Czech edition. In other words, from its very beginning, Rybicki’s book was migratory, not limited to any clearly delineated national or linguistic borders. Indeed, his poetics can be characterized as what Sherry Simon has termed a “translation zone,” with “spaces defined by a relentless to-and-fro of language, by an acute consciousness of translational relationships, and by the kinds of polymorphous translation practices characteristic of multilingual milieus” (“The Translation Zones” 181). Thus, situating itself as bilingual (and proliferating linguistically from there), the book begins as dialogic and is

informed by a volley of cities and languages, their “relentless to-and-fro.” If, as Pennycook and Otsuji argue, “[t]he city is always a site of struggle” (100–01), for Rybicki that struggle can be seen in his various languages—even including graffiti or the nonhuman, for example, in “POETRY LESSON (the singing of Czech birds)”—mirroring the speaker’s migration, socioeconomic precarity, and anarcho-activism.

The spatially dispersed, flowing, or layered lines of “The shots will disappear,” the poem which opens *The Squatters’ Gift*, might bring to mind a sort of vagabond Jack Gladney from Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, wandering the supermarket aisles in a consumerist haze: “The supermarket / melts / like a chocolate bar: / a dendrite stack” (3).¹ Where DeLillo presents Gladney seeking refuge in the comforts of ritualized shopping as a kind of mediation on late capitalism, Rybicki expands the vector into the multilingual and multidimensional, Greek mythology intersecting with 1980s Polish punk music, poetic string theory, time travel, wanderlust, and psychedelic dumpster diving. After all, “[p]oetry’s / the mathematics of / an inaccessible / dimension” (11). This poem presented me with the first foray into the unpredictable, confronting me with a series of decisions about how to translate segments in a language other than Polish, or whether to translate them at all. In this case, Rybicki deploys a series of parenthetical Czech words—*namorzniak*, *chorobopis*, and *wzducholot*—which, given the geographic proximity, Polish readers might track as both somewhat familiar and peculiar. Considering translation as “a palette of mobile practices of translingual inscription” (Malinowski 58), I chose to render those parts in Spanish—*un marinero*, *historial médico*, and *el dirigible*—aiming for how American English-speakers often brush up against Spanish in their day-to-day lives.

Privileging unpredictability, especially as it pertains to creativity and translation, helps one, as Retallack puts it, to “operate in an atmosphere of uncertainty, that gives us the courage to forge on, to launch our hopes into the unknown—the future—by engaging positively with otherness and unintelligibility” (22). The poet and critic Adam Wiedemann suggests that it is as if Rybicki began each poem “at the zero point of poetry” and continued “without respecting sacred literary rules and especially ‘culture’” (qtd. in Woźniak, translation mine). This “zero point” informed my reading and translation of Rybicki, allowing me to experience the myriad forms and languages without trying for systematic, categorical translation solutions. (In other words, just because non-Polish segments in one poem might be translated into Spanish, as was the case in “The shots will disappear,” I did

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Robert Rybicki will be from *The Squatters’ Gift*.

not feel this was a rule that needed to be applied throughout.) Not unlike American poet Michael Palmer—who regularly deploys paradoxes and oxymorons in his poetry—Rybicki is animated by contradictory impulses, continuously toggling between the epistemic and the somatic: “Thought clamps the body / like a barrel rim” (9). These competing energies allow Rybicki at one moment to offer a poem that stylistically recalls Czesław Miłosz—in “Footnote to Karasek,”² two friends reminisce over a cheap bottle of wine and the speaker wistfully concludes that “the heavens aren’t silent / if you have them in you” (70)—only to shift in the next poem, “illuminobjects,” to a parody of Frank O’Hara’s penchant for enthusiastic proclamations:

let every word be a revelation!
let it be beautiful like shitting under a tree,
& fucking squatting down & not
on this disgusting can. Who
will forbid me, who will tell me what to do? (71)

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Rybicki’s speaker embodies the sort of iconoclasm reminiscent of Peter Handke’s play *Offending the Audience*.³ Criticizing the esteemed Polish literary journal *Literatura na Świecie*—whose editors have been impacted by the New York School poets and have brought the likes of O’Hara, Ashbery, and Schuyler into Polish translation—Rybicki declares, “they think intensively about New Yorkers! / And I’m sitting who knows where? O’Hara’s shmara, / shmara & samara!” and “Get lost, Calvin Klein!” (71). The frustration or anger vented by Rybicki’s speaker raises “the question of the agency of poetry in the face of the economic crisis of the previous decade *expressis verbis* after his return from emigration”—querying what poetries get read, celebrated, or translated, and perhaps the inequalities inherent in such dynamics (Glosowitz 277, translation mine). Moreover, it speaks to a different kind of “relentless to-and-fro”: namely, the dominance of New York as a city in the social imaginary. After four decades, the impact of Ashbery and O’Hara’s on Polish poetry is still being felt today; perhaps even with the breadth of formal and geographical migration at play in Rybicki’s poetry, New York cannot be escaped and is somehow always a (perhaps unwelcome) resident in his translation zone.

² Krzysztof Karasek (b. 1937), Polish poet and public figure based in Warsaw.

³ Written by Austrian Nobel-Prize winning author Peter Handke, *Offending the Audience* (*Publikumsbeschimpfung* in German) is a 1966 play—sometimes called an “anti-play” or “non-play”—in which the primary aim is to implode the conventions of theatricality by eradicating the so-called *fourth wall* with a torrent of ironic and acerbic speech acts directed explicitly at the audience for the duration of the performance.

In many respects, the poem “APPLEMA” is typical of this volume, populated as it is with English, German, Spanish, and Silesian along with Rybicki’s idiosyncratic Polish. The title is a trimming of the word “apple man” (“jabłczarz” in Polish), which when abridged becomes a mysterious word that sounds like a cross between a hum and a curse, pushed out of pursed lips. The poem opens with bellowing bodily pains (“Heart rampage! / The sciatic nerve / like holy smoke!”) and then suddenly pivots to a multilingual, inter-species act of literary dialogue:

FOR
 a tausend years
 we’ll set up a journal
 CARRÁMBA
 and publish
 interviews with doggies & mousies
 en el lenguaje de perro
 y el lenguaje de ratón
 squeak squeak
 woof woof
 CARRÁMBA
 será la última palabra
 en el mundo
 muchas matas
 el lenguaje de plantas
 el lenguaje de bacterias
 BACTERIAN (49)

Rybicki takes as his starting point for the imagined literary journal a slightly misspelled interjection from Spanish (“¡Ay, caramba!”), a place where “doggies & mousies” can be interviewed, elevating the languages of plants or bacteria within a temporal frame of a millennium, the peculiarly emphatic “FOR/a tausend years.” Considering that controversial figures from Poland’s Communist regime (such as former Polish president Wojciech Jaruzelski and Czesław Kiszczak, the head of the secret police) appear in other parts of the volume, activities such as the imagined literary journal “CARRÁMBA”—like the migratory squatting—can be seen in the context of the samizdat, the underground, largely urban initiative opposing repressive political forces. Moreover, the visual layering of the poem provides a sense of architecture, as if glimpsing a segment of skyline; as Pennycook and Otsuji suggest, “layers are not about the mere overlapping of texts on flat surfaces; rather, they need to be seen in terms of sedimented activities and practices that are still in motion” (139). For Rybicki, such movement is tracked in language; in the envisioned poetic future, “we / shall visit each other in our homes / for which no one will want anything from us / we’ll happily prepare warm

meals" (49–50). The poem concludes with acts of generosity and empathy, providing both literal and metaphorical sustenance and shelter, but presumes throughout that the contours of such a place will be shaped by a continually multilingual volley. Such poetic practices can be informed by what Carol Gilligan describes as ethics of care: to quote from Retallack again, "[t]he same global and space information technologies that are disembarassing us of the illusion of other as absence are schooling us in multidirectional coincidence (a pattern, coincidentally, related to Carol Gilligan's web image of characteristic female thinking) as a connective principle at least as forceful as monodirectional (hierarchical) cause-effect" (114).

A similarly anti-neoliberal and anti-neocolonial imperative energizes the work of Korean-American poet and translator Don Mee Choi, who regards our languages as intertwined not only with our lives and struggles, but also with histories of imperialism, colonialism, militarism, and expanding economic ties (18–19), which adds a deeper temporal dimension to the translation zone. Choi's position proved a helpful lens for both understanding and translating Rybicki. During the five years of working on *The Squatters' Gift*, he was, in fact, deliberately squatting, conscientiously taking part in collective action. As a poetic translation zone, Rybicki's work is then, by its very nature, tendentious and nomadic. In a conversation with scholar Monika Glosowicz and poet Dawid Kujawa, published as "Rzygi Stardust" (the title alludes to David Bowie's famed gender-bending character, translated here into genre-bending and economic precarity, with "rzygi" as slang for "puke"), Rybicki declares: "Poetry needs to be taken out of school to become a forbidden fruit, and then it will taste different" (translation mine). In this context, his poetry can reflect how, as Simon argues, "both translation and hybridity are alternatives to ideas of assimilation (loss of identity) and multiculturalism (the multiplication of discreet and separate identities). Both translation and hybridity emphasize the disjunctive and provisional nature of affiliation, taking the form of interlingual or mixed expression" ("Hybridity and Translation" 51).

Such “mixed expression” is at its fullest in “HAPPYDADA,” a multilingual vortex, building off of Hugo Ball’s sound poetry and its incantatory childlike improvisation. Rather than leveraging an invented language like Ball, however, Rybicki mixes a plethora of languages even within a single line:

gdy anoda i katoda nic nam nie doda,
gdy nada się na nic nie nada
und null mit nuddeln in moon,
pagoda i dynamiczny skun,
skok in school, skeptic kung-fu in typhoon,
und simpsons on screen
w doktryn (42)

Or:

No-one knows how it grows,
frazofrenik z fraktalem frędzla fryzury Freuda,
ale fala z woala à la Aal im Allee (42)

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Loosely translated, this “phrasophrenic with Freud’s fringed hair” rides a wave (“fala”) of hybridity, practicing “kung-fu in [a] typhoon” even if, roughly translated, it amounts to “a whole lot of nothing on the moon.” The shifts between languages are so swift and numerous as to be acrobatic, with no particular language given primacy. After all, as the speaker states: “nomada gada dada” (42). For Polish speakers, “nomada gada dada” would be basically intelligible, roughly understood as “the nomad talkie dada.” For English speakers, the phrasing is still relatively traceable but could also bring to mind the hard rock band Iron Butterfly’s 1968 song, “In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida.”

Since, as Malinowski argues, “translating is not just a textual/literary process between source and target, but an ethical and cultural one that draws upon the person of the translator, pushing them to find a third, separate space beyond the assumed binarisms of the field” (60), I had to consider what, if anything, could or should be translated in “HAPPY DADA.” As a result, the poem is the only one in the book that remains unchanged. Importantly, however, “HAPPY DADA” is placed in the center of the collection, akin to a town square: it is the poem that the reader works toward, and then springs out of, the most energetic demonstration of the translation zone characteristic of Rybicki’s poetics. If a key feature of a translation zone is what Simon describes as “a relentless to-and-fro of language,” for Rybicki that to-and-fro is fueled by multilingual sonic play, where the sound qualities of a word like “skok” (“jump” or “leap” in Polish) can alliteratively hop to the English word “school,” only to flip into “skeptic kung-fu.” Similarly, “und simpsons on screen / w doktryn” skips from German to English to Polish, offering the soft rhyme of “on screen” with the Polish “w doktryn” (“doctrines”). In “Rzygi Stardust,” Rybicki notes that, by using six different languages in “HAPPY DADA,” “I deprived myself of the dictates of my mother tongue, which is a liberation from my own culture, and in the poem ‘POETRY LESSON (the singing of Czech birds),’ . . . there is not a single human word in the course of the lyric.”

As Rybicki’s speakers migrate to various hybrid forms of language, locale, or subjectivity, the reader takes on that itinerary, navigating the poetic centrifugal force:

The Squatters’ Gift allows you to look at the fundamental contradiction driving Rybicki’s work: extreme individualism collides with social

empathy, radical skepticism and situational ethics with the community spirit and leftist sensitivity. Gorgias meets Christ, Socrates—Jacek Kuroń. Poems, whose arena is the poetic “I” . . . also become attempts to elevate linguistic foundations for a new interpersonal reality. Sophisticated poetic paradoxes are not stairs up to a literary Olympus, but in the opposite direction—because the direction towards clarity and purity turns out to be down. (Woźniak, translation mine)

The poetic paradoxes that Woźniak highlights are also visible in Rybicki's crossing from exteriority to interiority, both linguistically and formally, as he continually tests new poetic configurations. From the explosively open-field poetics in poems such as “The shots will disappear,” “Dunk sans bunk,” or the six-page long poem “I WOKE UP” that concludes the book, he offers the sharp contrast of extraordinarily compressed lyrical poems that prominently feature negated or double-negated, neologistic portmanteaux—sometimes a dozen or more in number—like in “PREPOEM ON GIGIPOESIE” or the opening section of the four-part “MAN, SPEECH & IMPOTENCE”:

Mothness. Unspokement. A block.
It's an unbreakon lan. Break

yoursell. Yell. Where's he
fromm. An unvile

tongue unobtained from the viscera,
ununfound, flashy, fleshy,
reckless in the extracts from its nature,
feckless in the descriptions of the blind,
though kind, inclined and refined;

in the prosody of perdition
in the music of martyrdom,

secretly give yourself
an answer. Without experti. (15–16)

The portmanteaux have the gravitational pull of black holes, causing the poem to sputter and stagger in the mouth and on the page, and then slingshot forward, to be truncated mid-flight. “Unspokement” acts as a neologistic oxymoron; “yoursell”—a transactional self that transforms, via implosion, into “Yell.” The poem then gains momentum with a string of rhymes and assonances: “flashy,” “fleshy,” “reckless” and “feckless,” along with “blind,” “kind,” “inclined,” and “refined.” If any insights are offered,

they remain secret ones that are abruptly trimmed (or perhaps sloughed off into a Latinate plural): “Without experti.” Such gestures might recall the work of Białoszewski or Celan, among others, since Rybicki’s poetics is fundamentally informed by an imperative to extend various forms of 20th-century avant-garde writing. As he explains in the aforementioned essay (“Awangarda Poetycka”), he sees the innovative and the avant-garde as

the liberation of the poem from the bindings of speech, from rigid formulas, canons, permanent inter-sensory relationships; it is dynamic in every part of itself, like the engine of a car. The avant-garde poem trembles and vibrates: it’s not only a creation, but creates a new mimesis, a new sensitivity to stimuli. The great advantage of the avant-garde lies in the fact that it broadens the spectrum of poetic experience. (translation mine)

That “new sensitivity to stimuli” or “spectrum of poetic experience” is broadened in numerous ways throughout his book, but in just the second section of “MAN, SPEECH & IMPOTENCE,” Rybicki demonstrates how quickly he changes forms:

Towers,
spires,
chimneys, sky
scrapers.

Concrete,
brick,
walls
of glass.

Ten-story
apartment buildings.

At the feet
& from up high. (16)

The distinctive linguistic compression from the first section of the poem, replete with neologisms, negative prefixes, and a propulsive rhythm, gives way to a profound minimalism enacted as urban architecture, a linguistic landscape made from the skyward structures of spires and chimneys, coupled with both a bird’s-eye view and ground-level perspective. Such idiosyncrasies of Rybicki’s poetic syntax—whether in the original Polish or in English (and other languages)—demonstrate, as Glosowitz argues, that “subjectivity itself is collective, not naively relational, not so much based on

an existentialistically-framed community of experience, but on the proximity of systemic conditions between different subjects" (275, translation mine).

As both speaker and reader move through the book, that movement and travel are mirrored in the content of the poems as well as in their grammar and syntax. "JOURNEY AROUND THE STATION" opens with:

A drop on the needle, but
something like the crack of a board against the cobbles &
the laughter of three girls
on a soundless walk as

vitrified snow &
lumpenbroletariat

among the polystyrene butterflies
& files of memory dumps system errors
& dream like dawn:

not only the stomach & liver
are hungry. The arms are hungry. (24)

Gone are the hyper-compressed neologisms, peculiar compound nouns, or poetic structures from "MAN, SPEECH & IMPO'TENCE." Instead, we navigate different irregular stanzaic shapes to track the "laughter of three girls / on a soundless walk," although it is unclear, syntactically, who is walking soundlessly—the girls or the speaker? We are forced to pivot to the "vitrified snow," and then the neologistic "lumpenbroletariat." In the original Polish version, the phrase is *lumpensportowiec*, which carries the connotations of Karl Marx's famous *lumpenproletariat*, while *sportowiec* means "athlete" or "sportsman." When combined with "lumpen," however, the implication is more in line with the frumpy "athleisure" or perhaps football hooligans in tracksuits. Yet with so many of the poems in *The Squatters' Gift* raising the visibility of socioeconomic and urban precarity, the Marxist component of the term is important. Rather than deploy something like "athleisure" or "tracksuitors"—the latter of which carried pleasant assonance that could reinforce a sense of movement within the poem—"lumpenbroletariat" offered a solution that preserved the Marx allusion while pointing to the problematic aspects of a sporty "bro culture." Considering that Rybicki's poems are reflective "not of crystallized views or fortified . . . religious dogmas . . . but a free-thinking spirit, usually condemned to (and for) vagrancy" (Woźniak, translation mine), it was helpful to keep in mind the figures being described in these poems, while allowing for translational flexibility to navigate the ever-shifting borders of his poetic cartography.

I got double-fucking-dragoned in Bratislava
& was going to Vienna with a black eye,
with an idea on how to spell Lviv's ł
(ll) & I thought:

En route from Bratislava to Vienna for a hopeful encounter with the poet Oswald Egger (long associated with the latter city), the speaker gets assaulted and leaves with a black eye as an unwanted souvenir. Yet, amazingly, afterwards he ponders the creative minutiae of language: “an idea on how to spell Lviv’s l / (ll).” Combining “l” with the Polish “l” is perhaps a reverberation of the shifting borders of the city of Lviv, once part of Poland (now located in western Ukraine; Lviv was also the birthplace of Zbigniew Herbert, a Polish poet widely recognized in the Anglophone sphere). However, even in the midst of bodily harm, the volley of languages is nothing if not relentless, continually migrating within the translation zone of one language/culture reacting to another, one line or phrase resounding and proliferating, one Rybicki poem transforming into the next.

The “unsettling transfiguration[s]” which Retallack welcomes as a key feature of her poethical wager and the embrace of unpredictability are also implied in Jerzy Jarniewicz’s legislator-translator model. In his influential essay “The Translator as the Creator of the Canon,” Jarniewicz outlines the characteristics of what he identifies as “but two of the most interesting species” of translator, the *ambassador* and the *legislator*. While the ambassador brings into the target language a spate of widely regarded masterpieces from the source language and culture, the aims of the legislator are decidedly more personal:

This type of translator realizes that each translation becomes a fact of the literature of the language to which they translate. . . . For such a translator, the hierarchies, rankings or lists existing abroad do not matter in the least. They choose the texts for translation by themselves, guided not by the fact that they are representative for the culture from which they originate, but because their translation may enter into a *creative dialogue with the native literature*, offering it new paradigms, new languages, and new criteria. The translator of the second species establishes a new artistic law for their native literature (and if they happen to be authors, also for their own writing). (Jarniewicz, emphasis mine)

In Jarniewicz's view, the legislator-translator is one who privileges interpersonal relationships over the "pecking order" and may eschew deference to decorum or critical authority. Furthermore, like Rybicki—who, one might add, has no qualms dispensing with decorum—poetry translators have existed within the margins of the sharing economy (and long before we even had the term *sharing economy*, frankly). As Jarniewicz reminds us, poetry translators, unlike prose translators, frequently labor at their own risk and according to their own prerogatives. While publishers choose prose for translation (and the laws of the marketplace often cater to readers' tastes), translators *choose* poetry, often on the basis of personal interests and tastes (Jarniewicz). Lawrence Venuti goes even further, emphasizing a clear benefit to translating poetry: "[R]eleased from the constraint to turn a profit, poetry translation is more likely to encourage experimental strategies that can reveal what is unique about translation as a linguistic and cultural practice" (174). Rybicki's socioeconomic urban precarity perhaps similarly allows for his work to be "released from the constraint to turn a profit" (unless profit is understood as a form of contact) and, at the very least, does not punish a poetics of translation zones. Working outside of the more transactional dynamic of source-to-target language under contract or commission, a great deal of contemporary poetry translation is, to use Jarniewicz's term (presumably alluding to Shelley), *legislated* into existence by the translator's efforts, built upon an empathetic relationship between translator and poet and/or poem, and a desire for that poetry to be rendered visible to readers in the target language. Moreover, the potential increase in visibility and readership which translation can generate may be considerably greater than in the source language, particularly when the target language is used as widely as English.

Jarniewicz asserts that our view of foreign literature is primarily framed by translators, not literary critics or historians. Outside of the native country or culture, its canonical literature relies almost entirely upon what translations of those works exist and are accessible (Jarniewicz).

For his part, Rybicki also “legislates” the wider visibility of poets such as Oswald Egger and Rolf Brinkmann—with the poems “HUNTING FOR OSWALD EGGER” and “EXCERPTS FROM BRINKMANN,” respectively—in Poland and beyond, while his poetic translation zone is populated with numerous other literary figures, including Polish poets Tadeusz Różewicz and Krzysztof Karasek, Czech poet and publisher Petr Motyl, and the central figure of Dadaism, Romanian poet Tristan Tzara. If Retallack’s poethics generates enthusiasm for the unknown that one may encounter in a translation zone and serves as an entryway into translating Rybicki, Jarniewicz’s legislator-translator provides a model for the results of such efforts. Given these individuated prerogatives and what Jarniewicz describes as the “creative dialogue” these translations espouse, such energies can be seen as quintessential for legislating the poetic translation zone which Rybicki’s work inhabits.

One such quintessential example of the convergence between Retallack’s poethics and Jarniewicz’s legislator model can be seen in my translation of Rybicki’s poem “To Swallow a Shadow—” (“JEŚĆ CIEN—” in Polish). The poem begins:

To Swallow a Shadow—
 these words are
 nothing more than
 tobacco specks
 on a sheet of paper
 (a mouth full of skeletons);
 me, out of my head,
 like a ball rolling towards the pocket. (32)

Initially, when I encountered the line “pustostan pełno szkieletów,” I erroneously saw the word “pustostan” (a squat or vacant apartment) as “buzia” (mouth) and translated the line as “a mouth full of skeletons.” This almost certainly had to do with the fact that my child was using the word “buzia” quite often, so that word was at the front of my mind. With a poem called “To Swallow a Shadow—” my mind was primed to see a connection to an open mouth, as if seeing the body part was a kind of psychological afterimage.

Naturally, when revising the manuscript and with book proofs, I had the opportunity to change the line. Yet I did not. Why? In part, because I viewed the “error” of my (mis)reading as an opportunity for reflection and the embrace of unpredictability. A mouth can be seen as an emptying space, as the termination point of a river, or simply a space that expels words or sounds. The surrealistic image of “a mouth full of skeletons” echoed

parts of other poems within *The Squatters' Gift*; also, the psychoacoustics of the line in aggregate felt right in spirit, if not in literal sense. As Simon argues,

[t]he translator emerges as a full participant in the stories of modernity that are enacted across urban space—modernity understood as an awareness of the plurality of codes, a thinking with and through translation, a continual testing of the limits of expression. Translators are *flâneurs* of a special sort, adding language as another layer of dissonance to the clash of histories and narratives on offer in the streets and passageways. (*Cities* 6)

While Rybicki's speaker might be squatting in a building emblematic of urban decay, I would argue, again echoing Retallack, that his "ability to play, that is, engage with the material world outside our minds via the active imagination, is our way of participating in the real" (25–26). Given the myriad shifts in form, style, diction, and tone, in addition to the book's iconoclasm, surely the translator has some room (pun intended) for a bit of creative mischief.

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Rybicki's anti-dogmatic formal approach (Zajac)—the sheer scope of linguistic modes and locales—echoes Retallack's call to proactively involve oneself in "otherness and unintelligibility" with "robustly nuanced reasonableness," and a similar kind of conscientiousness and intrepidity is needed from the translator of such work. In doing so, legislator-translators *à la* Jarniewicz can act as an invaluable countermeasure to the growing currents of nationalism, tribalism, and the myriad forms of xenophobia. As Simon argues,

[t]he intense transactions of the translation zone put pressure on the idea that the transfer of ideas occurs between a "foreign" source text and a "local" target readership. In the spaces of borderlands or nodal cities, members of diverse cultures are neighbours and share a single territory. This means that the frames of language exchange must be recast to respond to more subtle understandings of the relation between language, territory and identity. ("The Translation Zones" 183)

Rybicki and his poems are "always somewhere else, perpetually on the road," whether it is Silesia, Slovakia, Austria or outer space, and "only the pilgrim traces of someone who has just left remain" (Rojek, translation

mine). An engagement with poetry so replete with neologisms and phrasal volleys can be, at turns, disorienting and liberating. However, as Retallack reminds us: “Forms that move the imagination out of bounds toward pungent transgressions, piquant unintelligibilities intrude into our tangible surroundings. They maintain an irritating presence, pleasurable or not, as radically unfinished thought. They give the reader real work to do” (48). The vibrant, tendentiously multilingual poetic translation zone which Rybicki inhabits—whether in an abandoned stadium or a cobblestoned alleyway, imagining the geometry of the Big Bang or pondering the nuances of the alphabet after being assaulted in transit—adds friction to any static notion of “foreign” sources or “local” targets. Moreover, if “Rybicki learns from book to book to live with himself as a multitude” (Glosowicz 265, translation mine), such a Whitmanesque expansiveness is not limited to the subject matter or the poetic modes of voice and address, but also includes a crowd of languages and architectures, even encroaching on the nonhuman with his use of birdsong. In the same way that Venuti speaks of hearing different “Englishes” growing up (Ray), Rybicki’s “Polishes” are an evolving zone of languages. These poems can change locations, languages, and layouts at breakneck speed, or else the speaker can slow down to marvel at polygons or puke. Consequently, the translator of Rybicki’s work not only needs to be attuned to the unpredictable, in Retallack’s terms, but to welcome it, as well as legislate, per Jarniewicz, and migrate his work into the target language(s). Richard Buckminster Fuller once wrote: “We’re all astronauts on a little spaceship called Earth” (see Charrière); Rybicki would change the scale from the interstellar to the terrestrial and retort: “The. Word. Rotates. Like. A. Tornado” (28). It is precisely within that tornado of a translation zone that the poet and translator may reside.

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“We translate in order to differ”: Kaja Gucio in Conversation with Jerzy Jarniewicz

Kaja Gucio: For some years now we have been seeing—and, dare I say, enjoying—an unprecedented interest in translators and translation as such. No longer invisible, translators have their names printed on book covers alongside the authors; they are invited to discuss their work in various media outlets, interviewed and, at least on some occasions, expected to speak on their author’s behalf, or even act as his or her representatives. While overall this new trend is quite welcome after years of essential obscurity, would you agree that it also has certain drawbacks and might bring new challenges for translators? And, while we’re at it, is this awareness of translators’ input really such a new phenomenon?

Jerzy Jarniewicz: The main new challenge that this trend poses is the need to redefine translation as such, or, though I know it may sound like a heresy, to agree that literary translation escapes definitions. If translators are now increasingly acknowledged as co-authors, it is because their work is recognised as creative and as involving similar creative activity as the author’s work. Translating a poem is in fact reinventing it, writing it again in a different language. It is for this reason that I have been campaigning to have the translators’ names on book covers: not to gratify them, but to make readers aware of whose words they are going to read. It is they—translators—who are responsible for the text offered to their readers.

Let me remark on one more important process. The difference, once considered unproblematic, between the original and the translated work, is now being questioned and problematised. It may sound surprising to some of us, but let me remind you that many of the so-called originals are already translations, versions, imitations (is Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* really an original text?), or that there are cases when the original does not exist, as



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with *Ulysses*: Joyce left us with many texts which can be called originals of his most famous work—a serious ongoing problem for editors.

Is it a new phenomenon? Yes, indeed it is. We have left, I hope for good, the days when translation was defined by such terms as “subordinate,” “secondary,” “derivative.” Gone are the times when we used to read literature in translation, ignoring the fact that we are reading a translation produced by a specific person responsible for it. Quite recently the Polish Association of Literary Translators launched a campaign that reminds readers that “Shakespeare did not write in Polish.”

KG: With such an extensive body of works under your authorial and translatorial belt, so to speak, you occupy a somewhat unique position in the literary field—both the translator and the translated. I am of course interested in your views on other people’s translations of your own texts, but before we discuss that, I’d like to ask if you see any overlap between these two professions. Is the AUTHOR in you always separate from the TRANSLATOR? Or perhaps there is some overlap, technical or otherwise, in how you approach existing texts that need to be rendered into Polish, carved out of the original material, and those that you, as the author, conjure up from (apparent) nothingness and summon into being?

JJ: It is not so that as the author I conjure up “from nothingness”: this nothingness is most certainly apparent. You cannot write a sonnet without a debt to Petrarch, nor can you write a novel that would not owe something to Cervantes. Literature has no beginning, no zero point, no matter how radical you as an author may be. There is always someone behind you. So, to come closer to your question, the author in me is not separated from the translator. As an author I am aware that I build my sentences in a way defined and tested during my work as a translator. As a translator I allow myself a great amount of liberty—in lexical and syntactic choices, in the kind of music I create—that would be characteristic of an author’s work. A critic commenting on my translations of Adrienne Rich’s poetry noticed that I often use Polish in a way that I use it in my own poems, without subverting Rich’s poetics. And the other way round: there were critics who detected in my verse the impact of English-language poets whose works I had translated. It’s a two-way traffic.

KG: To me, a translator is a reader, first and foremost, and it is their grasp of the essence of the text, both source and target, that makes the translation a success (or a spectacular failure, as the case might be). I do not, by any means, believe that we should follow the original to the letter, even if such a feat were possible; I do however think that there are limits

to the translator's freedom—out of loyalty to the text itself rather than to the author. Much has been said about the translator's (un)faithfulness—whether significant departures from the original are a mark of true genius or rather a sign of an inflated ego, an act of usurping the author's domain. Where do you stand on the *traduttore, traditore* conundrum?

JJ: I would agree with much of what you've just said, but first let me take issue with you on a couple of things. The translator is a reader, you say. Yes, but more importantly, the translator is an interpreter, hence my reading, my translation of *Hamlet* will be different from your reading and your translation of this tragedy. Which leads me to question the concept of "the text's essence"—is there such a thing as the text's essence? An aspect of primary importance as to which all readers would agree? If there is such a thing, then it must be something banal, which does not pose any real challenge to the translator. It is not the dubious "generally agreed-upon essence," but the difference that makes two or more translations of the same work meaningful. If we have twenty translations of *Hamlet*, it is because translators see this "essence" somewhere else, as something different. Translation itself is a matter of difference—it never produces the exact copy of the source text, hence what makes it worth pursuing is the kind, the quality, and the quantity of differences. Let me put it bluntly: we translate in order to differ. And it is the difference which we eulogise.

I would also contest your claim that we should be loyal to the text itself rather than to the author. Not because I think otherwise—what would loyalty to Homer mean?—but because I feel that my loyalty binds me primarily with the language of translation. If I feel that a given text is worth translating and if I translate it, it is not because of the loyalty to that text, but because I believe that this text may become a fruitful intervention into the target language, that it can allow me to discover the hitherto unknown or dormant possibilities of my tongue, that it will start an interesting dialogue with literary works of the target language. Otherwise, I would not see much sense in translating.

In my understanding of the process of translation, I often refer to Roman Ingarden's theory. To Ingarden, Husserl's student, the literary work, or in fact any work of art, contains within itself areas of indeterminateness, or "lacunae in definition." While reading and interpreting, we concretise the text, filling up its gaps, making determinate what is indeterminate in it, moving its potential elements into a state of actuality. This theory can be applied neatly to literary translation. We can see the source text as an area of potentialities, and each translation as an effect of the concretisation of these potentialities. Let me quote Ingarden himself: "[T]he concretion of the work is not only the reconstruction thanks to the activity of an

observer of what was effectively present in the work, but also a completion of the work" (40). What I find most significant here is that Ingarden makes a distinction between reconstruction and completion—the former being an objective and derivative process, the latter a more subjective and creative one. And this is indeed what happens when we translate: we *reconstruct*, but we also *complete*, which means that we expand, elaborate, specify, concretise, making each translation a unique text. In this, the translation becomes “the common product” of author and translator.

This is why significant, creative departures from the originals are neither marks of genius nor signs of inflated ego, nor acts of usurping the author’s domain. They are simply a necessity. I cannot imagine any translation of a significant literary work that might do without departures. Literature—and we are talking here about artistically valuable literary works, not about literary products—is first and foremost a journey into the possibilities of a given language. Languages differ—what is possible in one language, may not be possible in another language. You have to depart in order to translate.

KG: In that case, what liberties can (should?) a translator take?

JJ: I would not be foolish enough to define them. What liberties can novelists take? And what about the liberties that composers may enjoy? I do not think anyone would dare to answer such questions.

There are translations that we may easily call faithful, but there are others that depart from the original, sometimes radically—should we forbid them, get rid of them, cleanse the history of literature by removing such works as Ezra Pound’s translations of Sextus Propertius? Translation is an art, and as an art it allows—or requires—liberties. If these liberties are limited, it is always a sovereign decision of the translator, not of any external legislator. Someone might say that with Pound’s poem, as with Zukofsky’s version of Catullus or with Alice Oswald’s *Memorial*, we are leaving the domain of translation and moving into what should be called adaptation. My response would be to argue that adaptation is one of the many types of translation, or, more radically, that all translations of literature are by nature adaptations. Translation is not a discrete phenomenon, but a spectrum or a continuum extending from verbatim translation to free translation, which many would be happy to call adaptation. Who will be brave enough to indicate where “translation proper” ends and “free translation,” or “adaptation,” begins? And one more comment in this respect: we have no problems with calling *Moby Dick*, *Ulysses*, and *Flaubert’s Parrot* novels, though these works differ in form, and each undermines the definition of the novel we may have arrived at while reading the other two.

KG: With the ever-growing awareness of translators' existence come the ever-increasing expectations and criticisms, justified or not, from professionals and the general public alike. While it's never pleasant to be on the receiving end, critical voices are necessary; it has to be said, however, that they are getting more and more personal these days. In your experience, should we, as translators, take into account such feedback in our subsequent endeavours? Not as a means to garner others' approval, obviously, but perhaps in order to reevaluate our own choices and strategies?

JJ: I do not think that the problem with critical voices about our work is that they are getting more personal. It is rather that there are so few of them. A case in point is the new Polish translation of *Ulysses* [by Maciej Świerkocki], which garnered much response. On this occasion many articles revisited Joyce and his novel—but I have not come across any substantial text which would analyse the quality of the translation. *The new Polish "Ulysses"? Yes, let's talk about Joyce then!* One of the leading weeklies published a lengthy review of this new edition in which the reviewer, having competently discussed the significance of *Ulysses*, admitted that he had not read the new translation! It turns out that you can review a new Polish *Ulysses* without paying any attention to the fact that it is a new translation, the first after half a century, a translation polemical with the previous rendering of the novel into Polish.

KG: What is your take on the latest approach in translation analysis, namely "translator studies," where the emphasis is placed on the translator rather than the text? Are critics justified in their focus on translators' personal details and biography? Do you see value in such an interpretative perspective?

JJ: If you take it for granted, as I do, that translating literature is a creative activity, making the translator the co-author of the text, then the focus on their personal details and biographies may be justified to the same degree that it is justified in relation to "proper" authors. There are authors such as, say, George Byron, whose biographies can be an important, contextual dimension of their literary work and its interpretations. The same can be said of translators. Sometimes it helps to know who translated a particular text, and when, and where. We have, for example, inclusive or egalitarian translations of the Bible rendered by translators who associate themselves with feminism. In order to appreciate their work fully, it is helpful to know where they come from, what their ideological agenda is, why they depart from former ways of translating the Bible. Recently, in Poland, a new translation of George Orwell's essays has appeared. The

translator, Dawid Czech, identifies himself politically with the left and claims that his translations of Orwell are an attempt to rescue this writer from his former right-wing, conservative translators. Czech's goal is clearly defined, and we can now judge how effective he was in pursuing this goal. So when I read the new version of Orwell's essays, I focus on what makes these translations (supposedly) leftist: is it the more frequent use of the active voice? of everyday vocabulary? In this way, biographical details of translators, such as one's political alliance, may provide illuminating contexts for our readings, extending the frames of reference, focusing our attention on particular aspects of the text that we might otherwise neglect.

KG: Not only are you an established author yourself, but a number of your own works, both poetry and prose, have been translated. To what extent (if any) have you been involved in that process? Do you retain a sense of ownership of the translations? Not in terms of copyright, obviously, but, perhaps, "parental" responsibility?

JJ: No, I feel no need to control, nor in any way to affect translations of my work. Translations belong to the translators; they are responsible for what they do with texts. Once I have published my work, it belongs to the readers, interpreters, translators. It happened once that a poem of mine had been rendered into English with rhymes, though the original was unrhymed. My first reaction was to contest such an enterprise, but I quickly realised that this is exactly what makes literary translation—these journeys your works make between languages and cultures—worthwhile. A translated poem is always a different poem. Another translator may come and translate the poem without rhymes, but, say, with alliteration. That's the beauty of difference.

I know of writers, quite a few in fact, who would never relinquish their control over translations. What competence do they have as translators, what is their command of Polish? If Homer wanted to control Alice Oswald's reworking of *The Iliad*, we would never have *Memorial*. The situation reminds me of Samuel Beckett's plays with extremely detailed stage directions—what it leads to, this quenching of the director's initiative, is the actual waning of the theatrical potential of such plays as *Waiting for Godot*. Literature will live only if it is left to the translators.

KG: Does your experience as a translator in any way inform your own work as a poet or author? Do you think you handle the written (or spoken) word differently than someone who's never had to grapple with somebody else's text?

JJ: When I translate, I discover the potentialities of the target language, I shift its limits, I visit its territories which I haven't hitherto experienced. If it isn't what the so-called original authors are doing when they work on their own texts, then what is it? I see my translations as an extension of my work as a poet. Whatever is gained in one, contributes to the other.

Maybe this is particularly true in the case of poetry. When I look at the names of people translating poetry, the overwhelming majority are poets in their own right. An interesting phenomenon which may be invoked here is the popularity of what I call "translation-poems"—these are poems which have been inspired by the practice of translation, poems which blur the distinction between translation and the original, poems written by poets in their own right who double, often incidentally, as translators. Look at Robert Lowell's *Imitations*, which includes his translation-poems from Greek, German, French, Italian, Russian. But by no means is he the only one: I can refer you to *Tender Taxes*, Jo Shapcott's translation-poems from Rilke, or to *The Eyes*, Don Paterson's translation-poems from Machado, or to *A Double Sorrow*, Lavinia Greenlaw's translation-poem from Chaucer.

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KG: In an ideal world, we would only be working with texts that we find truly worthy of the readers' (and our own) time and attention. The reality, however, is different, to put it mildly, and only a select few can afford to be picky. Where, in your opinion, is the line that a translator should never cross when it comes to accepting an assignment? Can we be held accountable for the very choice of works we agree to translate?

JJ: This line is defined by economic necessities—translators' work is so badly paid that we can speak of scandal. Many of my colleagues, especially those at the beginning of their careers, work for next to nothing and have no opportunity to choose texts for translation. Many of them have to translate low-quality works which in private they may despise. This is not how things should be, but I would be far from blaming them. Yet in an ideal society I would expect translators to identify themselves with the texts they translate. I would like to see translation as a refined form of literary criticism which introduces us to what is most interesting in world literature. The translator's name on the cover of a book should be a recommendation for us, readers. A guarantee of high quality not only of the translator's work, but also of the text that they have decided to render into their language. I, for one, often buy books because of who translated them rather than who wrote them. It is the name of the translator that attracts my attention first.

KG: And the other way round—do you think that certain works should not be translated by certain people? I'm referring here to events such as the controversy when Marieke Lucas Rijneveld was first announced as the Dutch translator of Amanda Gorman's poems, but later resigned, after some critics argued that the job should go to someone more like the poet herself—"spoken-word artist, young, female and unapologetically Black" (Flood). I still remember my own astonishment when my translation of *The Old Man and the Sea* came out and nearly all interviewers asked what it felt like to work on Hemingway's book "as a woman." Do you think that gender, ethnicity, age, or perhaps some other characteristics should have any bearing on the choice of the translator? If so, under what circumstances? And who gets to decide?

JJ: The reasons why certain authors would refuse their permissions to translators of different gender, colour, age, ethnic group, etc., may be twofold. Behind some of these decisions are one's political views—an attempt to exclude someone perceived as an ideological opponent, a representative of a social group seen as a privileged, oppressive force. I can understand that translation rights may be granted exclusively to those with whom the author identifies himself or herself—in the name of some kind of solidarity. Why should I give permission to an established male translator when there are so many excellent, yet "invisible" female translators? Granting translation rights may be an act of intervention into an unjust social or political system. But there is also another reason: you may refuse to give your text to somebody, believing that if that person is different from you in some major aspects which you have addressed in your work, he or she will not be able to understand the emotional weight of the text well enough to render it adequately. If some authors require a particular translator on the grounds of their gender, ethnicity, age, it is their decision, which I respect. A decision which is more than a result of one's literary choices—it is often a political or ideological declaration, which any author has the right to make.

KG: This has already been discussed at length on a number of occasions, but I'm still curious if you would agree that every generation needs its own versions of literary classics. Or perhaps it is possible to produce a definitive translation, once and for all? Maciej Świerkocki's new *Ulysses* was one of the literary events of the year, as was, perhaps to an even greater degree, Anna Bańkowska's retranslation of *Anne of Green Gables*.

JJ: I would not say that every generation needs its own versions of literary classics, because to say so would be to impose on the art of translation a ridiculously rigorous rule. There may be generations which will need not

one new *Hamlet*, but three. There may be generations which will not need a new *Hamlet* at all. It is not the flow of generations that matters, but rather the evolution of the target language, the emergence of new schools of literary interpretation, or simply a fortunate instance of an exceptionally talented translator being born. In Poland a new translation of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* was recently published—the direct impulse behind it were the women's strikes and marches which in October and November 2020 spread all over the country after tougher regulations in abortion law were passed. Olga Śmiechowicz, the translator, made these events reverberate in her version of *Lysistrata*, introducing, for example, slogans from these marches. So it was not a new generation that necessitated the new translation of Aristophanes, but a political urgency: almost half a million people protesting in the streets all over Poland against what they saw as brutal curtailment of women's rights.

KG: Your own translations include a new version of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. What was it like to tackle Joyce after Zygmunt Allan's 1931 *Portret artysty z czasów młodości*? And do you think that previous translators are in any way present in your "process"?

JJ: My new translation of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was published almost a century after the novel's first Polish translation. Since that time the Polish language has undergone numerous changes. Our knowledge of Joyce's work is now incomparable to what was available to my pioneering pre-war colleague. These two reasons might be enough to understand the necessity of a new translation. But I also had my own approach to the novel, which determined my work. I saw it as a Bildungsroman, not so much of the eponymous character, but of language itself. Stephen's growing up to maturity is in fact the story of his language passing through various—nineteen—intermediary stages before reaching its autonomy. Each stage has to reach a point in which it exhausts itself, compromises itself, and needs replacement. Joyce, in my reading, has not offered us a psychological novel of development, but a work in which psychology is a correlative—or a function—of language.

KG: Do you consult older versions, compare them to your own, or perhaps avoid reading them entirely?

JJ: Working on my translation, I kept the old version away from me. I needed utter freedom from the successes and failures of my predecessor.

KG: Finally, and only if you are willing to reveal such information, of course—is there any particular work of literature that you are hoping to translate more than any other?

JJ: Having translated *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and two shorter, less known pieces by Joyce [*Finn's Hotel* and "From a Banned Writer to a Banned Singer"], I dream, but not obsessively, of translating *Ulysses*, though the chances of it are slim, as the novel has just been successfully re-translated. Maybe in twenty years I will return to this idea.

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get written each year. She reads most of them, and then translates some. A firm believer in the “*sine cat non*” principle, she lives and works under constant supervision of her cat Ciri, a highly critical and detail-orientated feline. Other than that, she does some knitting.

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LIFE/DEATH/TRAUMA



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A Hybrid Medium—Life (and Love) in John Ashbery’s Poetry

ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the form of John Ashbery’s long poems, with a view to discussing it as a vitalist formula. Ashbery continues the American romantic vitalism by bringing it close to perspectives provided by contemporary post-secular thought. In this context, Ashbery is a poet of what the Polish post-secular scholar Agata Bielik-Robson calls “life enhanced”—a position achieved by human subjectivity that becomes conscious of its immersion in materiality, while also retaining an individuating distance from the orders of nature and death. However, given Ashbery’s American transcendentalist heritage, his is a modification of the post-secular position. In it, life is a quality of the poetic medium which develops a hybrid connecting negative transcendence, essential to Bielik-Robson’s “life enhanced,” with the immanently materialist flow of experience. On one hand, Ashbery’s hybrid mediums can be associated with the immanence of the flux of experience described in William James’s concepts of “radical empiricism.” On the other, Ashbery is also a poet of negativity that disturbs the flow of immanence—a longing for completion that is a remnant of transcendentalist models informing romantic thought. The hybrid medium of Ashbery’s long poems is a form of subjective life in which the psychological complications of the transcendence-based models—skepticism or solipsism—are modified as traces of transcendence merging with the flux of experience. The result is an environment in which material life obtains resolution, while the psychological subject recognizes its connectedness to the material habitat.

Keywords: John Ashbery, life in post-secular and ecopoetic perspectives.



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“This life is lit
with all the sleep it can absorb.”

(Ashbery, “World’s End,” *And the Stars Were Shining* 28)

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Life is “legendary,” as John Ashbery says in the poem I quote above (28). We are in it, but struggle to get around it, as though we were trying to get out of our own skins and grasp ourselves, the complete shapes of our lives, and thus their meaning, from a hypothetical external vantage point. But no such perspective is available. There is an ironic circularity in this—while we never get very far in trying to name the point of life, our lives are occupied with just this very task. Our attempts to grasp the point of living fail, as the formulations they offer quickly become clichés. Paradoxically, the very passage of the failures turns out to be nourishing.

John Ashbery’s poetry delights in this irony. It collects the failures—his poems are filled with platitudes on life, not out of spite, but, on the contrary, out of care. Ashberian irony is warm, kind, but also brilliant, which is unexpected, since kindness stopped being identified with cognitive power. His poems recycle the cognitive content of used metaphors, and obtain the substance of the poetic space—nothing short of the life of the poem. As Fred Moramarco points out, “the sweeping banalities” about life receive a special treatment in Ashbery, who “embed[s] [them] in imagery of intermittent life and motion” (39), and as a result “create[s] a body of work that is ‘a living thing,’ both for him and for his readers” (38). The idea of poetic creation being a “living thing” sends us to Whitman, who famously declared: “This is no book, / Who touches this, touches a man” (611). The implied referent of Whitman’s “this” is life. It hovers between “man,” a living organism, and “book,” an object. Both organism and object are material beings, but they are matter that comes to life when “embedded” in the poetic packaging. Such is Ashbery’s reading of the vitalist American tradition that precedes him, and it is also a cue from which I take my topic. The encounters of life and the material world in Ashbery’s work call forth and delineate an enticingly evasive area. Recalcitrant to any single theoretical paradigm, this vitalist area—haunted by tensions between the external world and the mechanisms of psychology—constitutes the core preoccupation of Ashbery’s poetry.

Any claim of this sort risks ridicule. Does Ashbery’s output have a “core”? The poet himself refused to explicate the meanings or themes of his poems. Born out of variables of the New York avant-gardes, his is an unabashedly self-centered poetry of the aesthetic experience itself—of the poetic mind’s onerous task of always having to restart itself

anew. A journalist caught this mode well when she observed: "He has an indistinct, meagre notion in his head. . . . Or else his mind is blank" (MacFarquhar 87). Lack of themes is a theme in itself. "A lot of what is found in my poems gets there so that the poem may start" (Ashbery, Interview 379), as the poet himself said, in an interview granted years ago to an avid Polish reader.

A survey of Ashbery's academic reception will not grant any more centered thematic focus. Harold Bloom saw him as one of the belated *ephebes* of the romantics, laboring with, but also against, the ambiguous gifts of the "anxiety of influence" (*Anxiety* 142–46). Marjorie Perloff, an inveterate champion of the modernist experimentation resurgent in contemporary poetic dictions, enlisted him in her group of followers of "the poetics of indeterminacy," inaugurated by Rimbaud (7–13). Helen Vendler confessed how "irritating and seductive" it was for a critic like her, an advocate of central lyric traditions, to tune herself to "Ashbery's wavelength," a critical feat that "can't be willed" (130). Charles Altieri, to provide an example of a prominent critic who tried to sever Ashbery from romantic or historical avant-garde predecessors, set him, alongside painters like Jasper Johns or Robert Rauschenberg, in the project of refitting the phenomenology of mental acts for the demands of postmodernist consciousness (53–81). The thematic *foci* found in Ashbery's writing keep proliferating among younger commentators: he has been a poet located "on the outside" and "looking out" on his autobiography (Shoptaw); of the consciousness formats or "attention spans of the citizens of the age" (DuBois xiv); an evasive agent of the "unit of the book" (Vincent 22) which conjures "livable space for queer readers" (19); or, on a note that is closest to my interests, of an "invisible terrain" where poetry engages nature non-mimetically (Ross).

Another initial difficulty—what is life? In this paper I am going to treat Ashbery as a representative of vitalism that runs deep in the veins of the American Emersonian tradition. But a qualification like this sounds hopelessly broad. Is Ashbery a transcendentalist poet? What do we achieve by saying, as Harold Bloom did a long time ago, that Ashbery is a poetic son of Whitman and Stevens? If Ashbery is a poet in the grand American transcendentalist lineage, what shape does this take in his creative output?

Rather than historical lineage, I am going to focus on Ashbery's form, and treat his poems, especially the textual space of his longer works, as a form of life—living spaces fleshing out the vitalistic processes and flows as they traverse indeterminate spaces between inorganic matter, bodies, and thought. By focusing on Ashbery's poetic medium, I intend to present him as a poet of life, a specific understanding of this concept, one theorized in the messianic variety of post-secular thought, which in Ashbery's case adds a new chapter to the Whitmanian line of

vitalism. Some strands of post-secular thinking speculate about a return of religion in connection to literature, amounting even to forms of “religious awakenings” (McClure 334). However, as the Polish scholar Piotr Bogalecki has demonstrated, post-secularism is a rethinking of the legacy of various religious traditions, as they have been taken up by a diverse group of contemporary philosophers, rather than an outright declaration of the return of religion in its original form (14–21). Closer to this concept, Agata Bielik-Robson has seen post-secularism not as a “full return of the religious, with its dogmatic setting of revelation,” but as a much more nuanced search for the traces of “enhanced life” (Afterword 350), which is a form of unfulfilled messianism, a promise of genuine *exodus* from the dominant orders of being—nature and death—as a result of which life comes fully to its own right, transcending any ontologically closed order (353). When it does that, life is revealed as a feature of a singular human subjectivity, coming to terms with its embodied and final form, enjoying its individuation from the realm of nature (358).

Ashbery’s vitalism takes the American transcendentalist poetic line into this post-secular territory. Life in Ashbery is a psychological urgency that responds to the pressures of material exigencies with aesthetic means. The living form of this poetry creates a specific space, a medium in which the psychological processes, related to certain philosophical positions, enter reciprocal relations with the material world. This form is clearly anthropomorphic, without being anthropocentric—other material beings participate in it. While definitely engaging the materials of the world, Ashbery’s poems are not ecopoetry—they simply shun the thematic focus characteristic of this poetic.¹ Ashbery’s treatment of nature insists on thinking about how forms of transcendence, not reducible to any immanence, still have something to tell us about how we interact with our physical environments.

¹ The recurrent motifs in definitions of ecopoetry and ecopoetics emphasize foregrounding nature, addressing environmental issues, and overcoming anthropocentric conceptual schemes. In Leonard M. Scigaj’s early definition, ecopoetics is a program which rallies poetry under the banner of responding to the broadly understood climate crisis. As the crisis of ecosystems has become more and more of a fact, “we will need a poetry that does not ignore nature,” which, in turn, leads to a call for a kind of poetry-writing that accords nature “its own voice, separate or at least equal to the voice of humans” (Scigaj 5). More recent approaches further stress the need to redress the earlier imbalances by moving beyond the anthropocentric perspective toward forms of ecocentrism. Derived from the American Romantic experiment, ecopoetry strives to overcome the dualistic mind/body schemes and build a “commitment to a vital natural world” (Fiedorczuk 1). These formulations depend on fluctuating philosophical models of materiality and agency. Against this view, Ashbery’s poetry is a paradox. It remains shamelessly “textual,” “linguistic,” and “aestheticizing,” revealing no particular “commitment” to any given aspect of being, or life, or experience. And yet, it is not oblivious to nature. In short, it interacts with nature, without the programmatic imperatives clearly present in the field of ecopoetry.

TOWARD ASHBERY'S POST-SECULAR VITALISM—A MIX OF TRADITIONS

Ashbery's post-secular vitalism cuts across various sectional divisions. If it strives toward Bielik-Robson's "enhanced life," this affinity is derived from the Emersonian lineage, not from Jewish philosophy, the starting point of Bielik-Robson's position. Further, his poetry's engagement with natural surroundings is not an outcome of an academically or theoretically prescribed agenda—under whatever name it comes to us nowadays. While it does not have a program or a politics that one could join, it definitely has a strong predilection—one for turning aesthetic experience into a form of habitation. The variety of post-secular thought that we encounter here is a strongly aesthetic one. The Ashberian medium within which vitalism negotiates its position toward the *physis* of the world, both matter and time, originates from aesthetics—from the poet's ingenuous cross-pollination of vast ranges of aesthetic experience. His formal mediums are devices which turn the basic variety of religious experience—the Jamesian term which, I would claim, is the earliest known post-secular gesture of translating traditional religion into the language of vitalism—into a variety of aesthetic experience, wherein matters of life and death become matters of the post-secular messianic treatment of life.

Thus, I am focusing on the mediums themselves, treating them as the poet's primary preoccupation. Life acquires topical condensation in Ashbery through the formal filter of the poetic format. It is with the study of the movements initiated within his amply formatted poetic mediums that we see in what sense Ashbery engages, and reinterprets, the American transcendentalist lineage. Life, conceived of as the movement of thought, which the poem merges with the movements of psycho-rhetoric, vehemently clashes with its physical surroundings, to dazzling aesthetic—but also cognitive, philosophical, spiritual, theological, psychological, political, and cultural—effects across the archives of the American Transcendentalist poetic mind. "Life only avails—not the having lived" (129), proclaimed Emerson in "Self-Reliance," and whenever one looks in his proleptic essays, one finds those vitalist transitions catalyzed by material constellations of nature. "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life" (61), announces Thoreau in the opening of his *Walden*, and the deliberation requires transaction with material nature. Whitman and Dickinson achieve poetic power when the sensations of their poetic psychological selves coalesce into states of enhanced aliveness through collisions with their physical contingencies. Within this lineage, the messianism described in Bielik-Robson's post-secular version is modified. The exodus of life—self-assured

after it had freed itself from the repetitiousness and mechanicity of death and nature—means individuation from nature followed by a return to the material environment in order to infuse it with vitalist energy.

Ashbery, for his part, is the most reticent representative of the line, which, of course, I have drawn here rather selectively. What he hides is tension. Where the transcendentalist tradition aims at high plateaus of intensity, Ashbery is the poet of the flow, often deceptively languid, where not a single specific psychological or aesthetic position lasts long, bathos giving way to seriousness, and nonsense to most surprising insight.

It is this flow, and the way it is hybridized with remnants of the transcendental, that I would like to examine below. We begin to sense that hybridity when we treat the poetic format as the meeting ground of two vast dimensions, without a priori treating them as emanations of one substance. These dimensions are the vitalist flows of energy, responsible for the movements of thought and language, and the presence of material nature, both at the level of objects and of vaster natural orders, such as the flow of time. To speak of hybridity is, of course, to immediately take a position within current debates. Ashbery's flows become poetic mediums of life—spaces of transaction between thought, affect, language, and the material dimension. However, while falling in the vicinity of models based on the metaphor of the stream, Ashbery's formats evade the Spinozian and Deleuzian singularity of substance on which many current ecological and post-humanist varieties of vitalism are based. Engaged with the aesthetics of the stream, Ashbery's formats engage immanence, in order to interfere with it; here, the stream is interrupted or conjoined with traces of negativity in a manner that is not a dialectical abolishing of the negative. Yet, never reducible to the material aspect of the flow, Ashbery's traces of negativity do not thwart the processes of inhabiting a material or natural world. On the contrary—life in Ashbery's poems consists in their uncanny ability to position negativity in such a way that, instead of thwarting the formation of subjectivity that inhabits a material world, it is rather a key factor enabling the inhabitation. An Ashbery poem is a hybrid medium, a poetic "milieu"—the term I borrow, via Bielik-Robson, from George Canguilhem's philosophy of biology—wherein psychology meets time and matter, resulting in a vitalism that transcends the biological genealogy of the term. In Canguilhem, as in Bielik-Robson's post-secular messianism, life is something much more than mechanical reproductivity; rather, it is an element endowed with a transgressive "knowledge" of itself, which makes it a vibrant center of its biological *umwelt*, one that, confident in its powers, "does not resolve into its environment" but keeps experimenting against all mechanical tendencies inherent in the "crossroads of influences" (120).

To illustrate how Ashbery is a poet of this kind of vitalism, I intend to focus on the forms of his longer poems, primarily the prose pieces in *Three Poems*, with the assumption that the features of those forms extend over the encounters between psychology and matter in his subsequent longer works. As I am going to show, these forms are hybrid mediums which arrange non-dialectical entanglements of material positivity with forms of negativity; as a result of these encounters, they precipitate into vitalist habitats, enlivened by an intense form of participation or belonging, one metaphor for which is love.

THE POEM AS ENVIRONMENT' AND ASHBERY'S AVANT-GARDIST "NEW REALISM"—TOWARD THE IDEA OF ASHBERY'S VITALIST POETIC MEDIUM

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To think of the poem as a medium is to think of it primarily as space of distributed agency rather than merely an utterance of subjectivity that is prior to the emergence of this space. The concept treats the linguistic event of the poem as an opening of a group of correlations which organize disparate elements into *an environment*—a space of a certain degree of coherence, where various physical correlations are obtained. The idea that the poems in the American tradition, connecting Whitman to Ashbery and also including such foreigners as John Clare, form such spaces was put forward by Angus Fletcher. In a book entitled, tellingly, *A New Theory for American Poetry*, Fletcher analyzes how the linguistic artefacts of those writers, based on specific kinds of rhetorical innovation, are attempts to create correlations between language, thought, and the sense of vastness and diversity found in nature. The formally arranged space withdraws the immediately recognizable subject to give way to encompassing forms of consciousness, no longer belonging to a single individual, delineating a span of mutual dependencies. What emerges, according to Fletcher, is the "environment poem" (9).

Particularly important to the genre is Whitman's grammar. The Whitman poem is based on the unit of the participle phrase. This "participial thinking" (112) enhances the grammatical mode of the middle voice, which bespeaks a withdrawal of any "strong sense of the subject" (108). The middle voice pushes the poem *en route* to a constant transition that is also an accumulation of observation. Elements of all kinds enter an "aggregation and the forming of the ensemble" (112), which is a state in which aggregates of diversity are experienced in their immediate contemporaneity. The seemingly fragmented grammar accrues toward an immediacy, a "continuous present" (*ibid.*). In this way, the poem encircles spaces of belonging,

where the interaction between subject and material acquires immediacy, a poetic mode that is much different from a mere description. The poem becomes a space where diversity is provided with a bond. The poem is not just a poem; it is an “environing symbolic and semiotic space” (124) that the reader enters in order to participate in multiplicity and diversity. The natural and social dimensions enter reciprocity and a “social coherence” correlates with “the coherence of the living environment” (114). Ashbery belongs firmly in this tradition, together with his contemporary Ammons, and his long poems particularly are such poems-environments, or, more emphatically, “living systems” (119), with a “capacity . . . to develop [their] own ensemble character” (206).

There are two features of Fletcher’s model that I would like to highlight. First, it joins the artifice of rhetorics to nature. The environment poem is an ecological projection based on rhetoric: a grammatical position connects aesthetics and the cognitive sphere. Not being a mere description or imitation of nature, the “environment-poem” is an “imaginative product” (116). Secondly, the space of such poems joins matter with mental predisposition, which, further in the process, opens to forms of transcendence. Such a poem points to the “vastness of our ecological home” (ibid.); however, for that space to become a “home,” another element is needed—longing and belief. The poem-as-environment is never a “literal fact,” but an “imaginative discovery and an imaginative product” (ibid.). It is a search for further states of coherence and belonging, which are physically missing in contemporaneity but already haunt the physical ground as traces of a future. A model of metaphysics and transcendence is an ingredient in this ecology, and it is one that reverses Plato. Fletcher uses Deleuze’s analysis of how individual sensation in Proust is set in motion: “The individual, subjective associations are here only to be transcended in the direction of Essence” (Deleuze qtd. in Fletcher 131). This is consistent with Deleuze’s own reading of Whitman, in which the philosopher credits the poet with the discovery that nature is “a process of establishing relations,” which makes the transcendental idea of Whole a derivation of relations, not their source (Deleuze 59). Fletcher stresses how this signals endless process. Whitman’s poem establishes relations which tend toward unity, just as the poem itself is *en route* to the identity of its voice, “a seduction of the reader into a search of the author” (120).

Stephen J. Ross, a critic who addressed the problem of Ashbery’s relation to nature more recently, is sympathetic to Fletcher’s “environment poem,” but notes two related problems. Does the term “environment poem” make Ashbery an eco-poet? Such a view would be at odds with Ashbery’s pronounced interests, which focused on artifice rather than naturalness. To redress the balance, Ross undertakes to

show how Ashbery's use of metaphors using nature aligns with his strong debt—unmentioned by Fletcher—to European and American avant-gardes. The avant-gardist Ashbery is an artist focused on his materials, of "auto-reflexivity [built] into the matter and manner of his poems" (Ross 26), which is a very sensible following up on Ashbery's drawing of unceasing inspiration from such artists as Joseph Cornell, Giorgio de Chirico, Yves Tanguy, or Raymond Roussel, in whose intensely artificial imaginary habitats or landscapes, "matter and manner fuse to form one element" (Ashbery, *Sightings* 17). Ross reminds us that Ashbery's target was always a "new kind of realism" (Ashbery qtd. in Ross 17). It is correct that natural landscapes are paradoxically frequent in this poet of artifice, but he is a poet of "nature without ecology," one who avoids "the false ideology of nature worship" (Ross 30) where "the natural is elevated over the textual" (35). Instead, Ashbery works with the avant-gardist fiction of being "inside and outside itself at the same time" in which nature is treated as "an aesthetic resource" (29).

Ross is right—Ashbery is not a poet of nature. Natural landscapes—rivers, mountains, trees—appear in his poems, a fact overlooked by earlier phases of his reception, but they become materials in an attempt at new realism, the fiction of being inside and outside a poem at the same time, with which Ashbery synthesizes two traditions: romantic vitalism and the avant-garde's perennial fiction of bringing art close to life. In this fiction the natural elements become part of poetic matter or substance that saturates the canvasses or texts of his favorite artists to such a degree that they spill over to haunt our so-called reality, and, so far as nature is concerned, return to it, affecting it in ways that give us greater sense of ecology—a *more comprehensive perception of the agential processes with which and by which we have a world*.

If ecology is rumination on dwelling, Ashbery's larger ecology includes what escapes our dwelling's conscious architectures. It is surprising that neither Fletcher nor Ross reaches for a language, deeply ingrained in the American tradition, which synthesizes nature, aesthetics, language, and a sense of metaphysics, which is the language of American pragmatism. Particularly, it is the language of William James, his idea of life as the flux of experience, in which we participate by means of predispositions—linguistically modulated beliefs—the central among which treats the universe as a "personal form," a "Thou," instead of an "It," as he put it in his seminal "The Will to Believe" (*Writings 1878–1899* 476). I am not claiming that Ashbery is drawing on James—although the connection is viable, because of his finding inspiration in Gertrude Stein, James's student. I am suggesting, however, that Ashbery's poetry redraws all the lines and traditions mentioned above. He amply illustrates his proximity

to the Jamesian idea of life being a flux of experience, but enriches the flux with the negative element—a transcendental remnant in the form of longing for something that is missing in the material construct of the flux.

In light of those redrawings, my term—*Ashbery's hybrid medium*—modifies Fletcher's and Ross's thinking about Ashbery and the material world. Fletcher's environment-poem is based on the "esemplastic circle" (9), which recalls the romantic search for organic unities, steeped in Neoplatonic mysticism. But Ashbery's poetics develops a more complex amalgam. Here, the romantic Neoplatonism, with its panoply of resultant transcendentalisms, merges with models based on the stream, as an outcome of which both paths are changed. It is true, as I note above, that Fletcher is aware of that quality, attempting to include Deleuze's reversal of Plato. But the reversal does not do justice to Ashbery's variety of oneiric transcendence: his negativity—a trace of a negative ingredient, absent in the very midst of the flow—does not stem from, nor does it reduce to, the stream; rather, I propose to view this *negativity as a pervasive form of longing*, neither prior nor subsequent to the stream. The sheer characteristic of this ingredient is that its consciousness *attends to the passage of the stream*.

Further, in relation to Ross, my idea of the medium emphasizes interaction, catalyzed inside Ashbery's uncanny landscapes, between the psychological and the material. The medium is a poetic "milieu"—neither the Neoplatonist circle, nor the Spinozian/Deleuzian pure stream of single substance, but an uncanny, unexplained event in which the psychological trauma of being in the world organizes itself against—but also thanks to—the facticity of its material contingencies. Life occurs in such a medium at the point where psychological negativity nears the material, visits it—never to be entirely defined by it. Ashbery's poetic trajectory is one in which romantic philosophical solipsism, the famous Hegelian "beautiful soul," receives modulation, through art, which allows the subjectivity emerging from the poems to attend to matter. Unlike other varieties of negative thought, Ashbery's modified solipsism attends to the materials of our world to prevent them from disintegrating into mechanicity and reification. The solipsistic soul uses art to visit matter, see itself in it; matter needs the medium of the poem, to be something more than mechanism.

ASHBERY'S HYBRID MEDIUMS—THE PHYSICAL WORLD AND ITS TEMPORALITY

Ashbery's long poems work as spaces which bring together the physical world and consciousness, primarily human. But they are also an inquiry into their status and distribution. The ingenuous construction of those

poetic apparatuses stems from Ashbery's taking a *licentia poetica* kind of liberty with two philosophical models, each with different psychological ramifications, and gearing his imaginative product to the parameters of both. One of them is the Neoplatonic model which fueled Romanticism, and which leads to forms of transcendental subjectivity, plus its attendant varieties of negativity. In it, the practical inaccessibility of the level of transcendence—one is never one with one's transcendental subject, always sliding back to the level of empirical engagements—leads to a panoply of philosophical or psychological skepticisms. The strongest recent example was Paul de Man's brand of deconstruction with its concept of absolute irony—an extreme evolution of the Hegelian construct of the "beautiful soul," which is "self-enclosed and perfectly transparent to herself" (Bielik-Robson, *Saving Lie* 194), but which can never touch the world around it, fearing contamination. On the psychological level, the model results in skepticism and solipsism. The skeptic/solipsist undertakes a move to touch the world but sees all of the fruits of their action as mere empirical fiction, a trope always dissolving into unreality. While such forms of skepticism result in methodological paralysis—de Man's irony was theory's dead end—or in existential depression, Ashbery's brilliance rests in his ability to utilize this position to poetic effects not only of stunning beauty but also of psychological efficacy.

The other model is one of the stream, flow, or transitivity. Here, on the American ground, the source is Emerson and the modulation his metaphysics receive within pragmatist discourse. The transcendental level in Emerson is already a hybrid. In it the Neoplatonist Oneness is merged into the stream of material experience. The vertiginous task of the Emersonian self-reliant soul is to get in touch with the stream, while also retaining the contours of the transcendental subjective individuality. The pragmatist reply to that romantic fiction was William James's "radical empiricism": the individual getting in touch with themselves as they navigate their way within the transitionality inscribed in the flux of experience. Here, both the individual and the material world are modalities of focused selection. The ploy is supposed to keep the Emersonian ideal of immediacy in the game—the individual self performs a selection, of itself and the world around it, from the flux/stream of experience. The stream concept by-passes the potential negativities of the Neoplatonist models, where the ONE, never quite reached, can become an empty space. James's idea of the stream, his "pure experience" or "the immediate flux of life" (*Writings 1902–1910* 782), is immune to this kind of negative mutation; it constitutes the immediately accessible base of reality in which the individual is fully immersed. The human life is a matter of attending to the relations obtaining within the stream—their selection and cultivation.

The aesthetic potential of the stream model is as great as that of the Neoplatonic one. Jonathan Levin showed how the Emersonian-pragmatist model generates an aesthetics of transitiveness, a way of intercepting and mobilizing the “transitional dynamic that runs through [William James’s] psychology and philosophy” (9). Levin continues: “[T]he novelist . . . is someone . . . on the lookout for every incipient transition . . . some element in the overall field of relations, which . . . will deepen . . . the fabric of the fiction” (ibid.). The result, in the novel, is the concept of the character as Henry James’s famous “center of consciousness”—an entity that comes to the fore as a controlling center of relations and transitions. What if we concentrated, instead, on the fabric itself—on the substance of the stream as represented in its fluidity and transitiveness—starting to detect the distributions of consciousness that are internal to it? And, further, what if the resulting centers of consciousness revealed types of withdrawal, skepticism or negativity tantamount to the models based on transcendence? The result would be Ashbery’s hybrid medium.

The first level at which we notice the effects of this hybridity is Ashbery’s curious, aesthetically and psychologically fascinating treatment of one of nature’s most encompassing entities—temporality. It is one of Ashbery’s mediums’ central tasks to explicate the coherence of the individual self that is immersed in the temporal flow. A phenomenology of temporality occurs here: the subject aligns itself with the flow while at the same maintaining a fiction of manipulating it. In a word, the goal is the capacity, which should legitimately be called poetic, of our profiting from change in time. This is the topic of many of Ashbery’s longer poems, but it is particularly emphasized in the two long prose pieces in the volume *Three Poems*, “The New Spirit” and “The System.”

Instead of Whitman’s unit of the phrase, the texts operate on the units of the long sentence and the entire paragraph. Just as in the case of Whitman, the precise subject of those sentences recedes, becomes hidden, or, and this is one of the main points, becomes distributed in the fabric of the medium. The (implied) individual subject is immersed in the ample substance called forth by the progression and accumulation of the sentences, which shuttle between the observation of the material detail and abstraction. This matter, belonging both to the grammatical and aesthetic plane of language and psychology, constitutes the basic material building substance of the medium. Ashbery occasionally turns our attention to it, by metaphorizing it as environing entities submerging the individual. They are a “medium through which we address each other” (*Three Poems* 13), or a “greenish aquarium light” (33), or “a dimensionless organism like the wind’s” (61). In those, Ashbery’s insistent textualism seeks life-enhancing metaphors merging the fleeting

character of consciousness with the evanescence normally related to the items of the physical world, light or weather.

These metaphors suggest enclosure, but this is just one aspect of the hybridity in question, the other being the flow-like transitivity. The substance is a *res extensa*, a medium for the flow to happen in. The resultant effect is one of capturing the phenomenology of change in time—the unceasing passage of it in which we are caught—while at the same time retaining a sense of permanence. Ashbery enhances the sense of the flow and change by ironizing our being immersed in temporality. At the same time there is a subjective faculty responsible for producing this sense, and its constant coming to be voiced creates an anchoring in the flow, a level of awareness that oversees the empirical sequentiality:

One is plucked from one month to the next; the year is like a fast-moving Ferris wheel; tomorrow all the riders will be under the sign of February . . . Just to live this way is impossibly difficult, but the strange thing is that no one seems to notice it. (65)

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In Ashbery's poetics, the paradoxical, perhaps deeply ironic, quality of our being in the flow (do we really fit in it?) hides solipsistic machinery. The motion of the flow is here instigated, propelled, and maintained by a curious dynamic stemming from the heterogeneity of the voice. The identity of the speaker, once it comes to the fore, is stretched between two poles. One is the more empirically anchored self—a subject immersed in the material world, interacting with objects, meeting friends, observing others. The other is a more distant and mysterious “you,” who is often addressed in the prose, and whose identity remains to be revealed. This “you” is clearly a hypothesis of a whole—a larger consciousness, belonging to the flow as such, indicating its edge, or surface, implying the circularity characteristic of transcendentalist models. The interactions between the two poles occur throughout Ashbery's early and middle phases, and the prose of the “The New Spirit” is a case in point.

There is a clear tension, noted frequently in this prose, between inside and outside—an opposition which has no place in the philosophical models of the stream, inside and outside being mere interchangeable modalities of the ontology of the flow or stream models. In “The New Spirit,” the flow of the prose is speckled with declarations of wishing to go out, to reach the external world, a movement that seems arrested at the stage of mere observation or wish, as if the speaker were separated from the flow. At the beginning of “The New Spirit,” the speaker is enclosed in “common memories, remembering just how the light stood on the water that time,” and the power of memory creates a thin but steady pane of separation between him and the external

world: “Outside, can’t you hear it, the traffic, the trees, everything, getting nearer” (5). Approaching the outside—such is the predominant, not exclusive, situation of the speaker. The approach becomes a “continual pilgrimage” (5).

“Pilgrimage,” the romantic trope of quest for transcendental subjectivity, is here merged with the flow of the medium. This results in a double perspective: elements of the flow are both immediately accessible to the part of the self that might be called empirical, while a sense of remoteness remains as a parallel track. An element of externality is built into the very fabric of the poem, which also creates an interplay of dynamism and stasis. Movement and change are basic reality, but the hypothesized transcendental subjectivity represents stasis, or permanence of the movement itself. There are moments when the movement is called into question: “It is only that you are both moving at the same rate of speed and *cannot apprehend the motion*. Which carries you beyond. . .” (ibid., emphasis mine). That skepticism of the movement, calling attention to a whole which (hypothetically) encloses it, is a trace of the transcendental dimension, the idea of the self-enclosed and self-transparent whole, remaining in its place. This quality was recognized, early on, by John Koethe, who, referring to Wittgenstein’s idea that the subject is “a limit of the world,” rather than being in it, argued that “the conception of the self underlying Ashbery’s poetry is . . . that of the transcendental or metaphysical subject” (96).

But this conception, with its philosophical lineage that spans Descartes, Hume, Kant, and early Wittgenstein in Koethe’s early diagnosis, receives a psychological expansion when it is merged with James’s “flux.” A doubleness occurs, a tension of inside/outside, which we already noted at the beginning of “The New Spirit.” It reappears much further in this non-narrative flow, with another instance of the difficulty of going out into the world: “You can feel the wind in the room, the curtains are moving in the draft and a door slowly closes. Think of what it must be outside” (Ashbery, *Three Poems* 23). This repeated difficulty signals a plethora of skeptical and psychological divisions inside the self and produces solipsistic distance that will later fuel Ashbery’s ekphrastic “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.” After registering the difficulty of the outside—its being there, unreachable—the internal psychological division is openly thematized, in the context of the continual transformation in time:

So there is no need to wait to be transformed: you are already. I am aware of it, because I see you like a star, that mild friendly, and warming presence, so many trillions miles away, and this suits me because I would have you only in this way: as you are, as you are to me. . . . And therefore we are to travel abreast, twin riders dazzled and disintegrating under the kaleidoscopic performance of the night. (*Three Poems* 23–24)

This double traveling is the mark of transcendentalist distance being transposed onto the flux and flow of experience. The internal division has a philosophical and psychological explanation. First, we have the position of the hypothetical transcendental subject, akin to the Hegelian “beautiful soul,” fearing the outside—the empirical world. Its distance to the world has a psychological solipsistic structure: a subject hypothesizes its own perfect (spherical) version, distanced from the world, synthesizing experience, a transcendentalist base for the interactions that occur on the level of empirical engagements. The perfect, transcendental subject of the beautiful soul is, as we have seen “transparent to itself,” as a self-knowing entity, but, in the medium of Ashbery’s prose, it receives a counterpart—the empirical self that participates in the experiential flow, and both poles hypothesize each other’s existence. Ashbery modifies the solipsism modeled on transcendentalism: here, the transcendental aspect of the self senses its empirical counterpart and becomes apprehensive of the physical change. At first, the distance between the two aspects of the self produces a sense of separation, a vacuum, an emptiness, unknowing and unreachability. We find this negativity mentioned at the beginning of the text: “To formulate oneself around this hollow, empty sphere” (5). It is from this fictitious, rhetorical “formulating oneself around” the vacuums and rifts of our psychological being that the passage of Ashbery’s poetic substance stems.

The two aspects of the self, “travelling abreast,” are “dazzled and disintegrating,” but the “warming presence” of their mutual attraction must now be seen as the very fabric of the flow. This allows for the fiction of continuous commentary on the fact of change, from a projected stable vantage point, which, on a different level, constitutes the very cognitive reception of one’s participation in the temporal change—in short, our awareness of time: “And so a new you takes shape” (21). Temporal change is accompanied by physicality of space: “It is not necessary to sanctify the gods in order to live in the suddenly vast surroundings that open out among your features” (*ibid.*). A reciprocity occurs here: solipsistic distances, signaled by the phrase “your features,” merge with actual physicality; conversely, the physicality of space is acknowledged without metaphysical justification. Returned to the flux of experience, the internal conundrums open up to the abundance of physical space, registered in its granularity. The two poles of the self, seeking each other out, are now aspects of the flow, which results in internal or external landscapes coming into focus:

To be your breath as it is taken in and shoved out. Then, quietly, it would be as objects placed along the top of a wall: a battery jar, a rusted pulley, shapeless wooden boxes, an open can of axle grease, two lengths of pipe. We see this moment from outside as within. (*Three Poems* 5)

Ashbery's romantic subject, with its transcendentalist remoteness, apprehensive of the outside, is rescued by the flow of the empirical, which, in turn, receives a focus. This quality returns in "The System," the central piece of *Three Poems*. Again, at a point of confrontation with the plurality of the things of the world, which would have resulted in another removal of the transcendental aspect of the self from the empirical level in the de Manian deconstructive models, this self remains in touch with the flow, held there by the longings of its empirical counterpart. The empirical pole of the self prevents that separation, and uses the idea of the whole to conceptualize the plurality of objects. A cognitive mechanism appears that registers singularity as well as congeries of objects:

Just the absorption of ourselves seen from the outside, when it is really what is going on inside us—all this overhead chatter and speculation and the noises of the day as it wears into the calm of night. . . . And so all these conflicting meaningless details are transformed into something peaceful that surrounds, like wallpaper. (82)

The metaphor of the wallpaper is another example of the persistence of the skeptical frame—isn't wallpaper a levelling out, a flattening, which, again, erases the singularity of the material object in the world? Such flattening out is a remnant of the purely solipsistic and skeptical models, but Ashbery attenuates the possibility of the loss of the world, by highlighting the effort with which the skeptical apparatus is merged with material reality. The effort is signaled as the difficulty of seeing—the transitional movement of the medium itself, which contains, envelops, and begins to override the tropes of the traditional solipsism, is a device whose workings are recognized through a characteristic visual blurring.

The result is fluctuating visual focus. The vector of the poetic mediums is one of overcoming solipsistic blockages and delegating the agency of the individual mind's faculties onto the flow of the medium itself. The unstable visuality is "the proof that you are there" (7). There is a "casual, poorly seen new environment" which acts as a "new kind of arbitrariness for you, one that protects and promotes" (9). It is an "impregnable order of the day" which "surrounds you as the artless gestures of a beautiful girl surround her with nobility" (ibid.). Tropes of non-skeptical acceptance of the ordinary ("casual," "artless") are interwoven with traces of the transcendentalizing conceptual frame—the unreachability of the abstract entities, like "impregnable order" and the synthetic abstract wholeness of a person and her gestural mannerisms.

Such "poorly seen landscapes" are the medium which becomes the primary epistemic stage. The dynamic of the prose stems from the rhythm

created between the belief in its completion and the attendant falling away from it. Moments in which such completion is achieved occur in selected passages, particularly in "The System," where registering the outside world is no longer the task burdening individualist subjectivity, but is delegated to the presence of the medium. They are represented as apparent dissociations from reality, loss of contact with it, moments "of inattention and incapacity or unwillingness to understand" (80). However, and this is the Ashberian paradox, they do not sever the subject from the outside world. On the contrary, they create a new formula of connectedness:

As the discourse continues and you think you are not getting anything out of it, as you yawn and rub your eyes, and pick your nose or scratch your head. . . this knowledge is getting through to you, and taking just the forms it needs to impress itself upon you, the forms of your inattention, and incapacity or unwillingness to understand. (ibid.)

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Understanding, being in touch with reality, happens here outside of conscious individual subjective agency. It would be a mistake, though, to place this agency with any form of the unconscious mind or larger systemic entity raised by various theoretical frames, such as, for instance, the labyrinthine presence of language, regarded, very abstractly, as a whole. The only "whole" hypothesized by Ashbery's formula is the event of the poem, which, in this case, is the passage of its medium. It is the "knowledge" that belongs to this medium—produced by it and carried within it—that will be the bond of the "poorly seen environment," the growing sense of the self's gradually more fully realized, anti-solipsistic belonging to its adjacent spaces.

The transposition of cognitive powers onto the presence of the medium is frequently thematized in Ashbery in connection with the motif of love. Love in Ashbery is the name for a psychological state in which the individual subject's cognitive powers align with the cognitive powers of the medium itself. A few pages after noting the role of "moments of inattention," a different moment of crisis comes into view. The subject is paralyzed, unable to start a conversation with a lover, but the paralysis is overcome, again, with the acknowledgement of the agency of the medium, which, however, is now fully participated in by the subject:

But as you continue gazing embarrassedly into the eyes of the beloved, talking about extraneous matters, you become aware of the invisible web that connects those eyes to you, and both of you to the atmosphere of this room, which is leading up to you after the vagaries of the space outside. (95)

A new substance defines space and perception here, a “web of connections,” and it overtakes the tasks of constituting reality from the apparatus of the transcendentalist model, without, however, nullifying the individual. Importantly, the flow of this substance does not consist in completely erasing the earlier, solipsistically distanced self. The flux itself is organized and steadied, receiving a definition, when it is contaminated with the “vagaries,” forms of inattention, gaps, losses, and vacancies that attend the psychology derived from the transcendentalist models. In the moment of restarting contact with the lover, which is also regaining connection with the world, the fluent matrix of the new hybrid medium—not just of the impersonal, philosophically postulated “flux of experience”—is bound, brought into a resolution, by a forgotten “word,” which is hypothesized to have been uttered in the pre-history of the moment:

Suddenly you realize that you have been talking for a long time without listening to yourself; you must have *said it* a long way back without knowing it, for everything in the room has fallen back into its familiar place, only this time organized according to the invisible guidelines that radiate out from both of you like the laws that govern the kingdom. Now there is so much to talk about. (ibid., emphasis mine)

Here love is an overcoming of solipsist separation, but let us note that the traces of centrality do not vanish. The center is a variety of intersubjectivity which is also posited here as the very fabric of reality—it is intersubjectivity distributed as the “invisible web” from the previous fragment. Centrality—the old romantic dream—is here beautifully reconfigured. The center is absent presence of the mysterious “word,” the unpronounced “it” that now organizes space. Who, or what, does it belong to? Can we trust that the subject really “said it”? Only a tendency toward it, an expectation, a longing toward it existed, was felt or intimated. *It is this longing that now becomes a vital part of the medium.* It has no “author”; it exists only as a foreboding of externality, an echo, now merged with but not fully dissolved in the flow of empirical reality.

Ashbery’s medium is a non-dialectic interaction of the flow of experience with the traces of radical alterity. This non-dialectic tension is most emphatically thematized in “Self-Portrait in the Convex Mirror.” Stemming from the clash between the solipsistic and narcissistic circularity of Parmigianino’s construct—his famous self-portrait—and the influx of urban distraction also imposing itself on the subject, the poem is a further stabilization of the medium. Parmigianino’s potent visage represents the transcendentalist wish of abandoning empirical temporality—the perfect roundness of his painterly construction represents the power of solipsistic/

transcendentalist synthesizing capacity to dwell outside of time. It becomes "life englobed" (*Self-Portrait* 69), a materialization of the device which injected traces of permanence in the change-navigating medium of *Three Poems*. Here, it becomes a strong fantasy of the "whole . . . stable within / Instability" (70), which has an absolutist program of eliminating contingency, constructed "so as to perfect and rule out the extraneous / Forever" (72).

The poem's thrust is to confront this oddity: the flow brings in the minutiae of daily existence experienced by the poet's empirical persona, the irregularities and contingencies of urban environs, the extraneous "filiations and shuttlings" (*Self-Portrait* 75) by which, as Ashbery puts it, "our business is carried out" (*ibid.*), into confrontation with Parmigianino's solipsistic/narcissistic, self-enclosing, but stunningly influential artistic contraption. Ashbery's subject is fascinated with the painter's concept, but also understands that Parmigianino's is a "life-obstructing task" (80). Thus, he endeavors to develop his own response, one that would actually accommodate the indefiniteness of growing into moments, not by levelling all of them out into the homogenous "magma of interiors" (71)—the product of Parmigianino's optics—but by appreciating their indeterminacy and granularity. Parmigianino's time-freezing globe is confronted with "life . . . stocked there / In recesses no one knew of" (76). The push is toward rediscovering the singularity of "lapidary / Todayness," a presence acknowledged in its freedom from the blueprint of the "whole," in which "no previous day would have been like this" (78). The stake of the game is to register the spatiotemporal definiteness of one's immediate environments, with their actual texture. The poem wants to be able to absorb, without levelling out, the messiness of difficult, "uncharted" everydayness, the metonymic representation of which are the very physicality in which writing happens—"desk, papers, books / Photographs of friends, the window and the trees" (71). It is those, that are to be saved from melting into the "magma of interiors."

And yet, in this poetics, the saving action does not consist in eliminating Parmigianino's transcendentalist construction. On the contrary, his visage, indeed the entire conceptual frame it represents, keeps haunting the medium of the poem. Each movement is accompanied by Parmigianino's spherical "argument" reappearing, returning, as the repressed contents of our narcissism, our wish for a whole that would hold off extraneity and save our sense of the coherent self from vanishing. Ashbery imagines a formula of hybrid optics—the extraneity and nuance of our physical spaces are acknowledged; at the same time, this very texture becomes possible within a connective substance which provides a necessary bonding, and whose other aspect is longing. The individualities of physical spaces

emerge in their separateness when touched with a haunting presence of transcendentalizing nostalgias. The passage of the poem—always bent on spontaneity, contingency, nuanced high-resolution—is sealed by the unexpectedly strong trope of “cold pockets / Of remembrance, whispers out of time” (83).

Ashbery’s poetic mediums offer landscapes by enmeshing the transcendentalist longings into the fabric of the poem. The method is perfected in the long poem “A Wave,” and then in the extreme book-length exercise of *Flow Chart*. In those works, natural or urban terrains, material objects and elements of landscape receive focus and organization within the poem as a medium which hybridizes empirical flow and a transcendental sense of externality. The emergence of such “landscapes” is the main theme of “A Wave.” In earlier phases of Ashbery’s reception, critics described those landscapes in terms of mental activity—as thought-mappings. In postmodernist fashion, these were “horizontal, self-referential,” resulting in “constructed landscapes of knowledge” (Costello 68), which, however, were regarded as merely a mental reverie, a repository for “unaccommodated thoughts” (61). According to Bonnie Costello, these highly artificial vistas are more of an anticipation—dreams of landscapes, not landscapes themselves, reveries whose self-referential construction becomes available to the reader in the poet’s “pellucid moments” (68–69).

Costello is right about the anticipatory quality. However, in the view that I am proposing, this position itself plays a vital part in creating a very real habitat. The longing and anticipation punctuate and structure the flux of experience; they redistribute the desire contained within it in order to slow it down, to organize it into more palpable fixtures, thus turning it into a “ground” or space within which the exact objective and thingly character of the world emerges. Such an emergence of the palpable within the hybrid milieu of the poem occurs amply in “A Wave” and *Flow Chart*. In both cases the terrain that emerges within the ground of the hybrid medium is everydayness—the immediate ordinary surroundings, mostly urban, someone’s flat, or the vaster city tracts and grids.

At one point in “A Wave,” the very presence of the wooden furniture on which the writing action takes place is acknowledged: “we sit down to the table again / Noting the grain of the wood this time and how it pushes through / The pad we are writing on” (*Wave* 73). The wood itself is not *the ground*. In fact, the material object acquires something of a ghostly quality that we saw earlier as belonging to Parmigianino’s visage. But it does not mean that the furniture is unreal. On the contrary, Ashbery is re-configuring the idea of material reality: matter comes to life, matter matters—it becomes vitally interrelated, or, as currently viable academic discourses would have it, “vibrant” or “entangled” with the human subjectivities which are also

present in the milieu. *It is the milieu of the poem that is the ground.* In *Flow Chart*, it is the entire city, as a sort of a large object, that is implied to be the underlying haunting participant of the medium of this book-length poem. It emerges from the poem's gargantuan digressive flow, at the end of it. Just as the grain of wood "pushed through" the writing pad in the fragment of "A Wave," now it is the very material presence of the city that comes into view, to seal the writing action of the poem's milieu in its last syntactic bits: "By evening the traffic has begun / again in earnest, color coded. It's open: the bridge, that way" (*Flow Chart* 216).

Critics have written a lot about Ashbery's alternative rhythm of clarity and confusion. As we have seen, Bonnie Costello noted Ashbery's "pellucid moments," which are "charged with strangeness." They are proleptic, "not beyond knowledge, but ahead of it" (68). Much has been written, in the same vein, about Ashbery's "transparency." For Bloom, it was a trope of enhanced seeing boosted by "transcendental influx . . . [a] visionary flame" (Introduction 8). Ross plays down this high rhetoric and reminds us of Ashbery's debt to French avant-garde traditions where "transparence" is a feature of style which tends to abolish the boundary between world and art object (43–44).

All of those ideas converge in the concept of Ashbery's poetic medium as the vitalist, post-secular milieu. Here, the pellucid moments are circular indexes of the vitalist rhythms of the milieu—the poem itself as medium and environment—as it centralizes into its own self-consciousness. On the level of the human participants of the milieu, these moments register as surges of consciousness of our being changed by our surroundings as we change them. These are non-skeptical moments of world regaining, happy returns of our sense of belonging, which result in care, sustenance, and world-enabling nourishment. The strongest possible metaphor for this sense is "love":

love determines us, and we look the same
 To others when they happen afterwords, and cannot even know
 We have changed, so massive in our difference
 We are, like a new day that looks and cannot be the same. (*Wave* 81)

This passage belongs in "A Wave." The title of the poem thematizes the powerfully transforming and yet barely perceptible passage or growth of this kind of subjectivity attendant on world-sustaining awareness. Let us note the subtle ironies and conceptual contradictions the fragment carries. The change in question is both massive and imperceptible; the day is new while also being the same as others. These are all transcendentalizing tropes—indexes of conceptual wholes which are hypothesized, never reached. Now,

they are re-engaged with the flow of daily experience. As this happens, their previous alterity—their transgressive otherness—is also transformed and reconceptualized as “love.” Love is the state that the medium as a whole achieves when the various strands of the self and the material world come together. It is as if the speaker of this fragment became one with the medium/milieu of the poem itself. Love becomes a name for the non-absolutizing and caring oneness of humans and their very ordinary finite world.

CONCLUSIONS

In her post-secular messianic position, Agata Bielik-Robson has developed a concept of life as a self-aware form of tension or energy which is capable of holding off its dissolution into the large ontological orders of nature and death. Bielik-Robson’s vitalist messianism debunks the determining powers of those orders. Death, understood as perfect nothingness, cannot be any kind of determining principle, since nothingness contains no founding intentions; nature, understood in traditional ways, is a “homeostatic isolated system operating with the economic minimum of energy” (*Finitude* 2). This is the nature of Aristotelian *phusis* and Darwinian “natural selection,” where the life of an entity is exhaustively defined by the necessity of being born and dissolving under the auspices of the same ambivalent determinants—what brings life also causes death. Against this, Bielik-Robson reaches for Georges Canguilhem philosophical biology, in which life is an operative principle that does not reduce to the conditions of physical environment. Instead, it is a “transgressive force investing in more and more freedom of responses of the ‘living subjectivity’ to the surrounding world” (4).

Canguilhem saw life as a principle concentrated in the action of that living being, which, rather than being a mechanical recipient of stimuli, becomes a “machinist”—a force that organizes the vital milieu around itself (111). The living organism is thrown into its environment, but its task is to nourish it by its responses—the living being “composes its milieu” (*ibid.*). As such, the organism is the “milieu”—in the sense of “the middle” (center)—of its environment. Life, in this biology, is a creative action of selection, not just mechanical adaptation to stimuli, it is a “significative being” (113). As such, it is a form of knowledge—it is experimental, transformative, and, as Bielik-Robson’s reading of Canguilhem stresses, transgressive—an experiment aiming at individuation from the prevailing orders.

Ashbery’s vitalism aligns with this position. It consists in the composition of a poetic form—the medium of the poem—the ultimate goal of which is to produce an intense sense of belonging. What stands

as forms of longing for alterity and transgression in post-secular philosophical positions is redefined in Ashbery as “love”—a strong state that reconfigures both the forms of subjectivity and its physical surroundings. These emergent states provide a nourishing, transgressive ingredient, preventing the mechanical deterioration of the networks of our worldly engagements. His medium tends toward, prepares ground for, and composes a sense of finite human belonging—and active and caring coexistence—with its very finite and material surroundings. In Ashbery’s “pellucid moments” longing re-enters the finite world and the individuating and individuated subjectivity is a feature of the entire hybrid medium, now fully come to life.

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In Search of Autonomy: Sexuality and the Promise of Liberation in Witold Gombrowicz's *Pornografia* and Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*

ABSTRACT

Around the launch of the Penguin series *Writers from the Other Europe* in 1974, Philip Roth's novels turned to the intersections between sexuality and Jewish-American life with an increased intensity. Roth's choice to include Witold Gombrowicz in the series invites new perspectives on the representation of collective experience and individual freedom by writers who saw their heritage not only as ill-fated but also fraught. While both authors grapple with the idea of commitment to historically disadvantaged communities, *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Pornografia* spotlight the resistance growing in tandem with the narrators' sexual awakening. Although writing in politically disparate contexts and almost a decade apart, Roth and Gombrowicz use the theme of sexual desire to question the impact of difficult legacies on contemporary Jewish-American and Polish life, respectively. Ultimately, the novels' engagement with sexuality speaks to the idea of transgressing one's foundational ties to create an autonomous self, a question relevant for both the American myth and the vexed issues of national belonging shaped by the legacy of Polish Romanticism. This article argues that Roth and Gombrowicz engage with the theme of sexual desire to create a promise of liberation, which allows them to propel the tension between the individual and the collective. Despite leading to moments of emancipation, the characters' sexual awakening in *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Pornografia* fails to restore their autonomy, dramatizing the novels' images of imprisonment within the collectivity through a failed attempt to invent an autonomous self.

Keywords: promise of liberation, sexuality, desire, personal autonomy.



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Ever since entering the literary scene with *Goodbye, Columbus*, which would become part of his first collection of fiction in 1959, Philip Roth continued to interrogate how the past seeps into contemporary Jewish-American life. With his unapologetic images of anxiety-ridden Jewish sons revealing society's rejection of otherness as much as the resistance to assimilation among many immigrant parents, Roth's attitude towards his cultural background proves complex. Distrusting sentimentality at the same time as making an effort to understand the East European Jewish past through dialogues with survivor-writers such as Primo Levi and Aharon Appelfeld, Roth's oeuvre frames the question of contemporary Jewish-American identity as one of personal freedom. Far from discrediting the importance of the Holocaust for the Jewish experience, the author probes the possibility of reinventing the self in spite of the inherited historical burdens. Particularly interesting in the context of identity dynamics driven by the movement of the self against moral authority in Roth's work is his project of opening the Western reader to 20th-century Eastern European literature. *Writers from the Other Europe* was a series of seventeen novels published by Penguin Books between 1976 and 1983 in collaboration with Roth as a general editor. Dedicated to authors censored under the Soviet Regime, it invites a reflection on how disparate narratives respond to a similarly troubled national past. Apart from the affliction distinguishing Eastern Europeans and Jewish Americans after the Second World War, an intriguing link emerges between Roth and those authors on the list who staged a conflict of past and present in their works, preoccupied with the pressures of collective belonging rather than questions of adversity and misfortune alone.

Portraying the crisis of individual freedom after the war, Roth and Gombrowicz questioned the relentless presence of the heritage of suffering in their communities (Roth 77). Roth's choice to include the Polish writer in the Penguin series thus invites new perspectives on the literary treatment of collective experience and individual freedom. Ross Posnock notes that Roth's admiration for Gombrowicz is well-known (72), while Ira Nadel's biography *Philip Roth: A Counterlife* sheds light on Cynthia Ozick's gratitude towards Roth for introducing her to the Polish author (340). These perspectives encourage questions about the literary sensibility of the two writers, especially because a link between the works of Gombrowicz and Roth remains understudied. Having discovered Gombrowicz, Roth saw him as an author willing to "put himself at the centre of the chaos," as well as displaying "the devilishness, like the devilishness in Pinter that I liked" (qtd. in Pierpont 11). The comment about the provocative character of Gombrowicz's work applies also to Roth's own writing. Parallels

between the provocative tone and images of immaturity in Roth's and Gombrowicz's prose have been discussed by Posnock in *Philip Roth's Rude Truth: The Art of Immaturity*. As one of two monographs in English scholarship that compare Gombrowicz and Roth, Posnock's work does not elucidate the connection between the collective experience and sexuality in the authors' novels.

This article will analyze the conflict between collective experience and autonomy in Gombrowicz's *Pornografia* (1960) and Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) to evaluate the relationship between the characters' erotic awakening and their ability to break free from the surrounding sociocultural structures. Combining comparative analysis with theoretical perspectives on sexuality and liberation offered by Michel Foucault's second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, I will argue that Roth and Gombrowicz engage with the theme of sexual desire to create a promise of liberation, which allows them to explore the tension between the individual and the collective. As my argument unfolds, I will show that despite leading to moments of emancipation, the characters' erotic awakening in *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Pornografia* fails to restore their autonomy, dramatizing the novels' image of imprisonment within the collectivity through a failed attempt to arrive at an autonomous self.

The two texts invite comparison as they both explore vexed boundaries between the individual and the collective against the erotic lives of the characters. *Pornografia*, narrated by a middle-aged writer, Witold, plays with the analogy between the protagonist's struggle to retrieve his autonomy and Gombrowicz's own search for authentic self-expression. Beginning with Witold's unexpected encounter with Fryderyk, the novel tells the story of the two characters' journey to the countryside, set against the background of German-occupied Poland. Throughout their visit, the protagonists develop a fascination with each other, leading to a mutual obsession with the youthfulness of the local teenagers and bizarre attempts to force the young people into a sexual union. *Portnoy's Complaint* reveals that the reality labelled by suburbanites as an ignominious urban past continues to shape Jewish life outside the new upper-class environments. Narrated in the first person by thirty-three-year-old Alexander Portnoy, the novel takes the form of a confession to a psychoanalyst, in which the intertwining of sexual obsessions and guilt is inextricably linked to the stigma of a working-class background and Jewish history. Grounded in tensions between the individual and the collective, both novels spotlight the narrators' growing desire to resist the mentality, demands, and norms within their communities; in other words, the desire to become autonomous.

TOWARDS THE INNER DYNAMICS: BECOMING A SUBJECT OF DESIRE

In the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault emphasizes a link between sexuality and liberation, observing that the emergence of the former as a term at the beginning of the 19th century corresponds with a change in how individuals assigned “meaning and value to their conduct, their duties, their pleasures, their feelings” (5). According to Foucault, autonomy emerges in the realm of sexual activity as one learns to “focus their attention on themselves, to decipher, recognize, and acknowledge themselves as subjects of desire” (*Hermeneutics* 13). A shift from the outer spheres of life towards the inner dynamics of the self brings into focus the individual value system and its reconfiguration when pleasures and feelings gain layers of previously denied meanings.

Focused on the problem of belonging to the community, in which the “individuality of members . . . might be completely swallowed up by the demands of the group struggle,” *Pornografia* and *Portnoy’s Complaint* make the orientation towards the inner dynamics of the self particularly meaningful (Izenberg 453). While rooted in the analysis of ancient culture, Foucault’s perspective on the turn from the outer towards the inner as foundational to the relationship between sexuality and autonomy highlights the universal power of recognizing oneself as a subject of desire. In Foucauldian terms, the body represents the site on which discourses inscribe themselves with the possibility to be contested. The notion of the body as “the target of power” precludes “the liberal conception of individuals as unconstrained creative essences,” at the same time, bringing into focus the inner dynamics of the self and its role as a potential locus of autonomy (Mills 82).

Rather than seeing individuals as stable entities, Foucault analyses “the discursive processes through which bodies are constituted” (83). What gives rise to such processes in *Pornografia* is the revival of myth-making in the postwar Polish society. The author looks critically at the Polish attitude towards the past, claiming that his choice to set the novel in 1943 should remind the nation that “its womb can accommodate conflicts, dramas, ideas other than those already theoretically established” (*Pornografia* 13). The statement problematizes the legacy of Polish Messianism with its efforts to justify suffering as a consequence of Poland’s unique status in God’s plan. Lying at the heart of this critique is the inability of the nation to invent itself beyond “the collective provinciality and its manias” (Gasyna 9).

In *Portnoy’s Complaint*, interrogated through the positioning of the body as a site of resistance is the notion of Jewish-American belonging. Arising from the spirit of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, Roth’s

novel implicitly contrasts the rigid discourse surrounding interracial relationships and assimilation in the Jewish-American community with a broader cultural phenomenon encouraging liberation of the body from constraining cultural structures. Emerging from the tension between the individual and the collective is the awareness of “a body totally imprinted by history” (Mills 83). Consequently, in discovering desire against the reality of collective belonging, Portnoy shapes his sexual experience into a symbolic inversion of the Jewish-American discourse. In both novels, the body as “a site of struggle and discursive conflict” affords the characters the experience of the self beyond the ideas projected on them by the collective imagination (84).

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“A LONGED-FOR ENDING OF SORTS”: POLISH COLLECTIVE BELONGING

The state of collective stagnation leads the writer-protagonist in Gombrowicz’s *Trans-Atlantyk* to exclaim on the day of leaving Poland for Argentina:

Oh, sail ye, sail ye my Compatriots to thy very own Nation! Sail ye to thy Nation sacred albeit Accursed! . . . Sail ye to that St. Crackpot of thine, by Nature accursed, for ever being born yet remaining Unborn! Sail ye, sail so he will . . . forever hold ye between Existence and Nonexistence. (8)

Written in a style parodying the tradition of “nobleman’s storytelling” (*gawęda szlachecka*), which has its roots in Baroque literature, the passage mediates the image of the nation crippled by its own myths. Using the pejorative terms “St. Crackpot” (“*Cudak*”), “monster” (“*Stwór*”), and “St. Sluggard” (“*Ślamazara*”) as equivalents to homeland, Gombrowicz speaks of a society in a state of abeyance. While the bold moments of sexual freedom in Roth’s novel echo a broader countercultural dimension underlying the sexual revolution of the 1960s, no social shift of a similar kind exists in *Pornografia* to hold a mirror to the protagonist’s self-discovery. Set in a world defined by intellectual inertia and well-worn debates about God and nation, the dominant image of society in *Pornografia* is, again, that of a grey zone between “Existence and Nonexistence.”

Pornografia opens with the image of artists persisting in the routine of meetings in Krucza Street amid the havoc of war-devastated Warsaw. No longer a part of Zodiak, Ziemiańska, IPS—the centers of the avant-garde in the golden age of Poland’s prewar cultural life—the group “trie[s] hard to go on as artists, writers, and thinkers” (7). Confronted with German military force, operations of bunches, the Underground Army, and the

Polish police, the narrator Witold finds himself inhibited by a sense of tragedy and contends with the imbalance between the collective and personal dimensions of his life. The situation changes with the arrival of a middle-aged theatre director Fryderyk, whose distinct behavior traits and aura of detachment from national problems appeal to Witold as crucial for his own self-realization. Fryderyk's unexpected visit fills the narrator with curiosity about "the new beauty and new poetry" beyond the surroundings dominated by war and initiates his association of sexual dynamics with personal freedom (Gombrowicz, *A Kind* 127).

Finding a counterweight to the surrounding forms of patriotism in the new kind of human presence, the narrator begins to rebel against the process of being shaped by convention in the spirit of Gombrowicz's famous dictum: "Let me conceive my own shape. Let no one do it for me" (*Ferdysdurke* 32). Studying Fryderyk's appearance, Witold sees him as "isolated from us in that eternal game of his . . . so separate from our collective drama, so disconnected from the discussion 'nation, God, proletariat, art' . . . that I found it restful, it gave me some relief" (*Pornografia* 10). The emphasis on Fryderyk's incongruence with the collective spirit exemplifies the characteristic feature of Gombrowicz's writing, described by Maria Janion as contradistinguishing the Polish and the human (55). The emphasis on Witold's relief at the sight of Fryderyk shifts the overtone of the scene from an ordinary encounter to one in which Fryderyk seduces the narrator with the potential of liberation from the collective void.

Embarking together on a journey to the countryside, described vaguely as related to a business supplying them with livelihood, the narrator begins to fantasize about discovering something sublime behind the visible details of the friend's demeanor. The effect of the sexually charged voyeurism is to reveal the narrator's excitement about the idea of retrieving his autonomy through experience that resists the demands of collective belonging. As noted by Allen James Kuharski, Fryderyk acts as "a catalyst for the release of the sexual fears and repressed desires of those around him" (150). Witold continually marvels at the qualities of the friend's presence, expressing astonishment with something impalpable described as "his singular inner quality" (Gombrowicz, *Pornografia* 11). The emphasis on the "peculiarity" or "silently-shouting impropriety" surrounding Fryderyk's appearance recurs in the narrative to hint at Witold's repressed desire (10). While Fryderyk's body appears to the narrator as alluringly peculiar, the physicality of others strikes him as "alien, brazen . . . crawling and pressing on us, only deepen[ing] my tête-à-tête with him" (10). At the height of his astonishment with the new stimulus, Witold describes the friend as "not an ordinary being but something more rapacious, strained by an extremity" (13). The contrast between Fryderyk's "rapacious" appeal and

the ordinariness of other people in the village creates an implicitly erotic dynamics that feeds into Witold's fascination with the idea of transcending "the deep sense of victimhood and struggle" expected of him as a member of postwar Polish society (Rosenson 150).

As suggested by the contrast between the imprisonment within the collective drama and the sudden animation under the peculiar male presence, Fryderyk's arrival propels the narrator to believe that erotic experience can be a passageway to personal freedom. A promise of liberation evoked by the characters' encounters emerges vividly during Witold's visit to a local Catholic church, a symbol of "an indigenous national tradition and a material embodiment of Polishness" (Jakubowska 50). Throughout the visit, the narrator denounces the mass for its overpowering effects under which "the lurking multiplicity of meanings vanish[es]" (Gombrowicz, *Pornografia* 20). When focusing his gaze on Fryderyk, who sits in the same aisle, Witold discovers that suddenly "a mass turns into an anti-mass," losing both its meaning and redemptive powers (Oklot 270). Using reproductive vocabulary such as "collapsing in a terrible impotence, no longer capable of begetting life," Gombrowicz depicts the disintegration of the mass under the weight of the protagonist's desire (Gombrowicz, *Pornografia* 22). Empowered by the sight of Fryderyk, the narrator describes his inner experience as a moment of victory over the collectivity: "What victory over the Mass! What pride! As if its abolition was, for me, a longed-for ending of sorts: finally I was alone, by myself, without anyone or anything but me" (24). Under the influence of the friend's presence, Witold experiences a temporary reversal within the hierarchy of power, which creates a promise of liberation by presenting the collective realm, not his private reality, as conquered.

"THE *UNDREAMT-OF*": SEXUAL DESIRE AND JEWISH-AMERICAN BELONGING

Engaging with Nazi occupation in Poland and the socioeconomic oppression of Jews in America, Gombrowicz and Roth, respectively, portray characters who attribute to erotic life a potential to actualize their liberation from the collective realm. Notably, *Portnoy's Complaint* derives the promise of liberation from the positioning of sexual life as the narrator's means to "choose pleasure [for myself] over duty to [my] loved ones"—a symbolic situation where, in focusing the attention on itself, the self becomes an agent shifting priorities and making choices (Roth 85).

Summing up the events of his father's life at the age of thirty-three, Alexander Portnoy struggles with the awareness that "nobody ever really

gave him satisfaction, return commensurate with goods delivered" (6). Far from the suburban world of the socially mobile, upper-class Jews, the narrator's father represents the perspective of the socioeconomically exploited. Selling insurance in Newark's most impoverished neighborhoods, the father receives medals for extraordinary returns, but his superiors' prejudice prevents him from ever obtaining promotion. Throughout his confession to psychiatrist Dr Spielvogel, Alexander Portnoy tries to come to terms with his parent's wish to raise a son into a member of the middle class and rehabilitate the family's social status through a conventional definition of success projected onto a child. At one point during the session, the character asks in the context of his propensity for neurotic behaviors: "Doctor, what is this sickness that I have? Is this the Jewish suffering I used to hear so much about? Is this what has come down to me from pogroms and the persecution?" (37). Portnoy's guilt for not measuring up to paternal hopes meshes with a sense that the extent to which his life follows an inherited structure of history seems disproportional to independent action. Described as "all I really had that I could call my own," the protagonist's erotic life takes a form of resistance against the Jewish milieu, offering space where convention and dominant values can be actively transgressed (33).

Given the need to distance himself from his Jewishness and working-class background, the sphere of sexual life appeals to the narrator as a way to "leave off complaining . . . and go out into the air, and live" (119). The possibility of transgression inherent to this erotic experience represents Portnoy's process of endowing sexual life with the potential to actualize his personal freedom. To escape the image of "a nice Jewish boy" that overshadowed his childhood, Portnoy explores the unruly and boundless nature of desire, the very dimensions that disrupt the projection grounded in the collective structures (37):

What is he doing to himself, this fool! this idiot! this furtive *boy*! This sex maniac! He simply cannot—*will* not—control the fires in his putz, the fevers in his brain, the desire continually burning within for the new, the wild, the unthought-of and, if you can imagine such thing, the *undreamt-of*. (101)

In fantasizing about the reaction to his sexual adventures, Portnoy uses sexuality to project a vision of himself through the eyes of those who embody the essence of the Jewish custom. Instead of focusing on the character's inner experience, as does Gombrowicz's mass scene to depict the momentary impact of the erotic life on autonomy, Roth operates primarily on the level of the external collective projection. Key to the

promise of freedom here remains the intersection of rule-breaking and physical pleasure. Throughout the book, Portnoy recalls his teenage sexual experience in the context of a realization that taboos could be “so easily and simply broken, confidence . . . given to the whole slimy, suicidal Dionysian side of my nature” (79). In evoking the liberating aspect of the sexual self-discovery, the narrative circles back to Portnoy’s impression that the most powerful moments of release from guilt in his life are primarily the moments of transgression tied to the uninhibited erotic life. The narrator claims: “to break the law, all you have to do is—just go ahead and break it! All you have to do is stop trembling and quaking and finding it unimaginable and beyond you” (79). The narrative pits the sphere of erotic life against collective structures by highlighting the narrator’s belief that transgressions connected to sexual experience speak directly to the aspects of his class and ethnic backgrounds:

O America! America! it may have been gold in the streets to my grandparents, it may have been a chicken in every pot to my father and mother, but to me, a child whose earliest movie memories are of Ann Rutherford and Alice Faye, America is a *shikse* nestling under your arm whispering love love love love love! (165)

In this passage, the structures of the old world symbolized by Portnoy’s allusion to Herbert Hoover’s 1928 presidential campaign promising “a chicken in every pot and two cars in every garage” emerge in contraposition to the object of sexual desire (qtd. in Safire 115). For Portnoy, the allure of interracial relationships and non-Jewish women’s media image lies primarily in the distrust of assimilation represented by his parents and their belief that “the only place for a Jew to live is among Jews” (Roth 52). Portnoy’s attribution of an emancipatory potential to erotic life emerges from a link between sexual pleasure and defiance of norms such as “marrying nice Jewish girls, and having children, and buying houses, and putting down roots” (100). Ultimately, his association of America with sexual freedom represents a shift from the priorities of the Old World towards the belief in the power of erotic life to actualize personal liberation.

THE DYNAMICS OF (UN)FULFILLMENT

Recognizing erotic life as a pathway to emancipation, the narrators of both novels invest their quest for autonomy in symbolic subjects that overstep the boundaries of collective realms. In *Pornografia*, Witold’s

erotic awakening reaches its apex at the sight of local teenagers, Henia and Karol, whose youth appeals to him as untainted by the circumstances of the collective struggle. The figure of “American shikse” constitutes parallel dynamics in *Portnoy’s Complaint* as an embodiment of “the inter-marital threat to the survival of Judaism” (Jaher 518). Yet, it is important to note that transgressing the world of postwar American Jewishness offers Portnoy an alternative landscape where the countercultural spirit of the 1960s has already been grounded. If Portnoy’s self-discovery is premised on overstepping the boundaries of American Jewishness, Witold, operating in an environment devoid of a countercultural principle, experiences eroticism primarily through the person of Fryderyk. The remoteness of the Polish countryside combined with complex para-rituals as prerequisites for actualizing same-sex desire in *Pornografia* point to the vicarious mode of Witold’s erotic experience, constituting a significant difference between the two characters’ situations.

The use of the symbolic subjects in the novels invites the reader to consider why the sphere of erotic life corresponds with the characters’ rebellion against the collective dynamics, but the promise of liberation mediated by emancipatory moments ultimately cannot be realized. Drawing upon the analysis of classical antiquity which ascribed to sexuality the aspect of “a care of the self” (*epimeleia heautou*), Foucault positions sexuality as a component of individual ethics. The author emphasizes a link between sexual activity and the techniques of life that allow one to embark on a new relationship with one’s self and others, suggesting that “our problem nowadays is not, in a way, similar to that of the Greeks, since most of us no longer believe that ethics is founded in religion, nor do we want a legal system to intervene in our modal, personal, private life” (Foucault qtd. in Taylor 240). If ethics is something we establish through individual action rather than a finished achievement of religions or legal systems, the project of liberation through sexual life is viable only to the extent it incorporates “intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being” (Foucault, *Hermeneutics* 11). Assuming that the use of pleasure is to be approached with agency that is crucial to ethics, Foucault’s proposition is that sexuality offers one an area to exercise an attitude of care for oneself as much as for others.

While Foucauldian understanding of sexuality sees emancipatory potential in eroticism, Gombrowicz’s development of *Pornografia*’s plot undermines such trust. The motive of an impossible coupledness in the novel performs the failure of a liberating operation based on a Foucauldian understanding of sexuality. *Pornografia* sees Witold and Fryderyk stage

suggestive situations with hope to arouse Henia and Karol's interest in each other, even though such development is unlikely from the beginning due to the girl's engagement with another man. Resorting to clandestine communication through letters, the adults arrange bizarre events, such as requesting Henia to roll the bottoms of Karol's trousers. Gombrowicz justifies Fryderyk's intrusion in the private reality of the teenagers by describing his role in the novel in terms of "a stage director, even a chemist, who by bringing people together tries to create the alcohol of a new charm" (*A Kind* 128). It is again Fryderyk who arranges a moment of the young people's physical touch and, in cooperation with Witold, makes the scene visible for the girl's father to undermine her engagement. Although the goal of Witold and Fryderyk is to become autonomous from the collective, their failed undertaking to bring Henia and Karol together shows that this desire must remain only a desire. The absurdity and eventual failure of the characters' efforts captures the essence of Gombrowicz's idea of the "interhuman church" with its strictly relational ontology, which rejects the possibility of absolute autonomy and, at most, recognizes a chance to loosen the grip of the national community.

Witold and Fryderyk's staging of the artificial erotic situations exemplifies the phenomenon described by Roland Barthes as "see[ing] the other in the guise of an inert object, like a kind of stuffed doll . . . to shift . . . desire from this annulled object to . . . desire itself" (36). Such power dynamics also underpins Portnoy's sexual encounters as his desire to stage provocative erotic scenarios degrades non-Jewish women, exemplified by Mary Jane Reed, the illiterate daughter of a West Virginia coal miner. In both novels, the promise of liberation through sexual pleasure reveals a problematic degree of manipulation involved in the attempts to bring about the desired erotic conditions. Portnoy disparagingly nicknames the woman "Monkey" and expects her to act on his fantasies, which includes entering a threesome with a prostitute during their vacation in Rome. Confronting Portnoy with "an increasingly powerful sense that she is being dehumanized," the woman, nonetheless, complies with the demands, stimulated by genuine feelings of love (Hayes 106). Given the problematic power dynamics whereby the enforcement of an erotic scenario violates the subject's integrity, Foucault's link between sexuality and "the attitude towards the self, others, and the world" helps to elucidate the failure of both characters' hopes for liberation (*Hermeneutics* 10). The more "embedded, practice-based account of autonomy" proposed by the French thinker positions individual ethics as decisive for one's ability to find freedom in the sphere of sexual activity (Critchley 41). Without attention to the ethical implications of agency, the characters in both novels fallaciously

premise their liberation on the submissiveness of another subject. Thus, it is in the moment of confrontation with the agency of the women and the teenagers that Portnoy and Witold, respectively, become aware of their ultimate inability to become liberated.

The characters' paradoxical inability to acknowledge the autonomy of others within the plan to retrieve their own ultimately prevents them from reaching the desired fulfillment. As she no longer agrees to submit to Portnoy's demands, Mary Jane shifts in his perception from "the fulfillment of . . . lascivious adolescent dreams" to "the girl who has got me all wrong" (Roth 134). Learning about the woman's feelings, the protagonist admits that the unfolding image of female vulnerability spells the failure of his liberation project: "You see, in this Monkey's estimation it was my mission to pull her up from those very abysses of frivolity and waste of perversity and wildness and lust, into which I myself have been so vainly trying all my life successfully to sink" (135). Portnoy's disappointment mirrors the failure of Witold's liberation plan in that they both dismiss the possibility that their objects of desire have feelings beyond the sanction of a preconceived erotic scenario. In *Pornografia*, the teenagers not only remain indifferent to each other but also mirror the dynamics of the narrator's fascination by disclosing the desire to enter the adults' world. Instead of developing a bond with Henia, Karol endeavors to impress his older colleagues and stages similarly provocative situations as Witold and Fryderyk in hope to win their respect. At one point in the novel, the character approaches an old lady in the field and pulls up her skirt during a walk with the adults. A seemingly innocent joke leads Witold to the bitter realization that the two adolescents desire to enter maturity as much as he wants to experience bliss through their youth: "He didn't want to be just 'a boy with a young girl,' but 'a boy with adults,' a boy who is breaking into adulthood. . . what a dark, perverted idea!" (Gombrowicz, *Pornografia* 66). The narrator's ultimate realization is that the teenage fascination with maturity clashes with his private fantasy and, thus, can no longer serve as a driving force of personal liberation.

The link between the sexual dynamics and the unfulfilled promise of liberation allows the authors to dramatize their portrayals of imprisonment within the collective. Towards the end of Gombrowicz's novel, the urge to control other people's behavior is used against Witold and Fryderyk as the local community employs the same techniques of manipulation to enforce their participation in a collective mission. In the final part of the novel, the landowner who offers a shelter to an underground resistance leader, Siemian, learns that the Home Army wants to kill him due to the confidential information he could disclose. The news about the visitor's conflict with the Resistance instantly prompts the landowner to carry

out the murder on his own terms. The process of devising a strategy for killing Siemian resembles “the reconstruction of Witold and Fryderyk’s erotic game” as the landowner and his family resort to parallel methods of scenario staging to draft people into their self-appointed mission (Jarzębski 49). Involuntarily involved in the conspiracy and no longer able to pursue his erotic fantasy, Witold realizes:

Hipolit’s tone of voice revealed a lightning-fast change in our relation. I ceased to be a guest, I was in service, stuck with them in harshness, in cruelty that was turning as much against us as against Siemian. But how had he wronged us? All of a sudden, rushing headlong, we had to butcher him, endangering our own necks. (Gombrowicz, *Pornografia* 143)

Here, the narrator expresses bafflement with a sudden change of his household status as the authoritative tone of the landowner imposes on him the attitude of dedication to a national cause. Through the use of a passive voice in the phrase “stuck with them in harshness” (“*wsadzony wraz z nimi w ostrość*”) the narrator presents himself as subject to somebody else’s action, which undermines his previous self-image as an agent of change within the dynamics of Henia and Karol’s friendship. The pressure on Witold to comply with the collective action parallels his own expectations towards the teenagers to serve as “marionettes in the throes of an elemental force” and fulfil his fantasies regardless of private feelings (139).

The motif of vengeance is also at play when the failed promise of liberation meshes with Portnoy’s discovery of his impotence, seen as a punishment for mistreating Mary Jane. The character labels the situation as “The Monkey’s Revenge” and self-mockingly imagines himself at a court against the accusation of mental abuse. Portnoy’s lack of remorse creates space for feelings of self-pity as he ponders: “Well, why, damn it, can’t I have some fun! Why is the smallest thing I do for pleasure immediately illicit—while the rest of the world rolls laughing in the mud” (Roth 225). Ultimately, the recollection of impotence announces the impossibility of moving away from the collective realm:

And all at once it happens again, I am impaled again upon the long ago, what was, what will never be! The door slams, she is gone—my salvation! my kin!—and I am whimpering on the floor with MY MEMORIES! My endless childhood which I won’t relinquish—or which won’t relinquish me! Which is it! *Remembering radishes*—the ones I raised so lovingly in my Victory Garden. In that patch yard beside our cellar door. *My kibbutz*. Radishes, parsley, carrots—yes, I am a patriot too . . . only in another place. (271)

Similarly to *Pornografia*, the final section of the book presents an unexpected shift in the protagonist's self-governance, depicted as a direct consequence of mistreating the subject he desired. Dean J. Franco asks in the context of this plot development: "Is it possible that this seemingly transgressive, liberating, boundary-breaking novel, in fact arrives at the lugubrious conclusion that liberation is a ruse?" (52). Implicated in the spirit of the 1960s, the individual failure comments on a broader countercultural dynamic. If democracy perpetuates inequality and segregation, Portnoy's predicament seems to suggest that the revolution emerging on its foundations cannot become a driver of viable change. Announcing "the eclipse of his idealistic quest for a humanism that transcends ethnic and national divisions," the protagonist's conclusive recollection of the Victory Garden grounds him within the realm of childhood and, by extension, the very collective tensions he wished to escape (53).

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CONCLUSIONS

Pornografia and *Portnoy's Complaint* depict characters who, burdened with the difficult legacy of their respective collectivities, transfer the desire for autonomy onto the sphere of erotic life. In both novels, the process of endowing erotic dynamics with an emancipatory potential builds a promise of liberation which does not culminate in a permanent change to the characters' predicament. As exemplified by the ethically problematic side of Witold's and Portnoy's erotic pursuits, the unrealized promise of liberation allows the authors to propel the existing tensions between the individual and the collective. Witold's final entanglement in the defense of a collective purpose parallels his desperate attempts to pair the teenagers. Similarly, Roth depicts Portnoy's impotence as an eerie punishment for the mistreatment of Mary Jane, which meshes with his realization of the inability to leave behind the collective realm. Depicting characters disciplined by the same force they believed would bring about their liberation, Gombrowicz and Roth draw upon the unrealized promise of liberation to dramatize their portrayals of imprisonment within the collectivity. Considered alongside *Pornografia*, Roth's novel reveals parallels between both Polish and Jewish-American experience and the two authors' attitudes towards their difficult legacies. For both writers, history marked by the events of the Second World War lies at the heart of the fraught relationship between the individual and the collective, mediating the rejection of a "merely sentimental solidarity" with the native milieu (Kazin qtd. in Gooblar 12).

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Precious Evanescence: The “Little Angels” by Chichico Alkmim through the Lens of Vladimir Jankélévitch

ABSTRACT

This article establishes a dialogue between two distinct domains: the portraits of deceased infants—known in Brazil as *anjinbos* (“little angels”)—captured by the Brazilian photographer Chichico Alkmim (1886–1978) in the first decades of the 20th century in the region of Diamantina (Minas Gerais), and the thought of the French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch (1903–85), who deeply reflected on themes such as death, memory, transience, irreversibility, and innocence. The article is divided into two main sections, each with two subsections. The first section begins by contextualizing the conception of the *anjinbo* in the popular and religious collective imagination of Minas Gerais, from colonial times to the early 20th century (1.1). It then introduces Chichico Alkmim’s biography and his particular approach to the *anjinbos* portraits (1.2). The second section shifts the focus to the project’s central aim, connecting cultural and historical implications, as well as artistic traits of this poignant photographic production to certain aspects of Jankélévitch’s work. Initially, this connection is explored through a negative approach (2.1), highlighting how the religious beliefs surrounding the *anjinbos*, the association between childhood and death, and postmortem photography contrast with Jankélévitch’s values and sensibility. The final subsection (2.2), however, delves into a point that might draw the philosopher closer to Chichico’s *anjinbos* portraits: the commitment (endowed with ontological and ethical implications) of attesting to a completed existence.

Keywords: memory, death, “little angel,” photography, funeral.



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During a visit to the exhibition *Chichico Alkmim, Fotógrafo*, held in the Palácio das Artes (Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, Brazil) in 2019, I realized that Chichico's portraits of dead children, the so-called "little angels" (*anjinhos*), could be profoundly interpreted through the thought of Vladimir Jankélévitch. Especially recognized for his works on moral philosophy and musical aesthetics, Jankélévitch constructed—outside the dominant philosophical schools and trends of the second half of the 20th century—"a kind of private constellation" (Berlowitz qtd. in Jankélévitch and Berlowitz 238). Within this "constellation," themes such as death, transience, memory, nostalgia, innocence, enchantment, irreversibility, and irrevocability are intertwined and illuminated in their multiple ontological, anthropological, ethical, and aesthetic implications, offering a privileged theoretical framework for reflecting on that photographic production.

Upon discovering what Chichico's "little angels" refer to, some readers might quickly choose to skip this text, since the theme of death, in itself, is one that our contemporary Western worldview often prefers to avoid or reject.¹ This rejection may be even greater when it comes to the death of a child, which appears to be particularly incomprehensible and absurd. We would rather forget that death could arrive "too early to cruelly cut short the life of those who were just born and who would have all the right to live it" (Recalcati 23).² Besides reminding us of this possibility—one that, fortunately, is diminished today in privileged countries that are spared from war, famine, and epidemics, and benefit from advanced medicine—the portraits of dead infants may now easily be seen as reflecting a taste for the macabre.

Nevertheless, Chichico's "little angels" could evoke reactions, feelings, and thoughts beyond mere morbid curiosity—a potential danger for both the author and the reader when engaging with such a theme. When one closely considers the context of the portraits, one realizes that they do not only expose infants' corpses but also address care, affection, and devotion. These forms of relationship may offer a different "tonality" to an approach to death, from which beauty, delicacy, and poetry are not completely excluded (although, as will be shown, this is not the predominant Jankélévitchian approach to death). Furthermore, the examined photographs raise political and social

¹ As Lisciani Petrini, one of the most prominent scholars of Jankélévitch's thought, sums up, there is "in the people of our time a growing horror of death and, consequently, an obstinate 'anesthetizing' flight from it and from the 'dying patient,' and even now from funeral rites and symbols themselves, which have been replaced by increasingly depersonalized practices and 'mass-produced' articles" (*Charis* 58–59).

² All the non-English texts quoted in this article that appear in the "Works Cited" section are my own translations.

questions that remain relevant to our time (particularly in relation to postcolonial studies), an aspect that can be emphasized through the lens of Jankélévitch's thought.

This analysis will be divided into two parts. First, it will be necessary to contextualize the traditional concept of the "little angels" (especially as understood in Brazilian culture) and its depiction in Chichico's work. Secondly, the proposed dialogue between these portraits and Jankélévitchian philosophy will be explored: initially, via the differences in their conceptions, and then via a significant point of intersection, namely, the importance and the commitment—imbued with ontological and ethical implications—of attesting to a completed existence.

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THE "LITTLE ANGELS" AND CHICHICO'S WORK: A CONTEXTUALIZATION

A POPULAR EXPRESSION IN A RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEW

Largely deployed in the Iberian Peninsula, in Italy, and in Latin America from the 18th century to the first half of the 20th, the denomination "little angels" (*anjinhos* in Portuguese, *angelitos* in Spanish and *angioletti* in Italian) used to refer to baptized, dead infants. These were generally newborns up to 7-year-old children, who were considered to be deprived of the "use of reason"³ and consequently of the possibility of committing sin. That immaculate condition enabled their souls to ascend directly to Heaven, where they would intercede on behalf of their earthly family (in particular facilitating their mother's future entrance to Heaven).

As Duarte notes in her doctoral dissertation, this conception combined popular and orthodox religious beliefs. On the one hand, Catholic theology could not endorse the identification between a human child and an angel. According to the explanation of the Brazilian Benedictine monk Estêvão Bettencourt, dead infants, even when baptized, "do not become *angels* or *little angels*, as people sometimes say. They can only be considered little angels to the extent that they reproduce the innocence of angels. Between the nature of the human spirit and the nature of the angel there is no possible transition" (qtd. in Duarte 143–44, emphasis mine).⁴ On the other

³ See *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (132), session XXI, chapter IV.

⁴ This insurmountable ontological difference could be apprehended through the entry "angel" in the *Vocabulário português & latino* (1712), by Raphael Bluteau, where the celestial creature is defined as "a created, intellectual, spiritual, and complete substance. A *substance* because it is an entity, capable of subsisting by its own; *created* because it is extracted from

hand, religious ideas such as purity restored to children through baptism and preserved until the acquisition of the “use of reason,” the intercessory power of the elect souls, and the Communion of Saints, which allowed “exchanges between the earthly and the celestial worlds” (73), were affirmed by the decrees of the Council of Trent (1545–63). Additionally, the title of *anjinhas* also appeared in some death registers in parishes both in Portugal and in Minas Gerais, indicating that the official Church may have, in some cases, incorporated the colloquial expression (151–54).

It is important to note that, contrary to our contemporary perspective, the feeling which accompanied the loss of a baptized dead infant in Latin America and in Catholic European countries was not necessarily a melancholic or grievous one. On the contrary, the family and the surrounding community would have enough motives to rejoice, believing that their beloved innocents, besides becoming strong intercessors, were promptly received in Paradise and spared from the hardships of earthly existence (Delumeau 489).

As a matter of fact, an official post-Tridentine document of the Catholic Church, namely the *Rituale Romanum* enacted by Pope Paul V in 1614, prescribed that the funerals of baptized infants deserved a festive celebration, in contrast to the somber funerals of adults.⁵ This prescription—which encouraged an optimistic posture from the child’s parents, godparents, and other relatives—appears to have been followed literally and even intensified in Brazil, where it persisted in some locations until the first half of the 20th century.⁶ For instance, during a journey to the city of Rio de Janeiro in the early 19th century, the English traveler Luccock expressed his surprise at the cheerful attitude of a mother attending the funeral of the last of her

nothing; *intellectual* because it is provided with understanding, with which it understands things in one single and simple intuition, without discoursing, combining one thing with the other; and *complete*, because, by its own hypostasis, it is its only complement” (qtd. in Duarte 128, emphasis in the original). Obviously, none of those traces is shared by a human, who, moreover, is always an *individual*, unlike an angel, who, according to Saint Thomas of Aquinas (*Summa theologiae* I, q. 50, a. 4), is always the perfect representative of an entire species, escaping from the multiplicity of earthly beings (Bonino 124–26).

⁵ The document establishes that “in the funerals of children, just as in those of adults, the bells should not be rung; if they are rung, they should not sound mournfully, but festively. The garments appropriate to the child’s age are also prescribed, as well as the use of flower crowns or aromatic herbs to indicate the integrity and virginity of their body, along with the use of a stole and white surplice for the parish priest and priests” (Duarte 77).

⁶ According to Pelegrín, the extremely joyful funerals of the “little angels” were widespread across the countries of Spanish-speaking America, where they have been maintained up to the present day in the province of Santiago del Estero (Argentina), among rural populations. She also hypothesizes that the *Velorio del Angelito* in Hispanic America originated from the *Vetlatori del Albaet* in the Spanish region of Valencia, a practice that may have continued until the first decades of the 20th century.

surviving children (80). Later, the renowned Brazilian folklorist Câmara Cascudo records that, in the state of Ceará (Northeast Brazil), probably at the beginning of the 20th century, the funeral processions of the “little angels” were often accompanied by celebratory displays including pistol shots, prayers, and poetry (qtd. in Duarte 75). And, according to the childhood recollections of the writer Iara Ramos Tribuzzi, in her hometown of Salinas (North of Minas Gerais) in the 1940s, cheerful ringing of bells announced the funerals of the *anjinhos*, whose bodies were placed over a wooden support, covered with a cloth and adorned with a profusion of colored flowers, some of which were made out of crepe paper by the mother of the deceased. Nevertheless, due to an increasing process of secularization that, from the end of the 19th century onward, affected to varying degrees the different regions of Brazil (and of the world), Brazilian families tended to adopt more circumspect attitudes towards the loss of their infants (72).

In addition to secularization, the changes in the human relationship with death that occurred in Brazil (as well as in the Western world) during the 19th and early 20th centuries were also driven by unprecedented advances in hygiene standards and technology. On one hand, the improvement of sanitary conditions—brought about, for example, by the development and application of certain vaccines—may have “made the loss of one’s own child less common and, therefore, more tragic” (*Storia e Memoria*). On the other hand, the memory of the departed loved ones was progressively liberated from religious symbols and constraints, as the burial place moved away from the territory of a parish. Therefore, private expressions of grief and affection arose in innovative forms and media, such as photography and newspaper obituaries, which considerably extended postmortem tributes beyond the restricted memorials of national heroes, artists, and saints.⁷

CHICHICO’S BIOGRAPHY AND AN OVERVIEW OF HIS “ANJINHOS”

It was precisely at this historical period that Francisco Augusto Alkmim, known by his nickname Chichico, was born in Bocaiúva, a small town in the North of the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais. Around 1913, after moving to the colonial city of Diamantina (also in Minas Gerais), Chichico devoted himself entirely to photography, working occasionally as an itinerant photographer but more consistently as a studio-based one. His

⁷ A comprehensive bibliography on the ancient and internationally shared practice of postmortem photography—which includes titles examining the portraits of deceased infants—is provided by Virginia de la Cruz Lichet (2025). As the present article focuses on the occurrence of this practice in Brazil, another text should be added to the aforementioned bibliography: the doctoral dissertation “O corpo, a morte, a imagem: a invenção de uma presença nas fotografias memoriais e *post-mortem*” by Carolina Junqueira dos Santos.

studio, installed at his own residence, was fully equipped by the mid-1920s and likely remained active until the mid-1950s (Silva Santos 45). Notably, “unlike many other studio photographers working in the countryside of Brazil at that time, Chichico never limited himself to portraying Diamantina’s bourgeoisie. Laborers connected to small-scale mining, commerce, and industry also frequented his studio” (Instituto Moreira Salles). It is widely acknowledged in Diamantina that, in some cases, those underprivileged clients, most of them descendants of the enslaved, had the opportunity to be photographed—and photographed with dignity⁸—thanks to Chichico’s generous heart, capable of accepting unusual payments for his services, such as “a cabinet and a pounder” (Alkmim 103), and of providing clothing and footwear whenever necessary.

Among the more than 5,000 glass negatives that compose the photographer’s collection,⁹ which include images of “weddings, baptisms, funerals, popular and religious feasts, landscapes, and street scenes” (Instituto Moreira Salles), we find 53 postmortem items, of which 46 are photographs of the *anjinhas*. As occurred with the portraits of deceased adults, those of the dead infants, probably dated between 1913 and 1930, were taken both indoors and outdoors, and, in some cases, in the small villages where the grieving families lived. Irradiating an eerie, yet at the same time, graceful atmosphere, the photographs of the *anjinhas* are full of religious references and allusions, substantiating a recent statement by the Italian maestro Riccardo Muti (one that is especially valid from a religious standpoint): “[W]hen we speak of death, we speak of sacrality” (Muti and Torno 57–58).

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⁸ It is important to note that even in the work of a photographer with social concerns—Chichico was a member of the charitable and educational institution União Operária Beneficente de Diamantina (Silva Santos 59)—and committed to portraying Afro-Brazilian individuals in an affirmative way, undeniable traces of social exclusion can still be found. One of his portraits, which received a prominent place in the exhibition *Chichico Alkmim, Fotógrafo*, captures two female figures who, while flanking the central four members of a well-to-do white family, hold the backdrop of a bucolic landscape. According to Lilia Schwarcz, the figure on the right is “the photographer’s wife—Maria Josefina Neto Alkmim, or simply Miquita—known as his right hand in the studio” (184), while the one on the left is “a barefoot black girl, a little disheveled,” wearing a “dirty and stained” white dress that “was evidently a work outfit” (185). The girl stands in stark contrast not only to the white children in the portrait (from which she was probably cropped in the photo’s final version) but also to Chichico’s other portraits of “Afro-descendant figures, immortalized in refined clothes, carefully styled hair, and fashionable shoes” (ibid.). The presence of the girl in the photographic plate inadvertently denounces the shocking inequality in post-slavery Brazilian society, a situation that directly affected Afro-Brazilian children, who were often adjuncts of white families, reduced to the condition of “common laborers, with no right to education or protection” (ibid.).

⁹ This collection has been held since 2015, under a loan agreement, in the Moreira Salles Institute (Rio de Janeiro), the most important photographic archive in Brazil.

We may mention, as examples of those elements, the white dresses and flowers that, covering and surrounding the infant's corpse, allude to his or her immaculate and elect soul; the luminosity that, irradiating from that corpse, suggests a divine or supernatural presence; the inclusion of religious images, such as the Sacred Heart of Mary, watching over the deceased infant; the participation in the scene of living children dressed as angels, simulating the reception of the infant in the celestial sphere; and the inclined position of the baby's torso or of the coffin creating an illusion of an angel's ascension.



Fig. 1. Chichico Alkmim, *Anjinho*, Diamantina (MG), undated. Gelatine silver glass negative. Courtesy of Chichico Alkmim's Archive (Instituto Moreira Salles).

As Virginia de la Cruz Lichet explains in "Image de la Mort et la Mort en Images," some of the features seen in these portraits were common tropes of this photographic genre at the time. This confirms that secularization in certain parts of the globe was not as radical or accelerated as we might have assumed, influenced by the Nietzschean diagnosis of the "death of God" in modernity.¹⁰ Certainly, Diamantina, a small episcopal city¹¹ somewhat

¹⁰ See "The Madman" in *The Gay Science*, Book 3, §125 (Nietzsche 181–82).

¹¹ The Diocese of Diamantina was created on 6 June 1854, and elevated to Archdiocese on 28 June 1917.

isolated due to its geographical position, its altitude (about 1,300m above sea level), and its topography, could be listed among those locations. Therefore, Chichico's "little angels" (as well as other portraits of the genre in that period) would not only combine the new, socially recommended attitude of restraint toward the dead with previous religious beliefs, but would also, at unexpected moments, capture the lingering "familiarity with the child's death and even relaxed attitudes" (Duarte 79).



Fig. 2. Chichico Alkmim, *Anjinho*, Diamantina (MG), undated. Gelatine silver glass negative. Courtesy of Chichico Alkmim's Archive (Instituto Moreira Salles).

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A POSSIBLE DIALOGUE WITH JANKÉLÉVITCHIAN THOUGHT

SOME POINTS OF DIVERGENCE

Proceeding to the philosophical foundation of this investigation, we should firstly emphasize that Jankélévitch's thought is originally woven with two threads of contrasting textures. On the one hand, the agnostic thinker of Jewish descent demonstrates a delicate sensitivity to the manifestations of positive mysteries, such as music, poetry, love,

and forgiveness, trying to “touch” those *ineffable* realities through a language that, at times, flirts with poetry, Neoplatonism, and Christian mysticism. On the other hand, he adopts a very direct and even harsh approach when he focuses on war crimes and death, the object of study of his impressive work *La Mort*, published in 1966. Contrary to the nature of the *ineffable*, whose extreme fecundity inspires inexhaustible verbal and artistic formulations, death is the register of the *unspeakable* (*indicible*) par excellence: situated outside of our “possible experience” and identified with radical non-being, there is no content in it to be expressed, there is no continuity between it and life that allows a description or a preparation for it.

Therefore, the conception of the *anjinhas*, which human imagination furnishes with an unreachable and void state, would probably sound to Jankélévitch like an attempt to “elude the obstacle of unspeakability (*indicibilité*)” (Jankélévitch, *Mort* 54). It could be, according to the philosopher’s specification, a *euphemism* to cope with death,¹² which, as observed in this essay’s introduction, becomes even more shocking when it claims a child. While the Greeks used to invoke “in the place of the furious Erinyes, the benevolent Eumenides of death” (*ibid.*), from the 18th to the first decades of the 20th century, Brazilian Christians would have replaced the “scabrous monosyllable” (*ibid.*)—*mort* (death), which in Portuguese is actually a disyllable (*morte*)—with a peaceful image: the *anjinha*. This sort of euphemism sounds to the philosopher like “a fiction from which bad faith is never entirely absent” (56). Curiously, this moral hypothesis is implied in a passage of the renowned book *Casa-Grande & Senzala*, where the Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre states that the expression at hand derived from a strategy conceived by Jesuit priests in the colonial period who, “perhaps to mitigate among the indigenous people the harmful effect of the increased infant mortality that followed the contact or the intercourse under dysgenic conditions between the two races, did everything to adorn or to beautify the infant’s death” (203). Although this hypothesis is quite doubtful,¹³ we cannot

¹² Besides *euphemism*, Jankélévitch recognizes two other possible ways of avoiding the “mortal nothingness”: the *apophatic inversion* and the *conversion to the ineffable*, which he identifies as his own strategy. The former is the simple and consistent act of falling silent before unsayable death, and the latter, according to the explanation of Lisciani Petrini, “the consciousness that we *cannot* truly speak of death and despite that—it would be better to say *precisely because of that, not despite that*—we speak infinitely on it, *knowing that it is exactly what keeps us inside life*” (“Risposta,” emphasis in the original). Therefore, death is paradoxically converted into its opposite by the philosopher, who concludes *La Mort* with a suggestive affirmation of the fecundity of life itself.

¹³ The fact that this conception of a dead child as a “little angel” and other similar infant funeral rites were also present in Europe, within a context of religious consolation and embellishment of death, disavows Freyre’s theory.

deny that the conception of the “little angels” was directly connected to practices and ideas, such as baptism, sin, salvation, and expiation, through which the Catholic Church strongly manipulated the faithful, notably those who belonged to other religious matrices, stimulating fear and fantasies.

A component of fantasy certainly takes part in the conception of the “little angel,” contributing to the elusion of the emptiness of death. According to Jankélévitch, the “beyond” should be really *beyond* everything in immanent experience, including any idea of the future, a term that integrates the time-honored expression “future life.” For an imaginative individual or collective mind that, as already mentioned, surpasses the limits of “possible experience,” Paradise is “a sublimated here below, as Hell is a monstrously grimacing and deformed here below” (Jankélévitch, *Mort* 344). Moreover, the conception of the “little angels” supposes a “mercenary hope of Paradise” (ibid.), especially from the mother who expects to be favored, both in the present and in the “afterlife,” by the aforementioned intercession of her lost child. Even if such a belief, in this circumstance, functioned as the only possible consolation, it would have negative moral implications according to Jankélévitch, an advocate of Fénelon’s theory of “pure love” (Jankélévitch and Berlowitz 126), because it ultimately implies an emphasis on self-interest that hinders a virtuous movement.

Independently of its logical, metaphysical, and moral problems, this belief in the “beyond” has left memorable traces in the arts. In his philosophy of music, Jankélévitch is aware of this contribution, when he praises the ethereal atmosphere of the last movement of Gabriel Fauré’s *Requiem*, “In paradisum deducant te angeli”: “May the angels lead you into Paradise. . . . May the choir of angels receive you. . .”¹⁴ Suggestively, the soprano line that leads the choir is, in some interpretations of the *Requiem*, performed by *pueri cantores*, living “little angels,” who, in musical and imaginary terms, assume the role of the angelic choir. Therefore, it is not entirely unreasonable to admit, using Jankélévitch’s thought as the theoretical basis for this study, that a visual art like photography could also have discovered an aesthetic potential in the treatment of euphemistic or fantastic motifs (even with a reduced degree of stylization, since, in the examined photography genre, the little angel is the infant’s corpse itself).

Nevertheless, Jankélévitch would probably have viewed Chichico’s and other photographers’ depictions of the “little angels” with some degree of aversion, for the simple fact of belonging to the genre of postmortem

¹⁴ One of the philosopher’s encomiums of this concluding movement may be found in *La Musique et l’ineffable* (126–27).

photography. In the final interview that forms the posthumous book *Penser la mort?*, Jankélévitch interprets the famous portrait of “Proust on his deathbed” (106), taken by Man Ray, along with embalmed corpses, mortuary masks, and hand casts (in the case of dead pianists), as a symptom of necrophilia. Paradoxically, according to the French thinker, the cult of death and its vestiges were stimulated by Christianity (106–07), acknowledged as the “religion of love” (107) and of resurrection, a point that Chichico’s portraits somehow indicate in the combination between the infants’ corpses and religious elements. For his part, Jankélévitch, in his inclination to the ineffable mysteries of life (Jankélévitch qtd. in Suarès 117–18), expressly condemns the attachment to such objects and images, as well as their aesthetic appreciation, seeing in those attitudes nothing else than “the curiosity of death, the curiosity of horrible things, from which men must turn away, in my opinion” (Jankélévitch, *Penser* 107).¹⁵ Coincidentally, the philosopher touches on a problem already presented in this article’s introduction: the risk of morbid curiosity, which, in addition to its theoretical sterility, is incapable of offering genuine nourishment.

Although one cannot find any direct mention of portraits of dead infants in Jankélévitch’s work, in *La Mort*, the philosopher identifies something “macabre” in connecting death with a life stage rich in potentiality, such as childhood. This identification, which could have further hindered his appreciation (and the appreciation of those who consciously or intuitively coincide with his position) of such a photographic practice, appears in the following passage, one that is eloquently illustrated using examples from the visual arts:

Is death hidden inside life like that hideous skull within the face of which it is the skeleton? In any case, this hidden skull is our concern. . . . *Melancholia* is, perhaps, the name given by Dürer to this unconfessed concern. The opposition is diametrical between Dürer’s concern and Raphael’s insouciance: Raphael is entirely turned toward the child and nativity, toward hope and the promises of future, toward radiant positivity of color and light . . . no mistrust constricts the smile of the Madonnas, no worry fades the glow of flesh, no concern veils the serenity of innocence, the anguish of decay does not poison the blessed blooming of life. The macabre artist, on the other hand, the artist of necrophilic civilizations, disassembles, from visible positivity, a suprasensible negativity that, in turn, he makes visible and manifest. (Jankélévitch, *Mort* 40)

¹⁵ Although the philosopher does not mention it, an emblematic example of a “horrible thing,” questionably embellished and converted into an object of Christian cult, is the Heilige Munditia (Saint Peter’s Church, Munich), the skeleton of an alleged female martyr from the first centuries of our era, ornamented with a crown, pieces of cloth that do not disguise her bones, colored stones, false eyes, and rotten teeth.

In the passage above, Jankélévitch, like Nietzsche in *The Case of Wagner*, implies an opposition between a Septentrional and a Meridional poetics, the former represented by Dürer's *Melencolia I* (an engraving full of elements that turn it into a *memento mori*, whose main figure is curiously an angel in the form of a pensive young woman, seated beside a *putto*), and the latter by the acclaimed Madonna paintings by Raphael. However, complementing Jankélévitch's remarks, it is important to note that, in the Italian Renaissance, "macabre" gestures can also be seen in some representations of the Virgin Mary and of the Holy Family. Niccolò Rondinelli, for example, depicts the threat of death, disguised in an idyllic ambiance, through a Madonna who does not look directly at the Infant Jesus on her lap, but at the goldfinch that foreshadows her baby's future Passion.¹⁶

Obviously, regarding the portraits of the "little angels," death is not merely a shadow seen in a small, living creature due to a perverted gaze (51), nor is it the insight afforded by an external and/or *a posteriori* knowledge of that individual's entire story. Rather, it is an irrevocable reality, effectively experienced by the child's family during the instant in which the photograph was taken. Yet even this distinction might not have been sufficient to make such portraits attractive to the French philosopher. Although he declares his artistic preference—especially in music—for a poetics of *ricordanza* (Jankélévitch qtd. in Jankélévitch and Berlowitz 215–16), his sensibility inclines more toward a vague and indefinite kind of remembrance, an "open nostalgia," born not from the geographical distance from one's homeland or from a beloved, but from the humanly shared awareness of time's irreversibility (Jankélévitch, *Irréversible* 360–67). This favored nostalgic atmosphere, closer to the aesthetic categories of grace and charm than to those of the tragic and the sublime, thus diverges from Chichico's portraits, which, although not completely devoid of grace, are marked by "determinate and motivated regrets" (Jankélévitch, *Mort* 270) and by a more explicit depiction.

A POINT OF CONVERGENCE: ATTESTING THE "FACT OF HAVING BEEN"

If, according to Jankélévitch, we must turn away from "horrible things" which flirt with necrophilia, then why would it still be important to value those ancient portraits and, furthermore, to relate them to the thought of that very philosopher? A suitable response, one already advanced at the end of the introduction, can now be outlined.

¹⁶ *Madonna col Bambino* (*Virgin and Child*) (1490–95). Oil on panel, 63 x 50.5 cm. Palazzo Barberini, Rome.

Interestingly, the philosopher's own moral engagements—also expressed in his writings—diverge from the tendencies characteristic of some crucial concepts that lay the foundations for his ontology and aesthetics. First, as concerns the ontological aspect, if the ineffable events privileged by the philosopher (music, charm, charity, love, and innocence) are not permanent “beings,” but rather an “almost-nothing” (*presque-rien*), a “disappearing apparition” (*apparition disparaissante*), it is, in some contexts, an ethical task to *resist* precisely temporal fluidity, in its “natural” tendency towards oblivion. As in the case of the monk Pimen in Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov*, who spends the night hours obstinately recording the former crimes of the Czar, Jankélévitch confesses to experience, after World War II, “the obligation to prolong within myself the sufferings that were spared from me” (Jankélévitch qtd. in Jankélévitch and Berlowitz 77). Thus, in declining to remain silent, as some of his peers do, he commits himself to keeping alive in the consciousness of his contemporary (and future) listeners and readers the constant risk of antisemitism¹⁷ and the ineffaceable responsibility of the German nation for the Holocaust, all the while vehemently condemning the amnesty of Nazi crimes.¹⁸ In this sense, the philosopher's word, like the monk's endless notes, “is not the field of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and of the inapprehensible, but that of good memory and of fidelity” (65), it is “a protest against the dissipation of the past” (*ibid.*).

The refusal of a *je-ne-sais-quoi* in an attitude of fidelity to history reveals that memory should not only be preserved but built up in determinate facts. The aura of “open nostalgia,” the “desire for things that perhaps don't exist,”¹⁹ the expressive ambiguity that the philosopher especially admires in some modern musical poetics (Jankélévitch, *Musique* 35–36), are not at all applicable to an ethical commitment. Therefore, when also compared to the aesthetic sphere, the moral one asserts its distinction, as it must avoid blurred remembrances and imprecise motivations.

¹⁷ Although the philosopher argues that antisemitism must be distinguished from other forms of discrimination, such as racism (Jankélévitch qtd. in Jankélévitch and Berlowitz 197–99), he was not only concerned with the constant risk of Jewish persecution but also sensitive to the plight of Palestinians oppressed by the State of Israel in the early 1980s (George 13–14).

¹⁸ This theme is developed in Jankélévitch's short but impactful essay “L'Imprescriptible,” initially published in the *Revue Administrative* in 1965, and included in the posthumous volume *L'Imprescriptible* (1986).

¹⁹ These words—used by Gabriel Fauré in a letter written to his wife, on 11 September 1906, to describe the genesis of the third movement of his *Piano Quartet No. 2 in G minor*, Op. 45 and to outline the characteristic expressiveness of music—were often quoted by the philosopher (Bru Zane Mediabase). There are four references, in *La Musique* alone, to that nostalgic “*désir des choses inexistantes*” (75, 96, 104, 130).

A sign of this unwavering dedication to preserving the memory of an absurd and painful past, without concealing the identities of the perpetrators and without neglecting the realness of the victims (even when the latter left no face or name), is evident in the following tribute, immortalized in *L'Irréversible et la nostalgie*:

That is the mysterious nothing (*néant*) of an exterminated young girl, who disappeared forever in a German camp. Nobody knows anymore either the name or even the existence of that child: that child without grave, and more anonymous than the “incognito” buried in a *tomb without name*, that child forever unknown is an eternal moment of history and not of all eternity, an eternal moment ever since her annihilation and then forever. That child is henceforth an indestructible past of human temporality. And we could even say: human history, at the limit, would not be what it is if the little martyr did not exist; it would be another human history, the history of another humanity. (201)

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This poignant and touching passage, which appears in a slightly different formulation in *La Mort* (421), played a central role in the conception of this article. It suggests that a concern for a child's precocious death and for the safeguarding of its memory might be in the horizon of Jankélévitch's thought. In that sense, the portraits of the “little angels” somehow align with the philosopher's ethical commitment and to an important aspect of his ontological perspective that could not be completely reduced to the “model” of the almost-nothing (although the *anjinho*'s life may offer a privileged example of this fundamental Jankélévitchian concept). If the religious beliefs implied in the conception of the *anjinhos* clearly contrast with Jankélévitch's approach to death, which avoids the relief and the consolations of an illusory “pharmacology” (Lisciani Petrini, *Charis* 56, 66), the photographs of the dead infants reinforce, as the philosopher does, that there is something “indestructible” (or almost so, in the case of the photographs) in an individual human's existence. That “indestructible” point, which “saves” us from absolute non-being, is precisely the quiddity of “having been” (Jankélévitch, *Irréversible* 339), i.e. the effectivity of our presence in the world during the years in which we are (or were) alive.

Therefore, an intriguing analogy can be discerned between photography and Jankélévitch's conception of death and life. Regarding the latter, the philosopher wonders: “Compressed between the two eternities, the two infinities, the two non-beings that envelop it, emerging between prenatal inexistence and postnatal inexistence, does life not amount to the almost-nothing of an instant?” (Jankélévitch, *L'Aventure*). Suggestively, the “instant” of life may *a posteriori* become a type of eternity, just as the instant of an exposure (or the instants, in early photography)

generates a lasting image. And as concerns photographic eternity (sometimes only possible, before the popularization of photography, through a postmortem portrait), this becomes particularly needed when the “instant” of life is extremely “compressed” by the initial and the final non-beings, preventing the construction of a legacy and its perpetuation through a lineage.

The *anjinhos* expose what is most precious in life: the evanescent and unrepeatable fact of being that will later be converted into the “fact of having been” (Jankélévitch, *Mort* 421). According to the philosopher’s non-religious perspective, the latter, perhaps, is the only positive element that could truly illuminate the young body deprived of the grace of movement and vitality—in Chichico’s portraits and in the memory of his or her loved ones.

We should still emphasize that, for Jankélévitch, both “being” and “having been” are universally shared, despite the attempts at ontological annihilation characteristic of genocides and the more accepted invisibilities derived from ethnic exclusion, racism, and social inequality. This inequality is exactly what permits the stark contrast between the preservation of the name of Licinia Valeria Faustina Italica, a Roman girl of the IV century, buried in a marble sarcophagus at the splendid Basilica of Sant’Apollinare in Classe,²⁰ and the anonymous Jewish girl, deceased in the still recent 20th century, who is beautifully honored by the philosopher.

Like Jankélévitch’s tribute, Chichico’s portraits of the *anjinhos* extend an acknowledgement of the fact of “having been” to excluded and marginalized groups. As already mentioned, the photographer’s work distinguished itself from that of his peers, in part by being uncommonly inclusive. That feature is particularly evident in the photographs discussed. Whereas many of the living children portrayed by the photographer clearly come from wealthy families, most of his *anjinhos* seem to belong to disadvantaged groups. These socio-economical distinctions are made evident by the photographs’ settings (many of the *anjinhos*’ portraits are taken either in or near the residence of the deceased), the portrayed individuals’ clothing, and—unfortunately, in a country where slavery had only been abolished a few decades earlier—their phenotypic traits. Therefore, in Chichico’s oeuvre, the deceased Afro-Brazilian infants of Diamantina and its surroundings not only had access to postmortem photography but also became the *protagonists* in his renditions of the “little angels” genre.

²⁰ The lapidary inscription says: “To Licinia Valeria Faustina Italica, who sleeps in peace and lived one year, six months and six days. Very sweet daughter, sorrowful parents (erected)” (*Ravenna Città d’Arte* 26).



Fig. 3. On the left: Chichico Alkmim, Diamantina (MG), studio of Chichico Alkmim, beco João Pinto, undated. Gelatine silver glass negative. Courtesy of Chichico Alkmim's Archive (Instituto Moreira Salles). On the right: Chichico Alkmim, *Anjinho*, Diamantina (MG), studio of Chichico Alkmim, beco João Pinto, undated. Gelatine silver glass negative. Courtesy of Chichico Alkmim's Archive (Instituto Moreira Salles).

The significance of this access and protagonism is highlighted by the fact that the posthumous title of *anjinho* was not always an inclusive one in the Brazilian context from Colonial to Old Republican eras. Although some parish records from 18th-century Minas Gerais document the death of a “slave little angel” (“*anjinho escravo*”),²¹ this title was eventually denied to Afro-Brazilians, even in post-slavery Brazil. This fact is not surprising, since, in Iberian culture as early as the 16th century and in the dominant iconography of the Renaissance and the Baroque, the fair type is often “identified with angelic and divine characters, as opposed to the dark-skinned, who are associated with fallen angels, the wicked, the evil, the traitors” (Freyre 71).

²¹ Among those records, one, dated 28 August 1720, belongs to the Matriz de Nossa Senhora da Assunção in the city of Mariana (Duarte 153) and the other, dated 15 April 1756, to the Matriz de Nossa Senhora da Piedade in the city of Borda do Campo (now known as Barbacena) (see “Barbacena”).

Regarding a recorded denial of the *anjinbo* title to an Afro-Brazilian baby, Câmara Cascudo recounts an incident in which a black man, probably in the early 20th century, approached the public cemetery of a city of the state of Pernambuco, in the Northeast of Brazil, seeking information on how to bury his son. A funeral service employee

asked him, in a pedantic tone, what the corpse's *causa mortis* was, and the father, tearfully, retorted: "What corpse, damn it! You call my son a corpse just because he was black and poor. If he were the son of a wealthy white man, you would call him an angel, shameless man!" (qtd. in Câmara Cascudo 59)

Returning to the ways of eluding death recognized by Jankélévitch, it was not possible for the grieving black family to substitute the "scabrous monosyllable" *corpse* for the discussed euphemism. Even in our time, in which many children do not survive perilous journeys toward the destination of a new country, in which so many individuals are deprived of civil documentation (as dramatically portrayed in the Lebanese film *Cafarnaüm*, whose protagonist is precisely an invisible child), and in which thousands of innocents are massively exterminated in Palestine, we have become desensitized to the unjust fact that not everyone has the right to memory, let alone to an embellishment of memory.

We may conclude this article by stating that the embellishment of memory should not be understood merely as a euphemism which, often involving some degree of bad faith, serves as a strategy to elude the abyss of death. From this perspective, Chichico's *anjinbos* respond to a legitimate urge to ensure human dignity—an urge that is in tune with Jankélévitch's ontological and anthropological conception. "The indestructible mystery of a completed existence that is forever affirmed" (Jankélévitch, *Irréversible* 338) through death is reaffirmed—and beautifully so—through Chichico's portraits.

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Redefining Death in *Zero K* by Don DeLillo

ABSTRACT

Don DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016) focuses on the possibility of overcoming death through cryonics. The narrative is set primarily in the Convergence—a facility which utilises cryonics to provide its subjects with the possibility of life extension, and a promise of a better life in the future. The result is achieved by removing the subjects' internal organs and keeping them alive in a state of life suspension, in an attempt to renegotiate the limits of human existence. As his father and stepmother become patients of the Convergence, the protagonist of the novel, Jeff Lockhart, grapples with the questions of life and death. The paper analyses the theme of death in the novel from the posthumanist perspective of Rosi Braidotti's text "The Ethics of Becoming Imperceptible," and compares it with the pursuit of immortality highlighted by the transhumanist movement. The secondary purpose of this paper is to investigate how the novel redefines grief by using the framework provided by Monika Rogowska-Stangret's ethical stance presented in *Być ze świata (Being-of-the-World)*.

Keywords: DeLillo, *Zero K*, cryonics, death, transhumanism, posthumanism, Braidotti.



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Don DeLillo's novel *Zero K* (2016) considers different ethical attitudes to life and death in the context of cryonic preservation, and explores the idea of people wrestling with their mortality by offering characters the possibility of life extension through technology. In the novel, it is the Convergence Institute which is the provider of this life-suspending procedure. The promise of resurrection—a return from the cryonic state in an unspecified future—offered by the Institute is not available to many, but merely to the privileged, wealthier part of society, including the Lockhart family. The protagonist of the novel, 34-year-old Jeffrey Lockhart, is the son of billionaire Ross Lockhart. Jeff's life changes radically when he is invited to travel with his father from New York to the Convergence located somewhere between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The readers follow Jeff as he accompanies his father, Ross Lockhart, and his wife, Artis Martineau, during their preparations and the final cryonics procedure at the Institute. Jeff's reservations about the place are contrasted with his father and stepmother's firm belief in being brought back to life and becoming part of the Convergence's society of the future. Surprisingly, the events at the Convergence are interrupted by Ross's change of heart. Jeff and Ross return to New York, where the novel shifts its attention to Jeff's everyday life and his relationship with his girlfriend Emma and her adopted son Stak. Soon after, however, Jeff's relationship with Emma becomes strained as Stak decides to join the Ukrainian army and Ross once again decides to undergo cryopreservation. Both Ross and Jeff return to the Institute where the protagonist witnesses his father's procedure at the Convergence and Stak's death displayed on one of the screens of the facility.

While in an interview DeLillo agrees with Peter Boxall and sees *Zero K* as a “departure from the novels of the earlier decade” (“Interview” 161), critics continue to find parallels between the novel and the writer's oeuvre. In *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (2006), published before *Zero K*, Boxall argues that “DeLillo's fiction suggests a deep underlying connection between technology, violence and capital, a connection which undermines the possibility of historical progression” (7); nineteen years and four novels later the claim still proves accurate. DeLillo himself contends that “*Zero K* is a leap out of the bare-skinned narratives of *Point Omega* and *The Body Artist*” (“Interview” 160), whereas Sonia Front sees it rather as a transition from *Point Omega*'s “exhausted consciousness . . . into the posthuman development of consciousness in the cryonic afterlife” (496–97). Nathan Ashman notes a similar transition between *White Noise* and *Zero K*: in *White Noise* Jack and Babbette dream of immortality, while in *Zero K* those dreams become real (301). Laila Sougri, in turn, traces the similarities of *Zero K* to one of DeLillo's earliest novels—*Ratner's Star* (1976) and compares the motivations of their characters: “Endor and Ross

share their Faustian need to push the limits of technological possibility and to mobilize the necessary means to achieve their goals” (17). Indeed, the preoccupation with technology, which continues throughout DeLillo’s literary career, has become a defining theme of his writing.

DeLillo’s exploration of mortality in *Zero K* has previously been discussed from both posthumanist and transhumanist standpoints by several critics, including Erik Cofer, Kahina Enteghar and Amar Guendouzi, Lovro Furjanić, Stefan Herbrechter, Lay Sion Ng, Laila Sougri, and Philipp Wolf.¹ This paper extends those discussions and argues that *Zero K* can be read as a novel that illustrates the clashing perspectives of transhumanism—represented in the text by life-extending practices of cryonics, and posthumanism—in particular, the concept of death as formulated by Rosi Braidotti. Moreover, in its contemplation of mortality, the novel contributes original perspectives on grief and victimhood to the ongoing discussion between the aforementioned philosophical movements. I argue that in this aspect, DeLillo exposes the shortcomings of both, and in turn comes to a conclusion which closely resembles Monika Rogowska-Stangret’s² ethical standpoint on the “insolubility of death” (46).

The most well-known advocate for the transhumanist movement and its biggest propagator nowadays is Max More, President of Alcor Life Extension Foundation and one of the editors of *The Transhumanist Reader*, a collection of texts encompassing the essential thought of the movement. The core beliefs of transhumanism are morphological freedom, seen as enhancement, both cognitive and physical, and life-prolonging practices in various forms, spanning from mind-uploading, through gene editing, to cryonics. Transhumanism was shaped by the inventions and ideas of the second half of the 20th century. As More argues, it was Robert Ettinger, the founder of cryonics, who propagated the early ideas of life extension that defined the movement (11). Ettinger himself discusses his project as follows: “At very low temperatures it is possible, right now, to preserve dead people with essentially no deterioration, indefinitely” and explains that “[i]f civilization endures, medical science should eventually be able to repair almost any damage to the human body, including freezing damage and senile debility or other cause of death” (qtd. in More 11). While cryonics is only one of many ideas propounded by transhumanism, life extension practices aimed at achieving immortality are the cornerstone of the movement.

¹ Laila Sougri, Kahina Enteghar, and Amar Guendouzi analyse *Zero K* from the posthumanist perspective, Lay Sion Ng, Lovro Furjanić, and Philipp Wolf from the transhumanist one. Stefan Herbrechter and Eric Cofer synthesise the approaches of both movements.

² All the fragments from *Być ze świata* (*Being-of-the-World*) by Rogowska-Stangret are translated by me. The title itself is inspired by Karen Barad’s article “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter.”

The transhumanist quest for immortality can be viewed as contradictory to Braidotti's concept explored in "The Ethics of Becoming-Imperceptible." Published in the collection *Deleuze and Philosophy* (2006), her essay may be considered one of the most formative texts in her career. Braidotti adopts Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of becoming-imperceptible and presents it as a moment of transition between life and death; she redefines death as another form of becoming where one can embrace the new, "imperceptible" version of the self. Becoming-imperceptible is present in Braidotti's other works, such as *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* from the same year, and in *The Posthuman* (2013), where she connects becoming-imperceptible with posthuman ethics. She explains it as follows:

What we truly desire as humans is to disappear, to step on to the side of life and let it flow by, without actually stopping it: becoming imperceptible. And yet our fundamental drive (*conatus*) is to express the potency of life (*potentia*), by joining forces with other flows of becoming. The great animal-machine universe is the horizon of becoming that marks the eternity of life as Bios-Zoe and its resilience, its generative power expressed also through what we humans call death. ("The Ethics" 153)

Braidotti defines becoming-imperceptible as a positive form of metamorphosis, which encourages one to understand death as the moment when one transcends the human/nonhuman boundary through death. She views death as a unity of all beings, "the point of fusion between the self and his/her habitat, the cosmos as a whole" (154). However, Braidotti acknowledges that *dying*, or, as she sees it, *becoming*, necessitates the sacrifice of the human sense of self: "At that point of becoming-imperceptible, all a subject can do is mark his/her assent to the loss of identity (defined as a by-product of *potesas*) and respectfully merge with the process itself, and hence with his/her environment" (157). The concept reframes death as the end of life as an individual, and the entry into a new beginning as a part of the collective.

This model constitutes a polar opposite to the one based on quasi-transhumanist enhancements aimed at prolonging life, and can be used as a framework for a critical reading of *Zero K*, a novel which, similarly to Braidotti's project, investigates the elite's drive for immortality. However, I supplement it with Rogowska-Stangret's discursive ideas, which, in turn, bring attention to and resolve the shortcomings of both Braidotti's and the transhumanist models. In *The Posthuman*, Braidotti connects becoming-imperceptible with posthuman theory, viewing them as compatible:

Posthuman death theory as a vital continuum could not be further removed from the notion of death as the inanimate and indifferent state of matter, the entropic state to which the body is supposed to "return." It

rather spells desire as plenitude and over-flowing, not as lack. Death is the becoming-imperceptible of the posthuman subject and as such it is part of the cycles of becoming, yet another form of interconnectedness, a vital relationship that links one with other, multiple forces. The impersonal is life and death as bios/zoe in us—the ultimate outside as the frontier of the incorporeal: becoming-imperceptible. (137)

The abovementioned dichotomy between the human individual and the collective is the incentive for Rogowska-Stangret's disagreement with Braidotti. The Polish philosopher argues that, instead of narrowing the divide between the human and the nonhuman realms, the distinction Braidotti makes between human life and *zoe*, deepens it further: "The opposition between the human and *zoe* seems problematic, as on the one hand it establishes the vision of the human as a narcissist . . . and, on the other hand, of life (*zoe*) as a dominant cosmic power, which erases everything human" (39). It is the obliteration of the human experience in favour of becoming-imperceptible that Rogowska-Stangret considers problematic. Braidotti's main objective is a redefinition of death as "becoming-imperceptible"; in doing so, she wishes to illustrate the possibility that "[s]omething in our existence will go on after death, but it is not the continued existence of the self" ("The Ethics" 149). Rogowska-Stangret's disagreement with Braidotti stems from the fact that Braidotti presents death as objectively positive and as a relevant addition to the posthuman rhetoric of death:

I believe that instead of aiming at the dissolution of death in life, we should make death forever insoluble—a moment of indigestible difference, the most radical otherness which accompanies every metamorphosis, every metabolism. That is why I think it is not always possible to turn negativity into positivity, at least not from an ethical point of view. Because the positivity with which we are left contains the shadow of negativity; it is not clear light, clear positivity. Ethics, in its attempts to compensate (or merely recognise the wrongdoings), demands that we leave some matters indigestible. (Rogowska-Stangret 46)

Rogowska-Stangret radically disagrees with Braidotti's notion of treating death as a process of becoming; she views Braidotti's concept as possibly threatening the ethical perspective on remembering the past, and as unsatisfactory in the context of posthumanist ethics (22–23). In response to Braidotti's theory, she introduces the term "bare death" as a counterpoint to the "violence" of forgetting or obliterating the trauma and history of the past. Braidotti's and Rogowska-Stangret's beliefs are representative of the posthumanist stance and are contrasted with a more transhumanist approach, which views death as optional.

Both the posthumanist and the transhumanist perspectives can be found in DeLillo's novel, and are presented as opposites. Herbrechter, Sougri, and Ng argue that *Zero K* juxtaposes the transhumanist pro-cryonics views professed by the Convergence believers, including Ross and Artis, with the posthumanist anti-cryonics attitude of the protagonist. Ross and Jeff become representative of the abovementioned philosophies and are positioned at the opposite ends of the spectrum. Thus, Jeff's need for connection and relationship with others and the outside world is indicative of posthumanism, whereas his father, who views himself as a man of progress and approaches the idea of cryonics in a seemingly scientific spirit, can be seen as a proponent of transhumanism. Interestingly, *Zero K* points out the blatant religious aspect of the transhumanist stance, and the simultaneous lack thereof in posthumanism. However scientific Ross's arguments may seem, when juxtaposed with his son's more secular, critical perspective on the Convergence's mission, Ross's thinking reveals a clear spiritual undertone. Thus, apart from posthumanism and transhumanism, the sacral and the technological aspects in the novel are inextricably linked: "For DeLillo, death is no longer envisaged in terms of religion alone but in terms of technology as well" (Sougri 184–85). Even though Ross tries to justify his choice by resorting to scientific arguments, the facility's design encourages viewing cryonics almost as a religious system, referred to as "faith-based technology" (DeLillo, *Zero K* 9).

By applying a design that enhances the spiritual connotations of immortality, the novel juxtaposes the reality of "dying" inside and outside of the Convergence. The Institute creates a visual spectacle necessary to maintain a shrine-like atmosphere through its still and quiet interiors. This aesthetic layer leads patients to believe that the transhumanistic procedure of cryonics is preferable to facing the problems and complexities of the outside world. Simultaneously, the screens at the Institute display apocalyptic images which disturb the meditative atmosphere of the place:

Like the setting in which they appear, these video installations are all the author's invention, vivified in evocative passages that veer between, connect, and interweave descriptive and introspective modes, as the narrator takes the time to dwell on specific images and the impact they have on him, which is both visceral and intellectual. (Vågenes 34)

The artworks and images in the Convergence are puzzling for the protagonist, as they significantly differ from the overall aesthetics of the place. The videos move Jeff emotionally and cause him to reflect upon the meaning behind the installations. Paul Sheehan compares the screens in the novel to the cinematic fascination with the portrayal of death:

“[T]he posthumanist machinations of the plot—technology as the conduit to immortality, taking control of the forces of life—are matched by a post-cinematic concern with the plasticity of the video image” (1701). He suggests an intricate relationship between film and what it displays, as it has the power to freeze the moments of life, and hence death, and make them eternal. By evoking the “plasticity of the video image,” Sheehan points out the manipulative aspect of cinema and underlines how deceitful the videos on the screens can appear. The cruelty displayed in the video installations at the Institute, which I analyse later in the article, enhances the contrast between the outside world and the place itself; thus, it stimulates the spectators to long for an escape from morbid reality. The outside environment is shown as barbaric, while the Institute provides a safe shelter for its patients.

The aesthetics of the Institute facility seem to obscure or eradicate Braidotti’s concept of “becoming-imperceptible,” challenging the logic of this idea of self-perpetuation pledged by the Institute, while her argument that “all we long for is to lie silently and let time wash over us in the perfect stillness of not-life” (“The Ethics” 152) seems to be in line with the promise of the Convergence’s eternal sleep. The philosopher underlines that even though life aspires to be “self-perpetuated,” it inevitably leads to death (ibid.). The founders of the Convergence, on the other hand, believe in the sustenance of human existence by retaining the body; they aspire to gain control over death by dismissing the impermanence of human life in its bodily form. This approach to death is radically different to Braidotti’s, as by preserving the body intact, cryonics disables the possibility of the Braidottian becoming. The philosopher argues:

Life being desire which essentially aims at extinguishing itself, that is, reaching its aim and then dissolving, the wish to die is another way to express desire to live. Not only is there no dialectical tension between *Eros* and *Thanatos*, but also the two forces are really just one—*Zoe* as a life-force aims to reach its own fulfilment. (151)

Rather than towards Braidotti’s ethics, the Convergence leans towards the rhetoric of transhumanist philosophy, which proposes that, as “The Transhumanist Declaration” phrases it, humans should have the right to “preserve the self through cryonics” (Bostrom et al. 55). While the cryonic procedure does not necessarily promise immortality, as it only suspends human life in time, it relies on the premise that technological advancement will be able to make human life infinite. According to Front, this technological advancement is reminiscent of religious belief due to their common “motivator,” which she argues is “the fear of death”: “both

religion and technology have the same roots and purpose; they both strive for immortality and they are both based on faith" (496). This is emphasised in the novel by the aforementioned sacral aesthetics of the Convergence, and, in turn, contradicts Braidotti, who considers death to be the opening of a new chapter and maintains that life does not belong to the subject: "[T]he life in me is not mine" ("The Ethics" 152). However, she makes an exception to that rule, which I discuss in what follows.

By referring to André Colombat's view on Deleuze's suicide, Braidotti intends to show that death itself can and should become an affirmation of life even in the act of taking one's own life:

Colombat . . . [l]inks the act of suppressing one's failing body, as in suicide or euthanasia, to an ethics of assertion of the joyfulness and positivity of life, which necessarily translates into refusal to lead a degraded existence. This notion rests on a preliminary and fundamental distinction between personal and impersonal death. The former is linked to the suppression of the individualised ego, the latter is beyond the ego: a death that is always ahead of me. (146)

This example can be compared to the stance of one of the characters in *Zero K*, Artis, who refuses to continue a "degraded existence" on a similar premise to Deleuze. While in Deleuze's case the suicide can be viewed as an affirmation of *potentia*, Artis opts for cryonics as a way to sustain her life. However, this is only partially true, as Artis also wishes to become part of the facility's visionary mission. Her choice of cryonics can then be viewed as an illustration of human megalomania, and not merely the refusal of a low-quality life of suffering from a chronic disease.

When comparing Ross's and Artis's decisions to self-style their "deaths," Adèle Nel considers Artis in a much more positive light as a woman battling sickness, for whom cryonics is a new chance at life. At the heart of Artis's intention lies a decision to fight for retaining her identity and against its gradual loss due to the progressing illness. To gain the chance of remaining her unaltered self in the face of becoming disabled, Artis has to sacrifice her present life and body. However, it seems that the character falls victim to the Convergence's transhumanist approaches to disability: "[D]isability becomes the outcome of a too-complacent posture toward death and 'technophobia'" (Hall 24). Melinda Gann Hall points out the risk of the transhumanists' view on disability, which she argues can extend into perceiving enhancement as synonymous with eugenics: "For the transhumanist, positive and negative eugenics are linked together. Transhumanism repeatedly treats the two as co-extensive: to rid the world of disability is to enhance the human being—

enhancement seems to require the rejection of disability and embodiment as risk and limitation” (23). As a result of her attempt to “save” herself, Artis becomes a disembodied consciousness trapped in the void and her intrapersonal experience, a bleak contrast to the Convergence’s promise of a future life. Ross, on the other hand, represents for Nel the wealthy and privileged individual whose behaviour she sees as a manifestation of human egocentrism: “his narcissism and his desire to have control over all things, even over death itself” (5). This is manifested in inviting his son to the Convergence facility to keep him company, but also as a witness, whose presence makes his “death” more ceremonial and relevant.

Ross can here be seen as the Vitruvian man, an image that, for Braidotti, symbolises the exclusivity and domination of the white European male part of society over the other (*The Posthuman* 15). Ng points out that a similar marginalisation of the other is present and especially evident in the treatment of the human bodies in the Convergence. Through the unification of all the patients, through procedures such as shaving them or taking away their organs, the subjects become reified by being deprived of their characteristics. Ng underlines the importance of Ross and Artis exemplifying a male and female, heterosexual, white couple submitting to the Convergence:

What is significant here is that their bodies once again echo the myth of Adam and Eve: a compulsory white heteronormative model. Just like the mannequins that are located in shopping malls in order to stimulate consumerism and to present an ideal version of masculinity or femininity, the bodies of Ross and Artis are being objectified and fetishized in order to stimulate the market of cryopreservation and to reaffirm heteronormative patriarchy and white supremacy. Meanwhile, their personhoods have become disembodied, suspended in ice. In this regard, the Convergence is neither moving toward posthuman nor postgender utopianism but moving backward to neoimperialism and patriarchy. (13)

The racism of the facility and its rejection of the variety of bodies can be seen in the procedure that Ng describes as “whitening” of the bodies (17). The “whitening” process becomes a means of control, allowing people to be in charge of their bodies. Ng claims that this can be viewed as a response to the anxiety associated with nature understood as Other, which remains uncontrollable and, therefore, poses a threat, while “human immortality is constructed upon the desire to control and the fear of otherness” (17). On the surface, the detachment from others and the outside might be viewed as an intentional shift of the Convergence’s perspective back to the individual. However, through the literal deconstruction of the human

body, the separation of organs, shaving, and positioning it in the special pod in the same way, an individual is deprived of any characteristics and becomes just another body, not a part of the collective. The bodies of the Convergence become a physical representation of transhumanist thought, showing that transhumanism demands unification: “Western societies put a premium on individuality. This represents a problem for transhumanism, which has little attended to the Spinozist elements of its project. The transhumanist agenda implies the dwindling if not the end of individuality, as its modifications move people toward becoming identical types and interchangeable parts” (Frodeman 109). Such unification happens in the Convergence and reduces Ross and Artis to bodies in the pods; there is, however, a difference between their “deaths” as witnessed in the Institute, and the nameless deaths of the masses outside. The ignorance of the deaths outside the Convergence exemplifies that imperceptibility, in Rogowska-Stangret’s words, can become “an act of cruelty” (23).

The only character who is able to notice death outside and inside the Institute is Jeff. When he recognises Stak, his girlfriend’s son, in one of the films, he realises that while the screens are part of artistic installations, they might also show the reality of war in the outside world. This contrast illustrates that the Convergence’s patrons hold a special, privileged status. The restricted availability of the services perpetuates the societal stratification of the capitalistic system. Seeing that “The Transhumanist Declaration” claims to support “the well-being of all sentience” (Bostrom et al. 54), Furjanić underlines the lack of inclusivity offered by the Convergence; he argues that as a result the project cannot be viewed as an egalitarian transhumanistic endeavour, since it is available only to those who can afford it. While transhumanism claims to preach inclusivity, it is not realistically achievable, as Furjanić rightly proves (509). However, I argue that *Zero K* can be seen as a critical illustration of what transhumanism might look like in practice by showing the contrast between the exclusive “deaths” of the rich and the plight of the masses. Stephanie Bender views this disparity as a result of biocapitalism:

Unacceptable death . . . only refers to the death of some, namely super-rich individuals like Ross who can afford to be cryotechnologically preserved. This kind of death, or rather un-death, produced by biocapitalist biopolitics, finds itself in direct relation to the deaths of the masses of people, likewise produced by the biocapitalist regime. Ross’s involvement in water privatisation and his profiting from natural disasters shows that turning the life of most into the profit of some will necessarily result in the destruction of the majority through ecocide and war. (193)

Bender underlines the absurdity of a situation in which the rich are not only able to profit from disasters and catastrophes but are also granted the privilege of escaping them through cryonics. Well-off individuals, such as Ross, are shielded by wealth and can escape “planetary woe” (DeLillo, *Zero K* 163). By disconnecting its patients from the external world, the Convergence represses the possibility of creating a Braidottian “continuum with Nature as One” (“The Ethics” 149). This is due to the design of the place and its separation, which is indicative of the human desire for control:

Immortalists and all kinds of transhumanists want to cut off human development from nature, genetics and evolution, that is, the given actuality that hitherto proved uncontrollable and not at one’s disposal. The fundamental rational is to prevail over the “complexities” of temporality. Classical aesthetics can be seen as (a more subtle) ideological precursor of that desire. (Wolf 143)

However, Ross denies this isolation and claims earth is “the guiding principle” behind the Convergence (DeLillo, *Zero K* 10).

While, on the surface, the statement “Return to the earth, emerge from the earth” (ibid.) may seem applicable to the Convergence’s endeavour, the Institute fails to fulfil these promises. When compared with Braidotti’s understanding of death as becoming one with Nature, it can be argued that the Convergence does not allow its patients to truly “return to the earth.” For Ross and Artis, who decide to become a part of the Convergence, the state of “death” is impermanent, as they are waiting to be brought back into life. For Braidotti, on the other hand, death is the inevitable extinction of the self. When it comes to the environmental aspect of the Convergence, the isolation to which the facility aspires frees individuals from the feeling of guilt caused by their ecological impact but also restrains them from becoming part of the environmental collective as they die. Although presented as eco-friendly, cryonics is far from sustainable. The facility has to utilise a vast amount of energy resources to preserve the bodies intact. The consumption of energy resources regardless of its impact on the environment is indicative of human hubris and a yearning for ownership and control—human characteristics tightly connected to the marketing aspect of the Convergence. This circles back to the very beginning of the novel, when Ross expresses the opinion that the desire to self-style one’s own death is in human nature. The character presents it as an urge that is impossible to fight against, an instinct more important than taking the environmental consequences of following it into consideration. In this way, what Alexandra K. Glavanakova calls “the unscrupulous commercialization of transactions involving the afterlife” (96) is present

already in the first lines of the novel, which illustrate the heightened importance of human life at the expense of the environmental other.

Besides engaging in cryonics, the Institute aspires to create a new society in the future with the Convergence's patients as its members. In this pursuit, however, the facility overlooks the environmental factor, and to fulfil its goal, it blurs the notion of time and space by disengaging the subjects from their outside world: "This is what we want, this separation. We have what is needed. Durable energy sources and strong mechanized systems. Blast walls and fortified floors. Structural redundancy. Fire safety. Security patrols, land and air. Elaborate cyberdefense. And so on" (DeLillo, *Zero K* 30). The separation is intentional on the Convergence's part; when Jeff mentions his concern about the lack of windows, Ross responds: "What's on the other side of a window? Pure dumb distraction" (43). This isolation from the outside world evokes different reactions in the two characters: it leads Ross to forget his ex-wife's first name, while on the other hand, Jeff keeps on recalling his past memories. This juxtaposition shows the difference in how the Facility influences characters depending on their eagerness or readiness to follow its ideals. The place itself and the idea behind it bring such a sense of discomfort to Jeff that it induces in him childhood memories of his mother, but also "foreshadows the harsh reality of transhumanist disembodiment that we witness in the 'Artis Martineau' section" (Cofer 467). This section is the novel's centrepiece and provides an insight into Artis's mind after the process of disembodiment. The mind-body separation of Artis shows the disconnect between the body and thoughts, which are presented as if they existed in a void: "Artis exists in a state of exhausting perpetuity, where all notions of boundary—time, space, the self—become violently and incomprehensibly dislodged" (Ashman 307). As N. Katherine Hayles argues, embodiment does not serve the purpose of distinguishing between genders or the animate from the inanimate, but "makes clear that thought is a much broader cognitive function depending for its specificities on the embodied form enacting it" (xiv). Deprived of the context of her body and environment, Artis becomes a "self devoid of any content" (Front 499). An insight into the soliloquy of her floating mind, however, suggests that hope lies in the language "that holds the power to anchor her in time and space" (ibid.). Indeed, critics concur regarding the novel's "faith in language's ability to redeem and render the world legible" (Dini 2), which is professed by the protagonist and is "a long-standing theme in DeLillo" (Herbrechter 14). Isolated from external stimuli from the outside world, Artis is left merely with language. I return to the theme of language in the final part of the article, where I explore why Jeff's fascination with language is ultimately flawed.

By becoming patients of the Convergence, Artis and other members reject the outside world and the posthumanist chance for becoming-imperceptible. Braidotti argues that her concept of becoming has its roots in philosophical nomadism and “is rather linked to a sense of interconnectedness which can be rendered in terms of an ethics of eco-philosophical empathy and affectivity which cuts across species, space and time” (“The Ethics” 156). Here lies the important difference between Braidotti and Rogowska-Stangret mentioned at the beginning of the article. While both focus on the interrelation between the human and the nonhuman, Braidotti underlines the gap between the two. However, Rogowska-Stangret argues that “[b]eing-of-the world means that there is no qualitative difference between us and the world” (26). *Zero K*, in turn, draws a clear distinction between the human and the environment, and dismisses both Braidottian “interconnectedness” and Rogowska-Stangret’s claim that the aforementioned difference is non-existent.

The Convergence’s rejection of the outside world and other people is far from being a favourable image of the transhumanist Facility. It is through the character of Jeff, who does not decide to pursue cryonics himself, that readers are offered a more complex perspective on the consequences of embracing this technology. The protagonist is not a participant in the process, yet he remains a party deeply entangled with his family members—Ross and Artis, who undergo cryonics. He faces the perspective of a person awaiting the “death” of a relative and the grief that is to come: “Following in the footsteps of other literary forbearers, Charon and Virgil, Jeff chaperones the dead” (Barrett 122). By remaining an external spectator, Jeff has an entirely different role in the novel: he is a counterbalance to his father’s and stepmother’s view.

The protagonist’s reserved feelings towards the Institute and life extension might falsely suggest that the novel aims to critique the Convergence and cryonics. However, the author himself denies having wanted to “convey a nostalgia for mortality” (DeLillo, “Interview” 162), which is represented by Jeff. DeLillo points out the complicated relationship between the son and the father as a reason for Jeff’s prejudiced response to the Convergence (ibid.). For Jeff the idea that he might undergo the procedure with his father and stepmother is so abstract that he is unable even to consider it as a serious proposal on their part:

Artis’s unsmiling invitation for Jeffrey to join them—creating an immortal triumvirate—is deciphered by Jeffrey as purely in jest. Indeed, he never stops to consider that there may be a grain of sincerity to her overture. Jeffrey, it appears, chooses to dwell in the embodied and terminal networked society, thus establishing him as a counterweight to transhumanist ideals. (Cofer 468)

Despite accompanying his father and becoming a witness to his pursuit of immortality, Jeff remains prejudiced against the idea. The detachment from the outside world, mentioned earlier, is experienced by Jeff as distressing: “Having been transported across the planet and into the corridors of the Convergence, Jeff’s sensitivity to the images is marked by an escalating sense of a double disorientation that is both personal and ecological” (Vågnes 36). The unease caused by the place itself, combined with the threat of losing his father to the Convergence, leads him to develop a limp—a psychosomatic sign dating back to his childhood trauma of his father abandoning Jeff and his mother. The threat of once again being left by his father brings back his childhood experience: “At the prospect of being abandoned a second time, he starts to act out his childhood traumas with still more intensity” (Laguarta-Bueno 123). As Jeff has to face the possibility of mourning the loss of the parent, he re-enacts the childhood behaviours he developed as a teenager.

Although indirectly, Jeff becomes the witness not only of the death of his relatives, but also of Stak, whose demise is displayed on one of the screens in the Convergence. The character of Stak embodies yet another way of dying, different from the already-discussed cryonic deaths. From the day he is born, Stak is a child stigmatised by war. Glavanakova points to the military conflict in Konstantinovka in 2014 and argues that it is through the character of Stak that DeLillo exemplifies “the intricate complexities of history and the endless power struggles” of Ukraine (94). The boy finds himself unable to adapt to his life in the American family and finally escapes his new home to join the army in Ukraine. Emma, Stak’s foster mother, intuitively predicts that he will soon leave her; this expectation of loss is similar to the one that Jeff experiences awaiting his father’s death. The example of Stak can be considered in the light of Rogowska-Stangret’s stance on the exclusivity of agency that lies in self-styling one’s death (a term also used by Braidotti) versus the passivity of accepting and experiencing death in the light of factors beyond an individual’s control:

Another important question arises: who can self-style their own death? In the face of the Holocaust, Chernobyl, PTSD, the sixth extinction, growing social inequalities, I wonder what it would be like to die on one’s own terms. I argue that in such situations we are exposed to “inevitable passivity,” which, among other things, makes it impossible for everyone to always and in any circumstances control or self-style their own death. (Rogowska-Stangret 43)

Rogowska-Stangret here puts forward the claim that, in the face of situations which can be referred to as “hyperobjects,” self-styling one’s death becomes

an impossibility. And while Stak can, in a way, be seen as a character who also “self-styles” his own death, it is dubious whether he truly had a choice and a possibility to start a new life in America and simultaneously forsake his roots and his homeland. Stak’s death complicates the problem of grief even further; while both decisions are voluntary, Ross’s choice is based on the belief that by sacrificing his present life, he will be able to renew it after being resurrected from cryonics in the future, whereas Stak gives up his life to become a soldier as a result of “radicalization” and “historical decisionism” (Wolf 149). Given that DeLillo makes a parallel between Stak’s decision and Heidegger’s involvement with the Nazi party, he is, however, far from presenting Stak’s choice as “a preferable alternative to the Convergence” (ibid.). Referring to Stak’s visit to an art gallery and his Heideggerian-inspired discussion with Jeff that “rocks are but do not exist” (DeLillo, *Zero K* 213), Wolf argues that this experience is an incentive for becoming involved in the war (149). Thus, both Stak’s and Ross’s decisions to self-style their deaths are based on completely different premises, and inspired by different events.

All of these deaths point to the relevance of grief eradicated by the posthumanist and transhumanist movements. Braidotti refrains from discussing cases of involuntary and voluntary deaths as well as those of innocent victims, in favour of pursuing a much more enthusiastic view of death as a new beginning. However, she briefly alludes to suicide as an affirmation of life. This differs from Rogowska-Stangret, who persists in her view that death should forever be “insoluble” (46). The Convergence in *Zero K* illustrates these conflicting views, as it approaches death from a dual perspective. On the one hand, the Institute diminishes the relevance of death by displaying soundless images of dying people and natural disasters on the screens that seem alien in the context of the place. On the other hand, the Convergence juxtaposes the brutality of death on the outside with the peace of what the facility offers. The contrast can be read as a way of drawing attention to the exclusivity and comfort of the Institute that also shifts the focus away from the fearful imagery of the place itself: dead bodies in the pods and mannequins. It can be viewed as a distraction from the overwhelming omnipresence of death in the tomblike Institute. By maintaining people’s bodies in pods, the Convergence allows its patients to exist in the state of undeath. In this way, the place becomes a transitional stage between life and death: “Away from the surface aspiration and desire for immortality, the Convergence makes a compelling case for avoiding life through cryonics” (Maffey and Teo 17–18). Yet, by contrasting cryonics with the deaths in the videos, the Convergence obliterates the relevance of those deaths.

The “harm” associated with the people dying on the screens is never addressed. Braidotti asserts that “joyful affirmation and becoming” can be only achieved through the rejection of grief (“The Ethics” 153). However,

it is through the act of witnessing Stak's death and accepting grief that Jeff can experience this "restorative capacity" of the act of mourning and thus "become." Rogowska-Stangret insists on the position that "maintaining the simultaneity of life and death is essential," while doing otherwise "makes it impossible to address the harm, and thus ethics loses its restorative capacity" (46). The "deaths" in the novel lead Jeff to a reaffirmation of his own life, or, in François Jullien's words, "de-coincidence": a reopening of new possibilities (qtd. in Jacomino).

The final scene is among the most pivotal, as it ties together multiple themes from the novel in one transcendental moment. In the scene, Jeff becomes a spectator of Manhattanhenge, "a phenomenon during which the rising sun or the setting sun is aligned with the east-west streets of Manhattan's grid of main streets" (Collins Dictionary). The name alludes to Stonehenge and was coined by Neil deGrasse Tyson (Dictionary.com). However, Jeff does not use the term while experiencing the moment. On the one hand, DeLillo's deliberate decision to omit this particular term in favour of describing the scene illustrates the fundamental connection between the environmental elements—sunrises, and the man-made urban architecture, but also historical ones, linking Stonehenge with Manhattanhenge. On the other hand, the act of naming everything is characteristic of the protagonist, as Barbara Pawlak points out: "The fact that the name eludes the language-obsessed Jeffrey is telling, suggestive of his new-found openness that stretches beyond the linguistic" (72). Jeff's experience in the Convergence proves to be transformative in that it frees him from the restraints of the language that he has desperately used as a coping mechanism. The scream of a neurodivergent boy accompanies the protagonist in the scene and marks yet another departure from the vernacular: "In contrast to the lives serving as art in the Convergence, Jeff's art serves life, as he pays more than scant attention to silence and stillness, the everyday moment and fleeting gesture, the 'pre-linguistic grunts' and 'cries of wonder' (274), the sacredness of ordinary language and extraordinary sights" (Barrett 122). Wolf views the boy's earnest reaction of delight as a counterpoint to the preconceptions of society and the Institute: "[I]t is the boy who proves the 'Convergence' transhumanist wrong" (164).

Although the boy's cry is incomprehensible, it is audible and embodied, whereas Artis's interior monologue remains silent, and she is deprived of the sensory experience of the outside world. Rogowska-Stangret importantly points out that "[t]he autistic perception—which is worth mentioning—is not a homogenous phenomenon, it can be a way to capture the specificity of being *of* the world, and reflection—a way to re/solve the world and problematise the harmful opposition between 'normal' and 'pathological' behaviour" (92). In *Zero K*, it is the boy's cries that are chosen to show the superiority of human experience over intellectual abilities. The boy is

accompanied by his mother, and together they become an allusion to Jeff's childhood with his mother, Madeline, and her attention to even the most mundane and irrelevant details. Jeff can be seen as the only character for whom the *potentia* of life and the acknowledgement of grief are not mutually exclusive. It is through the memory of his mother and Stak that Jeff can be seen as a character who embodies Rogowska-Stangret's ethical stance. The insistence on remembering, combined with an experience of becoming a witness to everyone's death, shapes him as a human being. The protagonist does not avert his eyes from the view of death; he acknowledges it, yet he is far from embracing it in a posthumanist way as Braidotti does. Instead, by witnessing the deaths of the people who were closest to him, he becomes even more aware and engaged in his own life. This proves that the affirmation of *potentia* can be even stronger if informed by the memory of those lost.

Zero K's cryonics project reveals the limitations of transhumanist thought, such as the promised inclusivity, connectivity, and control over one's death. However, it is by experiencing both realities, of living "outside" and "inside" the transhumanist Convergence, that Jeff comes to embody Deborah Rose's claim that "[l]ife's desire for its own becoming is actualised through interaction with other living and nonliving matter" (69). In the final scene, Jeff makes a conscious decision to view the boy's shouting as "cries of wonder"; this becomes a powerful metaphor for Jeff's making an effort to, in a Thoreauvian manner, "live deliberately" and reinstitute himself in the present moment despite the shadows of loss.

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Surviving *Hamlet*: Female Trauma through the Lens of Judith Lewis Herman's Theory

ABSTRACT

This article employs Judith Lewis Herman's Trauma and Recovery Theory as a framework to explore the theme of female trauma in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a play renowned for its intricate psychological depth. It analyzes the traumatic events experienced by the pivotal female characters, Queen Gertrude and Ophelia, examining their traumas, with specific focus on Gertrude's inner struggles regarding remarriage and Ophelia's trauma stemming from political manipulation and her lover's betrayal. Symptoms such as hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction observed in the female characters are scrutinized, as are the recovery efforts of both characters, in particular, Gertrude's quest for stability and efforts at reconnection with Hamlet, as well as Ophelia's remembrance and mourning process. Through close textual analysis and engagement with contemporary trauma scholarship, this article demonstrates that Shakespeare's portrayal of female suffering offers nuanced insights into the interplay between personal trauma and social structures, while highlighting the limitations imposed on female recovery in a patriarchal context.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, literary trauma studies, Judith Lewis Herman, character analysis, Gertrude, Ophelia.



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LITERATURE REVIEW ON SHAKESPEARE'S TRAUMATIZED FEMALE FIGURES

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Lewis Herman outlines a clinical model of psychological trauma structured around three symptoms—hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction—and three stages of recovery: establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with the outside world. While developed in the context of survivors of domestic violence, political terror, and sexual abuse, Herman's framework has since been applied across disciplines, offering a nuanced understanding of how trauma affects memory, identity, and speech. This article adopts Herman's model to reinterpret the emotional and psychological experiences of the characters of Gertrude and Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Rather than casting these characters solely as embodiments of victimhood or madness, the article highlights their coping strategies and chances of recovery, thereby illuminating dimensions of gendered suffering and resilience. This approach, in line with Herman's feminist emphasis on bearing witness to survivors of violence, bridges literary and psychological perspectives and contributes to an ongoing dialogue between literary criticism and trauma studies. This approach builds on and departs from previous critical traditions. Earlier critical interpretations of *Hamlet*, notably those by William Hazlitt and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, tended to frame the emotional suffering of Gertrude and Ophelia in terms of personal morality or poetic sensibility. These readings often emphasized character traits and individual choices, reflecting a broader tendency to understand female experience through moral or aesthetic lenses. However, in recent decades, with the developments in feminist theory and clinical psychology, scholarship has shifted toward examining how Shakespeare's female characters register the effects of structural oppression and psychological trauma. Shakespeare's depiction of madness in *Hamlet* has been widely interpreted through the lens of trauma, particularly in the case of Ophelia. Her descent into madness, characterized by fragmented speech, erratic behavior, and eventual death, has become representative of female psychological breakdown in early modern drama. Gertrude, though less visibly afflicted, has also prompted interpretations that explore the gendered dimensions of trauma, silence, and survival. Both characters have thus become central to critical conversations about how early modern drama encodes the psychological consequences of patriarchal power structures.

Literary critics have increasingly recognized that female trauma in Shakespeare's works is not only an individual affliction but also a manifestation of patriarchal oppression. Džaja and Dugandžić, for instance, argue that Ophelia's hysteria is consistently contrasted with

Hamlet's melancholy, illustrating a gendered hierarchy in representations of psychological distress. While male suffering is framed as introspective and meaningful, female distress is medicalized, aestheticized, or dismissed. This disparity reflects broader cultural mechanisms that devalue women's emotional experiences. Montironi emphasizes that the limited and regulated speech of Ophelia and Gertrude underscores the suppression of female subjectivity in early modern drama. Similarly, Hamamra observes that the tension between speech and silence in Shakespeare's female characters often serves as a subtle indicator of trauma, revealing itself through fragmentation, hesitation, and omission.

The feminist turn in Shakespearean criticism has emphasized how structural violence, manifested through gender roles, familial expectations, and societal norms, produces psychological trauma in women. Kramer focuses on the strained relationships between fathers and daughters, arguing that patriarchal authority disrupts the formation of stable female identity. In Ophelia's case, obedience to both her father Polonius and her lover Hamlet creates an untenable conflict between loyalty and autonomy, leading to emotional fragmentation. Gertrude, similarly, is caught in overlapping networks of familial and political loyalty that require the suppression of her subjectivity. Her remarriage to Claudius, often interpreted as moral weakness by traditional critics, has been recontextualized by feminist scholars such as Wyman and Heilbrun as an act of survival in a system that offers women little space for agency. Wyman interprets Gertrude's choices as coping strategies shaped by trauma rather than as evidence of complicity. Heilbrun extends this view by arguing that Gertrude's choices, including her silence and strategic ambiguity, are complex psychological responses to persistent structural violence.

In this context, Ophelia's madness emerges not simply as a result of personal grief or romantic despair, but as a cumulative reaction to emotional betrayal and social dispossession. Goodson applies contemporary clinical models to interpret her symptoms as indicative of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), emphasizing how emotional rupture, loss of familial support, and public humiliation converge to destabilize her sense of self. Her songs, disconnected thoughts, and symbolic gestures are read as forms of dissociation, a defense mechanism common in trauma survivors. Stevanović's comparative study of Gertrude and Dido illustrates how narrative conventions in Renaissance drama tend to limit the psychological development and moral complexity of female characters, positioning them within plot structures primarily shaped by male perspectives.

The theme of sexual vulnerability also plays a crucial role in trauma-focused readings of *Hamlet*. Kahn's exploration of classical influences on Shakespeare's portrayal of violated female bodies reveals how sexualized

female suffering becomes both a site of cultural anxiety and narrative control. While *Hamlet* does not depict explicit sexual violence, Ophelia's objectification and humiliation, particularly in her interactions with Hamlet, reinforce a social order in which female bodies are rendered symbolic battlegrounds for male honor and power.

Although previous scholars have acknowledged the trauma-like symptoms exhibited by these characters, their suffering has not been systematically examined and their recovery endeavors not explored within a contemporary clinical trauma framework, particularly one as comprehensive as Judith Lewis Herman's theory of trauma and recovery. This article seeks to bridge this gap by integrating Herman's trauma and recovery model into the analysis of Gertrude and Ophelia, as an attempt to deepen the interdisciplinary conversation between literary studies and clinical trauma theory. Another significant contribution of this study is its challenge to the prevailing view that *Hamlet*, as a tragedy, offers no space for recovery. On the contrary, this article contends that Shakespeare subtly incorporates moments that align with Herman's notion of recovery, and that allow even the most constrained female characters a fleeting moment of reconnection and self-assertion before their demise. It underscores how the intricate interplay between memory, identity, and dissociation not only deepens our reading of the two female characters but also expands the scope of literary trauma studies and character analysis.

TRAUMA AND JUDITH LEWIS HERMAN'S FRAMEWORK OF TRAUMA AND RECOVERY THEORY

The term "trauma" originally derives from the Greek word "traûma" which refers to a physical wound caused by direct external forces. With the development of the field of psychology in the 19th century, early psychoanalysts such as Jean Martin Charcot and Sigmund Freud began to use "trauma" to describe "the wounding of the mind brought by sudden, unexpected, emotional shock" (Leys 4). Since then, the definition of trauma has evolved with developments in the global political, economic, and social spheres, extending its relevance to various fields, including literary studies. Among the notable figures in trauma theory and practice, Judith Lewis Herman, a distinguished American psychiatrist and psychologist, has dedicated over two decades to clinical research and the teaching of trauma theories. Her classic work *Trauma and Recovery* approaches the subject from a feminist angle, based on a wealth of empirical data. Herman argues that "the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom" (1), with her research covering a wide range of trauma victims,

e.g., those of rape, incest, and domestic violence, as well as combat veterans and political prisoners. Through an in-depth analysis of the source and nature of different types of trauma experienced by survivors, Herman examines their trauma symptoms and explores methods of therapeutic intervention.

Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* has been pioneering in shifting conventional opinions towards traumatic events and trauma victims, by advocating a nuanced understanding and therapeutic approach that takes into account the victims' specific social contexts. Finding that "the ordinary human response to danger is a complex, integrated system of reactions, encompassing both body and mind" (34), Herman classifies the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) into three primary categories of hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. Hyperarousal is characterized by a state of continuous vigilance or "permanent alert" (35), serving as a self-protective mechanism. Individuals experiencing hyperarousal maintain a heightened readiness to react with exaggerated startle reflexes to any stimuli reminiscent of their trauma, perpetually bracing for potential danger as though it could occur at any moment. This condition often manifests in various sleep disturbances, including insomnia, an increased sensitivity to sounds, and a propensity to awaken abruptly in a state of panic. Intrusion refers to the persistent and involuntary re-experiencing of traumatic events. Victims find themselves incessantly haunted by vivid, distressing memories of their past trauma, despite the passage of years. Unlike conventional memories, traumatic memories are typically "encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images" (38), leaving the individuals sometimes unaware of their mental reenactment of the traumatic events, further complicating the healing process. Constriction happens in a state of "emotional detachment" (43) when individuals facing trauma reach a point where their self-defense mechanisms cease operation entirely, leading to a cessation of all effort and resistance. In this state, victims may become emotionally numb and dissociated from their desperate experiences, perceiving the events as if they are mere observers rather than participants. This detachment is often accompanied by a distorted perception of time and experiences of depersonalization, compelling victims to avoid anything that might evoke memories of their trauma. Apart from the three major types of trauma symptoms, Herman delineates further consequences of traumatic exposure, namely "disconnection" and "the damaged self." Disconnection describes the phenomenon where traumatic incidents "shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others" (51). This fragmentation hinders the ability of individuals to maintain or establish connections with the external world, posing significant challenges to their recovery process. "The damaged self" encompasses the erosion of positive self-perceptions, including one's basic beliefs, self-worth, and human

dignity. Following traumatic events, victims may struggle with feelings of inferiority and guilt, often accompanied by a profound crisis of faith.

At the heart of traumatic experiences lie deprivation of autonomy and a pervasive sense of disconnection from others. Consequently, the pathway to recovery is founded on empowering survivors and fostering reconnections with the community. In the latter portion of *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman outlines a triphasic process of trauma recovery. The initial phase is dedicated to the restoration of a sense of security, achieved through therapeutic alliances, pharmacological interventions, and relaxation techniques, or a combination of these approaches. The establishment of safety is crucial and can be facilitated by support from family, partners, close friends, or finding a secure refuge. In such environments, survivors are more inclined to open up, share their feelings, and plan for future safeguarding measures. This secure setting acts as a catalyst for emotional stabilization, enabling individuals to revisit and process their traumatic experiences. It is during this reflective period that survivors begin to recognize and reclaim aspects of the self that were lost or obscured by trauma. The second phase of recovery, as outlined by Herman, involves the processes of remembrance and mourning. During this phase, individuals who have experienced trauma recount their traumatic experiences in a comprehensive and detailed manner. The act of reconstructing their trauma stories helps the victims to directly confront their innermost fears, pains, and struggles, along with other associated negative emotions. This meticulous retelling of traumatic events allows these memories to become integrated into the survivors' life stories as part of their common life experiences. Through the repeated narration of their traumatic experiences, the influence exerted by the perpetrators gradually diminishes, and the intense sorrow connected to these traumatic memories begins to wane. Consequently, traumatized survivors can rekindle their hope and desire for a fulfilling and joyful life. This newfound emotional resilience and readiness mark the transition to the third phase of recovery, where survivors prepare to reintegrate with the external world. This stage may involve learning to fight the fear when exposed to danger, fostering self-reconciliation, celebrating the emergence of a new self that has been forged through personal efforts, reconnecting with people to regain the capability to trust others, and discovering a sense of purpose as a survivor through participation in social activities and outreach to fellow trauma victims. Herman believes that by navigating these phases, survivors will liberate themselves from feelings of helplessness and isolation and ultimately consolidate their newly formed identities.

The application of psychological trauma and recovery theory to literary texts allows for a structured analysis of how characters embody,

respond to, and potentially overcome psychological distress. A central issue this study explores is the gendered nature of suffering in *Hamlet*, particularly how female trauma, expressed through silence, madness, and passivity, contrasts with male melancholia and existential turmoil. Moreover, this article challenges the conventional tragic reading of *Hamlet* by examining whether Shakespeare allows for any moments of agency or recovery for Ophelia and Gertrude, even within the constraints of their traumatic experiences. By incorporating Herman's recovery model, this study investigates whether the play offers fleeting instances of psychological resolution or empowerment for its female characters. Finally, this research seeks to bridge the fields of psychology and literary studies, demonstrating how contemporary trauma theory can enrich our understanding of Shakespeare's female figures and recontextualize their historical reception.

TRAUMA IN THE FEMALE CHARACTERS

Analyzing the origins of trauma experienced by the two female characters, Gertrude and Ophelia, allows a deeper insight into their inner worlds, which helps to identify the difficulties they face and their relationships with other characters in the play. Given that the traumatic experiences of these two characters may affect the progression of the entire storyline and the development of other characters, a thorough analysis of the sources of their trauma can provide a more comprehensive perspective for the textual interpretation of *Hamlet*.

GERTRUDE'S REMARRIAGE AS A PORTRAIT OF HELPLESSNESS AMIDST THE GRIEF OF LOSING A BELOVED HUSBAND

At the beginning of the play, Denmark is mourning for the recently deceased King Hamlet, and Gertrude is left to navigate her new role as widow amidst considerable political and emotional instability. Subtle textual cues suggest that King Hamlet's affection for Gertrude was profound and binding, as indicated by his expressed love "of that dignity" and marital vows (1.5.48–50). Even after his death, his ghost's admonition to Hamlet—warning against his "most seeming-virtuous" wife (1.5.46)—complicates the narrative, implying that Gertrude's emotional and psychological state is intricately tied to a lost ideal of marital fidelity. In the closet scene, when Hamlet condemns her for living "in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed, stewed in corruption. . ." (3.4.93–94), the sudden reappearance of the Ghost, urging Hamlet to "step between her and her

fighting soul" (3.4.114), signifies a critical moment in which Gertrude's internal conflict is foregrounded. It becomes evident that Gertrude and King Hamlet shared a profound and genuine love throughout their many decades of happy marriage. Gertrude's acceptance of Claudius's proposal reflects a forced adaptation—a mechanism of psychological constriction in response to overwhelming grief and an environment of relentless political instability, aligning with Herman's notion of constriction as a trauma response. Her vulnerability is compounded by her dual burden: the loss of a beloved husband and the ensuing courtly turmoil that demands immediate political realignment. This dual burden invites a reconsideration of her character as one whose actions—though seemingly complicit—can be understood as a tragic attempt to manage unbearable internal pressures rather than a simple moral failing. The plight of the "mobled queen" in the play-within-a-play metaphorically points to Gertrude's profound grief over the loss of her husband:

"Run barefoot up and down, threat'ning the flames
With bisson rheum; a clout upon that head
Where late the diadem stood, and for a robe,
About her lank and all o'erteemed loins,
A blanket in the alarm of fear caught up—
Who this had seen, with tongue in venom steeped
'Gainst Fortune's state would treason have pronounced." (2.2.516–22)

Excessive sorrow and peril confront Gertrude with "the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe" (Herman 33). Amidst her vulnerability, Gertrude accepts Claudius's proposal.

When Claudius, Gertrude, and Polonius are discussing the possible reasons for Hamlet's madness, Gertrude proposes that her son's feigned condition is due to "his father's death, and our o'erhasty marriage" (2.2.57). However, her response not only deflects scrutiny away from herself but also reveals her unwillingness or inability to fully confront the depths of Hamlet's grief and anger. Rather than portraying her as merely oblivious or complicit, Shakespeare presents Gertrude as a character struggling to reconcile her own trauma with her son's suffering, which is different from the traditional perception of her as an unrepentant figure. The moment she witnesses Hamlet stab Polonius to death marks a critical turning point in her psychological state. This act of violence shatters her fragile perception of control, forcing her to recognize both Hamlet's instability and the devastating consequences of the environment she has helped sustain. However, it is the revelation that she has married her husband's murderer that ultimately fractures her sense of self. Gertrude does not immediately

challenge Claudius, but her subsequent choices suggest an internal struggle between allegiance and awakening, a struggle that reflects the constraining conditions of female trauma in the play.

OPHELIA'S TRAUMA RESULTING FROM POLITICAL MANIPULATION, EXPLOITATION, AND A LOVER'S BETRAYAL

Living in a male-dominated environment and haunted by a familial trauma rooted in her mother's absence, Ophelia is subjected to relentless manipulation by the men around her. Deprived of the power to freely express her true thoughts and emotions, she exhibits absolute obedience to the dictates of her male guardians. Her relationship with Hamlet is systematically undermined by both her brother Laertes and her father Polonius. Laertes warns her against the ephemeral nature of passion, urging her to suppress her emotions and maintain her chastity, while Polonius reduces her to a possession by declaring: "I have a daughter: have, while she is mine" (2.2.106).

Polonius's intervention extends to orchestrating Ophelia's romantic relationship. For political expediency, he admonishes her against Hamlet's "implorators of unholy suits" (1.3.129) and compels her to divulge intimate details about Hamlet's advances, treating her as a mere instrument in his investigation of Hamlet's sanity. Under the weight of her father's authority, Ophelia is forced into a state of isolation—both physically, within the confines of her household, and mentally, as her internal world is dominated by the overwhelming dictates of male control. In this state of captivity, both physically and mentally, the perpetrator becomes "the most powerful person in the life of the victim" (Herman 75). "The destruction of attachment requires not only the isolation of the victim from others but also the destruction of her internal images of connection to others," as Polonius demands that Ophelia hand over Hamlet's love letter as the "object of symbolic importance" (80). This imposition not only strips her of personal autonomy but also catalyzes a process of internal fragmentation, wherein her personal memories are overwritten by the external demands imposed upon her.

The second and perhaps more devastating layer of trauma for Ophelia arises from her "sexual victimization" (Hunt 646) at the hands of Hamlet. While previous readings have emphasized this as a straightforward case of betrayal, this analysis situates it within a broader process of psychological intrusion, wherein Ophelia's bodily autonomy is violated and her identity is forcibly redefined. Hinted at in the text is the possibility that Ophelia may have been sexually involved with Hamlet, influenced by his promises of marriage, and there is evidence suggesting that she might be carrying

his child during her descent into madness, as observed by the Priest during her funeral: "Her obsequies have been as far enlarged" (5.1.228). Her loss of chastity which is interpreted as a transgression against Christian norms further exacerbates her vulnerability, even as she is paradoxically afforded a maiden's funeral due to her noble status.

Hamlet's seduction and subsequent abandonment inflict profound emotional trauma on Ophelia. More than merely a personal betrayal, his actions function as a catalyst that activates her underlying trauma, aligning with Herman's notion of intrusion, where traumatic content repeatedly invades her conscious experience. He cruelly demeans her as "a breeder of sinners" (3.1.122) and accuses her of promiscuity. This public degradation leaves Ophelia bereft of any emotional or spiritual refuge, intensifying her internal disintegration. Therefore, the convergence of political manipulation, sexual exploitation, and familial control creates an environment in which Ophelia's inner world is inundated with conflicting memories and emotions, effectively erasing her capacity for coherent self-narration.

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TRAUMATIC SYMPTOMS IN THE FEMALE CHARACTERS

Further exploring the psychological dimensions of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, we find that Gertrude and Ophelia are burdened by the weight of familial misfortunes, political conspiracies, and emotional frustration. In anatomizing their traumatic symptoms, we discover an intricate manifestation of hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction.

HYPERAROUSAL

The cumulative impact of loss, deceit, betrayal, and violent death in *Hamlet* is central to understanding Gertrude's and Ophelia's states of hyperarousal, a key concept in Herman's trauma theory. In Herman's analysis, the traumatized have "an elevated baseline of arousal" (36), leaving their bodies in a constant state of alertness, and vulnerable to even minor provocations. Gertrude's hyperarousal functions as a defense mechanism that both reflects and perpetuates her internal crisis, underscoring her struggle to maintain control in a reality of profound loss and betrayal. In the closet scene, for example, when Gertrude seeks to inquire about the play "The Mousetrap," Hamlet's aggressive command for her to sit down, coupled with his use of a mirror to force her to confront her inner self, triggers a potent startle response. Gertrude's exclamation, "What wilt thou

do? Thou wilt not murder me? Help, ho!” (3.4.22–23), reveals that her body is primed to react defensively to any perceived threat. This reaction is not simply a momentary expression of fear; it encapsulates the enduring effects of her traumatic experiences which force her into a perpetual state of hyperarousal. Gertrude’s desperate pleas for Hamlet to cease his relentless accusations further illustrate the characteristic features of hyperarousal. Rather than engaging in a reasoned dialogue, her responses become increasingly frantic, suggesting that every verbal assault from Hamlet resonates as a personal, almost physical, wound. This reaction aligns with Herman’s concept of hyperarousal, where trauma results in an exaggerated and unmodulated response to perceived threats, thereby compromising the individual’s capacity for rational interaction. Gertrude’s hyperarousal not only underscores her emotional vulnerability but also reflects the broader social and political pressures that exacerbate her trauma.

Ophelia, too, exhibits pronounced symptoms of hyperarousal. Following Hamlet’s rejection, she oscillates between outbursts of anger and profound sorrow, an abrupt departure from her usual gentle and virtuous image. In the description of the witnessing Gentleman, she “hems, and beats her heart, spurns enviously at straws, speaks things in doubt” (4.5.5–6) as “her winks and nods and gestures yield them” (4.5.11). Ophelia’s emotional fluctuations can be interpreted as manifestations of hyperarousal, a state in which the cumulative stress of familial manipulation and sexual exploitation leads to intrusive recollections and erratic expressions of distress. She then unexpectedly sings an indecent ballad about pre-marital sex in the presence of the king. This song functions as an involuntary, disjointed reenactment of her trauma from the interplay of personal betrayal and systemic oppression. Her subsequent return to deep distress, particularly upon recalling her father’s murder, further confirms that her mental health has been fundamentally undermined by these traumatic events.

INTRUSION

Ophelia is rendered “a sacrificial victim” (Wicher 173), subjected to the relentless imposition of others’ agendas. Her experience of intrusion should be understood as the systematic violation of her agency, where her personal desires and identity are repeatedly overwritten by the controlling demands of her father and brother, as well as the erratic affections of Hamlet. Her feeble confession that “I do not know, my lord, what I should think” (1.3.104) exemplifies her psychological intrusion, where the overwhelming presence of patriarchal control has disrupted her ability to form an autonomous internal narrative. In Hamlet’s affectionate letter,

where he refers to her as his "soul's idol" (2.2.109) and promises, "Thine evermore, most dear lady, whilst this machine is to him" (2.2.123–24), we witness the remnants of a relationship once imbued with mutual care. Later, at her grave, Hamlet's fervent confession that "I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers could not with their quantity of love make up my sum" (5.1.271–73) further underscores that their past connection was deeply significant. However, the sharp contrast between past affection and her current desolation intensifies the sense of intrusion; the persistent echo of former intimacy invades her present, triggering painful memories that she is forced to relive.

Ophelia's struggle to reconcile the loving Hamlet of her past with his present, frenzied demeanor plunges her into traumatic recollections, disrupting her sense of continuity and contributing to a fragmented identity. As Ophelia's mental state deteriorates, her ballads serve as a medium through which her traumatic experiences are reenacted. Her ballads are characterized by a "disjointed speech pattern" (Pang, Thrichelvam, and Wider 4), seemingly meaningful yet meaningless. In line with Herman's observations, traumatic memories are typically "encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images" (38). The imagery found in Ophelia's ballads, such as "shroud," "grave," "cold ground," "bier," "deathbed," all contribute to the atmosphere of despair, while the "dove" image indicates Ophelia's remaining love for Hamlet. These recurring themes of death, betrayal, and the loss of love in the ballads mirror her romantic attachment to Hamlet and foreshadow the tragic events that unfold later in the play. By narrating her experiences of deception and abandonment, Ophelia involuntarily relives her traumatic past. Unsuitable for a refined young lady, the use of vulgar language in these ballads further suggests her descent into a state of mental breakdown. At this moment, the boundaries between reality and memory have become increasingly blurred, underlining the immense impact of her traumatic experiences on her psyche. Ophelia's experience of intrusion is a multifaceted process wherein the constant reactivation of traumatic memories, whether through enforced public disclosures, the residual echoes of lost intimacy, or the involuntary recitation of ballads, systematically undermines her psychological integrity.

CONSTRICTION

For both Gertrude and Ophelia, constriction emerges as a coping mechanism, which refers to altering one's state of consciousness to shield oneself from overwhelming trauma. As Herman explains, "the helpless person escapes from her situation not by action in the real world but

rather by altering her state of consciousness" (42), and this change of consciousness may be accompanied by "a feeling of indifference, emotional detachment, and profound passivity in which the person relinquishes all initiative and struggle" (43). Constrictive symptoms are not easy to detect, but are likely to be "mistaken for enduring characteristics of the victim's personality" (49). In *Hamlet*, both female characters exhibit a deliberate narrowing of emotional expression as a response to sustained psychological assault. When Gertrude copes with Hamlet's violent accusations with repeated pleas—"speak no more" (3.4.89), "speak to me no more" (3.4.95), "no more" (3.4.97)—these phrases also reflect a defensive constriction, wherein Gertrude suppresses her emotional expression in an attempt to avoid further psychological injury. In her constrained state, every verbal interaction becomes laden with the weight of unprocessed grief and guilt, effectively neutralizing her capacity for active resistance or self-assertion. The articulation of her inner life is severely compromised by the oppressive forces of a male-dominated environment. Another example is that she attempts to mitigate the overwhelming grief caused by Ophelia's death by preserving emotional distance and resorting to a description replete with euphemism and botanical imagery.

In contrast, Ophelia's symptoms of constriction are more overt, and symptomatic of a deeper dissociative process. Following Hamlet's rejection and the traumatic loss of her father, Ophelia's consciousness appears to be slipping into what Herman terms "hypnotic trance states" (43). Appearing as erratic and distracted, Ophelia adopts a singing manner of communication when meeting the Queen. The King notices that she has been "divided from herself and her fair judgement" (4.5.85). One of the ballads sung by Ophelia narrates the tragic tale of a girl who sacrifices herself for love, only to be abandoned and humiliated by her lover, which is obviously a metaphor for Ophelia's romantic entanglement with Hamlet. By narrating from a third-person perspective, Ophelia creates a sense of self-detachment, as if she is recounting a story which happened to someone else. She manages to remain emotionally unaffected, disassociating herself from the painful experiences depicted in the ballad. The ballads provide a channel through which Ophelia can indirectly process her emotions. This psychological defense mechanism helps shield her from the direct impact of the loss of her father and her ex-lover's betrayal. In Gertrude, constriction manifests as an inhibited but persistent attempt to maintain some semblance of order amidst chaos, whereas in Ophelia, it leads to a total dissociation from reality, revealing not only the gendered dimensions of trauma but also the profound impact of external oppression on the capacity for psychological healing.

TRAUMA RECOVERY EFFORTS OF THE FEMALE CHARACTERS

Herman perceives that the three stages of recovery are “an attempt to impose simplicity and order upon a process that is inherently turbulent and complex” (155); as such, the sequence of recovery steps may differ among trauma victims, and personalized treatment procedures specific to each patient are required. Gertrude and Ophelia have gone through different stages of trauma recovery, and the extent of their individual recovery from these traumatic experiences varies.

GERTRUDE'S PURSUIT OF SAFETY AND STABILITY AMID FAMILIAL LOSS AND DECEPTION

For trauma survivors, establishing safety is a critical prerequisite for any subsequent healing. According to Herman, recovery begins with regaining bodily control and gradually extends to asserting control over one's environment. The reestablishment of this control requires “the establishment of a safe living situation, financial security, mobility, and a plan for self-protection that encompasses the full range of the patient's daily life” (Herman 160). In Gertrude's case, the abrupt loss of King Hamlet not only devastates her emotionally but also destabilizes the political and economic security she once enjoyed as Queen. The marriage to Claudius undoubtedly constitutes a secure refuge for Gertrude, one through which she maintains the status of Queen. Apart from protective resources, the union may also provide emotional support, as it is evident in the text that Claudius genuinely loves Gertrude; indeed, he may have harbored a secret affection for her for some time. Seizing the throne fulfills both his ambitions and the opportunity to have a legitimate marriage with the woman he desires. As Claudius states in the play, Gertrude is “my virtue or my plague” (4.7.13). Despite the profound guilt due to his “foul murder” (3.3.52), Claudius is unwilling to relinquish “those effects for which I did the murder: my crown, mine own ambition, and my queen” (3.3.54–55). Therefore, Gertrude's marriage to Claudius could be understood as a desperate, adaptive strategy to restore a semblance of stability and safety in a chaotic court environment.

As a deeply caring mother, Gertrude feels compelled to plan for the future of her son. She realizes that only by marrying the new king can she preserve Hamlet's position as the successor to the throne. From a political standpoint, Gertrude assumes the responsibility of ensuring that the kingship does not fall into the hands of others, and she knows that if she loses her position as Queen, Hamlet will also lose his status as an heir. Therefore, to safeguard Hamlet's position,

she perceives no alternative but to marry Claudius. As a political move, Gertrude's marriage to Claudius secures her position as Queen as well as Hamlet's position as the most immediate successor to the throne. Gertrude also encourages Hamlet to quickly move on from the shadow of his father's death with words of consolation such as "thou know'st 'tis common; all that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity" (1.2.72–73). These consoling phrases function as a subtle call to accept the inevitability of loss while maintaining resilience. Directed at both Hamlet and herself, the words reflect an internalized struggle with grief and an implicit determination to reassert order in her life. Gertrude's actions, including her insistence that Hamlet remain in Denmark and her plea, "let not thy mother lose her prayers" (1.2.118), are indicative of her effort to reforge bonds and protect her son's future. Through these politically charged and emotionally nuanced gestures, Gertrude attempts to rebuild trust and reestablish a secure environment in a way that mirrors Herman's notion of recovery wherein the individual seeks to connect with trusted others in order to prevent the recurrence of trauma (206). Thus, Gertrude's effort at recovery is characterized by her struggle to balance personal grief with the demands of survival in an oppressive, patriarchal milieu, which provides critical insights into the gendered nature of trauma recovery in *Hamlet*.

OPHELIA'S REMEMBRANCE AND MOURNING PROCESS

Within Herman's theoretical framework, remembrance and mourning constitute a transformative process whereby trauma survivors reassemble fragmented memories and confront inner conflicts. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare employs ballads as a deliberate narrative device for Ophelia, enabling her to articulate the traumatic memories of captivity, suppression, and betrayal that have fractured her sense of self. Ophelia's use of ballads is a complex, symbolic attempt to reconstruct and reinterpret her traumatic past, both revealing and temporarily mitigating the internal chaos wrought by her experiences.

Ophelia's distribution of flowers operates as a "nonverbal method of communication" (Herman 177) that encapsulates her stage of remembrance and mourning. When she declares: "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance. Pray you, love, remember" (4.5.174–75), the seemingly disjointed nature of her expression underscores the inherent difficulty of coherently reassembling traumatic memories. Moreover, the sequence of flowers she distributes is a carefully constructed narrative strategy that maps her internal emotional landscape and reflects the disintegration of her self, as well as the longing for a return to wholeness.

In melancholy love ballads, flowers often symbolize "love's fragility and its inextricability from human mortality" (Bialo 302). Each kind of flower that Ophelia hands out carries symbolic meanings. For instance, rosemary represents "remembrance," expressing Ophelia's nostalgia for the beautiful memories she shared with Hamlet. Pansies, symbolizing "thoughts," signify Ophelia and Hamlet's mutual thoughts and recollections, as echoed in Laertes's statement that Ophelia's "thoughts and remembrance fitted" (4.5.177–78). Fennel, which symbolizes "flattery," alludes to her father's flattery towards Claudius. Ironically, it also points to Hamlet's sweet words, used to deceive her into love. Columbines represent "marital infidelity," with an insinuation that Hamlet has betrayed his love vows and accused her of being the sexual aggressor. Ophelia presents rue, symbolizing "repentance," to Queen Gertrude, as an allusion to the Queen's regrets about marrying her husband's murderer and failing to sooner recognize her son's inner pain. Ophelia also keeps some rue for herself, indicating her own remorse for believing in Hamlet's promises, surrendering herself to him, only to be humiliated and rejected. Daisies carry a connotation of "unhappy love," signifying the tragic conclusion of Ophelia's romantic relationship. Violets, with their symbolic meaning of "faithfulness to love," imply her enduring affection for Hamlet. However, "they withered all when my father died" (4.5.183–84), indicating that her love for Hamlet died the moment he killed her father. This sentiment is also conveyed in the closing line of the ballad she sings before presenting the flowers: "Fare you well, my dove!" (4.5.167). The dove, a symbol imbued with mythological significance as a token of love in ancient Greek tradition, serves as a final, decisive break with the past. Far from being a mere nostalgic lament, this farewell signals a determined act of self-liberation and a refusal to remain tethered to the pain of lost intimacy. Ophelia's subsequent ballad that begins with "And will he not come again" (4.5.188) serves as an elegy for her father Polonius. In this song, Ophelia deeply mourns her father's tragic death: "He is gone, he is gone, and we cast away moan, God'a'mercy on his soul! And of all Christian souls, I pray God. God be with you." (4.5.195–98). Each kind of flower represents a facet of her emotional state and reflections on her life experiences, especially on the traumatic events.

Through the act of singing these ballads and distributing symbolic flowers, Ophelia engages in a ritualized process of remembrance and mourning. It also represents her desperate and tragic attempt to reclaim agency in a life overrun by external control. Ultimately, her self-destructive immersion in the water, accompanied by the continuous echo of these ballads, marks both an escape from unbearable agony and a symbolic, if ephemeral, self-liberation.

GERTRUDE'S RECONNECTION WITH HAMLET TROUGH REBUILDING TRUST AND SELF-SACRIFICE

Once a semblance of safety is achieved, trauma recovery involves reasserting control and preventing further harm, a process that Gertrude engages in, though in a deeply conflicted manner. When the truth about King Hamlet's murder emerges, Gertrude is overwhelmed by mixed emotions of shock and shame. Instead of succumbing to despair, she consciously opts to integrate these traumatic experiences into her life, aiming to "deepen her alliances with those whom she has learned to trust" (Herman 197). At this stage, Herman's theory suggests that survivors may begin to regain a capacity for appropriate trust (205), a pivotal step toward recovery. In Gertrude's case, this nascent trust is evident in her gradual realignment with Hamlet which is deeply rooted in her maternal love and protective instinct. Despite the barrage of accusations from Hamlet, which pierce her already fragile emotional state, she remains determined to protect him. Her defensive responses, including the oath to help conceal his feigned madness—"if words be made of breath, and breath of life, I have no life to breathe what thou hast said to me" (3.4.198–200)—illustrate a critical shift from passive victimhood toward an active but constrained form of agency. This transformation is not merely a return to maternal duty; it is an effort to rebuild a relational foundation that can withstand the recurring threats of further trauma. Herman notes that survivors in the process of recovery are "always linked with the question of prevention" (206), underscoring the deep-seated fear of re-traumatization. For Gertrude, this fear compels her to take decisive measures to shield her son from additional harm. Her commitment to prevention is vividly demonstrated when, upon learning of Laertes's challenge to Hamlet following the deaths of Polonius and Ophelia, she intercedes by pleading, "for love of god forbear him" (5.1.275). This intervention is not a mere maternal outburst but a calculated, trauma-informed response aimed at averting further violence, suggesting that Gertrude is actively reconstructing her sense of control even as she remains entangled in the cycle of tragedy. It is plausible that she has already overheard conspiracies between Claudius and Laertes to poison Hamlet, a possibility that heightens her determination to protect him.

Unfortunately, Gertrude's attempts at mediation are ultimately futile, and the duel proceeds as planned. During the fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes, Gertrude raises a toast to Hamlet's success, saying: "The queen carouses to thy fortune, Hamlet" (5.2.290). This act of public support can be interpreted as a maternal gesture of reconciliation, indicating her desire to mend their strained relationship. While this moment is fleeting and occurs in the play's final act, it signifies Gertrude's endeavor to bridge

the emotional gap with her son before her untimely death. In a final act of self-sacrifice, she consumes the poisoned wine intended for Hamlet, and in her dying moments, she desperately warns him: "O my dear Hamlet! The drink, the drink! I am poisoned" (5.2.310–11). This voluntary sacrifice, far from being a passive resignation to fate, is reinterpreted here as a deliberate, albeit tragic, reclamation of agency, and a final effort to repair the broken bond with her son and to prevent further harm. Her sacrifice is pivotal; without it, Hamlet's quest for revenge would have lacked the necessary emotional and narrative catalyst for its resolution.

In summary, Gertrude's trajectory—from initial shock and constrained withdrawal to a tentative reconnection with her son through acts of protective intervention and ultimate self-sacrifice—exemplifies the complex interplay of trauma, recovery, and agency. Gertrude's efforts to rebuild trust, to ensure safety, and to prevent the recurrence of trauma are not only reflective of a personal struggle but also a critical commentary on the constraints imposed by a patriarchal system that leaves women with few options for genuine healing. To some extent, Gertrude has become an indispensable agent in the unfolding of *Hamlet's* tragic resolution, underscoring the nuanced dynamics of trauma recovery in a hostile world.

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CONCLUSION

Judith Lewis Herman's Trauma and Recovery Theory offers an interdisciplinary approach for reexamining Gertrude's and Ophelia's experiences in *Hamlet*, shifting them from objects of aesthetic or moral judgment to subjects of recognizably traumatic processes. This article has demonstrated that both women exhibit responses of hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction, yet their subsequent trajectories diverge sharply, revealing how early modern patriarchal constraints shape, and often thwart, their paths toward healing.

Gertrude's journey unfolds as an effort to reestablish a sense of safety after King Hamlet's death. Her hasty remarriage secures political stability and financial security, aligning with Herman's first recovery stage of restoring control over one's environment. As the play progresses, Gertrude's maternal interventions of pleading with Hamlet to moderate his accusations and defending him against Claudius's schemes reflect Herman's emphasis on forging alliances with trusted others as part of integrating traumatic memories. In her final self-sacrificial act of drinking the poison intended for her son, Gertrude both protects Hamlet and reclaims agency over her own narrative: a poignant, if tragic, moment of reconnection and self-assertion.

Ophelia's experience, by contrast, exemplifies a constricted response that is marked by profound internal fragmentation and dissociative withdrawal. Her distribution of flowers and disjointed ballads offers a form of symbolic mourning but fails to generate the interpersonal support needed for genuine recovery. Instead, her grief becomes an intrusive cycle of fragmented memory, and her self-destruction marks a premature end to any possibility of reintegration. Rather than achieving a meaningful recovery, Ophelia's attempts at remembrance become inextricably linked to her descent into madness and self-destruction. This divergence in recovery processes not only highlights the gendered dimensions of trauma in *Hamlet* but also reinforces the limitations imposed by a patriarchal system that denies women the resources needed for genuine healing.

By integrating Herman's model with close textual analysis of *Hamlet*, this study reveals how Gertrude and Ophelia's actions correspond to defined psychological processes, and highlights the gendered limitations that prevent female characters from completing the recovery stages Herman describes. Consequently, Gertrude emerges not simply as a traitorous widow but as a trauma survivor who negotiates agency under duress, while Ophelia appears less as a passive victim and more as someone whose dissociative strategies tragically outpace available supports. This perspective enriches Shakespearean criticism by demonstrating the value of applying contemporary clinical theory to Renaissance drama, and encourages scholars to recognize the ways in which *Hamlet* both encodes the symptoms of trauma and gestures toward recovery. In this way, it underscores literature's ethical potential to acknowledge suffering, to imagine avenues for resilience, and to deepen our understanding of how characters, like real individuals, might survive and even transcend the wounds they carry.

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All but a Pose? Unlikeable Heroines in Contemporary Fiction by Women

ABSTRACT

The present research grows out of an engagement with emerging trends in contemporary fiction by young women authors whose works frequently feature unrelatable and ultimately unlikable female narrators and/or protagonists. Within the framework provided by dissociative feminism and nascent Femcel/Femceldom Studies, I investigate the portrayal in fiction of female protagonists who are young and talented, but who nevertheless struggle with strong self-destructive tendencies. In the first part of the article, devoted to *Conversations with Friends* (2017) by Sally Rooney and *The Lesser Bohemians* (2016) by Eimear McBride, I enquire whether the two authors' young protagonists fall into the trap of repeating their own patterns, or whether they manage to overcome the self-delusion that smart and sensitive types like themselves are prone to wallow in, both physically and mentally. The second part turns to Lisa Taddeo's and Eliza Clark's troubled narrators in their respective debuts, *Animal* (2021) and *Boy Parts* (2020), offering a comparison of the two novels in terms of their treatment of predatory, cunning, and deceptive female protagonists. In an attempt to dissect the empathy and support gained among readerships by unconventional female protagonists, I also explore the ways in which misogynistic narratives about female depravity are appropriated and reclaimed by female authors who then "recycle" them for their own purposes, daring to challenge the patriarchal order.

Keywords: Eliza Clark, dissociative/post-wounded feminism, femcel, Eimear McBride, Sally Rooney, Lisa Taddeo.



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INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have seen an unprecedented rise in fiction by women which seems to have gained even greater momentum in recent years. Female authors have won major prizes—to mention but a few notable examples: the 2018 Nobel for Olga Tokarczuk (awarded in 2019), her 2018 Man Booker Prize for *Flights* (shared with her translator Jennifer Croft), Bernardine Evaristo's and Margaret Atwood's joint Booker in 2019. Even more importantly, the last couple of years have spawned a number of outstanding debuts, novels, and short stories alike. Whereas the old-school prizes for established authors such as Atwood have long been anticipated, it is the ranks of “fresh bloods” that have captivated audiences and critics, to the degree that it is now difficult to imagine the literary world without Eimear McBride's multi-award winning *A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing* (2013) or Sally Rooney's best-selling *Conversations with Friends* (2017), followed shortly by the equally popular *Normal People* (2018) and its acclaimed TV adaptation.

Naturally, Rooney and McBride have not been the sole contenders—the literary scene has also warmly welcomed up-and-coming writers including Ottessa Moshfegh, Kristen Roupenian, Emma Cline, Lisa Taddeo, Eliza Clark, Kate Elizabeth Russell, and Halle Butler. While the work of these authors is diverse, they may safely be identified as representing a new kind of writing of female experience. In the present article, I wish to highlight a common element in their work, i.e. the emergence of a new type of narrator and/or protagonist who emerges as a violent and feral anti-heroine and an unrelatable and ultimately unlikable narrator. In her 2019 essay “The Making of a Millennial Woman,” Rebecca Liu notes that ours seems to be the age of the unlikeable woman whose “rise . . . is a victory.” Referring specifically to Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* and Lena Dunham's *Girls*, Liu goes on to lay bare the frequently shadowed side to these—and many other—fictional characters which she defines as their “par excellence . . . deeply disempowered” condition. In this vein, their unlikability gains a more disturbing significance—apart from corroborating the medially attractive self-ironicising element, the characters' unlikability testifies to the existence of a serious social problem which Liu describes as “a colossal social failure to provide substantive avenues of flourishing, care, and communal generosity.” A similar point is made by Rebecca Walker who, in a discussion of Sally Rooney's novels and their female protagonists, notes how Rooney's characters, young women of means and (relative) privilege, nevertheless “suffer intensely in their inner psychology and in relationships” (336). The inhibited “flourishing” (ibid.) and the experience of intense suffering are indeed addressed, in various forms, by many millennial women authors,

from Ottessa Moshfegh's grim and repulsive *Eileen*, through the neurotic, unhinged and self-induced insomniac narrator of her second novel, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, Emma Cline's narcissistic and spoilt teenage protagonists in *Girls*, to Kate Elizabeth Russell's traumatised Vanessa, a modern Lolita for the #MeToo era.

This article is structured in two parts, the first devoted to Rooney's and McBride's novels *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *The Lesser Bohemians* (2016). Their works might be considered as representing a "milder" strand in fiction in which the violence is less graphic, more internalised, and often directed inwards, at the characters themselves, who fall victim to self-harming practices and self-destructive behaviours. In what follows, I offer a comparison of the two novels and their treatment of the predicament of being a young and talented woman who nevertheless struggles with strong self-destructive tendencies, posing the question of whether, in the end, the characters fall into the trap of repeating their own patterns, or whether, perhaps, they manage to overcome the self-delusion that smart and sensitive types are prone to wallow in, both physically and mentally. In the second part of the article, I turn to Lisa Taddeo's and Eliza Clark's troubled narrators in their debuts, *Animal*¹ and *Boy Parts*. Both novels have provoked considerable discussion in popular and critical circles alike; both have been just as avidly loved as detested. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, both feature predatory, cunning, and deceptive female protagonists. Given that women have long been boldly seizing authorial positions as writers, artists, and performers versus the objectified—not to say, compromised—statuses of "writees," "artistees," and "performees," I endeavour to investigate the contemporary implications of these acts and the significant alterations to the distribution of power across gender divides, resulting in shifts in subject/object positions.

In addition, I intend to examine the empathy and support garnered among readerships by unconventional female protagonists who dare to subvert the patriarchal order, while simultaneously remaining deeply entangled in its power dynamics. Also worth investigating are the ways in which misogynistic narratives about female monstrosity are appropriated and reclaimed by female authors who recycle them in order to put them to alternative purposes. With recourse to nascent femcel and femceldom studies, as well as the theoretical context offered by the tenets of dissociative feminism, I wish to turn the spotlight onto the portrayal of young female characters struggling with difficult choices, making bad decisions, and battling complex emotions (e.g., anger, jealousy, and disappointment).

¹ *Animal* is Taddeo's 2021 literary debut; her first published work was the 2019 non-fiction book *Three Women*.

Among the literary creations signalling a shift in the representation of the female experience is the figure of the “femcel,” a creature who seems to be claiming her rights to representation with notable vehemence. The femcel, in some respects a descendent of—or a millennial sister to—Sara Ahmed’s figure of the “feminist killjoy” (2023), receives an overly simplistic definition in the popular online resource UrbanDictionary, which categorises her as “a female incel” or “a woman who can’t get a relationship.” The facile gender-reversed symmetry here feels rather suspect. There is, in fact, much more to the femcel than simply being a reflection of the incel. Indeed, the female figure is frequently characterised by drastically different features, for instance, the fact that her celibacy is not always involuntary. In fact, femcels invariably find intimacy, sex, and the purely physiological aspects of relating intimately and (sometimes) romantically to another person difficult, to say the least, and even repulsive, off-putting, or violent, in some cases. In their recent study of what they call the “contemporary gender politics of involuntary celibacy,” Jacob Johanssen and Jilly Boyce Kay note that the emergence of a femcel identity might appear to be a reaction against toxic masculinity, especially in its incel variety, but that such a premise is misguided—any form of a viable “toxic femininity” cannot be read as a mirror to its male counterpart because the latter’s toxicity is always directed against “bad” women and frequently involves violence towards those evil “others” who are held solely responsible for the incels’ predicament (3). Toxic femininity, in contrast, focuses predominantly on women themselves, their mental and physical states, their choices and predilections, which might—but do not necessarily—lead to favouring celibacy, or a variation thereof (11). Recently, the term “femcel” has become an appealing label for young feminists who reject patriarchy, along with its entrenched masculinity, domination, and violence. Groups of women self-identifying as femcels are emerging and connecting with each other via social media platforms (e.g., TikTok/BookTok, Reddit, etc.) which also tend to rank popular authors of contemporary fiction such as Ottessa Moshfegh, Sally Rooney, or Halle Butler as Internet femcels’ informal matriarchs. The protagonists of these writers’ novels seem to inspire femcels in terms of social and political views as well as with regard to aesthetics, including fashion and make-up. As such, we may already refer to the emergence of a femcel movement which—and this is particularly interesting—appears to have a close relationship with literature. Femcels are said to share a group of specific characteristics: they experience misandry, loneliness, alienation, and celibacy, self-imposed or otherwise. At the same time, they feel emotions that are not readily explored in literature about women: anger, fury, jealousy, bitterness. It is believed that femcels often struggle from mental health problems (depression,

bipolar disorder, eating and personality disorders) and share strongly developed introspective abilities. Undoubtedly, the rise in popularity of the term “femcel” has coincided with an increase in the representation of female protagonists who share similar characteristics in prose written by young women. Therefore, these similarities cannot be ignored, but any hypotheses undoubtedly require further research. The groundwork was laid by Emmeline Clein in her 2019 article “The Smartest Women I Know Are All Dissociating,” which drew on earlier writing by Leslie Jamison. In Clein’s view, the “credo” of the contemporary dissociating young woman, exemplified by Waller-Bridge’s Fleabag, Ottessa Moshfegh’s heroines, or, to a slightly lesser extent, Sally Rooney’s protagonists, embraces engaging in fatalism, exhibiting a “so what?” attitude, assuming an overall dispassion, and favouring disengagement, all of these being points made previously by Jamison. However, despite the self-deprecating “allure” of dissociative feminism, Jamison advises proceeding with caution when pondering whether to go all the way with “disaffected affect” (117). Referring to Lena Dunham’s TV series *Girls*, Jamison introduces the term “post-wounded” to describe the predicament of young women who “are wary of melodrama, so they stay numb or clever instead. Post-wounded women make jokes about being wounded or get impatient with women who hurt too much. The post-wounded woman conducts herself as if preempting certain accusations: Don’t cry too loud; don’t play victim” (120). Still, without disavowing the post-wounded, dissociative attitude, Jamison emphasises that “suffering is interesting, but so is getting better” (126), and that “[t]here is a way of representing female consciousness that can witness pain but also witness a larger self around that pain—a self that grows larger than its scars without disowning them, that is neither wound-dwelling nor jaded, that is actually healing” (ibid.). The post-wounded woman’s “jadedness” is also echoed in the behavioural patterns exhibited by Rebecca Liu’s “Archetypical Millennial Woman” for whom “deflective irony” is always easier than “confront[ing] [her] own traumas.” Nowadays, with social media being one of the main channels for communicating feminist content, it is worth examining these attitudes from an artistic perspective and tracing their symptoms in contemporary women’s writing, especially given how emergent femcel literary studies seem situated at the complex intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and mental health. Such a strategic placement invites a joint examination of loneliness, isolation, and cultural expectations of women’s attractiveness and sexuality, as well as their professional position and social status. This kind of research also sheds light on how women’s portrayals are influenced by the societal understanding of concepts of beauty, success, and happiness, and the peculiar and very individual phenomenon of “worlding”—as Eimear McBride puts it,

“making something out of nothing” (“In Conversation”)—which seems to denote an important rite of passage in many a young woman’s journey towards becoming her true self. “Young protagonists,” McBride goes on to say, “are at the mercy of their impulses, and of experience more generally” (ibid.); hence, they are traveling without roadmaps, which at some point might turn out to be their very bodies, bruised and scarred and bearing witness to freshly accumulated losses, debts incurred, and insights gained.

BOHEMIAN CONVERSATIONS—FEMININITY OF THE POSE: SALLY ROONEY AND EIMEAR MCBRIDE

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Conversations with Friends and *The Lesser Bohemians* both fit the format of the coming-of-age novel. The texts focus on the “worlding” processes that their protagonists, Frances and Eily, go through in their own ways, sometimes chaotic, sometimes misguided, but always unique and authentic, although, for Frances at least, this entails embracing a modicum of inauthenticity and “fronting” in her self-presentation before others. While Rooney’s and McBride’s protagonists might not be blood-thirsty, revenge-driven *femme fatales* like their peers in Clark’s and Taddeo’s works, they are no strangers to violence, though it is often directed inwards, surfacing as various forms of self-harm (or death wish) that they indulge in. These acts, though, stem from a hypersensitivity which characterises both young protagonists, who are in fact only embarking on the process of “worlding”—Frances (*Conversations with Friends*) and Eily (*The Lesser Bohemians*) are just getting started in the world, and indeed they seem to have quite a lot in common with each other.

At the core of the two novels lies the story of a young woman’s affair with an older man—in Rooney’s work this involves a curious *menage à quatre* comprising Frances, her best friend—and former girlfriend—Bobbi, and the sophisticated artistic couple Melissa and Nick. This is the realm of the contemporary Dublin elite, consisting of artists, writers, actors, and all sorts of “influencers” and performers whose world Frances and Bobbi take by storm, finding themselves in quite the bourgeois drama of adultery, loyalties betrayed, and secrets exposed. This is the world of grown-ups, one which, on closer inspection, proves to be as shambolic and troubled as that of young Frances and Bobbi. All of the protagonists, in fact, are characters in the making, and Rooney proves her mastery as a psychological observer “revealing the bittersweet truth about the workings of innocence and the pains of growing up” (Schwartz). Her characters discover that being an adult does not automatically mean that one fits in, as the example of Nick, Frances’s married lover, poignantly illustrates.

McBride's *The Lesser Bohemians* engages similar motifs, in particular with regards to Eily who—as Toby Lichtig puts it, referring to McBride's highly praised debut novel—when compared to the first girl who was “half-formed,” is “two-thirds there.” Eily has gained the first third with her very decision to leave rural Ireland and come to London to pursue her dream of becoming an actress; importantly, though, she is anything but the conventionally unhappy Irish woman escaping to England in search of refuge and deliverance (Murray 471). Eily is brisk, determined, curious, and at once scared to death and thrilled by all the prospects London offers. Unfurling “this bud of life I own” (McBride, *Bohemians* 3), she thrusts herself into the whirl of auditions turning into all-night parties, accidental hook-ups, drunken wanderings all over the city with strangers—or perfectly alone, indulging in an exploration of the physicality of the whole experience. Along the way she encounters Stephen—20 years her senior and a seasoned actor going through a professional and personal crisis. Stephen is evasive, aloof, reluctant to commit, with a troubled past that still haunts him; their union seems the least likely thing to happen but against the odds—or perhaps precisely because the stakes are so much against them—they make it work, exorcising their demons in the process. Both have a surfeit—Eily, though she tends to make light of it, is a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, and Stephen—as he reveals to her during one terrifying long night—suffered similar violence from his own mother and apparently, later on, also from his wife, with whom he has a daughter. As Ruth Gilligan notes, McBride forces readers to confront the “deeper considerations of the performative nature of the self,” reminding us that any relationship entails the coming together of two very different entities.

Both texts revolve around the sense of novelty that makes youth so unique and difficult, even if the dilemmas that Frances and Eily face are, objectively speaking, as old as time. Each protagonist struggles in their quest for self-discovery which—marked as it is in both their cases by ambition, hypersensitivity, and insecurity—frequently leads them towards self-harm, neglect of their own well-being, and excruciating internal battles over how to reconcile their budding consciousness and self-awareness with the demands posed by the particulars of their immediate reality. Frances often finds herself thwarted by her own conception of herself and the “proper” way to be in the world which, as Alexandra Schwartz puts it, “follows an attractive ascetic principle . . . that to act in the world is to do inevitable harm to it.” Frances thus downplays her problems, including health issues, and withdraws to her self-professed altruism, according to which it is better to refrain from actions whose implications might affect her public persona of the smiling girl who is always agreeable and encouragingly polite, even if this attitude leads her to situations and predicaments she is not happy about.

Perhaps also prompted by her insecurity, Frances's social and romantic engagements are deeply marked by a fear of rejection which causes her to obsess over others' impressions of her. She self-analyses with what feels like a grudging relish; still, the introspective scrutiny hardly ever yields any real resolution:

Was I kind to others? It was hard to nail down an answer. I worried that if I did turn out to have a personality, it would be one of the unkind ones. Did I only worry about this question because as a woman I felt required to put the needs of others before my own? Was "kindness" just another term for submission in the face of conflict? (Rooney 176)

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The apparently simple category—niceness—continues to breed problems for Frances; taking up the issue with Bobbi only seems to add to the confusion because, for Bobbi, all things necessarily come down to questions of power and its configurations within the accepted modes of the social contract:

Maybe niceness is the wrong metric, I said. Of course it's really about power, Bobbi agreed. But it's harder to work out who has the power, so instead we rely on "niceness" as a kind of stand-in. I mean this is an issue in public discourse. We end up asking like, is Israel "nicer" than Palestine. (301)

Yearning to feel in control of her interactions, Frances struggles to maintain airs and graces. This is partly why her affair with Nick comes as such a shock to herself—she discovers that, by letting go of some of her self-composure, she gains power over another person in a configuration essentially repulsive to her in its blatant banality and bourgeois predictability, the very things she has always tried to distance herself from. The more engaged she becomes in their relationship, the more acutely she suffers from the realisation that it may come to a bad end, a sentiment she openly shares with Nick during one of their "trysts": "I ran my finger along his collarbone and said: I can't remember if I thought about this at the beginning. How it was doomed to end unhappily. He nodded, looking at me. I did, he said. I just thought it would be worth it" (159). Despite these misgivings, Frances cannot afford to lose the gratification that Nick's attraction promises. Her friendship with Bobbi did not give her such an experience; in fact, in their partnership, Frances has always played the role of the more ordinary counterpart, with Bobbi stealing all the limelight with her exuberance, charisma, and total non-conformity, the latter made possible largely thanks to her social standing and inherited wealth. Bobbi could afford her flamboyance and idealistic defiance which have not only come naturally to her but which have actually

been encouraged by her family. Frances, of much humbler middle-class origins, has always been expected to account for her decisions, actions, and attitudes. However, despite her intense introspective proclivities, she still prefers to shirk responsibility for her decisions and choices, evading accountability whenever such an option emerges. In a commentary on the motives of Rooney's heroines, Lucinda Rosenfeld notes that in Frances's case, these often come down to "the ravages of 'late capitalism'" inflected by "discomfort with current liberal-left shibboleths regarding 'the patriarchy'"; indeed, while Frances embraces the social and sexual freedom at her disposal, the way she employs the tools it generates remains persistently intent on diminishing her self-esteem and self-worth. As Rosenfeld puts it, Frances—like many other contemporary heroines—is a "self-loather . . . racked with self-disgust . . . seeking out [her] own debasement." Bobbi seems to fall out of this self-hating framework, offering up a persona at once stronger and "healthier" in terms of her views and actions, and curiously more vulnerable or guileless, despite her outspoken and apparently reckless ways. While their bond has surely been a defining relationship for both of them, Bobbi has always been dominant, and Frances the more grounded sidekick; because of the affair with Nick, power seems to shift between them and Frances embarks on a path that is hers exclusively, not shared with Bobbi. Significantly, before they were friends, they had been lovers: this queerness seems to sit particularly well with Bobbi's buoyant self-re/presentation, while Frances appears to have experienced quite a struggle in shifting from a "romantic/intimate" to a "friendly/neutral" relation. Perhaps, though, this only further expands the complexity of friendship between young women—closeness between women, much as it can be passionate and consuming, is rarely free from resentment, jealousy, or rivalry, and this surfaces in the complexities of Frances's and Bobbi's bond.

Juxtaposed with these two, Eily might appear somewhat blander, but this is just a veneer which conceals her unabashed spirit and an appetite for life best expressed in her own words: "New again opens for me. Girl I've been, woman I'll be" (McBride, *Bohemians* 91). In a most straightforward sense, the pronouncement may be read as referring to the fact that Eily, while still a virgin, is actually quite intent on losing her virginity. Significantly, these are her own words, uttered with all the certainty that youth grants; by no means is this a case of a girl sheepishly doing male bidding. Eily will not tolerate this: she plays by her own rules and answers solely to her own urges and desires.

What is true for both Eily and Frances is very aptly defined by Silvia Antosa in terms of a significant rite of passage: "The necessary rite of transition from childhood to womanhood for a young girl has to do with sex and sexual awareness, thus challenging the long-standing taboo

concerning female sexuality in relation to the process of ‘education’ of women in literature” (205). Indeed, McBride’s and Rooney’s fiction offers bold new ways of writing sex and presenting girls as willing sexual beings who may enjoy their nascent sexual lives. In Rooney’s writing, though, sexual exploration and the drive towards uninhibited self-expression are frequently accompanied by guilt-tripping and the desire to be seen as pliant and docile, eager to be subjugated and tamed in sexual encounters. Both Frances and Marianne retain an expectation of violence from their partners, a yearning which may function as a substitute for their own self-loathing looking to be expressed in a way that would be free from the restraints of self-accountability. As Rosenfeld observes, “the male characters don’t always comply. Neither the married lover in *Conversations with Friends*, nor Marianne’s sensitive boyfriend in *Normal People*, is willing to strike the heroine, despite her requests.” This sensibility, while it departs from the conventional conditioning of women as docile and passive because it allows them to reclaim agency, leads to their choosing to be “their own worst enemies . . . [rather than] men’s victims” (ibid.) which, though problematic and potentially misguided, remains an informed decision.

Perhaps owing in part to her non-millennial generational status, Eimear McBride (born in 1976) offers a more straightforwardly positive perspective on sexuality and its potential, a stance which aligns her more with Sarah Hall (born 1974) who imbues sex with the power to liberate and regenerate her otherwise battered heroines, than the unequivocally Gen Y Sally Rooney (born 1991). McBride has openly stated in her non-fictional work *Something Out of Place: Women and Disgust* that gradually, finally, women in literature—and elsewhere, for that matter—cease to function as “things to be looked at,” and instead become “actors with their own desires” (50–51). She goes on to reveal to those who still doubt that girls have all sorts of sex; they masturbate, watch porn, and fantasise wildly, because sex is a formative experience, though the realisation might not emerge easily, given how its public manifestations still tend to follow—albeit to a gradually lesser degree—the tried and discredited tropes of, for instance, the innocent schoolgirl, the seductive femme fatale, or the ruthless dominatrix, all manufactured for someone else’s pleasure and gratification. To facilitate the rejection of such outdated modes of representing female sexuality and desire, a new approach to recording women’s sexual experiences is required, one exemplified by writers who do not shy away from giving readers the “real thing,” undoctored by social expectations, conventions, or moral double standards. Seen and recorded that way, sex becomes the language through which young protagonists get to know themselves and others, too (Lichtig). Moreover, as Lichtig notes, sex also “serves [the readers’] understanding of [the] burgeoning

relationship[s]” that the protagonists get involved in, thus bringing the reading experience intimately close to the real-life channels of reaching out to other human beings.

“GIRLS OF PREY”—THREATENING FEMININITY: LISA TADDEO AND ELIZA CLARK

While sex is by all means a driving force for Joan, the protagonist of Lisa Taddeo’s *Animal*, the novel—showcasing the heavily sexualised nature of the heroine—focuses on the link between trauma and sexual violence. In the past few years, fiction and drama by women have recognised the appeal of flawed and angry antiheroines who reject the demand to be “likable,” and Joan, the narrator and protagonist of the novel, joins Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s *Fleabag* (2016–19), Arabella from Michaela Coel’s acclaimed 2020 TV series *I May Destroy You*, the characters in Megan Nolan’s *Acts of Desperation* (2021), and Emerald Fennell’s twisted tale of revenge *Promising Young Woman* (2020), among others.

Animal comes with several trigger warnings, one of which is actually stated directly by the narrator herself close to the very start of her narrative. Joan addresses the as-yet undisclosed recipient of the story in the following way: “If someone asked me to describe myself in a single word, *depraved* is the one I would use” (Taddeo 7, emphasis in the original). Depravity has been an integral part of her life which, at least to some extent, explains why the world which she moves in is a dark realm of abuse and dysfunction. The violence of Joan’s past, which seeps into her present and, perhaps, will continue to mar her future, gets a very striking and vivid depiction in the novel thanks to Taddeo’s sharpness of observation and expression. At one point, Joan says of a waitress: “She was the kind of simple, inarguable pretty that I had never been. I was sexually attractive. Sometimes other women didn’t see it” (37). These three sentences reveal a lot about the narrator, both in terms of her appearance and her attitude towards herself and what others might think of her.

Examples like these proliferate in the novel, and add up to a vivid representation of Joan’s warped sense of the world and her position in it. Taddeo seems to derive as much pleasure from drawing on the bizarre and kinky as Joan does from going around wreaking havoc with her rapaciousness, cynicism, and cold, even cruel, detachment from any traces of emotionality. In this murky domain, Joan wields absolute power which she exerts with apparently no qualms whatsoever, flaunting her exquisite disregard for conventional morality or any ethical codes of conduct. These, however, are required essentials for her to succeed in her mission which is

to find her long-lost half-sister Alice, who, as we gradually discover, is the key to exorcising the “dark death thing” (7) that befell Joan when she was a ten-year old girl. Childhood trauma, Joan staunchly believes, made her the way she is now, and the unspeakable atrocity of her past releases her from any societal moral norms. She is a victim and a survivor but sadly, she is also “radically one-dimensional . . . [and] has no interests apart from sex and trauma” (Newman). Joan relentlessly sexualises every event, every person she encounters, even if just in passing, and appears to take a perverse pleasure in degrading acts and experiences. Such an attitude might be read as a sign of what Stephen Marche diagnoses as a significant literary transition: namely, the arrival of “the literature of the pose” which obliterates “the literature of the voice” and, instead of aspiring towards personal fulfilment, favours “contempt and social anxiety” as its “dominant modes.”

Joan is all about “pose,” especially in terms of her obsessive hypersexualisation of herself and everyone around her, including her parents, and a determined pursuit of debasement. Marche refers to this as “sexual immiseration,” which he regards as “the most remarkable feature of the literature of the Pose.” In his view, sex is banal, no matter how much of it any given character has, and “the writing of the pose is anathema to originality and daring” (ibid.), something which is evident in the way Taddeo writes Joan’s character, with painstaking attention to Joan’s many affects and self-professed quirks but essentially failing to enrich her protagonist with a human complexity. The edifice eventually crumbles, though not until Joan has tried her utmost to convince the reader of her self-professed depravity and unscrupulousness.

Melissa Katsoulis’s review describes the novel as an *American Psycho* for the #MeToo era—a comparison which, while somewhat sweeping, is undoubtedly “catchy” and entices one to read the book, promising a certain recognisable type of thrill. Still, Joan is not a psycho-killer, and her pursuits, while for the most part immoral, narcissistic, and perverse, have more to do with self-destruction and are generally directed against her own self, even if she professes otherwise. She falls in line with the post-wounded women described by Jamison because whenever she gets a chance to choose how she wants to act, she always goes for a cynical, detached, and bitterly disillusioned reaction. A certain affinity with Patrick Bateman can be detected in the ways in which she portrays the world around her—every husband philanders, every wife dreams of being degraded, every girl is only looking to test her budding sexual attraction and bring men to their downfall. People are indiscriminately opportunistic, motivated by pleasure, money, and power, and in order to attain these goals many would not think twice before committing a crime. The excess of atrocities, while initially

refreshing in its potential to unsettle the reader and make them question their assumptions, becomes overwhelming and confusing, and leads to the narrative losing credibility and originality, much in line with Stephen Marche's argument with regard to the inescapable hollowness of literature of the pose—the "triumph of the Image over the Word" is only a pyrrhic victory because in the long run, "the literature of the Pose is unsustainable." At the same time, the accumulation of misery and dread corresponds to the somewhat hallucinatory quality of the Californian setting—the sense of uncanniness, foreboding, and rising tension is augmented by the relentless cries of the coyotes at night or the incessant traffic noises and ambulance sirens piercing the humid Los Angeles air. In this way, echoes of *Animal* might be discerned in Bret Easton Ellis's latest novel, *The Shards*: both works subscribe to what could be called "California/Los Angeles Gothic" and share a similarly oppressive atmosphere of fear, persecution, and threat.

Where Taddeo succeeds is in creating a narrator who does everything within her power to discourage readers from liking her, yet for whom readers still cheer. As such, Joan represents "femcelcore" at its finest (or worst?), wearing her depravity, disenchantment, and utter self-absorption like a badge of honour. She gladly reveals everyone else's hypocrisies, but never flinches at condemning herself in equal measure, exposing how, according to her worldview, everything comes down to sex, money, and power; men are prey, sexually and financially, and women constantly compete against each other in relentless rivalry for the best prospects. Even Alice, the sister whom Joan has been so intent on finding, is not spared—when Joan sees her for the first time all she can feel is hostility and jealousy: "She wore no makeup and I wanted to kill her . . . But first I wanted to put her in a cage, fatten her up, feed her hormones and pig cheeks and Fanta. Knock her teeth out and shave her eyebrows. I wanted her to die ugly" (Taddeo, *Animal* 224). Curiously enough, what Taddeo has in store for Joan is deliverance and rehabilitation, an intention she manages to obscure until the very end of Joan's narrative when several shocking revelations take place. The novel draws to a close with a sequence of Joan in labour pains, driven to the hospital by Alice, and just about to give birth to a baby daughter. It is in fact this daughter who turns out to be the addressee of the entire story, which then seems to acquire certain confessional qualities, with Joan rising to the status of a character in pursuit of atonement or expiation. Neither Alice, nor the daughter—nor the reader, for that matter—know whether Joan is going to survive the birth, whether these are her last moments or whether she is actually already dead. This indeterminacy does leave some space for speculation of a potential happy ending, but it feels rather arch. Another issue which cannot go unnoticed is that Joan, a feral and unhinged, hypersexualised

and revenge-driven character, appears to find peace and even a modicum of contentment through means as conventional as becoming pregnant and giving birth to a baby daughter. Does that take the femcel out of her? Is this the acquiescence and final humbling of her hitherto incorrigible nature? Has Taddeo really, in all honesty and with clear purpose, intended to communicate such a final message? Does this not betray the character of Joan and go against the grain of everything she professed to be and believe? Or is such a reading deprecating and simplistic? The narrative maintains ambiguity in these matters and does not end on any definitive note. In an interview for *Salon*, the American news website, Mary Elizabeth Williams asked Taddeo if *Animal* was “a summer read” but whether Taddeo’s answer is revealing remains open to debate:

I mean, maybe. It depends on what kind of a beach you are looking for. I would examine who the person is, which beach reader we’re looking at. For me, it is a beach read. It was a beach write. For me, I guess this is the closest I could come to writing a beach read. So hopefully it is, for some people, a beach read. (Taddeo, “Bad women”)

Eliza Clark’s *Boy Parts* is certainly no beach read, for any kind of beach preference. Again, as in *Animal*, an angry protagonist-narrator is the focus—the thirty-something Irina is a talented photographer but works at a local pub; she identifies as queer, and—similarly to Joan—she was sexually abused by her teacher when she was a teenager. Like Joan, Irina, too, has a predilection for violence which she quite actively seeks and then determinedly wallows in the ensuing self-abasement, being no stranger to self-harm. In contrast to Joan, she has a living mother, though, for the most part, Irina wishes she were dead—their relationship is fraught with misunderstandings and resentments, with the mother always eager and ready to criticise Irina on all matters, to which Irina responds with equal malice. The father is not really in the picture but Irina’s circle of intimates also includes Flo, her best friend, though again their bond is by no means healthy, especially given that the two used to be romantically involved, echoing the pattern in Rooney’s *Conversations with Friends* where Bobbi and Frances also used to be a couple. Irina seems to be at a difficult point in her life—once hailed as a “wonder kid” in art school, scoring a major photography exhibition, now she finds herself artistically stunted, working at a job below her qualifications, with her days marked by a procession of pointless, inconsequential hook-ups and an all-consuming ennui. Things take a new turn when she meets “Eddie from Tesco” and develops an obsession with him. She taunts him to become a model for her photography sessions, which she still performs from time to time;

as the novel progresses, we learn that she has a very strong sense of her artistic persona and knows full well what she likes creatively—first of all, she photographs boys and men almost exclusively, and they always have to meet her very clearly defined requirements. In her street-scouting for models, she looks for ephemeral, feminine boys, frequently gay and queer, whom she photographs in very unsettling scenes which teeter on the thin line between consensual BDSM practices and downright abuse, although she always gets her models to sign a consent form and also usually checks if they are of legal age.

The novel's twist is revealed only late in the story, though as readers we are provoked into sensing that something is amiss at numerous moments. Nevertheless, the revelation that Irina is a fetishist psycho-killer who murders and chops up her boy models keeping their various body parts as trophies and mementoes comes as a profound shock. As disturbed, sick, and twisted as she is, Irina does not really appear to be an entirely unlikable character. Rather, she possesses a certain "refreshing" quality which might make it more challenging for the reader to despise her unhesitatingly. Granted, she enjoys disturbing art; she drinks and takes drugs; she does not care about most things, herself and her reputation included, but she is also a fine photographer who was accepted by several art colleges, among them Goldsmiths; in discerning circles she is a recognised name. There is also a great deal of determination in her—for example, even after a night of wild partying and attempted rape, which culminated in violent sickness, she regains self-control, replies to emails, reports to work, and even calls her mother back. What ultimately facilitates her—at least partial—"redemption" in the eyes of readers is probably the unorthodox femininity that she represents and which serves as a potent riposte to the long history of literary (and otherwise) domination of women by men. While there can be no denying her bloodthirsty urges and murderous record, the type of femininity she stands for—feral, unhinged, unconventional—is certainly worth acknowledging, especially seeing how it prompts further reflection and discussion.

There is, in addition, her art, which can also be read in terms of a radical feminist involvement bent on subversion and reversing the male gaze, though the way she executes this is, to put it mildly, troubling. When she works, she is highly focused and sure of herself and what she wants to achieve. She efficiently manages her models and persuades them to do exactly what she desires, which frequently raises questions of consent and exploitation. She is very much objectifying the young men and boys she photographs, to the point of actually turning them into twisted, even tortured, assemblages of random body parts caught at uncomfortable angles and frequently in sexually gratuitous poses. She gradually loses herself in

her pursuit of the perfect shot, spiralling into a dangerous obsession which, however, is not entirely devoid of logic and rationale—Irina begins to see her art as retribution for centuries of misogyny and how women have been consistently and effectively denied power, autonomy, and respect of their boundaries. During the opening night of her Hackney Studios exhibition, a female critic approaches her and comments on one of her pieces:

“The way you’ve played with consent here is wonderful,” she whispers. “Critical, bold, a wonderful actor, your boy. Discomfort radiates from the screen.” It turns out she writes for the *Observer*—so there’s at least one good write-up for me. I smile at her and empty my glass. I’m there on the screen. That’s me. With the bottle, the power, a great big camera and bigger hair. (Clark 278)

The irony could not be greater—in fact, there was no “play” with consent, there was simply no consent to begin with. Irina is sexually aroused by the power she feels when she forcefully subjugates and violates Eddie, recording everything on camera and then submitting the result as her main entry for the exhibition. Irina succumbs to the adrenaline rush brought on by the nearly absolute power she seems to hold over Eddie, and the conviction of her invincibility pushes her even further so that towards the novel’s conclusion, she is engaging in a volatile power play with a fellow artist from the exhibition, Remy:

I tie his hands together, above his head, then to the bed frame. He tells me I looked amazing tonight, and asks if I wore the dress with him in mind. I laugh at him. He keeps fucking talking, so I stuff a pair of socks into his mouth. Then I slap him. I slap him harder, and harder, till his lip bursts. . . . I ask him if he’s okay. In what I think is some attempt at bravery (toxic, masculine bravery), he nods. . . . I prod and puncture his stomach. . . . I cut a thin slice from his belly button to the dip of his collarbone. He is whimpering, and crying, now. When I ask if he’s okay, he nods. . . . I run the tips of my fingers through the blood on his chest, and I draw a smiley face on his torso. (280–81)

Irina seems to be genuinely surprised that all this feels so easy to do—and that there are apparently no consequences. She becomes even more brazen and stops at nothing in her handling of Remy, until her own body refuses to cooperate and she runs to the bathroom to vomit; when she gets back, Remy has run away. Irina loses her grip on herself, and, dissociating from reality, descends into a wild fantasy from which there may be no turning back, or at least this is how we as readers are invited to look at the story’s resolution—or, in essence, lack thereof.

CONCLUSION

It is typical of predators to take on unassuming guises—the quiet neighbour, the elderly lady, or the well-mannered professor—but when a well-groomed girl with an interesting hobby or profession turns out to be the antagonist, the sense of something being out of place proves hard to come to terms with. A pretty girl being a ruthless killer seems to go against common sense, and this incongruity often works to the perpetrator's advantage. Irina is a very attractive young woman, who is fully aware of her good looks and what they can do for her. At the same time, she feels insecure, always worrying about spoiling her appearance or letting herself go. Thus, interestingly, Irina in a sense falls victim to the paradigm which particularly oppresses women, but also men, though to a different degree; she is at once furious at having to comply with the standards imposed on women, and paralysed with fear at the mere thought of losing her good looks and the twisted comfort and security that they promise. In this sense, Irina—and also Joan from Taddeo's *Animal*—are both “unlikable” and hard to identify with, because as young and attractive women, they stray from the conventional narrative within the framework of which they should rather be dutiful and kind, perhaps slightly troubled, but not neurotic or depraved. Instead, they are feral and unhinged, driven by obsession, compulsion, egotism, and self-indulgence; they are predators—but are they really completely beyond comprehension and “redemption”? Female unlikability and/or instability as categories date back to Freudian discussions of hysteria as a peculiarly feminine condition whereby pliant femininity is feted while “unruly” femininity—potentially hysterical and excessive—only deserves to be repressed and controlled. Judged in this way, many contemporary female protagonists could only hear one verdict—guilty as charged; but what if their depravity should be linked to Kristeva's concept of abjection, and Mary Russo's identification of a “female grotesque”? Or, more recently, to Eimear McBride's investigation of “dirt” vis-à-vis the female body, and the female experience par excellence (*Something Out of Place*)? The ways in which both Kristeva and Russo articulate the tensions surrounding female identity align with McBride's reading of dirt as “matter out of place” (*Something Out of Place* 9). In this light, female depravity, viewed through the lens of abjection, reveals how women who transgress societal norms are often marginalised and stigmatised as the “other.” Abjection, as Elisabeth Gross explains this foundational concept of Kristeva's theory, functions as a reaction of subjective horror or disgust to something that appears to challenge or threaten our cherished sense of self, and might occur when we are forced to confront our repressed “corporeal reality” (92). Combined with

Russo's theory of the grotesque, which celebrates the unruly and the non-normative aspects of femininity, these stances expose the fragility of female identity within patriarchal structures, highlighting how an exploration and endorsement of depravity can ultimately serve the purpose of perverting the tradition-sanctioned trope of a "damsel-in-distress" so as to redress the balance—or surpass it—with patriarchy, and subvert conventionally prescribed gender roles.

While a justification of the violence perpetrated by some of these young female characters feels misguided, their "depravity" might be granted some validation and legitimacy, in view of how they dare to move beyond patriarchal values which only allow the existence of such violence when it serves a didactic/self-improvement purpose. Could the "evil" heroines be simply allowed to stay the way they are, i.e. dangerous and depraved, and liking it? Acknowledging that the trope of the "evil" woman goes as far back as the Biblical Eve or even earlier, an investigation of the "fallen" women of, for example, 19th-century literature, reveals that, while they were sinning with regard to, or against, their society, they were not transparently "evil" characters. Quite the contrary, they were often represented as victims with whom readers were invited to sympathise to some degree, understanding how their "crimes" were often out of proportion with the punishments they received. Perhaps what distinguishes the contemporary young heroines most from those prototypes is their staunch refusal to be approached as objects of pity or sympathy. This is evident in the various "poses" they assume in their attempts at preserving their carefully constructed personas which, within the socially and culturally embedded patriarchal frameworks of today, might end up enmeshed in the prey/predator dichotomy. It may even feel as if in our roles as readers, critics, and writers, we, too, are moving around in circles—just as the unlikable, unhinged femcels and girls of prey are.

Perhaps the entire debate comes down to the question of "turning the tables" on patriarchal order and conventions in the sense of creating art and writing fiction which break away from any arbitrary expectations external and/or alien to the goals and desires of women. While in some cases the protagonists and narrators are obviously grappling with trauma and its aftermath, struggling to understand and overcome it, there are also instances of characters who, by common standards, are simply not nice people. Nevertheless, they may still deserve some level-headed advocating to prove that they have every right to be so. After all, the history of male unlikability in literature is long and twisted; one need not even refer to psychopaths and killers like Patrick Bateman or Hannibal Lecter to gauge how incompetent, crude, or egotistical male characters hardly ever come in for the same criticism and censure as their female equivalents.

Working from this premise, in the present article I have emphasised women's right to do "bad" things, arguing that their transgressions might have an even greater potential and appeal than the exploits of their male counterparts. The female characters in the novels by McBride, Rooney, Taddeo, and Clark I discussed may or may not care whether they become legends in the mould of male villains; some, like Rooney's Frances, will continue to seek out social validation or will settle for a quieter—"lesser"—life built from scratch with their chosen partners, the way that Eily and Stephen try to do in McBride's novel. Others may upend their life so as to give the best to their children, even if this might ultimately mean their own undoing, as in the case of Taddeo's Joan. The fate of others, like Clark's Irina, may remain indeterminate, leaving them suspended in a vicious circle of their own misguided choices and conflicted desires. The fact that these "girl-bosses," killjoys, femcels, and women-predators oppose easy categorisation challenges patriarchal and other conventional discourses which have attempted to shape and control them.

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REVIEWS



 **Rafael Schögler**

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“Stop Read Listen”: A Review of *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and the City*, edited by Tong King Lee (Routledge, 2021)

At least since Sherry Simon published *Cities in Translation* in 2012, the city has become a major trope for translation theory and translational thinking. This is not to say that geographic spaces (Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*, 1995), linguistic landscapes (Shohamy et al., *Linguistic Landscape in the City*, 2010), literary representations (Cronin, *Translating Ireland*, 1996), or the reconstruction of memory and historical trajectories of multicultural spaces and societies had not existed as areas of interest before that. What has characterised endeavours in this field over the last decade, however, is an increasing inter- and transdisciplinarity, where academics not only take time to read beyond their specialties, but also engage with artists, activists, and colleagues interested in phenomena tied to language, translation, and urban space in joint publications, conferences, and open public events. The notion of cities in translation inevitably includes an understanding of cities as transformable and transforming entities. To study these, a multitude of approaches has been developed ranging from the *flâneuse*, or *flâneur* (Canan Marasligil; Andre Furlani) to the excavation of institutionalised forms of language and translation policies in archives (Lieven D’hulst) or approaching translation in and of the city as embodied experience (Zhu Hua and Li Wei; Randa Aboubakr)—all discussed in the *Handbook*.

The Routledge Handbook of Translation and the City, edited by Tong King Lee, comprises 26 chapters that bring to life this decade-long transdisciplinary encounter. Structured in four parts, it starts by laying



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theoretical foundations and portraying methodological trajectories used to analyse the relationship between translation and the city. The second part focuses on policies and institutions, the third on translation as praxis, and the fourth on translation as trope. Throughout the *Handbook*, the reader finds historical and contemporary reconstructions, work based on literary translations, analyses rooted in ethnographic observations, as well as rich reflections by curators and artists. As a truly transdisciplinary enterprise, the *Handbook* contains contributions by scholars of international relations, translation, and education, historians, comparatists, and linguists, curators and practitioners, as well as translators, freelance writers, and artists. Since it is impossible to discuss the content of all the chapters in detail here, I shall try to weave a thread of four recurrent tropes that connect different chapters in this fascinating volume.

1. *Translation and multilingualism in the city are a spatial phenomenon.* Sherry Simon writes of sites of translation, referring to zones and spaces that host stories and transcultural encounters; Carmen África Vidal Claramonte addresses notions of the time-space continuum to conceptualise translational spaces of the between, where power defines agency to influence human mobility, but also the flow of ideas and therefore the question of how, where, and when translation takes place. This set of questions, then, relates to how translation and the city form identity, dealing with cultural heterogeneity and unequal power relations. Federico Italiano reflects on maps as spaces of representation of power. Contrasting the concepts of the map and the territory, he demonstrates the transformative power of maps as tools for constructing boundaries; he traces their evolution over time—from 13th-century Florence to the cartographic representation of Tenochtitlan in 1521, and onward to Calcutta in 1887 and New York in the 1980s. Spaces of translation are also present in many other contributions, entailing institutions such as street markets, schools, churches, or publishing houses. One chapter touches upon the “karate club” as a space of translanguaging (Zhu Hua and Li Wei), another discusses contested, multilingual, and translated political messages on the walls of Cairo (Randa Aboubakr), and yet another, the representation of empire(s) on the streets and sculptures of Lemberg/Lwów/Lviv (Irene Sywenky). Rita Wilson highlights the fact that translations give rise to novel phenomena that exist independently of both the source and target contexts. Drawing on literary works, she guides her readers through the street markets of Melbourne, exploring their rich multimodal forms of communication. The concept of space serves as a compelling framework for understanding the multifaceted dynamics of translation and translanguaging, as well as the nationalistic, economic, and cultural power struggles inherent in linguistic representations within both public and less visible urban spaces.

2. *Multilingualism and translation in the city are the norm, not the exception.* Another recurring theme in this volume is the ubiquitous presence of translation and multilingualism in the city. In historical analysis, this is illustrated by the changing language policies in Brussels (Reine Meylaerts) or Istanbul (Şule Demirkol Ertürk), where translation is as much an object as a medium of remembrance, bringing to life the history of refugees and the persecution of minorities, both intrinsically connected to recurring shifts of imperial rule. Likewise, the many layers of multilingualism are addressed in chapters analysing linguistic landscapes. Patrick Heinrich offers a harsh evaluation of the changing language regimes in Tokyo's public sphere by illustrating how language-policy decisions taken in connection with the Olympics were driven by the motivation of representing certain languages rather than taking into account the actual needs for linguistic diversity to facilitate communication. Tereza Spilioti and Korina Giaxoglou analyse strategies of translanguaging and transcribing (the use of specific features of one language, such as spelling or script, in another language) in different types of urban spaces in Athens, ranging from the airport to graffiti in high schools and squats. The chapters of this *Handbook* illustrate very convincingly that the co-existence of languages in the city results from processes of globalisation and forms a marker of cosmopolitanism, at the same time illustrating historical layers of colonisation, settlement, and repression.

3. *Translation and multilingualism in the city are contested, transient, and ephemeral.* This observation can be found in many chapters. In an autoethnographic manner, Myriam Suchet and Sarah Mekdijian offer a counter-mapping of the city in Dakar, retracing their steps in the Niayes dominated by contrasts, such as the lack of running water in the communities and its presence on an abandoned golf course. Their recurring counter-mappings—on paper, film, or sand—contest dominant representations of the city and create a dialogue with the authorities and their representations of space, identity, and language. Hunam Yun understands cities as palimpsests of desires that keep being rewritten and transformed over time: she draws on literary productions to gather narratives related to different languages present in the city. Narratives surrounding English, the language of the coloniser, are divided up into narratives fetishising this language versus those that see it merely as a vehicle of communication. Literary representations are also part of Andre Furlani's reconstruction of the duality in the two settler-colonial languages of Montréal/Montreal; the scholar concludes that translation is never neutral, and in this particular case it creates the possibility for English and French communities to avoid communicating directly, if they so wish.

4. *Translation and the city uncover traumas, memories, and dissonance.* Several contributions link translation, the city, and trauma. Anne Malena,

for instance, addresses US-American racism by finding its traces in long-forgotten translations tied to New Orleans. Malena compares translations to ghost stories, as they keep slipping away, and the evidence of their existence is often hard to ascertain. She does find travelogues of an Ursuline nun from the 18th century published in several editions in English and French that uncover how any person involved in settling these lands contributed to an imperialist venture; moreover, she analyses novels that represent the perspective of Creole populations. Similarly, Simon Harel addresses trauma—in the sense of that which resists conscious figuration and translation. He uses the notion of autophagy as a form of writing and translating primitive psychic mechanisms leading to psychic self-destruction: a powerful notion that requires careful re-reading and reflection before its full potential can be grasped.

The *Routledge Handbook of Translation and the City* captivates not only due to its rich contributions and the diverse locales which it traverses—spanning Lagos (Elena Rodríguez-Murphy), Delhi (Jaspal Naveel Singh), Tallinn (Federico Bellentani), New Orleans (Anne Malena), and Athens (Tereza Spilioti and Korina Giasoglou)—but also by presenting a vast set of interdisciplinary methodological approaches. Readers will find ethnographies, linguistic analyses, historical reconstructions of translation policies, interpretations of literary productions, artistic research-creation projects, and decolonial interpretations, all weaved together. Besides the interesting content of this volume, it is important to note a practical feature: at the end of every chapter, each contributor provides suggestions for further reading, which makes this *Handbook* invaluable for graduate students and all interested readers. These recommendations encompass materials in the diverse range of languages represented in the chapters and reflect a broad spectrum of perspectives, often introducing angles that even specialists in the field may not have previously considered.

Translating the city will never end: neither as a practice, form of expression, embodied activity, nor as a rationalised form of analysis. Cities as living spaces will continue to host memories of violent transformations, of civil disobedience, of hope, fantasies, and identity formation.

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 **Anna Pochmara**

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A Review of Eve Dunbar's *Monstrous Work and Radical Satisfaction* (University of Minnesota Press, 2024)

Eve Dunbar's *Monstrous Work and Radical Satisfaction* examines how Black women writers during the era of Jim Crow and early desegregation reimagined ideas of work, worth, and satisfaction in ways that both challenged and transcended the promises of racial integration. At its core, the book contends that liberal humanism, racial integration, and pluralism fall short of addressing the most pressing challenges facing the Black community. Rather, Dunbar highlights a counter-narrative through the concept of “monstrous work”—a term encompassing both paid and unpaid forms of domestic, cultural, and community labor that defy categorization by dominant economic and social discourses. Dunbar defines “monstrous” as “a turn away from the forms of life that are offered by the state and other hegemonic agents toward more radical forms of Black being” (10). This shift opens the door to a kind of radical satisfaction that transcends the need to prove that Black people are “‘human too’ or ‘worthy’ of American citizenship” (3). This satisfaction, she argues, lies in the affective possibilities that allow Black women to feel whole and complete. “I examine texts that explore Black women’s completeness, joy, and happiness outside the bounds of normative racial inclusion,” Dunbar declares (3). Throughout the book, she interweaves insights from Black feminist thought and literary criticism, drawing on a range of influential scholars, from Audre Lorde’s discussion of the erotic as a source of power to Saidiya Hartman’s theorization of wayward lives. Her argument is further enriched by the work of Angela Y. Davis, Hazel V. Carby, Patricia Hill Collins, Toni Morrison, Hortense J. Spillers, Claudia Tate, and Sylvia Wynter, among others. By bringing together these voices to analyze the fiction of Ann Petry, Dorothy West,



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Alice Childress, and Gwendolyn Brooks, Dunbar's project envisions a powerful tradition of Black women's writing and criticism.

Dunbar opens the volume with a deeply personal preface that situates her inquiry within her own family history. She reflects on the contradictions of Black womanhood—caught between the need to conform to societal expectations (which prized relentless productivity and visible utility) and the equally compelling need to affirm self-worth outside those narrow parameters. Her recollections of her mother's precarious labor experiences and the challenges faced by her grandparents provide the backdrop for understanding how Black domesticity and labor have historically been both essential and systematically devalued. This personal narrative is not simply anecdotal; it frames the broader scholarly investigation into the alternative forms of satisfaction and identity forged under segregation.

In the Introduction, Dunbar problematizes the national narrative of desegregation. Drawing on Zora Neale Hurston's controversial 1955 critique of integration—a critique that warned against accepting racial “progress” at the cost of genuine Black dignity—Dunbar points to the tradition of Black thought that resists superficial claims of inclusion. Hurston's skepticism about integration's capacity to heal racial wounds lays the groundwork for Dunbar's exploration of how Black women writers, through their creative work, prioritized self-affirmation and community-building over an integrationist model that demanded assimilation to mainstream ideologies steeped in patriarchy and white supremacy, ultimately forging alternative visions of Black identity and liberation.

Dunbar's analysis begins with the writings of Ann Petry, whose protagonists engage in what she terms “ugly work”—the labor that is decried or marginalized by mainstream society yet is vital for survival and self-assertion. Focusing on the supporting female characters from *The Street* rather than on its main character, the author shows that the ideology of respectability and bias against sex work has blinded critics to the radical ways in which those women use their work as a means to assert autonomy. Their marginal position uniquely empowers them to challenge oppressive social, racial, and gender norms—ranging from rigid standards of propriety and beauty to restrictive ideals of womanhood. In this context, their engagement in sex work or witchcraft becomes a radical act of resistance, subverting mainstream expectations by demonstrating that labor deemed “monstrous” can yield alternative forms of satisfaction and foster a strong sense of community among Black women.

Dunbar extends this analysis to other canonical writers of the period. She challenges the conventional view of Dorothy West's work as a Black Bourgeois novel of manners, contending instead that in her fiction, the domestic sphere emerges as a site of both vulnerability and liberation.

West's narratives counter the prevailing negative stereotypes of the Black family by foregrounding domestic work—child-rearing, cooking, and the nurturing of kinship networks—as a form of political and cultural resistance. Furthermore, rather than constructing a hegemonic heterosexual private sphere, West introduces a queer family of two women—a move that leads Dunbar to describe *The Living Is Easy* as an early Black queer domestic novel. Overall, instead of conforming to the state's narrow definition of domesticity, Black women in West's texts reclaim the home as a space of creative possibility and self-determination.

Alice Childress's writings add to the corpus of monstrous work by focusing on the experiences of Black domestic workers. Dunbar begins the chapter with an examination of Childress's FBI file during McCarthyism and argues that her portrayal of Black working-class women is dangerous to the state because, functioning outside a fixed routine, they are challenging to surveil. Through their quiet acts of resistance—what Dunbar terms “domestic work”—these women assert their agency, carving out spaces of autonomy within environments that are systematically designed to oppress them. Invoking communist rhetoric, they cast themselves as radical workers and not obedient servants. Drawing on her own experience, Dunbar constructs a vision of Gramscian Black working-class “organic intellectuals” (100), whose political and intellectual engagement is deeply intertwined with Black social life and the joy of communal bonding.

The fourth chapter is informed by the recent developments in critical theory and the emergence of animal studies. Dunbar explores the interstices between the human and the nonhuman in the texts of Gwendolyn Brooks, demonstrating how she revises the dominant discourses that have historically used animalization to dehumanize Black people. Brooks's strategy, Dunbar demonstrates, is distinct from that found in canonical Black male texts such as Frederick Douglass's slave narrative or Richard Wright's protest novel. In contrast to the Black male tradition, Brooks engages with the nonhuman world, illustrating how connections with animals and other life forms can serve as metaphors for radical forms of belonging. In doing so, Brooks's work expands the definition of community beyond strictly human relationships, enabling Black women to articulate new modes of satisfaction that transcend divisions and binary oppositions that have long been inclined to devalue their lives.

In her coda, Dunbar reflects on the enduring legacy of these literary practices of Black women writers of the Jim Crow era. Pondering over a portrait of Breonna Taylor—a Black woman killed by the police who wrongfully entered her house in 2022—she emphasizes the urgent need to carve out space and time for Black women's self-affirmation, a radical act in a world that persistently devalues their lives.

Overall, *Monstrous Work and Radical Satisfaction* stands as both a scholarly study and a political intervention. Dunbar delivers compelling and meticulous close readings of the texts under examination while situating them within broader critical and historical discourses. Her eight-page analysis of the chicken-hacking scene in Brooks's *Maud Martha* exemplifies this approach, demonstrating the depth and nuance of her interpretations. These readings compel us to rethink the traditional African American male-centered narratives of rebellion, urging us to recognize radicalism in the often-overlooked counterhegemonic interventions of Black women—acts of resistance that frequently unfold within the domestic sphere and the fabric of Black social life. This study will appeal to scholars of African American culture and feminist thought, while its clarity and accessibility, despite an extensive theoretical framework, make it a valuable resource for all students of literature and culture.

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