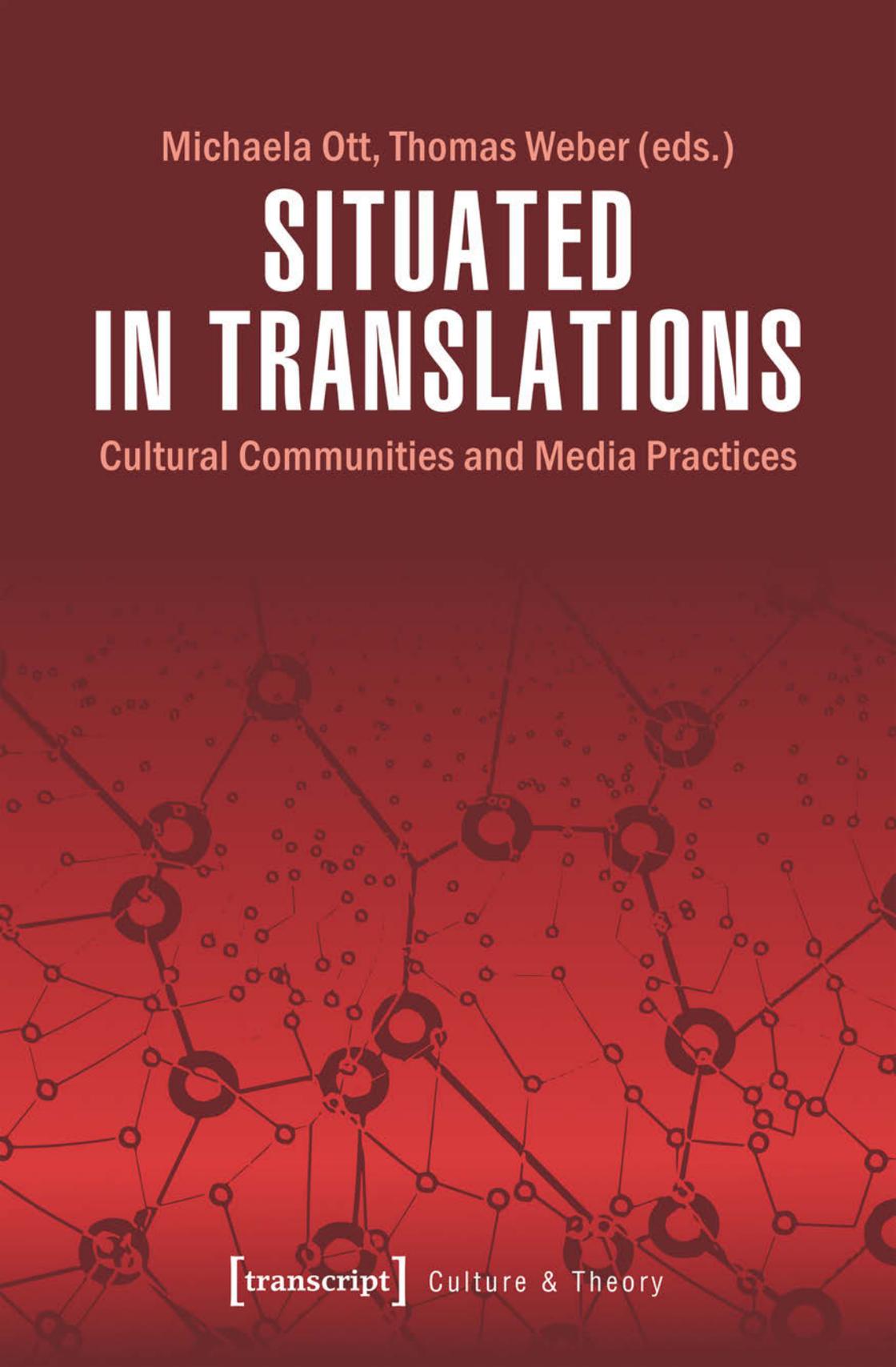


Michaela Ott, Thomas Weber (eds.)

SITUATED IN TRANSLATIONS

Cultural Communities and Media Practices

[transcript] Culture & Theory



From:

Michaela Ott, Thomas Weber (eds.)

Situated in Translations

Cultural Communities and Media Practices

April 2019, 234 p., pb., ill.

34,99 € (DE), 978-3-8376-4343-5

E-Book:

PDF: 34,99 € (DE), ISBN 978-3-8394-4343-9

Cultural communities are shaped and produced by ongoing processes of translation understood as aesthetic media practices – such is the premise of this volume. Taking on perspectives from cultural, literary and media studies as well as postcolonial theory, the chapters shed light on composite cultural and heterotypical translation processes across various media, such as texts, films, graphic novels, theater and dance performances. Thus, the authors explore the cultural contexts of diverse media milieus in order to explain how cultural communities come into being.

Michaela Ott teaches philosophy and aesthetic theories at the Academy of Fine Arts in Hamburg. Her main research interests are aesthetics of film, poststructuralist philosophy, theories of space, affections and dividualities and (post-)colonial topics.

Thomas Weber is professor for media studies at Hamburg University. His main research is on documentary films, media theories, and European cinema.

For further information:

www.transcript-verlag.de/en/978-3-8376-4343-5

Table of contents

Introduction <i>Michaela Ott, Thomas Weber</i>	7
Portrait of the Philosopher as a Translator <i>Souleymane Bachir Diagne</i>	15
Reassessing the Situation of the Text in the Algorithmic Age <i>William Uricchio</i>	23
Fragile Translations: Languages of/in Media Art <i>Claudia Benthien</i>	39
Chameleons (graphic short story) <i>Birgit Weyhe</i>	61
Framing and Translation in Birgit Weyhe's <i>Madgermanes</i> <i>Johannes C.P. Schmid</i>	107
Translation as Entanglement: Staging Cordelia's Survival in She She Pop's <i>King Lear</i> Adaptation <i>Testament</i> (2010) <i>Martin Schäfer</i>	119
Sensory Impressions as Imaginations of the Real: On the Translatability of the Immediate in Political Documentaries <i>Thomas Weber</i>	133
Situated Between Cultures. The (Im-)possibility of Translation in Ghassan Salhab's Films <i>Michaela Ott</i>	161

Diasporic Culture and Colonialism: Katherine Dunham and Berto Pasuka's Dance Translations <i>Ramsay Burt</i>	179
And so you see ...: On the Situatedness of Translating Audience Perceptions <i>Gabriele Klein, Marc Wagenbach</i>	191
Unbelievable Treasures: Artworks as Intersections of Culturalization <i>Sophie Lembcke</i>	215
Biographies	229

Introduction

Michaela Ott, Thomas Weber

From our Westernized and globalized cultural perspective and on the basis of our academic and ethical convictions, we would like to demonstrate that the construction of today's cultural communities is not primarily dependent on geographical, ethnic, social, or political attributions, but on aesthetic and media practices that communicate, transmit, and transform mediatized material, and translate it into new contexts of media culture.

Singular differences aside, these practices of translation are, on the one hand, ubiquitous due to the dissolution of borders in a mondialized world and the growing variety of technological configuration, transmission, and storage media; but, on the other hand, they are specifically determined by the distinct way that they are situated within media milieus and specific cultural communities. It is these media milieus and cultural communities that the articles collected here will examine with regard to their respective heterotypical forms of translation, understood as practices of adaptation that amalgamate cultures and transform meaning.

In this sense, translation does not simply occur between two languages or cultural spheres. Instead, it is shaped by a continuous process of cultural and media transformation that takes place between different semiotic registers and "Kultur-techniken" ("cultural techniques"). Within this context, the difference between original and copy seldom plays a significant role, as there is a burgeoning awareness of the fact that all symbolic expression, whether it takes place in language, image, or another sign system, is always mediatized and 'translated' to begin with—that is, it has undergone a process of historical genesis and transformation and therefore demonstrates diachronic, multilayered, and complex structures.

Similarly, translation is an act of 'appropriating' that which is understood as foreign and therefore by an act of adaption, but also by an act of self-attribution that shapes and expresses the way a community sees itself. In particular, it is today's hybrid mediatizations and composite-cultural products that make translation a procedure that tendentially cannot be brought to an end. Analyzing the traces of this procedure reveals the ambiguous situatedness and historic cultural contingency of expression, which frequently evolves locally and then diversifies mundially.

Gabriele Klein and Marc Wagenbach define translation praxeologically as an ensemble of practices that resituate and generate the configuration of subjects, media, artefacts, and techniques differently in relation to the situation. In their understanding, the situational only emerges from praxes of translation in the first place. In this way, Klein and Wagenbach describe translation as a “situational and situated praxis. Both the ‘situational’—in terms of something momentary, performatively generated, ephemeral, always absent—and ‘situatedness’—i.e., context, embeddedness, framing—are constitutive for translation.” (cf. Klein/Wagenbach’s text in this volume, p. 191) Both the spatial and temporal contingency of expression and the deliberate way the context of that expression is framed resounds in the title *Situated in Translations*. In their examination of dance performances, Klein and Wagenbach are less interested in analyzing the static, immutable aspects of a performance—the choreographic structures, the narrative, or the intention of the artists—than they are in examining the ephemeral, the “singularity of every single performance in terms of its temporal and spatial contingency.” (Ibid., p. 194) The special situatedness of each performance comprises “various observable interdependent activities, which cannot be traced back to individual motives or intentions. Instead, choreography here is understood as embodied, materially conveyed performance, organized by collectively shared, practical forms of knowledge [...]” (Ibid.) The aim of their praxeological perspective is to highlight the types of translation that result above all from actions and atmospheres, exhibiting performative dimensions that are always contingent, including the reaction of the audience. In their analysis of different performances, they discuss the difficulty resulting from the fact that the fluidity of the situational “cannot be grasped in reflection, but only remains a memory” (ibid., p. 212)—which is why memory protocols were crucial for their analysis. On the other hand, the performance must be deliberately embedded within the composite culture so that it can be perceived and judged: “A process of realization, perception, reflection and description thus condenses the situational and situatedness into a complex and conservable product of translation.” (Ibid.) Moreover, they understand translation as a process that brings about change in different temporal dimensions and, in some cases, also affects that which is supposedly original, casting it in a different light.

Viewing translation as a situated and situating, multidirectional activity like this necessarily shifts the focus toward artistic productions, as they frequently constitute cultural and media composites. In these composites, there is an interplay between not just different languages and their modal forms of expression, but also between different media articulations, between image, tone, and sound, between material installation, a given spatial ambience, and patterns of reception, and between configurations of protagonists and viewers. In her article, which also investigates modes of expression in both composite culture and multimedia, Claudia Benthien thus speaks of an “excess” of translation and problematizes the complexity of the translation process.

But there is another more pointed, epistemic, and political dimension to broaching the issue of situatedness: because contemporary translation is increasingly taking place between cultures that are not just European, there is a growing desire to capture the situatedness of each translation in its cultural and political precarity and to pay special heed to that which has not yet been perceived within such contexts, allowing us to observe symbolic difference in the sense of acknowledging, listening to, and examining the “Other” of another culture. One aspect of emphasizing situatedness is the epistemological and ethical aim of, through specific framings, finally accentuating and giving shape to what is there below the surface, what goes unheard, what is repressed. Framing and scaling frequently decide what can become visible and audible. Similar processes are thus also reflected upon as subprocesses of translation.

Using critical concepts such as intermedia and composite-cultural translation, we would like to put forward the idea that each cultural articulation depends on series and different scales of translation and framing processes. The contributions to this edited volume focus on media practices situated within different composite-cultural contexts and a broad range of media, including the body and its movement, voice, literature, film, art installations, and graphic novels. Going well beyond traditional notions of media production and reception, we are instead asking in which ways media are not only framed, translated expressions of specific, mostly Western codes and norms, but also whether there are other, non-Western, culturally different, and as yet unnoticed modes of framing and translating that complicate our understanding of these processes. The authors approach this question from a variety of perspectives, from which they discuss the materiality and conceptuality of media, as well as the cultural variety of translating and framing.

In her article, Benthien joins Klein in speaking against the use of Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of the “third space” to represent composite-cultural processes, as it does not do justice to all speakers to the same degree or pay the same attention to all positions: “They do not just create a (subversive) and dynamic ‘third’ but also imply and negotiate patterns of ‘social in- and exclusion’ (Klein) as well as hegemonic claims” (cf. Benthien’s text in this volume, p. 41). Today, there is criticism coming from many corners that concepts of interculturality, which consider two cultures to be distinct yet connected by way of a subject, no longer do justice to today’s cultural entanglements; they are often rejected in favor of more complex and challenging notions of cultural negotiation, notions that also include experiences of failed or fragmentary forms of translation. In this sense, Benthien shows how media art reflects upon the delicate “threshold between pitfall and promise” (ibid.) in linguistic and cultural translation processes.

The very different analyses collected here use symptomatic examples to show how contemporary translations combine different forms of media and cultural expression at the same time, thereby necessarily bringing forth other perspectives, modes of subjectification, and cultural composites. The translation processes at

issue here deviate from a conventional understanding both in diachronic and synchronic aspects: in diachronic terms, they distance themselves from a model or an ‘original text,’ become medial transcriptions, distance themselves from the purely linguistic, and reframe and reinterpret what has been said; in synchronic terms, simultaneous and qualitatively different translation processes can be observed, especially in theatrical, performative, and cinematic performances. Martin Schäfer speaks of “translation as entanglement” (cf. the title of Martin Schäfer’s text in this volume, p. 119).

It becomes important within this context to redefine the concept of ‘the universal,’ as Soulemayne Bashir Diagne explains in his article: this concept should no longer function as a vertical referent that has been removed from culture or as a binding standard; rather, it should become recognizable as the effect and the result of the incessant contact being made at a lateral level, of movements of transmission, and thus itself as a continued deviation and minimal redefinition. Despite all criticism, for Diagne, it is obvious that this kind of universal is indispensable to allowing that which has so far been excluded to communicate, participate, and become visible.

Ramsay Burt, in turn, makes reference to the Caribbean-British cultural theorist Stuart Hall, the first (post)colonial theoretician, who emphasized that, in the 20th century, every avant-gardist art form began with movements of cultural translation. In particular, says Burt, this is demonstrated in contact zones like the one between American/British culture and Caribbean-African culture, although it is not just different cultural codes that collide, but also different forms of expression, such as cultic dance and theatre performance. Burt even conceives of the theater performance as a process of translation that has solidified into a complex cultural practice. He also makes use of Hall’s concept of “perfidious reality” to characterize the different ways that African-Caribbean articulations are translated into Europe-compatible dance and the accompanying alterations, reinterpretations, and deliberate deceptions. He calls these types of translation “compromises,” as they are well suited to preparing one for a life in composite-cultural environments.

Alongside the articles that discuss the interweaving of different cultural elements and forms of expression (Burt; Klein/Wagenbach; Schäfer; Benthien; Ott; Lembcke), there are also articles that deal with graphic and, in particular, cinematic articulations as multilayered translation processes, which offer different images of reality (Ott; Weber; Weyhe). On the basis of these different observations, we contend that all symbolic articulations are situated in translations as determinative processes, i.e., that they are imprisoned and empowered to an equal extent.

The aim is thus to analyze cultural medial situatedness and translatedness in precisely this ambiguity. We are interested in subtexts, that which is suppressed, and that which is also intended in symbolic expression, that which can only be heard, perceived, and deciphered by considering its specific situatedness, its novel

use of media, the different epistemological approach taken (e.g., sensory ethnography, Weber).

In the texts collected here, there are numerous examples of translations taking place between cultures that seem to be worlds apart—Western European countries, the Middle East, the Caribbean, and different African countries—which are testament to enduring (post)colonial relations. Analyzing the composite-cultural situatedness of filmic translations encompasses, as in the article by Michaela Ott, a network of references made between Lebanon, Senegal, and France, reveals the aesthetically conveyed uncertainty in the different speakers' points of view and in the filmic expression that results from their situatedness between different cultural referents, made additionally uncertain by ongoing acts of war. Ott thus comes to the conclusion that, due to these circumstances, Salhab's films problematize translatability itself, refusing to simply translate perceptions into plausible images of reality. They de-individuate themselves through the continual dividualization of the films, which participate in one another, blurring the boundaries of the single film, and tending toward indistinguishability. Continually shaken by events of war [...] the films exhibit, in ever more radical variations, the consequences of trauma as the near zero point of expression and translation. (cf. Ott's text in this volume, p. 176)

In her graphic short story *Chameleons*, Birgit Weyhe describes her childhood in Uganda and her experiences of cultural difference, which is also the subject of her graphic novel *Madgermanes*. In this novel, she problematizes the situatedness of Mozambicans in the late GDR and after they returned to their country of origin, thereby graphically dramatizing the situation of cultural and social in-betweenness typical of the time. As Johannes Schmid emphasizes in his article, her graphic novel "oscillates between the generic cornerstones of autobiography, documentary, and realist fiction. Furthermore, Weyhe thoroughly explores the concepts of memory, home, and the experience of migration" (Schmid's text in this volume, p. 107). Weyhe does not just translate this narrative underpinned by autobiography into an amalgam of documentation and fiction, but also charges its meaning metaphorically. According to Schmid, Weyhe's metaphors underline experiences of cross-cultural movement and displacement, conferring central significance to perceptions and emotions in the conveyance of memory.

In other texts, dance performances testify to the processes of translation that take place between South African and Afro-Caribbean experiences on the one hand and those of a European audience on the other (Klein/Wagenbach; Burt), while others analyze contemporary art installations in terms of the way they combine Arabic and English texts in audiovisual media (Benthien) or integrate African *objets d'art* into contemporary European artworks (Lembcke). Lembcke deals with various practices that hybridize art objects between 'African' and European spaces. Using the specific example of the translation of an Ife bronze head into a piece of Western art for a Western art exhibition, she also discusses how such practices are appraised in different ways, with understandings ranging from hy-

perculture to the emphasis of difference. She examines the way that the art market constructs identitary cultural niches on the basis of economic interests, together with the accompanying symbolic devaluation or valorization. Joining Reckwitz, she takes a critical look at (dein)dividualized ‘hyperculture,’ which results from accepted patterns of appropriation, translation, and cultural remixing in the behavior of globalized players.

Martin Schäfer also refers to a complex tangle of overlapping translation operations in his article. He takes a look at She She Pop’s performance of *King Lear*, which references a German tradition of appropriating Shakespeare, a tradition that itself includes different translation operations that function as different forms of attribution and appropriation. Moreover, he describes the performance as a translation of text into a stage performance through media transformation, as a combination of various media, as a post-dramatic concept of alienation that exhibits its own mediality, i.e., its own staging, and not least as a transformation of the characters and their roles. Schäfer’s analysis focuses on the complexity of the various layers of translation processes, which allow new dimensions of meaning to appear by way of different processes of transcription.

William Uricchio’s article primarily focusses on situatedness within the context of global media developments. He emphasizes that algorithms are becoming the new cultural gatekeepers and that paradigms, epistemes, and paratexts, which are crucial to the way that cultural products are received and understood, are undergoing a qualitative change to their inherent value systems. The production of knowledge, he says, is being fundamentally altered by new technologies and their economic structures as they create new orders of knowledge in operations of configuration and curation. One and the same text can be ascribed different meanings in different networks, while previous terms such as author, agency, and textual stability are dissolving into new constellations.

Thomas Weber’s article deals with the presentation of sensory impressions in documentary films. These can be construed, firstly, as presentations of sensory, material, and corporeal characteristics and, secondly—as in recent documentary productions—as productions that generate constructions of corporeal sensory impressions in the spectator. Whereas the former is metaphorically charged with meaning, the latter is used to construct an impression of immediacy, whose meaning only unfolds in the specific medial milieu. Media milieus are constituted as specific forms of cooperation between different human and non-human actors (in the Latourian sense), which each develop their own specific practices of constituting meaning.

Not least, the analyses offered here are themselves understood as practices of translation that further transpose their objects of analysis. For its part, the theoretical analysis of modes of media expression sets the situational of the performance and the situatedness of the cultural context in relation to one another, which is why the overall conclusion can be drawn that such analysis “also relates the situated-

ness of academic and artistic practices to one another” (Klein/Wagenbach’s text in this volume, p. 212).

It is clear that, as the result of different disciplinary approaches taken, this edited volume cannot provide a coherent statement on the contemporary question of situational performance, cultural situatedness, or their media translation. Instead, it provides different, epistemologically stimulating options for accessing the research question by discussing contemporary examples of procedures of translating and framing. It reveals something about the complexity of today’s academic analyses, because increasing epistemological, postcolonial, and media awareness means that more and more points of view are being included, as a result of which processes of translation appear to be increasingly multilayered constructs that are even more sensitive to context.

This book was developed within the scope of the Hamburg-based research group Framing and Translating: Practices of Medial Transformations. The group was interested in taking an innovative approach by conceptualizing media and cultural perception, appropriation, articulation, and reception as forms of ‘translating’ and ‘framing.’ The aim was to build on existing theories of translation, moving toward interdisciplinary studies, and combining research on the arts, media studies, and cultural studies, as well as the social sciences. The research group, established in 2015, consisted of different projects led by scholars from the University of Hamburg and the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg (HFBK). This edited volume is based on the second international conference held by the research group in May 2017, which brought together scholars and practitioners working in the fields of philosophy, media, performance studies, and cultural studies, whose projects mostly focus on dynamic processes of cultural transformation in globalized contexts. The texts collected here are the results of this symposium, which was held at the University of Fine Arts in Hamburg.

Special thanks go to Linda Kutzki for her work on the layout and to Lydia J. White, who translated, copy-edited and proofread these sometimes challenging texts.

Portrait of the Philosopher as a Translator

Souleymane Bachir Diagne

Let me first present myself as a member of French philosopher Barbara Cassin's team of friends who are working with her on the still ongoing enterprise that the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* is (Cassin 2014). And the reason why I am evoking our intellectual collective is that my present contribution has as its starting point the very premise upon which the *Dictionary* project is founded: namely that we always philosophize *in tongues*. To explain the meaning of this expression (a paraphrase, of course, of a biblical phrase), let me put it in connection with two quotes: one by Edouard Glissant and one by Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o. Glissant famously declared that he writes "in the presence of all the languages in the world" (2010: 14),¹ while Ngũgĩ writes in *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance* that "translation is the language of languages" (Thiong'o 2009: 96). In this book, the Kenyan writer forcefully states that remembering Africa demands the development of all of the languages of the continent in their plurality: "A shared modern heritage will emerge." (Ibid.: 97) And to the potential objection that plurality means dispersion, he responds that translation is precisely what creates a common horizon.

"Philosophizing in tongues," being "in the presence of all the world's languages," translation as "the language of all languages": all of these phrases converge to tell us about the importance of the fact that a language is always "one among others," none being *the Logos*—in other words, the embodiment of the universal. In philosophy more particularly, they go against what French translator Jean-Pierre Lefebvre has labeled "ontological nationalism," one example of which is Heidegger's position, which holds that philosophy naturally speaks Greek and now today's Greek, that is, German, and possibly other European languages. In a word, philosophers have to realize that they always philosophize in certain tongues, that their theses and arguments are always produced in given idioms on which they depend in a way that their translation into other languages would reveal. The philosopher as a translator is fully conscious of the fact that she writes in the presence

1 | "[C]'est ce que j'appelle l'imaginaire des langues, c'est-à-dire la présence à toutes les langues du monde." Unless stated otherwise, all passages in translation have been translated by Souleymane Bachir Diagne.

of languages that de-center her position by questioning the philosophy of the very grammar in which it is expressed. This calls for two remarks.

The first remark is that, of course, the point is not to demand from a philosopher the actual mastery of many different languages (although it should be noted that this is the case for many philosophers from the “global South”) or even simple bilingualism. It should be recalled here what Jacques Derrida, the very figure of the philosopher-translator who nevertheless declared himself monolingual, has said about the meaning of translation within a single language (cf. Derrida 1998). It is clear that all the different languages of the world are rustling in his monolingualism, which means that to be a philosopher-translator is simply to have in mind the very texture of one’s language and to ask what turn one’s expression would take in another language.

My second remark is to respond to the objection that of course philosophers know perfectly well that they are thinking in a language, that there is no thought without language, and that, for this reason, they do know that the grammar of our language must be examined, questioned, and reconstructed in a way that allows the true meaning to manifest itself. For instance, and to paraphrase a famous example given by Bertrand Russell (1985: 188), given the following assertions: (1) *the present king of Belgium is bald*, and (2) *the present king of France is bald*, in order to decide whether they are true, I first have to analyze them respectively as (1’) *there is an individual who satisfies the condition of being king of Belgium and who has the property of being bald*, and (2’) *there is an individual who satisfies the property of being king of France and who has the property of being bald*. When (1) is analyzed as (1’), I can declare that, yes, it is true that an individual exists who is king in Belgium, so I just need to check a picture of him: if he is bald the assertion is true. As to (2), its form (2’) tells me immediately that the assertion is false since there is no individual satisfying the condition of being king of France.² The point is that, without the logical analysis of the assertion, I could have considered that, since that what does not exist has all the properties I could imagine, it is true that the current king of France is bald (since there is none: nothingness has all properties).

Such a philosophical reconstruction of our language is, of course, a form of translation (taking us from the surface grammar to the logical grammar of our language) that leads to a clarification of what we say. But being aware that we always think in language is not the same as being aware that we think in a particular idiom, which is always one among many.

To examine what we say, to perform a critical reappraisal of an argument is to submit it, if only *virtually*, to what Antoine Berman has called “l’épreuve de

2 | President Emmanuel Macron is nicknamed “Jupiter.” But we can agree that being the “king of gods” does not qualify one as king of France.

l'étranger" (1984)—“the test of the foreign”—the text of translation, imagining, for example, a language that functions differently from the one we work with.

We now have to take into account the fact that “ontological nationalism” means prejudice vis-à-vis other languages. A Heideggerian would thus dismiss the whole notion of philosophizing in a language that is one among others. Why do I need to translate into languages that are not the *Logos*, she would say?

The history of philosophy was constructed at a given time, relatively recently, upon the notion of the exceptionalism of Europe and its languages, at least some of them. The form taken by such exceptionalism is the result of forgetting the role of translation in that history and the becoming-philosophical of languages through translation. Thus, it was understood that *translatio studiorum*, the transfer/translation of Greek philosophy outside Greece and the Greek language, followed a unilinear trajectory from Athens to Rome and from Rome to London, Paris and/or Heidelberg; from Greek to Latin, then, before the European vernaculars progressively became languages of philosophy. However, apropos *translatio studiorum*, here is what Roger Bacon wrote:

God first revealed philosophy to his saints and gave them the laws.... It was thus primarily and most completely given in the Hebrew language. It was then renewed in the Greek language, primarily by Aristotle; then in the Arabic language, primarily through Avicenna; but it was never composed in Latin and was only translated/transferred [*translata*] based on foreign languages, and the best [texts] are not translated. (Cited in: Cassin 2014: 1149)

Noteworthy here is what is said about the becoming-Arabic of the history of philosophy. Because it questions the unilinear trajectory of Jerusalem-Athens-Rome-Latin-Christian Occident, to which, later on, the fabrication of the history of philosophy as a uniquely European affair will reduce the *translatio studiorum*. The history of *written* erudition in Africa also partakes in such becomings, to which Timbuktu is the best-known testament.

The translation/becoming-Arabic of philosophy has been erased in the construction of the history of philosophy as Europe's own particular *telos*, which could only be realized in the language(s) of that province of the world. The forgetting that any human language is, by right, a language of philosophy is a consequence of colonialism, of the idea that Europe had a natural anthropological calling, from the vantage point of being the incarnation of the *Logos*, to invite into its history, its languages, and cultures the other ‘humanities.’ Descartes did not think, while writing the *Discourse of Method* in French, that he was thus speaking a language decreed to be the abode of Being. On the contrary, he chose that vernacular against the expected sacrosanct Latin because it was his servant's tongue. And when it comes to philosophy in languages other than the European languages, this thinker of the radical beginning had no problem acknowledging that algebra, the matrix of his philosophy, was a science transferred/translated from Arabic.

Colonialisms create and feed the idea that there are languages that embody the *Logos*, unlike all other human idioms, which can only be ‘primitive.’ Anthropology as the daughter of colonialism, as best expressed in Levy-Bruhl’s thought (cf. Levy-Bruhl 1933), constructs non-European languages as primitive and naturally incapable of translating the *Logos*. Untranslatability divides humanity into humanities, establishing a radical separation between an imperial language, full of the Being that finds in it its abode, and indigenous tongues, which are not fully languages, as they are defined by lack and incompleteness. Ethnographical literature thus often offers clever discourses explicating what those *other* languages tell us about the natives, as they lack (1) the verb “to be,” of course, (2) abstract concepts, and (3) future tenses. Forgotten is what Roger Bacon wrote about translation in the history of philosophy.

I just spoke of anthropology as the “daughter of colonialism.” That is what it has historically been, as we know. But that being said, it should also be noted that, as the ability to translate (against Levy-Bruhl’s anthropology) and put in perspective, and the ability to de-center, anthropology is also a *machine de guerre* against colonialism and imperial negation. One should not say that anthropology is colonial science without adding that it is an equally postcolonial or de-colonial possibility. One of the best illustrations of such a possibility is Edward Sapir’s essay on “The Grammarian and the Philosopher.”

Usually when the name Edward Sapir is invoked, it is in relation to linguistic relativism, especially when his name is associated with that of Benjamin Whorf in the phrase “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.”³ The hypothesis of radical linguistic relativism seems to make translation impossible, since languages then appear as separate worlds. But we should cite at least as often Sapir’s important notion that the philosopher must be a translator who is eager to submit his arguments to Berman’s “test of the foreign” and who is even eager to choose for such a test the most foreign language, the one constituted precisely by colonial ethnography as ‘primitive.’ Here is an essential passage from his essay, full of humor and truth, that deserves to be quoted at length:

Few philosophers have deigned to look into the morphologies of primitive languages nor have they given the structural peculiarities of their own speech more than a passing and perfunctory attention. When one has the riddle of the universe on his hands, such pursuits seem trivial enough, yet when it begins to be suspected that at least some solutions of the great riddle are elaborately roundabout applications of the rules of Latin or German or English grammar, the triviality of linguistic analysis becomes less certain. To a far greater extent than the philosopher has realized, he is likely to become the dupe of his speech-forms, which is equivalent to saying that the mould of his thought, which is typically a linguistic mould, is apt to be projected into his conception of the world. Thus innocent

3 | Many reviews of the Science Fiction movie *Arrival* have quoted this hypothesis, which is indeed at the core of the original novel and film scenario.

linguistic categories may take on the formidable appearance of cosmic absolutes. If only, therefore, to save himself from philosophic verbalism, it would be well for the philosopher to look critically to the linguistic foundations and limitations of his thought. (Sapir 1949: 157)

And Sapir specifies that the best way to apply such a critical look is the test of translation:

It would be absurd to say that Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" could be rendered forthwith into the unfamiliar accents of Eskimo or Hottentot, and yet it would be absurd in but a secondary degree. What is really meant is that the culture of these primitive folk has not advanced to the point where it is of interest to them to form abstract conceptions of a philosophical order. But it is not absurd to say that there is nothing in the formal peculiarities of Hottentot or of Eskimo which would obscure the clarity or hide the depth of Kant's thought—indeed it may be suspected that the highly synthetic and periodic structure of Eskimo would more easily bear the weight of Kant's terminology than his native German. Further, to move to a more positive vantage point, it is not absurd to say that both Hottentot and Eskimo possess all the formal apparatus that is required to serve as matrix for the expression of Kant's thought. If these languages have not the requisite Kantian vocabulary, it is not the languages that are to be blamed but the Eskimo and the Hottentots themselves. The languages as such are quite hospitable to the addition of a philosophic load to their lexical stock-in-trade. (Ibid.: 154)

It is important to emphasize Sapir's insistence that every language is both complete and open ("hospitable" he says) to hybridizations. Thus, to say that a language lacks abstract concepts is to forget that words are words before they are concepts, which is to say that it is the usages of words that are abstract and not the words in themselves. One excellent illustration of this is the word "abstract" itself. If I read in it its etymology—*abs-trahere*: to pull from—it is totally concrete; otherwise it is abstract in most of its usages. In the same way, to say that a language lacks the verb "to be" is absurd: it is a case of what Sapir considers a projection of one's own language's mode of expression (S is P: a subject, a copula, and a predicate) as a "cosmic absolute."

And this leads me to a last remark on translation as a test, a way of questioning our "philosophical grammar," as Nietzsche would say. What Sapir says in this essay written in 1924 is for a large part what French linguist Emile Benveniste will say in 1958 in his famous article reproduced in the volume *Problems in General Linguistics* and entitled "Categories of Thought and Language" (Benveniste 1971). What Benveniste says in this essay is, in substance, that the *onto-logical* categories of Aristotle are ultimately what Sapir calls "absolutes," constructed as "applications" of Greek grammar: they translate the different ways of using the verb "to be" as a copula when responding to the different questions about the quantity, quality, position, modality, etc. of a thing.

I have mentioned Benveniste recapturing a point made by Sapir. In fact, the archeology of the notion that the logico-philosophical categories that metaphysics

owes to Aristotle are but the categories of Greek grammar takes us back to a famous controversy that was staged in Baghdad in 922, a conflict between philosopher Abu Bichr Matta and grammarian Abu Said as Sirafi (Elamrani-Jamal 1983: 151). The latter denounced the philosophers' pretenses that Aristotle's logic had provided them with access to a universal grammar of reasoning: Sirafi held that the so highly praised logic was only the logic of Greek grammar, while Arabic had to exhume its own logic as well.

In addition to this tenth-century Baghdad controversy, it should be noted that in 1956—that is, two years before Benveniste published his essay—Rwandan philosopher Alexis Kagamé had expressed the same position and had consequently argued that modern philosophical thought in Africa should develop as an exploration of the categories implied in African languages (cf. Kagamé 1956).

I will conclude on this point by saying, first, that it is indeed important that African languages be or become once again, through translation, languages of modern philosophy. I mentioned earlier the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*. With my colleagues at Université Cheikh Anta Diop, Dakar, I am currently carrying out a project of creating a Wolof version of selected articles from the *Dictionary*. But I make the precision that the perspective of developing Wolof as a language of modern philosophy has nothing to do with Kagamé's relativism, according to which each language conveys its own specific philosophy.

On the contrary: once again, the point is to *translate*. To philosophize from language to language. Against relativism, I believe that we must hold on to the aim of a universal, but a universal of translation—of an encounter between languages in translation. French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty has called such a universal a “lateral” one, which he defines in this passage:

The equipment of our social being can be dismantled and reconstructed by the voyage, as we are able to learn to speak other languages. This provides a *second way to the universal*: no longer the *overarching universal* of a strictly objective method, but a sort of *lateral universal* which we acquire through ethnological experience and its incessant testing of the self through the other person and the other person through the self. It is a question of constructing a general system of reference in which the point of view of the native, the point of view of the civilized man, and the mistaken views each has of the other can all find a place—that is of constituting a more comprehensive experience which becomes in principle accessible to men of a different time and country. (Merleau-Ponty 1960: 119-120).

I consider the invitation in this passage to be the foundation of a universal understood as task and horizon: an invitation to travel, which means de-centering out of exceptionalism; an invitation to learn other languages, which means coming out of the universalism of the *Logos* in order to comprehend, first, that a language is always one among many and, then, that the universal is evaluated in the text of translation. And I consider Merleau-Ponty's thought here to be ‘postcolonial’ in the

sense that it is thought that takes into account the post-Bandung world, a world of plurality, weaving together languages and cultures, all of them equivalent.

REFERENCES

- Benveniste, Emile (1971): "Categories of Thought and Language." In: *Problems in General Linguistics*, Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, pp. 55–64.
- Berman, Antoine (1984): *L'épreuve de l'étranger*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Cassin, Barbara (ed.) (2014): *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, translated by Steven Rendall/Christian Hubert/Jeffrey Mehlman/Nathanael Stein/Michael Syrotinski, translation edited by Emily Apter/Jacques Lezra/Michael Wood, Princeton/ Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1998): *Monolingualism of the Other; or, the Prothesis of Origin*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Elamrani-Jamal, Abdelali (1983): *Logique aristotélicienne et grammaire arabe*, Paris: Vrin.
- Glissant, Edouard (2010): *L'imaginaire des langues: Entretiens avec Lise Gauvin*, Paris: Gallimard.
- Kagamé, Alexis (1956): *La philosophie bantu-rwandaise de l'être*, Bruxelles: Académie Royale des sciences coloniales.
- Levy-Bruhl, Lucien (1933): *La mythologie primitive*, Paris: Alcan.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1964 [1960]): "From Mauss to Claude Lévi-Strauss." In: *Signs*, edited and translated by Richard C. McCleary, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, pp. 114–125.
- Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o (2009): *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*, New York: BasicCivitasBooks.
- Russell, Bertrand (1985 [1918]): "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism." In: *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, vol. 8, Boston/Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, pp. 157–244.
- Sapir, Edward (1949 [1924]): "The Grammarian and his Language." In: *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir on Language, Culture, and Personality*, edited by David G. Mandelbaum, Berkeley: University of California Press.