

*Creative, Social and Transnational Perspectives on Translation*

# **THE TRANSLATION OF EXPERIENCE**

## **CULTURAL ARTEFACTS IN EXPERIENTIAL TRANSLATION**

Edited by Ricarda Vidal and Madeleine Campbell



# The Translation of Experience

Experience is a multilayered, cumulative affair with transformation at its core. Its study, a necessary first step for its translation, requires an exploration of embodiment, the senses, and cultural and social environments.

The second of two volumes, this book explores how artefacts, as outcomes of experience brought about by the “artistranslator” perform semiotic work. This semiotic work arises through the intervention of their makers but also through their viewers/audience, often through the latter’s direct participation in the artefacts’ creation, which we see as an open-ended process. Drawing on diverse examples from across the world, the chapters explore visual materiality, the digital world and the multisensory nature of artefacts such as monuments, festivals, theatre performances, artworks, religious rituals, the urban environment and human bodies—the embodied perception of which may draw holistically or variously on the haptic, olfactory, auditory, kinetic or kinaesthetic senses. Throughout the book, experiential translation is framed as a political endeavour that allows experience to be shared across linguistic, cultural, generational or gendered divides in the form of artefacts that facilitate transformation and the acquisition of knowledge.

This book and its companion volume *The Experience of Translation: Materiality and Play in Experiential Translation* include an international range of contributions from graduate students and early career researchers (ECRs) to tenured academics in translation studies, comparative literature, performance arts, fine arts, media and cultural studies, as well as educators, artists and curators. It will be of particular interest to translators and arts practitioners, scholars and researchers in the transdisciplinary field of humanities.

**Madeleine Campbell** teaches at Edinburgh University. Her transdisciplinary research spans arts-informed language education, experiential translation and creativity. Publications include *The Experience of Translation* (2024), “The multimodal translation workshop as a method of creative inquiry – acousmatic sound, affective perception and experiential literacy” (2024) and *Translating across Sensory and Linguistic Borders* (2019). She is Co-Investigator of the AHRC-funded Experiential Translation Network (ETN).

Profile: <https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/en/persons/madeleine-campbell>

**Ricarda Vidal** is Senior Lecturer at King’s College London and Principal Investigator of the AHRC-funded Experiential Translation Network ([www.experientialtranslation.net](http://www.experientialtranslation.net)). As researcher, text-maker and curator, she explores the multimodal aspects of communication across perceived cultural and/or linguistic divides. Recent publications include *The Experience of Translation* (2024), *Translating across Sensory and Linguistic Borders* (2019), *Home on the Move* (2019), and the bookwork series *Revolve:R* (2011–2023).

Profile: <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ricarda-Vidal-2>

**Funding:** This work was supported by UKRI under AHRC Grant AH/V008234/1, awarded to Ricarda Vidal, King’s College London (Principal Investigator) and Madeleine Campbell, University of Edinburgh (Co-Investigator).

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# **The Translation of Experience**

Cultural Artefacts in Experiential Translation

**Edited by**  
**Ricarda Vidal**  
**and Madeleine Campbell**



**ROUTLEDGE**

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Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2025  
by Routledge  
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-032-61208-9 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-61210-2 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-46256-9 (ebk)

DOI: [10.4324/9781003462569](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003462569)

Typeset in Galliard  
by KnowledgeWorks Global Ltd.

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# Contributors Bios

**Sarah Ibrahim Aldawood** is a PhD student in the Comparative Literature Program at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. She received her MA in the Theory and Practice of Translation from SOAS, University of London, and her BA in English Translation from King Saud University in Saudi Arabia. She has worked as a lecturer at the College of Languages and Translation in King Saud University. Her current research interests include translation theory and art history, transfiction in contemporary Arabic literature and interpreting ethics and pedagogy.

**Ayse Ayhan** is Assistant Professor at Yıldız Technical University, Istanbul. She holds a PhD in Translation and Interpreting Studies and her research focuses on the interdisciplinary discussion of translation in the context of urban and artistic space and conceptualizing urban intervention as translational activity.

**Madeleine Campbell** teaches at Edinburgh University. Her transdisciplinary research spans arts-informed language education, experiential translation and creativity. Publications include *The Experience of Translation* (2024), “The multimodal translation workshop as a method of creative inquiry – acousmatic sound, affective perception and experiential literacy” (2024) and *Translating across Sensory and Linguistic Borders* (2019). She is Co-Investigator of the AHRC-funded Experiential Translation Network (ETN).

**Louise Devenish** is a percussionist, artistic researcher and director of The Sound Collectors Lab, based at Monash University. She collaborates with artists and researchers in music, visual arts, digital technology, and environmental sciences to create new musical works that explore sounds, stories and ecologies in the world around us.

**Muskan Dhandhi** holds a PhD in English Literature and Translation Studies from Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, India. She received the Charles Wallace India Trust Grant and Shastri Indo Canadian MITCAS Globalink Research Award during her PhD. She also worked as a Research Associate in a research project funded under IMPRESS-ICSSR.

**Delphine Grass** is Senior Lecturer in French and Comparative Literature at Lancaster University. Her most recent publications include *Translation as Creative-Critical Practice* (CUP, 2023) and a special issue of *Life Writing* co-edited with Lily Robert-Foley on “The Translation Memoir” (2024). She is a published poet and translator.

**Cat Hope** is a composer, musician, artistic director and academic. She is the co-author of *Digital Arts - An Introduction to New Media* (Bloomsbury, 2014) and Director of the Decibel new music ensemble. She is Professor of Music at Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music and Performance at Monash University.

**Joanna Kosmalka** works in the Department of British Literature and Culture, University of Łódź. She led the project “Polish (E)migration Literature in Britain and Ireland since 2004”, and later contributed to “Talking Transformations” and “The Theatrical Heritage of Polish Migrants” projects. She was also an investigator for the Experiential Translation Network led by Ricarda Vidal and Madeleine Campbell. Her research interests include migration literature and theatre; literary, film, and intersemiotic translation; multiculturalism, multilingualism and transnationalism. She teaches translation courses at the University of Łódź.

**Kate McMillan’s** art practice and written research engages with histories connected to colonial violence and women’s knowledges, as well as inequalities in the contemporary art world. She was the annual author of *Representation of Female Artists in Britain During 2020*, as well as various other academic publications that consider gender inequality in the visual arts and feminist arts-based research methods. McMillan’s monograph (2019), published by Palgrave Macmillan, *Contemporary Art & Unforgetting in Colonial Landscapes: Islands of Empire* investigated female artists in the Global South and the ways their practices defy colonial amnesia. McMillan is Reader in Creative Practice at King’s College London.

**Francesca Mirabile** has a Bachelor’s degree in Medieval Philology from the Università Degli Studi di Firenze and a Master’s in Arts & Cultural Management from King’s College London. She focused her art-based MA dissertation on experimenting with ways to translate the experience of a countermonument, with a case study from *Artichoke’s* event *Sanctuary*.

**Suman Sigroha** is Associate Professor at the IIT Mandi, India. She works on the intersections of art, history, fiction, myths, and oral history. She has published in journals like *International Research in Children’s Literature* and *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, and has co-edited *Translational Research and Applied Psychology in India* (SAGE, 2019).

**Giuseppe Sofo** is Associate Professor of French Language and Translation at Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia. He has published monographs and directed issues of scientific journals on translation, is a translator from French,

English, and German into Italian, and has exhibited research-creation works on translation at Crea Cantieri del Contemporaneo, Venice.

**Ricarda Vidal** is Senior Lecturer at King's College London and Principal Investigator of the AHRC-funded Experiential Translation Network. As researcher, text-maker and curator, she explores the multimodal aspects of communication across perceived cultural and/or linguistic divides. She has led collaborative artistic projects like "Translation Games" and "Talking Transformations: Home on the Move". Recent publications include *The Experience of Translation* (2024), *Translating across Sensory and Linguistic Borders* (2019), *Home on the Move* (2019), and the bookwork series *Revolve:R* (2011–2023).

**África Vidal Claramonte** is Professor of Translation at the University of Salamanca, Spain. Her research interests include translation theory, migrancy, contemporary art, and gender studies. She is a practising translator specialized in the fields of philosophy, literature and contemporary art.

**Mary Wardle** is Associate Professor of English Language and Translation Studies at Sapienza University of Rome. Her academic interests include the phenomenon of retranslation, paratextual elements, translation and memory studies and translation as an embodied practice. Recent and forthcoming publications include book chapters on the intercultural elements and translingual identity in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri (Springer); the paratextual elements framing Lahiri's production (Peter Lang); the English translations of the works of Primo Levi in a volume on *Translation Studies and Memory Studies* (Routledge); dance notation and translation (Bloomsbury). She is also the author of a monograph on translations presented as parallel texts (Routledge).



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# Cultural Artefacts and Experiential Translation

## An Entangled Experience

*Madeleine Campbell and Ricarda Vidal*

### Introduction

For the purposes of the present inquiry, we are primarily interested in exploring the nature and role of experience in the conceptualization and becoming of artefacts. Against this background, we aim to build an understanding of cultural artefacts as phenomena that manifest the translation of experience in tangible or intangible objects in a collective, dialogical space. The phenomenological dimension of experience has permeated many aspects of our arts-informed and transdisciplinary research on intersemiotic and experiential translation to date. We explored the intersection of translation theory and arts practice in *Translating across Sensory and Linguistic Borders* (2019) from the emic perspective of the translator and *The Experience of Translation* (2024) adopted a more socially-situated perspective on the translator's experience.

The age-old notion that the process and product of translation can relate to more than interlingual translation, as well as to other disciplines, has acquired a fresh momentum in translation studies over the past decade or so. For example, the special issue "Translation and the Materialities of Communication" (2016) compiled by Karen Littau, and Karen Bennett's "The New Iconicity" (2019) drew attention to the material and embodied nature of language in translation through the ages, building, as Lemke reminds us, on "a rich philosophical tradition that goes back to antiquity" (2015, p. 490). In the same decade, a less anthropomorphic orientation evolved, repositioning translation studies and expanding the field to both the more than lingual and the more than human. Cronin's (2017) ground-breaking book on eco-translation, Marais' *A (Bio)Semiotic Theory of Translation* (2019), and more applied compendia such as *Translating the Voices of Nature* edited by Taivalkoski-Shilov and Poncharal (2020) contributed to developing a posthuman approach to semiotics in translation. Bassnett and Johnston's (2019) argument for the "Outward Turn" drew on diverse developments in the field, including Sherry Simon's (2012) exploration of cities as living translation sites as well as Edwin Gentzler's (2017) call for a translation studies epistemology of intersemiotic translation. Noting changes in the "increasingly open discipline" of translation studies across the humanities and beyond, Bassnett and Johnston highlighted

DOI: [10.4324/9781003462569-1](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003462569-1)

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the need for “an increasing plurality of voices from around the globe” (2019, p. 181). They further underlined in stark terms the potential ghettoization of translation studies if it didn’t heed the prevailing currents:

The message to all of us who work in TS is that the field needs to expand outwards, to improve communication with other disciplines, to move beyond binaries, to engage with the idea of translation as a global activity and to configure the planetary into all our thinking.

(ibid, p. 187)

Many in translation studies and beyond have taken up the transdisciplinary baton. [Marais \(2022\)](#) sought to fill “a gap ... for a collected volume on ‘marginal’, ‘alternative’ voices in translation studies” (p. 1). A more-than-lingual, (inter)semiotic understanding of translation attributed a distributed, emergent agency to the process:

A Peircean theoretical scenario suggests something different: translation is described as a non-psychological process, materially and socially distributed in space-time, and strongly based on the design and use of external cognitive artefacts (sign processes). This situated view of cognition does not see the individual agent (translator) as the centre of creative processes but as participant in wider cognitive systems that are dependent on cognitive cultural ecologies. In concert with Queiroz’s ideas, IT [Intermedial Translation] is a context-sensitive (historically and physically situated), interpretant-dependent (dialogic), materially extended (embodied) abductive process. This view emphasizes self-organizing process and emergence.

([Queiroz et al., 2022](#), p. 241)

Together with non-binary, multimodal approaches, the affordances of digital and technological advances have provided a fertile substrate for more boundary-breaking streams in translation studies. These include [Vidal Claremonte’s \(2022\)](#) *Translation and Contemporary Art, Translation as Creative-Critical Practice* ([Grass, 2023](#)), *Experiencing Translationality* ([Blumczynski, 2023](#)) and *Experimental Translation* ([Robert-Foley, 2024](#)), to name a few. In this chapter, we interpret the implications of the “Outward Turn” with and beyond language by examining how ‘the thing itself’ comes into being as a translational phenomenon. This requires both an examination of how we understand ‘experience’ and how we understand ‘artefact’. To do so we engage with a range of disciplinary perspectives from within and beyond translation studies. Underpinned by an ecological view of the entangled nature of human and material agency, we explore conceptualizations of experience and artefact through a transdisciplinary lens including art and design, art history, anthropology, archaeology, material culture, social semiotics and cognitive and educational sciences. Through a discursive engagement with insights from these

disciplines, we aim to derive a broad frame of reference within which to understand a spectrum of cultural artefacts as transient becomings in the translation of experience.

## What We Translate when We Translate Experience

### *Culture, Embodiment and the Senses in Experience*

In an interview with Duccio Trombadori, Michel Foucault frames an experience as “something one has alone; but [that] cannot have its full impact unless the individual manages to escape from pure subjectivity in such a way that others can—I won’t say re-experience it exactly—but at least cross paths with it or retrace it” (1991, p. 40). Culture constitutes a framework through which individual experience can be validated beyond the subjective and thus develop its impact.

In the preface to their edited book *Experience: Culture, Cognition and the Common Sense* (2016), Jones, Mather and Uchill explain:

*Culture* signals our commitment to framing experience as a category of aliveness whose phenomena always emerge within specific cultural environments—including a bacteria’s ambient soup, a spider’s resonant communication across a web, or a human’s visual, musical, or olfactory composition. To use this term is also to acknowledge what human society does to make itself present to itself (and to other societies), in turn reorganizing it for further experience.

(Jones et al., p. 8)

Hence, any translation of experience needs to take into account that experience is both individual and socially framed and constructed. Emily Ogden (2022, p. 12) draws on Émile Durkheim to argue for the entanglement of that which we perceive to be ‘natural’ and accept as a given and that which is socially constructed, arguing that “the way we [perceive] the most basic categories, such as space and time, was given to us in infancy by the culture in which we were born”. This insistence on culture as a natural given is reflected in the English language in the process of the ‘naturalization’ of an ‘alien’ when a citizen of another nation acquires British or US citizenship, a process which includes tests for the ‘alien’ to demonstrate their familiarity with the culture of their new country.

Ogden’s reference to time and space and the role of culture in shaping perception necessitates a closer look at the senses. After all, it is through the senses that we perceive and experience the world around us. There is some disagreement with regard to how many senses there are, whether the traditional five or, as some neurobiologists suggest, more than thirty (see Howes, 2024, p. 3). And there is also the question of whether to go with Michel Serres’ (2009) suggestion that the body is so entangled with its surroundings via the senses, that

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it is difficult to differentiate clearly between them. As Steven Connor writes, “[f]or Serres . . . , the senses are nothing but the mixing of the body, the principal means whereby the body mingles with the world and with itself, overflows its borders” (Connor, 2009, p. 3). In Serres’ understanding, sensual experience is one of full body immersion, where all senses overlap with each other and the body overlaps with its surroundings (see also Campbell and Vidal, 2024c, on the porosity of embodied meaning-making between the self, the other and the environment). If experience is one of full body immersion, it follows that its translation is also a porous undertaking, where translation is aptly conceptualized as “the practice of breathing, of taking in what is outside, opening oneself to the affection of as well as the potential infection by the other, yet seeking to distance oneself in order to live: such are the existential and practical dilemmas that translation constantly opens up” (Rafael, 2023, p. 20).

However, as David Howes demonstrates in *Sensorium: Contextualizing the Senses and Cognition in History and Across Cultures* (2024), the senses are not just neurobiological mechanisms, but they are also social and cultural constructs, which have been conceptualized differently across cultures and histories. Society and culture shape the conscious use of our senses and hence how we experience the world. This chimes with Foucault’s reflection that “an experience is neither true nor false: it is always a fiction, something constructed, which exists only after it has been made, not before; it isn’t something that is ‘true,’ but it has been a reality” (Foucault, 1991, p. 36).

With reference to media theorist Walter J. Ong’s (1967) research on the socialization and technologization of the senses, Howes writes of the socially constructed senses “as our first media” (Howes, 2024, p. 9). Neurobiological research using event-related brainpotentials (ERPs) has shown that linguistic experience, mediated by the cultural artefact of language, can condition the way we perceive shapes and colour, identify patterns and generally categorize our perceptions to make sense of the world (Lupyan et al., 2020). The socialization of our senses, whether through language or technology, has implications for perception, which must then be thought of as “a public or social activity” in which the sensorium needs to be looked at “as a dynamic whole” within the framework of “cultural practice” (Howes, 2024, p. 9). Further, Howes suggests this view “directs our attention to the relations among the senses (however many there may be) and to the relations between their deliverances (i.e., particular sensations)” (ibid). Regardless of the neurobiological capabilities of our sense organs, eyes, ears, skin, etc., the linguistic, cultural and social context determines what and how we see, hear or feel and, by implication, how we experience and make sense of, i.e. derive knowledge about, the world around us.

Illustrating his point with the example of hearing, Howes concludes that “[i]t is only because our normal ways of hearing get internalized, become habitual and therefore ‘sink’ to the level of the subconscious (Bateson, 1972) that they seem ‘natural’” (Howes, 2024, p. 13). Hence, when we translate experience, we must be aware of the ‘natural’ ways in which it has been perceived,

processed, constructed. If we accept the argument that experience is both a layered emic, phenomenological construct and a cultural construction, however, we must be prepared to distance ourselves, to make sensual perception ‘unnatural’ in order to retrieve from the bottom of the subconscious the subliminal elements that contribute to an individual or collective experience. Our own research has operationalized means to “heighten the translator’s experience of the emic and affective properties of the sounds of a language” (Campbell and Vidal, 2024c, p. 192). One way to achieve, for example, “a sort of cleansing of the auditory palate”, is through listening to acousmatic sound as an epistemological tool to foster “a listening without preconceptions, in order to later return to the text to be translated with a fresh and as far as possible, less mediated approach” (ibid). This ‘distancing’ becomes all the more important if (an) experience is translated across cultural or historical divides.

Art, as we shall explore below, is a useful tool to achieve such distancing, to alienate the ‘natural’ so we can observe it in close detail. As Jones (2016, p. 15f.) writes, “art [is] a culturally produced modality for instigating special kinds of experiences that both stretch cognition and model it”. Art can hence be both the tool that enables the process of the translation of experience and the outcome.

Later Jones goes into more detail on how art instigates experience, defining art as “a range of marks, indices, rituals, and materials that humans make, arguably uniquely, to stimulate perception” (ibid, p. 26). These marks, indices, etc., or, indeed, artefacts, do not happen in a vacuum but rely on the same cultural conventions which also shape perception, and hence, need to be taken into account in translation.

### *Experiential Learning, Transformation and Uncertainty*

From a distillation of philosophical and psychological perspectives, experience is a transformative, cognitive and affective process, and its translation entails the materialization of knowledge through language or other tangible or intangible artefacts. Indeed, as cognitive philosopher Andy Clark reminds us, as a symbolic system and attentional device, whether made manifest through internal (private speech) or external (public language), “[l]anguage is in many ways the ultimate artifact: so ubiquitous it is almost invisible, so intimate it is not clear whether it is a kind of tool or a dimension of the user” (Clark, 2014, p. 421). Reviewing different conceptualizations of language, ranging from the socio-cultural perspective of language as a scaffolding tool (Vygotsky, [1962] 1986) to Dennett’s (1991, 1994, 1995) cognitivist view of language as a system that is capable of rewiring the brain, Clark takes a functionalist view. Recognizing the “cognitive virtues of linguistically scaffolded thought”, Clark (2014, p. 412) enumerates the functions of language as not only a communicative tool, but also a memory device, a means of categorizing our environment (for example through indexing and labelling), coordinating individual and collective actions, explicit planning and control, and crucially of facilitating cultural

## 6 *The Translation of Experience*

evolution through the sharing of concepts between individuals (p. 408 f.). But while cognitivist research is framed by a primarily computational model of human cognition, experiential theorists are more concerned with how the affective, mediated and transformative dimensions of experience contribute to knowledge construction.

In experiential learning theory as developed by John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky and summed up by [Roth and Jornet \(2013, p. 107\)](#), experience appears as “a category of thinking, a minimal unit of analysis that includes people (their intellectual, affective, and practical characteristics), their material and social environment, their transactional relations (mutual effects on each other), and affect”. Experience is thus embedded in and shaped by context and social relations. From the perspective of the individual it is “a complex interaction between body, sensory input, and neurological processing”, but it only comes to fruition in its “relationship with the world as humans encounter, interpret, and shape messages” ([Fox, 2008, p. 41](#)). It may be subjective, but it is not confined to the individual, and rather than evoking individual feelings, the emphasis is on affect. In experiential learning theory, experience is shown as something that exists beyond the mental construction and interpretation of the individual, as a social event that unfolds along social frames and relations. This resonates with Jones’ focus on modelling as part of making sense of experience in a coherent manner, whereby modelling is understood as “processes of sifting impressions, cascades of calculations, and attributions of significance carved from determinations of causality, which are in turn embedded in and generated by environments we have come to know” ([Jones, 2016, p. 25](#)). For the translator of experience this then also gives rise to questions of what and whose experience is translated and who it is translated for, in other words, which “environments” do we need to make ourselves familiar with. Or, as Fox argues, “[w]hat counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, always political” (2008, p. 52). Elsewhere, she refers to experience as “a relentlessly social activity, a matter of public meaning rather than one of individual significance” ([Fox, 2008, p. 49](#)).

As Roth and Jornet point out,

Scholars working with the category of experience all point to the role of the pathic dimension: in experience, affect, intellect, and practical action are woven into one cloth (Bakhtin, 1993; Dewey, 1934/2008a; Vygotsky, 1984; Waldenfels, 2002). But this dimension does not mean that affect is the result of interpretations.

([Roth & Jornet, 2013, p. 115](#))

Framing experience away from the subjective recalls Foucault’s statement that experience only develops its impact once it has escaped “pure subjectivity” (1991, p. 40, see above), and it also makes it possible to establish a framework for its translation. Such a framework could be guided by the four aspects Roth and Jornet identify as essential to a theory of experience, namely: “(a)

experience manifests itself in/as passions, (b) experience integrates over space and time, (c) experience is a moving force, and (d) experience is transformation” (2013, p. 118).

John Dewey differentiates between experience in general and having *an* experience, whereby the latter “stands out as something special against the stream of experiences generally” (Roth and Jornet, 2013, p. 107). With respect to our framework for the translation of experience this differentiation entails the added challenge of identifying the corner points of the experience, whether individual or collective, i.e. where and when it started and where and when it ended. However, given the cumulative, layered and entangled nature of experience, it is arguably not meaningful to establish exact beginnings and endings, and we have questioned elsewhere the notion of a source text as original (Campbell and Vidal, 2024a, pp. 2f). Just as the source text, or source experience, is open, its translation must be open with regards to affect and impact while at the same time, standing out as an event in its own right.

Roth and Jornet draw out the etymological relationship of experience to “travel, traversal, peril, risk, and change”, here placing particular emphasis on the fact that experience entails “our continued exposure to the world that is beyond our intentions and control” (2013, p. 118). The relational, dynamic and temporally contingent entanglement of conscious experience with the preconscious and unconscious is further encapsulated in their conclusion that “[e]xperience affects us in ways that we can come to understand only after the event has come to an end; and it affects us before we can understand what has happened” (ibid, p. 119). This resonates with Emily Ogden’s reflections on the uncertainty of pinpointing the exact moment in which something (life?) changes: “There is no present tense for this change. It *will have been* and it *was*. But it never *is*” (2022, p. 23, author’s emphasis).

Further, Roth and Jornet argue that the social, relational and externalized nature of experience is always also “in excess of cognitive construction” (2013, p. 108). This view is echoed by Karen Fox’s autoethnographic assessment of experiential education when she writes that “[t]he relationship between bodily knowledge and cognitive verbal understanding is anything but clear” (2008, p. 40). Experience is a multilayered affair, much of which is prenoetic. As we have previously argued, “the immediate (unmediated) nature of human experience, which is often unconscious ... appears to determine much of what is perceived and communicated before it reaches the symbolic level of understanding” (Campbell and Vidal, 2024c, p. 192). Further, psychological research on the phenomenology of creative flow has found that it is characterized by a “loss of reflective self-consciousness (i.e., loss of awareness of oneself as a social actor)” coupled with “distortion of temporal experience (typically, a sense that time has passed faster than normal)” (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi, 2005, p. 90; see also Harmat, de Manzano and Ullén, 2021 for a review of individual and group flow experience in the arts). Hence, there is considerable room for uncertainty—something to be embraced by as well as enabled in translation (see, for example, Vidal and Carter, 2024).

## 8 *The Translation of Experience*

Uncertainty is, in many ways, the driving force which allows experience to be transformative and new knowledge to emerge.

Thus, in experience there is a process of transformation that exceeds any intention or anticipation, and of which Dewey was well aware. In that process, “the old self is put off and the new self is only forming, and the form it finally takes will depend upon *the unforeseeable result of an adventure*” (1929, p. 246, emphasis added).

(Roth and Jornet, 2013, p. 121)

Here, perhaps, we briefly need to look at another kind of ‘experience’, which we might call ‘package experience’ in analogy to the ‘package holiday’. This is the kind of experience familiar from advertising and the corporate speak of the “experience society” (Miles, 2020). Like the transformative experience we have discussed so far, the ‘package experience’ is socially and culturally constructed and framed by affect, but it leaves little room for uncertainty or reflection, the kind of long-durational impact, the ‘risk’ and ‘peril’ of the ‘travel’ that are so important to transformation. As something to be consumed it no longer allows for personal growth or learning: the more the individual “looks to consumption as a means of finding him or herself, ... the more his or herself is lost”, writes Miles (2020, p. 7). In other words, experience, once reduced to consumable ‘package’, impedes us from actually experiencing the world in the sense of knowledge acquisition and growth. We will return to this point below in relation to the production and consumption of artefacts. Ultimately, as we shall explore in more detail, the translation of experience in the sense of growth (which is what we are pursuing here) involves a transformative step whereby experience becomes embodied and materialized, even ephemerally, as an artefact with its own momentum.

### **Cultural Artefacts as the Translation of Experience**

In our companion edited volume *The Experience of Translation*, the assembled authors elaborated experiential translation as a meaning-making process which is in-the-moment, temporally contingent, relational, material, ludic and embodied (Campbell and Vidal, 2024b). Building on our findings we now aim to explore artefacts as an outcome, output or result of *The Translation of Experience*, without taking this output or result as an endpoint or even an end in itself. With Deleuze and Guattari (1980), and Spinoza before them, we posit along with many new materialists that “entities or qualities do not pre-exist their relations” and that “relations are more productive than the *relata* themselves”, where we understand relations as experience and *relata* as the transient becomings of experience, instantiated in artefacts (Fraunhofer, 2023, p. 45; author’s emphasis).

Our outlook that artefacts arise from acts of translation that constitute agented semiotic work, which are mediated by and mediate the world around us, concurs with Marais' (2019) and Blumczynski's (2023) understanding of translation:

Translation is negentropic semiotic work (performed by an agent) in which any one or more of the components of a sign system or any one or more of the relationships between them are changed, or in which the relationship between the sign and its environment (time and/or space) is changed

(Marais, 2019, p. 141 as cited in [Blumczynski, 2023](#), p. 33)

This 'agented semiotic work', moreover, cannot be seen as subjective nor individual, but more as a collective phenomenon across the animate and inanimate world, and in a constant process of reconfiguration between translating agent(s) and artefact (see also [Campbell, 2024](#)). As Fraunhofer reminds us in her chapter on a posthumanist/more-than-human approach to "Translating Plants", a new materialist perspective on translation is also close to Actor-Network Theory (ANT):

Latour defines an 'actor' (or what we today call an 'actant'), whether human or more-than-human, as 'not the source of an action but the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming toward it' (Law 2005: 46). Substance is thus replaced by a shared agency.

([Fraunhofer, 2023](#), p. 42)

Physicist and philosopher Karen Barad initially translated the notion of shared agency from the concept of "entanglement" in quantum physics, which Fraunhofer applies in translation studies to move beyond the interaction-based instrumentalist and even the hermeneutic model ([Venuti \[1995\] 2018, 2019](#)) to one of "co-constitutive intra-action ... between given texts and cultures" ([Fraunhofer, 2023](#), p. 45). Fraunhofer's emphasis on intra-action as opposed to inter-action builds on Barad's notion of existence as one of "entangled intra-relating", where:

time and space, like matter and meaning, come into existence, are iteratively reconfigured through each intra-action, thereby making it impossible to differentiate in any absolute sense between creation and renewal, beginning and returning, continuity and discontinuity, here and there, past and future.

([Barad, 2007](#), p. ix)

Against this broad canvas, which applies a new materialist perspective to translation, let us return our focus to artefacts as experiential translation phenomena, without losing sight of our conception of artefacts as ephemeral (Deleuzian) becomings.

*Artefacts as 'Outputs of Experience': Art, Making and Mediation*

The Kantian notion of “fine art” as accountable only to itself offers one kind of explanation of the cultural artefact as the translation of experience(s):

The absence of function is what allows us to approach art aesthetically—with aesthetic attitude, that is—and hereby provide us with aesthetic experiences, which in turn are a special kind of experiences  
(Brix, 2015, p. 10.4)

However, the “absence of function” may seem reductive to etymologically inclined readers and translators alike who will no doubt deconstruct the term artifact or artefact, depending on their orthographic sensibilities, as derived from or relating to something (wo)man made through the intermediary of art, craft or skill, as summarized succinctly by Fluxus member Ken Friedman:

The word ‘artifact’ comes from two Latin words. The first, ‘arte’, means ‘by skill’, from ‘ars’, skill. The second, ‘factum’, is the past participle of ‘facere’, to do or to make.... artifacts constitute the twin relationship between doing and making found in the Latin ‘facere.’  
(Friedman, 2007, p. 6; 10)

We can here also think back to Jones’ observation that art “models and stretches cognition” and, “as a culturally produced modality” helps us make ourselves present to ourselves (Jones, 2016, pp. 15f, see above), which is arguably in stark contrast to the Kantian definition of art as the “absence of function”.

In an anthropological and by extension archaeological sense, an artefact can be conceived as a (mostly portable) object which reflects “symbolic significance in the cultural context of its production”<sup>1</sup> (Danto as cited in Brix, 2015, p. 10.5). However, as Gell (1996) argues, the nature of art and of so-called utilitarian artefacts cannot easily be separated, as objects indispensable in the daily life of a tribe or community are often “crafted with more care than what is technically required” (Brix, 2015, p. 10.5). Building on Gell’s (1996) example of elaborate fishing nets in Zande culture, Brix eschews art/utility binaries, contending with Gell that artefacts can simultaneously cater for bodily sustenance and bear religious, spiritual or cultural significance. Ultimately, however, Brix argues that “[w]hether we see something in its aesthetic-artistic or its practical-tool’ish capacity is not a matter of any one particular feature of the thing, but of how we approach it” (2015, p. 10.8):

Western thought tends to categorically separate art from ‘mere’ artefacts: The arts serve no function except for aesthetic contemplation, while artefacts are functional objects intended for a specific purpose.... the art-artefact dichotomy, rooted in the notion of ‘function,’ permeates contemporary design discourse.

(Brix, 2015, p. 10.1)

In contrast, it is the *relation* between art and design that is functional: design being the arts-informed “molding of practical and useful artefacts”, which Brix sees epitomized for example by the vision of the Bauhaus movement founder architect Walter Gropius (2015, p. 10.2). Brix writes:

Things are not just insignificant practicalities. Things are vehicles of existential meaning (Pallasmaa, 2010), and a thing is either useful (i.e., a tool; a ‘mere’ artefact) or culturally significant (i.e., a readable, meaningful artwork) depending on how we choose to see it. (ibid)

Many may think of artefacts as tangible objects, the historical and cultural import of which can be read: “One reason for the emphasis on physical artifacts may simply be their durability. An act or a word vanishes. An object—in the common sense of the word—does not” (Friedman, 2007, p. 6). However cultural artefacts, moving beyond the art/utility debate, can be more than ‘things’ (whether written text, digital representations or archaeological objects)—they can also be events, festivals that combine the tangible and intangible into material cultures, or indeed affects, ideas or states of mind. The definition of artefacts encompasses “those made by doing that never take physical form as well as those that are made in physical form, including remains” (ibid). Friedman further examines another type of artefact, which once took physical form but became intangible over time, for instance Mozart’s improvisations, which were a regular feature of his performances but no longer accessible after his death. This example of what he terms a “behavioral artifact” is ephemeral: “It comes and vanishes in experienced time. We will never experience this Mozart for ourselves except in imagined reconstructions” (ibid, p. 8). One step further into the intangible, Hagan argues that artefacts can be constructed entirely in the mind:

An artifact is more than the object that stubs our toes or the ancient document that tears at the edges; it goes beyond the virtual bits we see but cannot touch.... an artifact is first and foremost the fragile residue of memory crafted into a mental representation by an individual. Artifacts of the mind live only as long as individuals can hold them, and like the objects found on a dig, can be left untouched, until one day they become a persuasive act, one which might or might not reach further than that single mind.

(Hagan, 2007, p. 23)

Hagan’s argument for the artefact as an attentional tool capable of stirring a powerful affective response or creating a state of mind, whether or not entwined with memory, brings a further experiential dimension to the conception of artefact, to which we will turn in more detail in the next section. Here it also seems important to point towards artist Tino Sehgal’s (Sehgal and Raffeiner, 2016, p. 234) criticism of the reconceptualization of experience and with it, of the artefact, within the neoliberal market-oriented and corporate culture of the “experience society” (Miles, 2020), where the artefact (whether concrete art object, archaeological remains or intangible

performance) has become a mere object of consumption. Where the artefact is consumed as ‘an experience’ in the sense of ‘package’ as discussed above, it can no longer elicit the powerful affective response Hagan refers to.

In an attempt to synthesize a broad range of perspectives on the nature of artefacts, the late artist, art historian, curator and intermedia scholar Owen Smith tentatively offered the following definitions, qualified through the lenses of anthropology, art history and new media studies:

- 1 An object produced or modified by human agency, especially a tool or ornament.
- 2 A creation of human conception or agency rather than an inherent element.
- 3 An erroneous effect, observation, or result, especially one generated from the technology used or from experimental error.
- 4 A structure or feature not normally present but visible because of an external agent or action.

(Smith, 2007, p. 2)

Smith further expounds that, much like language (see Clark, 2014 for a review), artefacts are both “a product of our activities ... [and] mediate use” (Smith, 2007, p. 5). Drawing on the Fluxus movement and its reliance on scores or instructions to generate creative events, Smith surmises that “events are a form of artifact... a conceptual frame, a tool and most importantly, ... a mediating force” (p. 4). Such “artifacts”, argues Smith, following D. A. Norman’s essay on “Cognitive Artifacts” (1991), have the potential to distribute actions across time and people as well as to change the thoughts and actions undertaken by participants in the event (ibid). More generally, “artifactual mediation”, the mediation of human actions and interactions with the world through creative events, has the capacity to change our perspectives and see and know the world in a different way through a new “relational aesthetic” (ibid, p. 5). In other words, it facilitates experience as a transformational and cumulative process.

Smith’s rationale for artefacts as events structured by Fluxus-style scores or instructions resonates with an understanding of experiential translation as the transformative interpretation of instructions (in the form of the ‘source text’ as experience, however open-ended or uncertain) to create the translated artefact or target text in a process of “artifactual mediation” (2007, p. 5). As Blumczynski, drawing on Gell (1998) and Barad (2007) argues, the “mediatory role of art objects” offers a more agented, materially entangled and transformative perspective on translation than “the interpretation of objects ‘as if’ they were texts” (Gell, 1998, as cited in Blumczynski, 2023, p. 40). Further, a literal interpretation of translation as “corporeal transfer” is manifest, argues Blumczynski, in a small but growing body of research on the experiential aspects of “performance, materiality, energy” in translation (2023, p. 13):

‘What does [translation] do?’ is an ambivalent question that can signal fascination as well as anxiety. It may touch on matters of structure, design

and operation ('how does it work?') but looks beyond them. 'What does it do'—to me, to others, to the world around us? At its core, it is a question about experience.

(*ibid*, 2023, p. 7)

In the present chapter we distance ourselves, as Blumczynski advocates, from the restrictive implications of a linguistically-derived terminology of translation. We do so by including linguistic texts, whether orally constructed, in print or digital form, within the larger domain of cultural artefacts, rather than envisaging artefacts as extensions of linguistic texts. Further, we understand cultural artefacts as 'the translation of experience' to include tangible artefacts but also, as argued by [Smith \(2007\)](#) and [Friedman \(2007\)](#), intangible ones such as performance events, immersive art installations, or the conduct of religious or cultural ceremonies and festivals. In the latter case, 'instructions' in the form of tradition guide the performance of rituals, which temporarily translate the day-to-day significance of human activities from the mundane to the sacred or symbolic.

For Blumczynski, the question of the "ambivalence of experience" constitutes the "point of departure" for his exploration of translationality (*ibid*, p. 7). He is more interested here in the product of translation than in the translator or their process: "By making translation the subject, we accept the role of its objects" (*ibid*, p. 8). In this sense we would also surmise that the *output* of translation, and hence of experience, arguably converges with the construct of the (cultural) artefact as *the translation of experience*, the overarching theme of both this chapter and volume.

### *Material Culture and Artefacts as Experiential Phenomena*

The academic domain of material culture has traditionally been in the purvey of archaeology and the study of 'old' things: "Archaeological terminologies tend to equate material culture with things made by people, namely objects and artefacts", while "[t]hings, objects, artefacts and stuff in fact are problematic terms, which are used variously and sometimes interchangeably by different scholars describing the material world" ([Govier and Steel, 2021](#), pp. 300; 304). This ambiguity has given rise to debates over the ontological and epistemological implications of New Materialisms for the understanding of objects as more than "autonomous objects ... [,] evanescent materializations caught up in an unceasing flow of relations" ([Barad, 2007](#), as cited in [Witmore, 2021](#), p. 318). Others argue that it is possible to hold 'things' to be both autonomous and part of a web of relations: "things, as emergent entities, redefine their component parts in such a way that they are irreducible to them" ([Witmore, 2021](#), p. 319). The New Materialisms debates have occasioned much engagement with the field beyond archaeology to the humanities and social sciences, as signalled by the renewed interest in materiality in languages and (comparative) literature, including translation studies as noted above (for a review see [Campbell and Vidal, 2024a](#)).

A Baradian worldview, augmented with Hodder's (2012) illuminating perspective on objects as "relational beings ... entangled in human-thing networks", repositions the question of materiality as a more fundamental, non-binary entanglement of matter and human agency in the phenomenon of enactment (Govier and Steel, 2021, p. 301). The premise of entangled enactment entails that materiality is therefore not predicated on the pre-existing materiality of individual objects, things or artefacts as entities in isolation (ibid). As such, argue Govier and Steel, the New Materialisms' conceptions of material objects are more germane with Deleuze and Guattari's (1980) assemblage theory, with a focus on the etymological sense of the original French noun 'agencement', from the transitive verb 'agencer'. The Larousse dictionary defines 'agencer' as: "to lay out, arrange a grouping so that its elements are fully adapted to each other and the whole is best able to achieve its goal", and this definition implies a coming together of objects through agency (Larousse, n.p.; our translation<sup>2</sup>).

Govier and Steel contrast the Deleuzian conception of assemblages as "the flows of entities into and out of relationships" with the Heideggerian focus on objects that has informed a static, "flat ontology of symmetrical archaeology", which is characterized by "[t]he notion of things as bounded, separate entities" (2021, pp. 308; 300; 303). Rather, objects are actors on the same plane as humans as in Latour's Actor-Network Theory (2005) but with emergent relations in a constant state of motion or Deleuzian becoming (Harris, 2014): "New Materialisms recognize that people are composed of and equally a part of the substantive matter of the world; they are co-constituted matterings" (Govier and Steel, 2021, p. 305). The New Materialisms, while covering a wide range of perspectives (see Lemke, 2015), generally recognize the thingness or materiality of things, arguing that matter has agency which constrains or enables humans or organisms' engagement with objects or things in the construction of meaning. The latter conceptualization of matter, which is increasingly taken up in archaeology and "considers things as phenomena" (Govier and Steel, 2021, p. 308), constitutes a foundational principle in Blumczynski's understanding of translation as corporeal transfer: "Matter and meaning are not separate elements.... Mattering is simultaneously a matter of substance and significance" (Barad, 2007, as cited in Blumczynski, 2023, p. 39).

Material culture is also of course in the purvey of anthropology, where the artefact cannot be considered in isolation of its situatedness (past or present). As anthropologist David Howes reminds us in support of what he terms the "sensori-social" approach, artefacts "are bundles of social relations—that is, they concretize the *social* relations of production ... and [are], at the same time, bundles of sensory qualities or *sensual* relations" (2022, p. 322; author's emphasis), and, as discussed above, sensory perception is culturally mediated. According to this account, the distinction between matter, material and materiality is of less interest than the imperative to engage critically with the sensual and material connections artefacts can reveal about cultures and societies. Citing Küchler's (2017) interpretation of intricate patchworks

from Eastern Polynesia as physical instantiations of complex inter-island genealogies, Howes argues that a purely emic interpretation of artefacts cannot account for the inherent web of social relations they manifest. Such artefacts, as Howes emphasizes, “cannot be comprehended from the 1st person perspective of phenomenology” but necessitate a “topological, 3rd person point of view of the world seen ‘in the round’” (2022, p. 329; Küchler, as cited in *ibid*).

The definition and role of materiality in relation to the sensory and the social have been hotly debated in anthropology (see, for example, [Ingold, 2011, 2013](#)). One line of reasoning is that the sensori-social approach creates an artificial divide or border between the agent or subject, the object they are crafting or creating, and the environment by interposing society and culture and denying the material life of objects. Ingold rallies that the senses, rather than carrying a “semantic load of transmitted culture” have instead been “tuned through a process of socially and environmentally situated, ontogenetic development” ([Ingold, 2022](#), p. 337). This viewpoint, or “affordance-thinking”, draws on [Gibson’s \(1979\)](#) ecological construct of affordances and is qualified by Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach: “Gibson tells us only how we ordinarily see things, or what he calls ‘environmental objects,’ by means of light. But it is Merleau-Ponty who shows us what it means to experience light as such” ([Ingold, 2022](#), p. 338). For Tim Ingold materials are “‘coursing with life’ and ... making [is] a ‘process of growth’—not fabrication” (as cited in [Howes, 2022](#), p. 313). Ingold professes here a view that might be espoused by many artists and makers today, and certainly the archaeological position taken up by [Govier and Steel \(2021\)](#) that “matter has agency” also bears parallels with Gibson’s ecological concept of (material) affordances.

In this respect Mather’s investigation of avantgarde artist Gino Severini’s art and writing is of interest:

[Severini] meant that an artist’s knowledge, particularly firsthand sensory knowledge, could be translated into any of the so-called plastic arts, so a viewer interacting with works of art could access experiential content directly from the forms. Visual art in his estimation, possessed a new analogical way through three interrelated phenomena: an experiential source, a process by which it could be faithfully, but non-naturalistically transcribed; and someone other than the maker to interpret the result. Any referential literalness resulting from the visual recognition of artistic forms would only disguise the complex conceptual and cognitive processes that would otherwise enable the viewer to make sense of correspondences among sensory qualities, physical material and their meanings.

([Mather, 2016](#), p. 57)

Severini frames art as translation, to be specific, as a ‘faithful’ translation into a primarily visual artefact of the sensory qualities and physical material

that constitute the experience of phenomena like light, movement, noise, smell, form. Here, the artist postulates the possibility of ‘pure’ sensation, a listening, seeing or tasting without cultural preconceptions and unfiltered by individual emotions. This was, in fact, a central concern of avant-garde artists, who, as Rebecca Uchill explores, sought to make art that would enable the generation of “an elemental experience of sensing itself” (Uchill, 2016, p. 44).

Uchill specifically looks at the role of technology as mediator of experience, which first became the centre of attention of artists in the 1920s but is now at least as relevant as it was a century ago: “Rather than deprive a viewer of an authentic encounter between subject and object, technological means promised to shape all experience through a more precise version of sensitivity and (in its defeat of mere subjectivity) as a thoroughly collective proposition” (Uchill, 2016, p. 47). There is a certain kind of essentialism here, a suggestion that the senses can be isolated from their cultural and social baggage, that they can be stripped back to an elemental core which is shared by all humans (and to some degree, also shared with other animals) and which enters into a reciprocal relationship with material phenomena.

As Uchill demonstrates with reference to artist Hans Richter, in the 1920s, abstract film was believed to offer such a neutral and ‘pure’ experience of sensitivity (ibid, p. 44), whereby technology allowed the artist to isolate and extend individual senses (in this case, sight) to investigate their role in meaning-making. Uchill also refers to more recent technologies, such as the temperature-sensitive ink, which was used by Olafur Eliasson in the design of the book cover of *Experience* or Carsten Höller’s pheromone-infused endpages of the book, both amplifying the multimodal, multisensorial and material aspects of reading (ibid, p. 52).

### **The Translation of Experience as Gesture in a Dialogical Space**

In the artistic experiments of the avant-garde and contemporary artists referred to above, artefacts have been posited as relational “attentional tools” (Hagan, 2007). Laura Colucci-Gray’s observations further extend the notion of artefact as attentional tool through the metaphor of gesture:

Taking the lead from the fields of sculpture, theatre and drama, a gesture is a movement of the body that conveys the actions and states of mind of a character in relation with other characters and with an audience.... a gesture is connected to movement in space; it is a form of visual signing which can have emotional and cognitive impact, both on the actor and on the viewer’s understanding of a situation or ideas being presented.... Thinking of scientific and technological artefacts as gestures is thus inviting the reader to think in dynamic and spatial terms, as living performances, unfolding in ways that are different and often with unexpected consequences for different groups.

(Colucci-Gray, 2023, p. 1102)

In positioning artefacts as gestures in a dialogical space, in turn a “material feature of being and doing in the world” (ibid, p. 1103), Colucci-Gray highlights the relational nature of all artefacts, whether arising from the arts or the sciences and, we might add, from communities, artists and makers past and present: “Gesturing is an enactment of attention” (ibid, p. 1114). Illustrating her argument with the architectural engineering feat of the Firth of Forth Railway Bridge in Scotland as a “physical gesture as in the manner of theatre”, she highlights the way in which its physical presence changes the perception and understanding of its physical environment and context, as well as impacting the cultural and historical development of the region it serves (ibid, p. 1106): “as a cultural artefact, it is a model that speaks about the crafting of an experience in time and space. As an artefact, it [is] both affected and affecting human lives in the present” (ibid, p. 1108). The relational impact of cultural artefacts as gestures extends beyond the expression and reception of individual subjective experience to encompass a collective, dialogical epistemic experience enacted in time and space:

...a dialogical space well beyond the idea of ‘voice’ as an expression of subjectivity, to embrace the aesthetic qualities of gesturing in the dialogical space, ‘thinking with’ artefacts of poly-temporality and poly-rhythmicity.

(Colucci-Gray, 2023, p. 1111)

The dialogical space, then, enabled by the artefact, arguably allows both self and other to “at least cross paths with [an experience] or retrace it” (Foucault, 1991, p. 40). Colucci-Gray conceives of the cultural artefact as affording an embodied, “suggestive, tentative and invitational, rather than directional” aesthetic (in itself a perspective borrowed from the arts). This notion emphasizes for us the importance of understanding cultural artefacts as dialogical, polyvocal becomings, where the transformative ‘translation of experience’ occurs in a space characterized by the “intra-action” of humans and matter (Barad, 2007).

### **The Translation of Experience: Artefacts in a Perpetual State of Becoming**

This chapter has proposed a broad frame of reference with which to conceptualise experience and artefacts through a transdisciplinary lens. Insights from disciplines as apparently disparate as quantum physics, neurobiology, semiotics and archaeology offer multidimensional perspectives on the entangled nature of human and material agency in experiential translation. In keeping with Govier and Steel’s (2021) Deleuzean interpretation of the New Materialisms, this ecological view affords rich grounds from which to explore cultural artefacts as the translation of experience.

As we have argued, experience is a complex entanglement of pre-conscious, unconscious and conscious layers of meaning-making which ‘intra-act’ (Barad,

2007) in a relational and dynamic manner in the community and natural environment. Or as Blumczynski (2023, p. 37) has it: “The human semiotic experience encompasses the physical, the social and the cultural—with each of these domains containing the previous one but also going beyond it”. The translation of experience through its materialisation as artefact enables the relational and dialogical acquisition of knowledge for maker or ‘artistranslator’ (Vidal Claramonte, 2022) and recipient. Experience is translated again and again into an embodied, material and semiotic form. Wherever the artefact lies on the art/utility spectrum, this translation can be differentially instantiated through a variety of cultural artefacts such as language, temporal events, digital renderings or crafted objects. At the same time, technological or experimental error (Smith, 2007), play and uncertainty have a key role in the epistemic process inherent in the individual or collective creation of an artefact (Campbell and Vidal, 2019, 2024a; Vidal and Carter, 2024; Lee, 2022). Artefacts “might not reach further than [the] single mind” (Hagan, 2007, p. 23), where they arise and subside in the domain of individual mental or affective representation, or they can be shaped and shared with others.

Ultimately, the transformative step whereby experience becomes embodied and materialised is what constitutes the translation of experience, even ephemerally, as an artefact in a perpetual state of becoming. This becoming is brought about through a process of “artifactual mediation” (Smith, 2005, p.5) whereby a new relational aesthetic with the capacity to change and be changed through semiotic work emerges anew with each encounter. The artefact’s becoming is therefore less a function of archaeological or anthropological time than a function of the momentary intra-action afforded by the relations between beings and matter in a specific environment

## Notes

- 1 Though Brix (2015) sees this as an essentialist viewpoint which artificially separates art from artefact.
- 2 “Disposer, arranger un ensemble de sorte que ses éléments soient exactement adaptés les uns aux autres et que le tout réponde au mieux à sa destination”.

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# Chapters Overview

*Ricarda Vidal and Madeleine Campbell*

Experience, as we have argued in the opening chapter, is a multilayered, cumulative affair with transformation at its core. Its study, a necessary first step for its translation, requires an exploration of embodiment and the senses as well as of cultural and social environments. It matters who experiences what, where, how and under what circumstances, but it also matters that experience is open and entails uncertainty and hence room for growth.

The chapters in *The Translation of Experience* complement its companion volume, *The Experience of Translation* (2024) to explore how artefacts, as outcomes of experience brought about by the “artistranslator” (Vidal Claramonte, 2022, p. 28), perform semiotic work. This semiotic work arises through the intervention of their makers but also through their viewers/audience, often through the latter’s direct participation in the artefacts’ creation, which we see as an open-ended process. Vidal Claramonte’s *Translation and Contemporary Art* (2022) is primarily concerned with the shift in the social sciences and humanities toward visual culture amidst the proliferation of globally distributed digital images. We propose to extend her notion of the “artistranslator” beyond visual materiality to encompass material culture, both in the digital world and the multisensory nature of artefacts such as monuments, festivals, theatre performances, artworks, the urban environment or human bodies—the embodied perception of which may draw holistically or variously on the sense of touch, the olfactory, auditory, kinetic or kinaesthetic senses. At the same time as material presence, we embrace the immaterial artefacts of memory and absence as translations too, where absence, “is something performed, textured and materialized through relations and processes, and via objects” (Meyer, 2012, p. 103).

Along with Blumczynski (2023, pp. 36–37), we take an inductive, bottom-up approach to the analysis of artefacts as the translation of experience (see our opening chapter). Whereas the focus of attention for Blumczynski is “the living bodies of religious officials and the dead bodies of martyrs and saints (that is, relics)” (2023, p. 37), we focus more broadly on contemporary artefacts. Further, adopting Barad’s notion of entanglement, we conceive of the relation between experience, artefact and world as one of entangled “intra-action”, where “matter and meaning ... are iteratively configured” in perpetual

DOI: [10.4324/9781003462569-2](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003462569-2)

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“creation and renewal, beginning and returning” (2007, p. ix). Barad’s understanding is in turn congruent with [Deleuze and Guattari’s \(1980\)](#) conception of assemblages as never static, in a constant state of becoming (for an exploration of the relation between “entanglement” and “becoming” and its relevance to translation studies, see, for example, [Fraunhofer, 2023](#)).

As Brix argues,

Given the poor state of our planet and the problems created by this messy situation, demands seem greater than ever that we consider artefacts part of meaning, the creation of artefacts part of meaning creation in general, and the results of such creation part of discourse in general.

([Brix, 2015](#), p. 10.9)

Accepting [Brix’s \(2015, p. 10.9\)](#) understanding of artefacts as “part of meaning creation”, and the results of such creation as “part of discourse in general”, we have drawn up the following questions to guide our investigation of artefacts as the translation of experience:

- How does an artefact come into being?
- What role do (digital) materiality, chance or play perform in its creation?
- What role do language, the senses, affect, memory, cognition or imagination play in the creation of artefacts?
- What is the relation between (more than) human bodies and the artefacts they create or experience?
- What influence do culture and society or human conditions have on experience and the making or creation of an artefact?
- How do the personal and the collective contribute to the translation of experience in the creation of meaning?
- How then do we translate experience?

The contributors to this volume explore the translation of experience in relation to diverse contexts and from different angles. They look at memory (personal, collective, material), grief (personal and collective), migration (forced and voluntary), women’s bodies (in Eastern, Middle-Eastern and Western contexts), the fabric of cities, technology and different ways of knowing. The chapters have been organised into three sections, “Rituals and Transformation”, “Sites and Sounds” and “Bodies in Time”. Chapters that share similar concerns or affinities are in close vicinity, but connections can be made between all of them as they each address some (and sometimes all) of the above questions from different angles and contexts. Throughout the book, experiential translation is framed as a political endeavour that allows experience to be shared across linguistic, cultural, generational or gendered divides in the form of artefacts that facilitate transformation and the acquisition of knowledge for makers or artistranslators as well as their audience. While the following overview is informed by some of the transdisciplinary premises we propose in our opening

chapter, each chapter is guided *sui generis* by the contributing author's critical lens on both the artefacts and translating agents under examination.

### Rituals and Transformation

The chapters in this section explore diverse ways of knowing and perceiving the world, including suppressed, underrepresented or overheard voices, through the process of experiential translation. Rituals, gestures, how the senses are conceptualised within different worldviews play a role here, as well as embodied experience and transformation. Each of these chapters can be understood as a demonstration of Barad's (2007) conception of "intra-action", as they explore the entanglement between experience, artefact and the context in which these come into being. Thematically the section moves from a planetary perspective inherent to Amerindian indigenous cultures and activated in Western experimental poetic practices (Chapter 1) to the manifestation of the divine in the practices of communities of women in Northern India (Chapter 2) to the processing of human grief through art-making (Chapter 3).

The section opens with Delphine Grass's challenge to decolonise Western anthropocentric environmental discourse by expanding the framework of translation beyond national languages, to include the non-human and make space for a planetary imaginary beyond the humancentric categories of nations and national languages. Grass underlines her argument with analyses of "In die Natur", an experimental poem by German writer Ulrike Almut Sandig (2019/2022) and the autobiographical *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) by Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer. While Sandig uses poetry, translation, performance, spoken word and sound and video to create a complex multi-sensory artefact which allows recipients to forge new connections with nature and the planet, Kimmerer uses storytelling and the unique properties of the Potawatomi language to make the indigenous worldview based on animacy and reciprocity accessible to her (mainly) Western readership. Counteracting Western approaches to nature as objectified and de-animated, Sandig and Kimmerer return animacy and agency to nature without anthropomorphising it. In the process they use the English language in a manner that breaks open its conventions and by making it strange allow it to reveal new ways of perceiving and relating to the world. As cultural artefacts these works perform the kind of "sign-making practice" Grass identifies as central to "performing experiential worlds in which not only humans sign, and not only humans translate" (Grass, p. 24).

Sign-making is also central to Chapter 2, in which Muskan Dhandhi and Suman Sigroha explore the practice of *Sanjhi* in the Haryana region of Northern India, where complex practices of making clay sculptures enable women to perform the divine connection to the Hindu goddess Durga (worshipped for motherhood, marital bliss, strength and protection). As Dhandhi and Sigroha demonstrate, the artefacts at the heart of *Sanjhi* involve a range

of rituals, marks, materials and gestures which stimulate the senses in diverse ways enabling an embodied experience of the divine. The authors draw on an ethnographic study they conducted in rural and semi-rural areas in Haryana in 2021 and 2022. Documenting and describing the multi-stage process of meaning transfer and transformation occurring during *Sanjhi*, they analyse the experiential translation which occurs at each stage of the ritual and in which the participating women act as translators in the creation of clay artefacts and the performance of dance and song. On a second level, Dhandhi's and Sigroha's writing process can itself be read as an experiential translation of their fieldwork into the conventions of ethnographic research. In this sense, the researchers argue, experiential translation with its ability to defy linguistic barriers can be empowering for indigenous communities and grant them more visibility by allowing them to share their cultural and social knowledge systems.

The final chapter in this section by Francesca Mirabile is also concerned with the construction of signs as material instantiations of intangible experience, although here the resulting artefact(s) are not perceived as the manifestation of the divine as in *Sanjhi*, but of the different stages of human grief. Mirabile's chapter focuses on her attempt to translate the experience of an artwork, *Sanctuary* (2022), into a short-story collection. The artwork (or 'source text') was dedicated to those who had suffered bereavement. It comprised both a temporary wooden structure and a participative event, i.e. the construction, public usage for community workshops and public burning of the structure. The public was invited to be involved in all three stages of the development of *Sanctuary* with art-based workshops exploring grief and loss. Smith's definition of an event as "a form of artifact ... as a conceptual frame, a tool and most importantly, as a mediating force" (2007, p. 4) resonates with *Sanctuary* as well as with Mirabile's translation (see our opening chapter). In her chapter, Mirabile explains her use of intersemiotic translation and transcreation in her attempt to make the experience of *Sanctuary* accessible in a different art form. At the core of her work is a meticulous analysis of the material and intangible relational structures that comprised the artwork as a cognitive and perceptual event. On this basis, she eventually creates a new version in the form of a multisensory short-story collection, which comes with a set of instructions enabling readers to become performers, and, like the participants of *Sanctuary*, to fashion their own transformative experience of loss and grief.

### Sites and Sounds

The chapters in this section focus on urban space and memory. They relate to some of the themes explored in the first section, like loss and grief, as well as the embodied, sensual and relational experience of the environment, the transformative power of sign-making and the mediating functions of artefacts (Smith, 2007). In their exploration of the urban environment, all three

chapters draw on Sherry Simon's writings on "translation sites" (2019). As Simon explains:

Places are translational not only because of activities that take place within them but because they are also stories. Spaces in translation, objects of translation, there is a grammar waiting to be parsed. Between the 'in' and the 'of', between the active and the passive tense, between the figurative or textual understandings of transfer, translation acquires ever larger capacities.

(Simon, 2023, p. xv)

The three chapters in this section all explore storytelling as a multisensory experience to access the fabric of the sites they study. Each contributor reveals the situated, temporally contingent and multilayered processes that contribute to the experience of particular urban spaces in London (Chapter 4), Istanbul (Chapter 5) and Venice (Chapter 6). Here, they take the linguistic makeup of the sites and cities and their past and present cultures into account and how these contribute to the sights and sounds, the atmosphere of places, their sensory and material presence.

In Chapter 4, Mary Wardle analyses the *National Covid Memorial Wall* in London. The memorial consists of more than 240,000 red hearts painted on a stretch of 500 meters along the wall of the Albert Embankment opposite the Houses of Parliament. Each of the hearts contains the name of a person who died of Covid-19. As people continue to die more hearts are added. While the Pandemic has by now lost its urgency and is, by some, only dimly remembered, the site of the wall has lost none of its impact. Perhaps also, because it is still in a state of Deleuzian *becoming* (1980) as fresh hearts continue to be added and people experience it every day as they walk past. Hence, the wall "intra-acts" (Barad, 2007) as a memorial to the dead but also as a reminder that Covid and its aftermath, as well as the protests against mismanagement during the pandemic (which first motivated the creation of the memorial) are not resolved. In that sense the wall is both a physical and an intangible artefact. In her chapter, Wardle draws out how the creation of the wall experientially translates grief and loss. She anchors her argument in the cultural and historical analysis of the site as well as the materiality of the paint and the overwhelming physical presence of the wall. By revealing the affective architectural elements of the site, which she identifies as a polyglot "translation site" (Simon, 2019), paying attention to the sheer quantity of hearts and also the striking number of non-English inscriptions accompanying many of the names, Wardle argues that the wall facilitates the experience of grief and loss both on the subjective as well as the collective level. Here the wall acts as mediating artefact in a similar manner to *Sanctuary* and its translation as discussed in Mirabile's chapter.

In Chapter 5, Ayse Ayhan explores how the experimental and immersive theatre project *Museum of Monologues* in Istanbul's Fener-Balat district mediates the experience of the historical, cultural and contemporary makeup of

this part of the city. Ayhan draws on Simon's writings about Istanbul as a translational city, which is manifest in its multiple cultures, in the sounds of different languages in its streets, the presence of diverse architectural styles, different alphabets, etc. Ayhan analyses how the multilayered urban fabric of the Fener-Balat district is activated through storytelling in the Museum of Monologues, an experience that embraces multiple languages and is situated in historical buildings as sensual spaces. By dispensing with decorations or unnecessary props, the buildings speak for themselves through the affective qualities of their architecture, the atmosphere in the rooms, the view of the street below through the open window. The theatrical monologues delivered by actors in conjunction with the architectural space can be seen as dialogical gesture (Colucci-Gray, 2023; see our opening chapter, this volume) that facilitates the experience of urban memory across cultural and historical divides in the form of a living, breathing artefact.

Chapter 6 transports us to Venice, another city with a long multicultural history and another translation site. In this chapter, Giuseppe Sofò guides the reader through an exhibition he created in April 2023, which artistically performs and experientially translates the city of Venice into a series of artefacts. Unlike the translation of cultural and historical experience, which is at the centre of the Museum of Monologues in Istanbul, Sofò's exhibition focuses on a different, more whimsical way of urban exploration, akin to the experience of the drifter or flâneur of the late 19th century albeit facilitated by the chance artefacts occasioned by modern technology and Google Translate. Sofò works with the errors and affordances of translation technologies and the strangeness of AI-generated imagery to afford a fresh experience of Venice, one mediated by technology and, often due to the shortcomings of AI, strangely unburdened by cultural conventions. As the idea for the exhibition concept originated in Sofò's use of intersemiotic translation and an experiential approach in teaching creative translation to MA students at Ca' Foscari University, he also explores the pedagogical relevance of experiential translation in translator training at the end of his chapter.

## **Bodies in Time**

In the final section of the book, we return to some of the topics of the earlier chapters, in particular embodiment and the role of the body in performing semiotic work as well as the potential of experiential translation to bring suppressed or lesser heard voices to the fore. Three of the four chapters focus on female bodies and the experience of women. Movement, too, is a central concern in this section, whether that is the movement of migrants (forced or voluntary) or the movement of ideas across time and between generations.

Blumczynski's semasiological delving into the etymological roots of the word translation in terms of material transfer emphasizes the notion of movement, exile and migration embedded in its semantic genealogy: "Translation, in one of its basic historical uses, is about moving people—in the most literal,

material, physical sense.... Translation transports, but also exiles and deports” (Blumczynski, 2023, p. 12). For Blumczynski, the notion of transfer in the corporeal sense, which is now rarely used in mainstream interpretations of the construct of translation, regains import in the renaissance of materiality, performativity and sensory channels as elemental components of translatology in that “it is only reasonable to propose that linguistic (metaphorical) transfer draws on material (actual) transfer” (Blumczynski, 2023, p. 13).

Czarniawska and Joerges (1996, 32) note that ‘the simplest way of objectifying ideas is turning them into linguistic artifacts’.... The translation process is completed when the idea ultimately arrives at a new place and is translated into action.... Ideas are kept in motion by the energy produced by each translation.

(Blumczynski, 2023, p. 23)

In Chapter 7, Sarah Aldawood considers the movement of ideas across time and space and across materialities from functional objects to aesthetic artefacts when she analyses the works of two female Saudi artists as translations of women’s experiences during the *Sabwa* movement in Saudi Arabia, which peaked in the 1980s. Aldawood’s analysis draws on Sean Foley’s (2019, p. 14) assessment that contemporary Saudi artists have forged an aesthetic language that allows them to express political ideas while still being able to present their work as apolitical. This affords them a unique position from which to address issues which are not accepted as part of public discourse, such as women’s experiences during the *Sabwa* movement, which restricted their rights and personal freedom including access to public life. Analysing a selection of works by Manal Aldowayan (b.1973) and Maha Malluh (b.1959), Aldawood explores how these artists tread a fine line between an almost neutral remembering and an invitation to criticize. As she argues, their stance is best summed up by Moira Inghilleri’s concept of “sensitive observers” (2022, p. 98). While most of the works Aldawood analyses do not express an overtly political position on the *Sabwa* movement, they create an affective environment which allows the women’s experience of the movement to be shared across generations as well as, with respect to international exhibitions, across cultural divides. Aldawood explores both the shared making of art (for example, in interactive workshops) and the contemplation of the artwork itself as a creative and transformative process in which the artwork can be seen as mediating artefact, thereby allowing experience to perform semiotic work in a shared, multisensorial and embodied manner.

In Chapter 8, África Vidal Claramonte also examines how artworks translate women’s experience: her focus is on two US artists, Cindy Sherman and Dina Goldstein, and their critical engagement with the portrayal of women and women’s bodies in fairytales. Both artists use photography to subvert the fairytale genre, in particular its Disneyfied version, by performing female bodies which are closer to the actualities of female lived experience. In the

tradition of Western feminist art of the 1970s and onwards, they break open the smooth white skins of princesses to reveal the rawness of having a body that bleeds and vomits. Vidal Claramonte reads these photographic artefacts as rewritings of fairytales which foreground self-narration as embodied self-translation, whereby the self is understood as multiplied and fragmented, here enabling individual experience to be extended to the collective. Paying attention to the materiality of the photographs as well as the materiality of the bodies they portray, Vidal Claramonte shows how these artefacts perform semiotic work by conveying lived sensations, emotions and affects, thus experientially translating the intimacy of women's embodied experiences. By choosing to focus on Sherman, whose engagement with women's experience reaches back to the 1970s, and the much younger Goldstein whose fairy tale series dates from the 2000s and 2010s, Vidal Claramonte stresses the adaptability of fairytales which undergo continuous transformations as they are told and retold to fit new contexts and articulate different experiences. Fairytales are, indeed, excellent examples for [Blumczynski's \(2023\)](#) ideas in motion, which are invigorated by every new translation. At the same time, we become painfully aware that women's bodies and experiences continue to be contested. As such these artefacts operate as relational, "attentional tools" ([Hagan, 2007](#), as cited in our opening chapter, p. 16).

In [Chapter 9](#), Joanna Kosmalka looks at how ideas and ideals travel through translation in the case of migration by analysing the graphic novel *Rozmówki polsko-angielskie* (2012, *The Polish-English Phrasebook*) by Agata Wawryniuk and the adaptation of Julia Holewińska's play *Revolucja bałonowa* (2011, *Bubble Revolution*) by Polish Theatre Ireland. Kosmalka's analysis draws out how these two artefacts express the migrant's experience of translating themselves across linguistic and sensory borders, a process which is continuous, cumulative and transformative. Both Wawryniuk and Holewińska draw on their own experiences of living a life in translation, which they then proceed to express through the conventions of the graphic novel (e.g. particular design features or synaesthetic elements to render smell, pain or noise in drawing) and theatre play (e.g. staging, period props and sounds). Both works play with multilingualism, untranslatability and uncertainty, which Kosmalka identifies as the natural environment of the migrant, to translate temporally- and culturally-situated lived events. Depending on their own linguistic skills, readers and audiences may not be able to understand everything that is said or written in the novel or the play. Instead, they will experience the gaps and errors, the uncertainty and all that space for the imagination to set to work which characterises a life in translation.

While Kosmalka explores voluntary migration, which affords the migrant a degree of agency over their own movement and allows them to playfully engage with multilingualism and self-translation, [Chapter 10](#) shifts the focus to forced migration, where agency is often denied. In their chapter, Kate McMillan, Cat Hope and Louise Devenish ask how it may be possible to translate the experience of refugees (in particular women) without silencing

their voices or attempting to speak for them. Discussing their collaborative artwork *Never at Sea* (premiered in London in 2023), they show how art practice might hold answers to their question. Comprising film, sculpture, performance and sound, *Never at Sea* set out to translate the grief of forced migration into a multisensory, abstract and non-representational environment, which would allow a story of migration to emerge that could contest the xenophobic anti-immigration discourse prevalent in British politics at the time. The chapter takes the form of a conversation between McMillan (visual artist), Hope (composer) and Devenish (percussionist) and discusses the role of experiential translation in their collaboration. Affect and embodiment emerge as important tropes, as well as the role of mediation in experiential translation. Where Wawryniuk and Holewińska (see [Chapter 9](#)) engaged in playful multilingualism, *Never at Sea* performs the loss of language and belonging through gesture, dance, imagery, chanting and sound.

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Section 1

# Rituals and Transformations



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# I Translating the Anthropocene

Ulrike Almut Sandig's "In die Natur" and Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* as Planetary Eco-translation Practices

*Delphine Grass*

## Context

Western philosophy and, alongside it, translation, have traditionally centred their understanding of the world around humans by arguing that humans were the only species capable of producing meaning. In this epistemological world order, humans alone are seen to matter both ethically and ontologically. However, recent translation and anthropological scholarly works have challenged this worldview by expanding translation to the non-human world and exploring the possible links between ecosemiotics and translation studies (Cronin, 2016, 2017, 2020, 2023; Marais, 2019, 2021; Mussnug, 2022; Scott, 2018; Sealey, 2019). Alison Sealey's recent work, for example, suggests "parallels between the political issues recognized by translation scholars-of exclusion, misrepresentation and speaking for 'the other'-and those raised by biosemiotics, the study of signs in all living systems" (Sealey, 2019, p. 305). There are vital ethical reasons to take semiotic borders between humans and non-humans as seriously as national and cultural boundaries in translation studies. Binding translation's communication framework to human semiotic systems means translation studies risks perpetuating anthropocentric points of view of the world which legitimize environmental destruction. Such bias also prevents us from recognizing the importance of non-human translational forces at work in the Anthropocene, as well as the intricate bind between eco-semiotic, or the "semiotics of relationships between nature and culture", and biological survival (Kull, 1998, p. 350).

Taking into account Eduardo Kohn's observation that "signs are not exclusively human affairs. All living beings sign. We humans are therefore at home with the multitude of semiotic life" (Kohn, 2013, p. 42), this chapter explores how creative-critical translation practices, as norm-challenging approaches to translation across semiotic and sensing systems, can help articulate and translate the Anthropocene experientially from non-traditional Western perspectives on animacy and language (Hornborg, 2006). I contend that by re-thinking communication boundaries beyond traditionally assigned national and cultural linguistic ones, creative-critical translations invite a widening of

DOI: [10.4324/9781003462569-4](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003462569-4)

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our understanding of the Anthropocene to nationally indifferent terrestrial life forms and non-verbal experiences. Through practice-based critiques of traditionally ‘word-based’ translation norms, more-than-lingual experiential translation practices recognize new planetary ‘borders’, limits and epistemic thresholds in the context of translation studies, and in the becoming of languages and cultures which are endangered by climate change (Cronin, 2017, p. 92). Informed by recent developments in the field of translation studies (Cronin, 2016, 2017, 2020, 2023; Marais, 2019, 2020, 2023; Scott, 2018; Sealey, 2019), eco-cosmopolitanism (Heine, 2008) and anthropology (Kohn, 2013; Todd, 2015, 2016; Viveiros de Castro, 2014), this chapter will explore how experiential translations, as translations which translate not only across languages but across different embodied experiences, operate as a critique of a hermeneutic framework of translation traditionally centred around human experience of communication between fixed linguistic categories (DesRochers, 2023; Grass, 2023). Inherited from the Enlightenment, this framework of understanding privileges human language over other non-human forms of communication and human thought over non-human semiosis. Widening the ontological framework of translation theory through translation as creative sign-making practice, I contend, performs more inclusive and diverse practices of listening beyond fixed categories of national languages. Such experiential translation practices summon imaginaries of ‘multinatural’ planetary contexts and planetary diplomacies beyond internationalism by performing experiential worlds in which not only humans sign, and not only humans translate.

In the first section of the chapter, I will first show how, by exploring translation across the senses as well as across human languages, experiential translations create a discursive space for forms of planetary cosmopolitanism that go beyond (inter)national relations. I borrow the planetary from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who contends that:

The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan. It is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe. I cannot say ‘the planet, on the other hand.’ When I invoke the planet, I think of the effort required to figure the (im)possibility of this underived intuition.... If we imagine ourselves as planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away.

(Spivak, 2005, p. 22)

In the context Spivak describes as planetary, translation is not secondary to global relations, but inherent to our planetary condition. Difference, rather than oneness, hosts all biological and semiotic life. Expanding my previous work on “transtopian” translation practices, I will explore how experiential translations can “matter, weave and perform into poetic existence the space between national cultures” (Grass, 2023, p. 47; see also DesRochers,

2023) to include a multinatural as well as a multilingual world (Viveiros de Castro, 2014). In the second section, I will turn my attention to the critique of nationalism and internationalism in Ulrike Almut Sandig's translation "In die Natur", a creative and multimodal translation of Emma McGordon's poem "Magnetic".<sup>1</sup> In her creative and performative translation, the destructive force of the ocean is re-imagined as a non-human translator capable of redefining the linguistic and cultural categories assigned by ethnonationalism. I want to argue that experiential translations such as Sandig's which perform encounters between human and non-human worlds, help us re-think the traditional division between subject and object, language and matter and practice and theory in Western philosophy through their embodied, more-than-linguistic representation of the material impact of climate change on language and communication. In the third and final part of the chapter, I will turn to the works of Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist, writer, teacher of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and citizen of the Potawatomi Nation whose memoir *Braiding Sweetgrass* explores what she explains as the "grammars of animacy" of Potawatomi (Kimmerer, pp. 48–59). I will study how Kimmerer re-imagines science as an experiential translation practice between the human and the non-human world. We shall see that the practice of non-verbal experiential translation, in this context, becomes a kinship-making activity across species, which facilitates a planetary diplomacy.

### **Beyond Internationalism: Experiential Translation as Planetary World-Making**

For Naoki Sakai, the field of translation is defined by what he calls "the homolingual address" of national literatures (Sakai, 1997, p. 3). Inspired by Romantic theories of national unity, the speaker or writer of the homolingual address assumes an immediate apprehension of the message, and in so doing summons a homogeneous linguistic community in the image of the nation. As Sakai explains in *The Modern Regime of Translation and the Emergence of the Nation*:

It is through the assumption of shared language and everyday routines that a collectivity of people imagines itself, not as a multitude of disparate individuals, but as an organically unified commonality. The imagined homogeneity and organicity ascribed to the nation is supposed to derive from the facticity (Faktizität in Martin Heidegger's vocabulary) of a shared language.

(Sakai, 2017, p. 105)

The homolingual address described by Sakai defines and codifies affects, communities of care and political action both within and beyond one's immediate human nation. By essentializing the relation between self and nation around verbal communication, the national framework of the

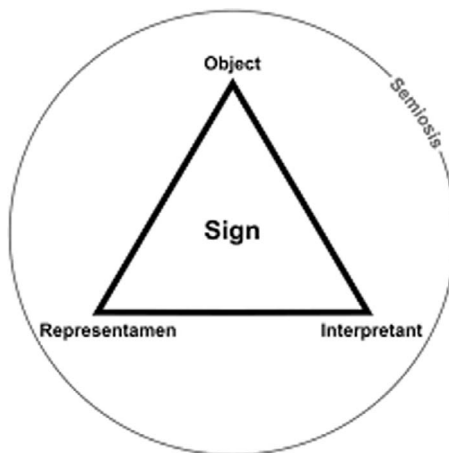
homolingual address shapes our relationship to more-than-human forms of life by establishing a global imaginary of kinship and relation that is mostly human-centred.

Experiential translation practices unsettle this single-species community framework by exploring translation across the senses as well as across national linguistic boundaries. In her chapter “Translating ‘our’ World through Sound: Domestication, Anthropomorphism, Incantation” which appears in *The Experience of Translation*, for example, Madeleine Campbell notes that “experiential translation has a significant role to play in tuning our senses to perceive, as far as the limits of our technologically enhanced antennae allow, the auditory, but also visual, olfactory or kinaesthetic signs necessary to read this [more-than-human] world, of which we are a part” (Campbell, 2024, p. 57). In broadening current Western communication ecologies to sensorial and embodied experience, experiential translation practices prompt us to move on from translation’s pre-discursive framework of cultural differences, inviting us to perform different models of communication across natures and embodied experiences as well as cultures. Through translation practice as an ‘experimental’ model of enquiry into the nature of our ecosemiotic relationship to the non-human world, experiential translation can critically engage with translational norms, which traditionally reify anthropocentrism by being both language-based and information-oriented (Grass, 2023; Robert-Foley, 2024; Robinson, 2022). Instead, Campbell and Vidal (2024, p. 3) highlight the “holistic, co-creative” and “processual” nature of experiential translation which, I want to argue here, can sustain new social models of planetary relations in which nature and culture are portrayed in entangled networks of ecological survival. By integrating pre-symbolic meaning-making systems into the field of translation, experiential translation practices make visible the fact that signs are “not just the reality of culture, but most necessary for retaining sustainable relations between human culture and ecosystems, as well as for the dynamics and rejuvenation of the culture itself” (Maran, 2020, p. 2). Such hermeneutic practices, as we shall see articulated in Robin Wall Kimmerer’s works in the final section of this chapter, are not new to Indigenous practices, but already built into many Indigenous knowledge systems and more-than-human communication ecologies.

Leaning on the field of linguistics to analyze human to non-human relations in Indigenous practices, anthropologists and Indigenous studies scholars have articulated trans-species translation frameworks and semiotic collaborations which seem oppositional to forms of anthropocentric international cosmopolitanisms (Kohn, 2013; Todd, 2016; Viveiros de Castro, 2014). They show that translation, in these contexts, cannot be contained within a human, let alone a national planetary linguistic framework. In his book *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (2013), for example, Eduardo Kohn recalls a conversation with Juanicu, a Quechua speaker, on ways of sleeping which might discourage jaguars from attacking: “sleep faceup! If a jaguar comes he’ll see you can look back at him and he won’t bother you.

If you sleep facedown he'll think you're aicha [prey; lit., 'meat' in Quechua] and he'll attack" (Kohn, 2013, p. 1). Kohn's anecdote and book host deep connections between human and non-human worlds where pre-symbolic and symbolic sign-making practices can be seen to cross embodied sensory realities. An anthropologist who spent years in the Amazonian forest, Eduardo Kohn's work challenges our understanding of signification and language as being a purely human property. For Kohn, "our exceptional status" as a semiotic species "is not the walled compound we thought we once inhabited" (Kohn, 2013, p. 42). Kohn's anthropological research, which aims to "provincialize language" (ibid, pp. 38-41; p. 224) in broader semiotic contexts, bases the analysis of Amerindian human to non-human translation and communication practices on Charles Sanders Peirce and Terrence Deacon's theories of signification (Deacon, 2015; Peirce, 1931). Unlike Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce "argued that the mental processes that interpret signs are also signs" and located the process of making meaning in a triadic conception of the sign relation called "semiosis", a triadic relation involving a sign vehicle (representamen), an object of reference and an interpretant sign (Deacon, 2015, p. 9; Peirce 1931). This triadic relation of semiosis can be illustrated as shown in Figure 1.1.

Kohn's narrative encounter with the semiotics of the forest, encrypted here in the jaguar, can be both contextualized by and go further than Peirce's triadic sign relation. In more than human narrative contexts, as Kohn's narrative reveals, such sign relations do not happen at a distance: things enter into friction, are touching and are exploded by semiotic contact. In the context where the interpretant is a jaguar, and the 'representamen' is human, the object might be translated into 'dead meat' or into 'a fellow person' depending on the position they sleep in. In other words, humans are no



*Figure 1.1* Peirce's semiotic triangle (based on Daniel Chandler [2002], 2007, p. 30).

longer the privileged sovereigns of hermeneutic systems. Interpretants can be jaguars, chickens, plants or fungi and interpret (or eat) other signs: the act of interpreting the world is not a distanced verbal activity, but a materially embedded signified practice dependent on shared planetary ecologies. In this semiotic framework, humans are not sovereign in the position of interpretant. Understanding translation as the extraction of meaning is impossible: the semiotic relation between humans and species is co-emergent with the act of communication and translation itself. In this context, as Maran puts it: “The sign—or, more precisely semiosis, that is the sign’s processual manifestation—allows some sort of connection to emerge that otherwise would be non-existing” (2020, p. 6). Human language is decentred or provincialized in a wider network and ecology of material-semiotic relations where signing is a relational, co-emergent activity between interpretant, representamen and objects. In other words, where any ‘sign’, or meaning production, is process rather than object.

Kohn’s fascinating insights into what can be thought of as material-semiotic ecologies of communication echo Viveiros de Castro’s theory of perspectivism, where translation is theorized to happen in a multinatural as well as a multicultural world. Glenn H. Shepard, Jr. and Lewis Daly explain Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism as follows: “in contrast to the Western scientific viewpoint, which postulates a single, all-encompassing universal ‘natural world’, multinaturalism implies multiple variable, perspectival natures that are determined by the unique lifeways of different animal and plant species and human cultural groups” (2023, p. 89). Such a vision of the world, explains Viveiros de Castro, invites not only a form of cultural relativism, but a multinatural perspectivism:

Cultural relativism, which is a multiculturalism, presumes a diversity of partial, subjective representations bearing on an external nature, unitary and whole, that itself is indifferent to representation. Amerindians propose the inverse: on the one hand, a purely pronominal representative unit—the human is what and whomever occupies the position of the cosmological subject; every existent can be thought of as thinking (it exists, therefore it thinks), as ‘activated’ or ‘agencied’ by a point of view—and on the other, a real or objective radical diversity. Perspectivism is a multinaturalism, since a perspective is not a representation.

(*ibid.*, p.72)

In this context, Viveiros de Castro adds, the translator’s role would no longer be to find a common referent to the same object, that is, to substitute one sign for another to designate the same object, but to understand objects socially and relationally in multi-species contexts. The task of the translator-shaman, in the Amerindian context, is not to exchange referents instead of exchanging signs, but to practice multi-species diplomacies across different multinatural contexts.

Far from furthering dualisms between mind and body, the interpreters and the interpreted, both Kohn and Viveiros de Castro's anthropological translations of Amerindian cosmogonies invite us to reconsider language and communication practice in more-than-human planetary ecological contexts where both matter and language are co-emergent and co-productive. Such epistemologies of translation de-anthropomorphize sign relations while embedding and situating humans in wider ecosemiotic relations which de-centre both humanity and the nation as normative social communication frameworks. Instead of pre-existing the act of translation, meaning is co-constructed and co-emergent to the act of interpretation, and translation is tasked with the process of understanding our relation to more-than-human others in broader ecosemiotic planetary contexts.

### **Performing Climate Change as Translation in Ulrike Almut Sandig's "In die Natur" (2019)**

In 2019, I organized an event and series of workshops for Lancaster LitFest entitled "Found in Translation: Literary Dispatches from the Periphery of Europe" (Grass, 2019). For the event, which was programmed on the day Great Britain should have exited the European Union, I invited several artists to translate each other's works to explore the themes of peripherality and belonging which had pervaded many debates about national identity surrounding Brexit. A contextual symptom of the resurgence of nationalist narrative in Europe and the Western world, discourse supporting Brexit relied on a particular narrative of peripherality and exceptionalism which the works presented at the festival explored through experimental translation practice. As the author-translators did not use bridge translations, each had to rely on the material qualities of languages, such as sound or alphabetical specificities, to translate the other's work. One particular translation by Ulrike Almut Sandig entitled "In die Natur" challenged the anthropocentric and romanticizing discourse of nationalism on nature by exploring the relationship between translation practice, cosmopolitics and climate change by focusing on the material dimension of language in her translation (Sandig, 2019/2022). As we shall see, by harnessing translation practice to explore and make visible the role of more-than-human actors in semiotic processes, Sandig decentred the role of human communication, thereby imagining new posthuman and planetary geographies in translation (Grass, 2023, p. 46).

For her commissioned piece, Sandig selected one line of Emma McGordon's poem "Magnetic" (2019).<sup>2</sup> Originally from the Cumbrian coast town of Whitehaven, in her poem McGordon reflects on the relationship between the changeability of the landscape, her Cumbrian dialect and the gender identity of the first-person narrator. Below is an excerpt from "Magnetic":

The body is a changing landscape,  
above all a truth taker.

A body describes land,  
 water, work evidence and proof.  
 A map is a memory of an old story  
 once told.

(McGordon, 2019, n.p.)<sup>3</sup>

Rather than rooting herself within a fixed regional identity, McGordon's poem foregrounds the importance of the body as a relational compass and mapping instrument. Her poem is a changeable, experiential account of her relationship to her body's gender and regional identity through how land and water re-write each other.

Sandig's translation of McGordon's poem relocates it within a wider planetary perspective. For her creative-critical translation of the poem into German, Sandig selected the last line of McGordon's text, "The tongue is a needle. And I am true North. Telling lies." (n.p.), and transmateralized this line into 12 different German anagrams making her poem. The anagram translation procedure reveals new locations, themes and correspondences that are materially hidden between the two texts and languages. In rebuilding a poem out of the last line of McGordon's, the text deterritorialises both the UK and Germany as countries of reference in the translation process and translocates McGordon's text to the Gili Islands instead. A home to the Sasak people, the Gili Islands are an archipelago off the coast of Indonesia. Here, Sandig's poem explores the disappearance of these islands due to rising sea levels and of the sea turtles who come to lay their eggs on its shores:

*DE:*

The tongue is a needle. And I am True North. Telling lies.  
 in der Heimat tollten Rettungshunde als Alge. o, ein Ei!  
 hatte es unterm Hut getragen. Lea in den Lilien o. Lidos  
 liegende, rinnende Gottesstatue, holla, reiht an! Im Ul-  
 tragruen d. Auen tosten Satelliten, Goldhelme, hiinei-  
 n in die Natur! Die Tiere heulten Moos, lallten: eggs! hat  
 uns hier eine angelogen? Lea, du trotttest dahin mit ell-  
 enlangen, teuren Automaten, heilst Heide, grillst Dio-  
 den, und hinterher? ausgeatmete Gili-Inselatolle, Not.  
 du, mandelaeugige Lea, nennst es Nitrithoelle. tot, ihr  
 Norden, heiter tot! huell die Gaumensegel in Atlantis.  
 The tongue is a needle. And I am True North. Telling lies.

Die drei zu Indonesien gehörenden Gili-Inseln liegen nur wenige Meter über dem Meeresspiegel. An den Stränden legen fünf Arten von Schildkröten ihre Eier ab.

"The tongue is a needle. And I am True North. Telling lies." ist Emma McGordons Gedicht MAGNETIC entnommen.

(Sandig, [2019] 2022, p.62)

EN:

The tongue is a needle. And I am True North. Telling lies.  
Late underdogs rattle in the home, ingest all. ‘Nu ein Ei’!  
Hide it in a hat. Lea runs legend-lost to unreel teeming  
data. Hello, in line! No suing the ultra-green tides. Meet  
a satellite retinue hounding neater gold helmets in  
to nature! genuine stellar lights, one alien theme. Did  
someone tell a lie? Lea, treading dust, uttering her inn-  
er need to linger: slum it, atone, still aged heath, ennui.  
Latent turn made true. The Gili-isles inhaled. Gone. One  
nitrate hell intuited, almond Lea’s egg rite unseen. Oh!  
The North ill, undone. See Lea, mud-genii, greet Atlantis.  
The tongue is a needle. And I am True North. Telling lies.

Note: On the shores of the Gili Islands several  
endangered species of sea turtles lay their eggs.

Stop climate change now.

(Sandig, [2019] 2023, translated by Karen Leeder)

Beyond its anagram shape, Sandig’s creative translation of McGordon’s text, here skilfully translated by Karen Leeder into English, distantly resembles a rondeau poem. Through repetition of the first line at the end characteristic of this form, the text seems to close in on itself in the image of an island. However, this self-enclosure is contrasted with the act of exposing the poem to the environmental force of the ocean and climate-induced erosion symbolized in the material translation of McGordon’s line into an anagram. In her English translation of Sandig’s text, Karen Leeder’s translation uses the same constraint by reusing the same letters of the line: “The tongue is a needle. And I am true North. Telling lies.” in her translation. Most of the semantic content of Sandig’s translation is translated, but signs and referents are moved again, disappear and reappear across the page due to the anagrammic constraints she observes.

As if disrupting the neat order of differences between national identities between English and German, Sandig performs a translation of “Magnetic” from the perspective of the rising oceans. She produces this effect by cutting the symbolic cliff-end of McGordon’s text by impersonating the crumbling effect of coastal erosion in the form of her anagram translation: “The North ill, undone. See Lea, mud-genii, greet Atlantis.” (lines 9 and 10 in Karen Leeder’s translation). Each line therefore uncovers German words and meanings contained in the English text by way of the anagram as a process of linguistic transformation and metamorphosis. In so doing, Sandig creates a material translation procedure which is reliant on its multilingual referentiality to resist complete destruction. The anagram form carries across not the meaning, but parts of the body of the source text: what is moved closer to the reader is no longer the source text or the source language, but the very ecological and material conditions

underpinning the survival of languages and cultures thematically explored in Sandig's poem.

The anagram as a material translation constraint allows other planetary connections to be made which seemingly undercut national and cultural individualisms. In Sasak language, "Gili" means islet, or little island (Hakim and Hidayat, 2017, p. 159).<sup>4</sup> Through this found translation, a double meaning transpires: 'Gili island' can be read as an inverse translation of 'Great Britain', highlighting a contrast between the great in 'Great Britain' and its smallness in relation to the vastness of the ocean's forces. In this transtopian, ecological contact zone between local identity and climate change, writing and translating seem co-emerging and relational: borders are made and unmade through experiential translation as a way of putting places, people and languages in material relation beyond the framework of human language. But in redefining the borders of translation as taking place across 'nature' and material realities as well as across pre-defined 'cultures', Sandig minoritizes all human languages in the context of the bigger ontological forces of climate change. As such, "In die Natur", it seems to me, represents climate change as a form of translation in its own right. While constituting an interlingual translation, the fictional material constraints of climate change performed in Sandig's experimental procedure undermines the idealism of international relations. Rather than moving meaning between places, it is places, languages and cultures themselves which are displaced by material forces in this performance of climate change as an agent of material translation: paying attention to the intersemiotic, material translations caused by climate catastrophes is foregrounded as vitally important in preserving the cultural and linguistic differences valued by nationalist discourses.

The act of translating McGordon's text from the elements' perspective is continued in Ulrike Almut Sandig and Grigory Semenchuk's film-poem and musical version of the text (see Figure 1.2). Here, it is the lack of communication and translation between 'nature' and 'culture' in the context of climate change which is highlighted with urgency. Set to music by Sandig and Semenchuk, the musical film version of "In die Natur" sets language in motion cinematically by making creative use of the English subtitles by Karen Leeder. As each line is sung in German, an anagramic shapeshifting of the translated subtitles dissociates and reassembles through a floating-letters effect.

Throughout the film, Sandig, featured in the still of the video-poem, remains silent, while a voice-over of her anagram translation of McGordon's text is playing. The only movements perceptible are that of the water and the shapeshifting, translated lines captioned at the bottom of the poem. The relation between Sandig and the ocean is emphasized by the blue make-up she wears across her eyes, highlighting the oceanic dimension of this experiential translation. In this visual and musical translation, traditional cultural elements such as human language are symbolically overwhelmed by the biosocial forces of climate change. The English of the source text, estranged



Figure 1.2 Still image from “In die Natur” by Ulrike Almut Sandig, Grigory Semenchuk, Sascha Conrad, trans. by Karen Leeder (Poetry collective Landschaft 2022).

and “foreignized” (Venuti, [1995] 2018) by the ocean’s force as an agent of what Amitav Ghosh named more generally “*The Great Derangement*” of climate change (Ghosh, 2016), is transformed by its unfamiliar encounter with a new material agency. The lack of translation between human language and nature is also illustrated in the disconnect between the cheerful singing voice-over of the poem and the silent face progressively drowning as the musical score develops. While the anagram form reveals shared ecological contexts by translating Western concepts of locality and belonging on a planetary experiential scale, the multimodal translation of the text into film and music highlights a lack of attunement to nature in the context of the Anthropocene.

In McGordon’s poem, both body and changing coastal landscapes are translated and re-embodied into each other to explore the plasticity of bodily identity and gender representation. The poem divests the simplified interconnectedness between land and identity traditionally represented in Romantic pastoral literary traditions by evoking instead the unstable link between land and sea:

Nothing about the body is guaranteed  
 its boundaries can shift and change  
 land around these parts is known to be unstable  
 holes in the earth have opened up and swallowed houses  
 as though they were lies.

(McGordon, 2019, n.p.)

In her creative-ecocritical translation of McGordon's text, Sandig continues McGordon's work of deconstructing human accounts of nature as 'passive'. Rather than staging the source of cultural differences to be in well-defined geographical national boundaries, 'nature' is represented as agential and active: a source of common instability and transformation between bodies, voices and cultures. The reproductive function of translation is re-appropriated and mobilized as a creative practice to embody planetary forces and agencies traditionally erased and subdued in gendered discourses representing nature and the environment as passive and de-animated. While the text version of Sandig's translation of McGordon's poem highlights the translational impact of climate change through the anagram form as a performance of linguistic and geographical erosion, the film and musical adaptation of the text highlight the catastrophic consequences of overlooking nature in traditional Western ecosemiotic relations. In Sandig's oceanic translation of McGordon's text, rising sea levels lead to a silencing and destruction of languages and cultures in return.

In a lecture she wrote for the University of Bonn, where she discussed the poem's multimodal journey and eventual translation by Karen Leeder, she asks:

“Preisfrage: Was ist jetzt der Körper des Gedichtes? Das Original? Die Vorlage des Originals? Die Adaptionen? Der Text? Das Audio? Die Performance? Also die verwirrende Klarheit auf halbem Weg zu euch?  
(Sandig, 2021)

The million-dollar question: What is the body of the poem? The original? The original draft? The adaptations? The text? The audio? The performance? The confusing clarity reaching you halfway?  
(translation mine and Simone Schroth's)

Through their concrete, material translation of McGordon's line in textual, sound and visual forms, Sandig and Semenchuk's works represent the forms of material translations at work in the environment as a source of both cultural instability and cultural transformation (Sandig and Semenchuk, 2022). The performance of coastal erosion as translation performed in the poem reveals the material-semiotic entanglements of planetary relations. Sandig summons a planetary ecological consciousness which goes beyond national territoriality to explore the intersectional nature of more-than-human ontological relations in ecological contexts.

Sandig's translations perform a critique of translation studies' linguistic and nationalist paradigm, then, by attuning us to the planetary environmental conditions which undercut the individual constructions of both individual and national languages. Hers and Semenchuk's multimodal translations of McGordon's text perform new ontological geographies and planetary belongings in the process, which are not mapped in translation's current framework of international relations. While, in national-linguistic frameworks, the sign

is perceived to be a stable object of cultural representation rather than a process, experiential eco-translations such as Sandig's explore the possibility of sharing the same language differently, opening translation studies to different modalities of expression, ontologies and natures, and in so doing, to planetary semiotic processes which lie beyond the human gaze. Through her strategy of 'foreignizing' human language through material translation practice, Sandig performs her translation in a 'multinatural' context (Venuti, [1995] 2018; Viveiros de Castro, 2014). The fictionalized failure of this interlingual translation relativizes human languages and national identities by attuning us to other semiotic systems and non-verbal planetary relations.

### **Translating and Re-animating Anthropocene Science in Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass***

First-nation Potawatomi botanist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer's exploration of more-than-human ecological relations presents another path towards unlearning Western territorial boundaries of translation and communication. Although not a translator in the traditional sense of the term, Robin Wall Kimmerer explores the relationship between humans and non-humans as translation in her works and scientific practice. Her memoir *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) recalls her encounter with what she calls Potawatomi's "grammar of animacy", where non-human entities such as plants and animals are endowed with personhood (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 48). Throughout her memoir, Kimmerer foreignizes Western epistemic language in order to re-animate non-human entities through creative acts of epistemological translation, giving non-humans not only visibility, but agency as semiotic actors. *Braiding Sweetgrass*, I want to argue, builds a strong case for translation as a social practice of "making kin" (Haraway, 2016, p. 99) with more-than-human subjectivities across "intra-acting" material-semiotic contexts (Barad, 2011). Invoking Potawatomi's grammar of animacy, her analysis of language lays the basis for an experiential translation framework in which the forms of sociability between humans and non-humans enunciated by scientific language can be questioned. Her work highlights how scientific language, by animating and de-animating some lives over others, already hierarchizes bodies, materials and ways of sensing. By showing the power of experiencing non-humans as persons in scientific practice, Kimmerer enunciates alternative ecological social contracts between humans and more-than-humans in tangled ecological planetary contexts. Her work cuts across Western epistemological frameworks of inanimacy to explore how scientific discourse could be translated into a Potawatomi epistemological framework. These relational translation practices perform acknowledgement and recognition, through translation as a cross-epistemic practice, of forms of non-human place-making and dwelling practices, which are often subjugated in Western epistemic contexts. They pave the way for a translation which goes beyond the question of linguistic equivalence to evoke the performative power of translation as a world-making activity.

This form of translation as ecological world-building practice is saliently articulated in the analysis of Western scientific discourse of *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Exploring the intersections between her work as a botanist and her identity as an Indigenous member of the Potawatomi nation, she explains her journey into learning Potawatomi, a language which, in its very grammatical structure, challenges the anthropocentrism of Western languages:

I grabbed a dictionary and flipped more pages and all kinds of things seemed to be verbs: ‘to be a hill’, ‘to be red’ ... all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive. Water, land, and even a day, the language a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things, through pines and nuthatches and mushrooms.

(2003, pp. 54–55)

In this passage, Kimmerer reveals the variety of subject positions which are embedded in Potawatomi’s grammatical structure. In Potawatomi, she explains, non-humans are granted agency in the same manner as humans: both material and semiotic worlds are seen as intra-acting across forms of sense-making in the embodied and experiential sense of the term. Stones, rivers, birds, fish, all are considered to have their own semiotic agency within a wider ecosemiotic network which cuts across the division between matter and meaning. In this ecosemiotic context, to be and to dwell is inherently a plural and relational experience: a matter of translating and being translated in wider biological and semiotic networks of survival. Knowledge cannot be extracted from the process of relation and co-habitation: it is co-emergent, relationally situated and therefore implicates a form of practice-led and embodied way of thinking with the other that is inherently co-translational.

Kimmerer’s work as a scientist and educator, she explains in her memoir, is also that of translating this Potawatomi epistemological framework into scientific practice. Seeing the non-human world as agential and animated with its own form of being means that science becomes not so much a practice of ‘discovering’ through the study of inanimate objects as a practice of ‘translating’ what the plants are saying to the scientist. Kimmerer explains:

To me, an experiment is a kind of conversation with plants: I have a question for them, but since we don’t speak the same language, I can’t ask them directly and they won’t answer verbally. But plants can be eloquent in their physical responses and behaviors. Plants answer questions by the way they live, by their responses to change; you just need to learn how to ask. I smile when I hear my colleagues say ‘I discovered X.’ That’s kind of like Columbus claiming to have discovered America. It was here all along, it’s just that he didn’t know it. Experiments are not about discovery but about listening and translating the knowledge of other beings.

(2013, p. 158)

In contrast with Western scientific discourse, as a botanist and educator, Kimmerer explicitly positions herself as a more-than-human translator rather than ‘discoverer’. Her memoir is a detailed analysis of the double action of translating non-human animacies into English and of her efforts to translate Indigenous epistemologies into English-speaking contexts. Her practice requires both a re-thinking of science and of translation as neutral and acultural epistemes. She explains: “While science could be a source of and repository for knowledge, the scientific worldview is all too often an enemy of ecological compassion” (2013, p. 345). Translating scientific discourse into Potawatomi cultural and linguistic contexts, her works undermine the primacy of human thinking in this relation. Instead, Kimmerer once again repositions the role of the scientist as that of a translator: “Trying to understand the life of another being or another system so unlike our own is humbling, and for many scientists, is a deeply spiritual pursuit” (ibid, p. 346). As a translator of Indigenous animacies into science, then, Kimmerer’s writings re-animate a world de-animated not by scientific practice per se, but by the deeply entrenched bias of Western humans towards the more-than-human world as a passive area for human discovery and extraction. Her work, as a Potawatomi writer and author, is thus to bridge and translate on behalf of more-than-human subjectivities erased by Western constructs of subjectivity. Her experiential translation practice not only introduces grammars of animacy into the English language and culture, but it also questions the instrumentalizing premise of Western translation norms of transparency most likely modelled on scientific objectivity. In reframing her epistemological role as a scientist as that of a non-human to human translator, she paves the way for a translation which would go beyond the question of equivalence as a go-to definition of translation in order to think of translation as a way of “making kin” (Haraway, 2016, p. 99) in “multinatural” contexts (Viveiros de Castro, 2014, p. 72).

In Kimmerer’s memoir, language and philosophy are closely intertwined. Kimmerer shows that translating Potawatomi grammars of animacy into Western epistemes challenges certain biological hierarchies which are structurally embedded into our language and communication practices. This task is accompanied by a more explicit re-thinking of the political families, which are nested in the exclusion of non-human animacies in Western grammars of animacies. Kimmerer demands that we not only construe these differences culturally, but politically—by exploring translation not only as a semiotic transaction of meaning between two pre-discursively established entities, but as an experiential, that is “holistic, in-the-moment, often shared and plural process” which can inaugurate new social, ethical and political relations (Campbell and Vidal, 2024, p. 3). She prompts readers to translate beyond the Western paradigm of translation and communication to include other epistemologies of care for more-than-human kins.

The social and kinship-making dimension of Kimmerer’s inter-species translation practice is further explored in the paper entitled “Listening to

the Forest”, where Kimmerer and Jeff Grignon discuss “Pine, Maple and Menominee Nations” interspecies relations: one community made of trees, plants, animals and humans (Grignon and Kimmerer, 2017, p. 68). As Kimmerer and Grignon show, such a territorial relationship undifferentiates hierarchically between human and more-than-human actors to create, instead, a more-than-human community. Kimmerer’s translation practice, then, points towards such a planetary “democracy of species” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 58). Beyond the nomos of human nations, her works invoke the importance of other species by referring to them as nations in their own right, as rightful subjects in a broader planetary ethical context. Her translations of Potawatomi epistemes, in other words, articulate and perform planetary communities into being beyond the anthropocentric European framework of international relations. In a section of *Braiding Sweetgrass* called “Maple Nation: A Citizenship Guide”, she foreignizes the English language and its anthropocentric translation paradigm by translating it into a Potawatomi grammar of animacy: “the maples, our most generous of benefactors and most responsible of citizens, do not deserve our government. They deserve you and me speaking up on their behalf.... Political action, civic engagement—these are powerful acts of reciprocity with the land” (ibid, p. 174). Rather than separating Indigenous practices from scientific endeavours, Kimmerer’s role as a translator is one of braiding and weaving different epistemologies together not only to advance knowledge (or move it from one language and location to another), but to advance and expand practices of care beyond humans in a manner that is ‘trans-relational’ rather than extractive. By trans-relational, I mean to refer to her practice of bridging biological as well as linguistic differences: a scientific approach which never assumes complete knowledge of the object studied but accounts for one’s own potential subjectivity and partiality in translating on behalf of non-human entities.

Kimmerer’s “epistemic translation” praxis is not a transfer of knowledge from place to place, but a co-creative practice of weaving differences into a place of mutual understanding which echoes other Indigenous interpretations of translation (Bennett, 2024, p. 1). As Margaret Noodin explains of Ojibwe in “Anishinaabe Translation Studies”, a language closely related to Potawatomi: “Anishinaabemowin, also called Ojibwe, uses the word ‘aanikanootan’ to convey the idea of translation. ‘Aanikanootan’ is closely related to ‘aanikoobidoon’, which is the verb for stringing things together or extending something by tying pieces together” (Noodin, 2019, p. 124). Noodin continues to explain the deep connections with kinship-making practices which translation, conceived this way, holds: “There is an echo of both in ‘aankikoobijigan’, which is ‘an ancestor, great-grandparent, or great-grandchild’ but nothing in the word signifies the nouns parent, person, or child” (ibid, p. 124). Instead, she explains that the connection between translation and kinship is practice-based: kinship is not a pre-existing set of relations or categories but a doing in the form and practice of translating others beyond the self. In that sense, Kimmerer, like Sandig, uses practice-based translation strategies to re-animate ‘nature’ and

stretch the remit of our political communities beyond the traditional human-centered gaze of Western nationalism. Their experimental and epistemological translations are a world-making exercise in re-writing our mental maps into more-than-human planetary geographies.

### **Conclusion**

In their essay “On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene”, Heather Davis and Zoe Todd articulate the need to contextualize and, indeed, translate the Anthropocene beyond Western epistemes and temporalities:

the Anthropocene is not a new event, but is rather the continuation of practices of dispossession and genocide, coupled with a literal transformation of the environment, that have been at work for the last five hundred years. Further, the Anthropocene continues a logic of the universal which is structured to sever the relations between mind, body, and land.  
(2016, p. 761)

In their translations, both Sandig and Kimmerer weave matter back into translational thinking by re-writing translation out of a capitalist model of global circulation and extraction. Re-animating the colonizing and universal discourse of the Anthropocene through translation as praxis, Sandig’s anagram translation re-animates representations of nature as passive and inconsequential and performs with urgency the consequences of not-translating non-human others. In this context, she presents climate change as a translational actor in its own right. Her use of the anagram to foreignize human language locates translations which exist beyond the human gaze of national cultures, while her and Semenchuk’s sound and film adaptation attune us to forms of planetary dwellings, borders and ecologies beyond the human gaze of international relations. Kimmerer, on the other hand, translates scientific knowledge into non-Western epistemologies by animating the English grammar and Western thinking through cultural and linguistic mediation of Potawatomi cosmogonies. Her re-thinking of scientific work as a form of translation situates science within a framework of ethical and social responsibility and recasts translation as an act of weaving relations with non-human others which exist beyond symbolic language.

By expanding translation practice beyond language to include experiential encounters which do not map onto pre-existing stable linguistic contexts, both translations expand the translation imagination beyond the task of moving ideas and meanings across places in an exclusively human world, re-thinking language instead from the perspective of other more-than-human material and experiential agencies. In so doing, they acknowledge a planetary context where not only humans make sense, and not only humans translate, revealing the more-than-human semiotic contexts which sustain human languages and cultures in the first place.

**Notes**

- 1 I thank Emma McGordon for sharing the written version of this poem with me.
- 2 I thank Ulrike Almut Sandig for sharing her notes with me in 2023.
- 3 The recital of “Magnetic” can be accessed here: <https://soundcloud.com/emma-mcgordon/magnetic-commissioned-for-lancaster-university> [last accessed 24.05.2024].
- 4 I thank Prof. Peter K. Austin for referring me to Hakima and Hidayat’s Sasak dictionary.

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## 2 Translation for Women, Women for Translation

### Experiential Translation in North India's *Sanjhi*

*Muskan Dhandhi and Suman Sigroha*

#### Introduction

During September and October, also referred to as the month of *Ashwin Pratipada* during the *sharad* (autumn) *Navratras* (the nine days dedicated to the goddess Durga) as per the Hindu calendar, *Sanjhi* is spectacularly celebrated across several villages in Haryana (a state in northern India) and the neighbouring states. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted by the authors in Haryana in September and October 2021 and 2022, which involved documenting the ritual audio-visually as well as interviewing around 25 women individually who followed the ritual. Through our fieldwork, we examine *Sanjhi* as a folkloric ritual that can be understood through the lens of experiential translation as it constitutes a situated, embodied social action which involves all human senses and emerges as a sensorial experience. The experiential dimension of our ethnographic research resonates with Campbell and Vidal's approach in *The Experience of Translation*, where:

experiential translation aims to make experiences translatable across the linguistic and sensory boundaries and media that together serve to generate, maintain or challenge cultural hegemonies.... [It] embraces the visibility of the translator and eschews semiotic erasures imposed by the norms and expectations of source and target cultures.

(Campbell and Vidal, 2024, pp. 2–3)

This chapter therefore establishes linkages between ethnography and experiential translation, where we posit that experiential translation is a process that is found in ethnographic practices. As ethnographers, we employ 'thick description' as a way of conducting the fieldwork. While conducting our ethnographic research on *Sanjhi*, we realized further how translation—specifically intersemiotic and experiential translation—is present within the ritual. Although the Haryanvi women as performers, artists, and audience might not be intentionally translating the text—whereby we refer to *Sanjhi* as a text—they are unintentionally performing it as translators. We believe that the process of translation is present within such traditions, which can in

DOI: [10.4324/9781003462569-5](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003462569-5)

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turn be examined through ethnographic practices if one observes carefully. As ethnographers, when we began documenting the ritual, understanding the socio-cultural context (the when, why, and what of the ritual), and capturing the affective emphasis while describing the ritual in detail, we witnessed translation as an underlying layer to the process—both in the performance of *Sanjhi* by Haryanvi women, and in the ethnographer’s documentation of the ritual. Translation—both intersemiotic and experiential—happens beneath the surface, is absent to the naked eye, but is still there. While translation and ethnography might be different fields with their own conventions, we observe that the two are also similar in their emphasis on the experiential examination of culture and society. This leads us to posit that translation and ethnography are related, through similar goals and processes, which we hope to affirm in the later sections.

*Sanjhi* offers an opportunity to study and analyze the close affinities between the disciplines of ethnography and translation. We witnessed festival participants acting as translators within a ritual where they were translating the ritual intersemiotically. *Sanjhi* is thus an event that is translated by participants, where translation takes place within the ritual, and through ethnography delivers a way of translating culture—through documenting and interpreting the enactment of the ritual, the two disciplines intersect and construct a space for conceptualizing actions and events as an act of translation on several levels.

Examining *Sanjhi* as a ritual translation helps us understand its sensorial and performative aspects. Doing so helps situate the researchers and ethnographers as contemporary translators analyzing an oral tradition through the lens of experiential translation, and therefore looking beyond the linguistic and cultural boundaries to acknowledge the visual and bodily involvement. Baynham and Lee (2019) argue that the composition of contemporary translators’ repertoire is made up of “different semiotic orders” (p. 18), where they need to move on from language to consider the materiality and affordances of “the visual, the gestural, and what can be communicated with the body or, to be more precise, by the body” (p. 97). Therefore, both ethnographer and translator need to examine “the materiality and affordances of the visual, of gesture, and the body in order to communicate” (ibid), thereby encouraging the observer/participant to interact with the text in translation, “not primarily affectively, but physically and sensuously” (Lee, 2014, p. 348). Campbell and Vidal (2019) also affirm the physical and sensuous when they define the translator’s gaze as not only using the eyes, but the whole body:

the translator’s gaze, the intense engagement of the translator with the source text which also entails an appropriation of sorts—not just with the eyes but with all other senses.... Perceiving through the eyes, ears, tongue or body of another opens the willing recipient (performer or spectator) to unfamiliar affects and sensory experiences, a ‘disorienting’

event that can, if enacted in a safe environment, lead to personal growth and greater levels of awareness and understanding of the other, and thereby enhance cultural literacy.

(Campbell and Vidal, 2019, pp. xxix; xxxiv)

Rituals like Haryanvi *Sanjhi* can be considered examples of Susan Bassnett and David Johnston's "outward turn" in translation studies (Bassnett and Johnston, 2019, pp. 181–188). As events that venture beyond the linguistic binaries and encourage translation within cultures, dismissing the limitations of words, they impact the source artefact by delivering new layers of understanding. It is more so in current times when these localized rituals are changing rapidly, or even being forgotten, given the socio-cultural changes brought in by modernization, and thus losing their cultural significance or moorings. Such rituals motivate the translators (i.e. the ethnographers and the women performing) to "understand a pluriverse of creative translation practices through lingual, visual, oral/aural, kinaesthetic performative and/or media-rich participatory events" (Campbell and Vidal, 2024, p. 1), where in our case *Sanjhi* constitutes both the text and the translatory event. Therefore, when looking at *Sanjhi* as a folkloric tradition, experiential translation prompts its translators to look beyond the linguistic and the literary to "probe the boundaries and question the perceived stability of the (multimodal) text, whether 'source' or 'target', of the translator themselves and of the environment in which they operate" (ibid). Experiential translation "acknowledges and reveals the role of the body and materiality in meaning-making" (ibid). This perspective helps both the ethnographers and the women who practice the ritual to understand this event at an experiential level and to keep it culturally relevant and significant for the future generation of women artists as performers.

Experiential translation is a recently developed epistemological construct and is of growing interest. It appears as a socially-situated extension to intersemiotic translation, one of the three categories or kinds of translation as stated by Jakobson ([1959] 2000). In Jakobson's original definition, first, is intralingual translation, representing translation into other signs of the same language; the second category is interlingual translation, which symbolizes translation from one language to another; and the third is intersemiotic translation, which involves translation from language to the non-verbal system of symbols. However, Jakobson did not discuss the transfer between two non-verbal systems. This gap can be considered a crucial originating point for further critical inquiry on producing a theoretical framework for intersemiotic translation and thus also experiential translation. Iedema (2003) dwells upon the problems arising out of such a translation and focuses upon the disparities produced when a transfer of meaning or a translation is between different semiotic systems. His work encourages multimodality as an effective counterargument to monomodal approaches; he argues that it concerns two significant issues: "first, the de-centring of language as favoured meaning-making;

and second, the re-visiting and blurring of the traditional boundaries between and roles allocated to language, image, page layout, document design, and so on” (Iedema, 2003, p. 6). *Sanjhi* offers an illustration of this counterargument. The ritual connotes multimodality (in relation to intersemiotic and experiential translation) since it operates in varied modes—visual, oral, and performative, and in agreement with Iedema (2003), the ritual dismisses the fascination with language, it rather questions boundaries between image and language. While *Sanjhi* exists as an image of the goddess, at the same time it is also an orally narrated event. To reach an understanding of experiential translation thus entails, as O’Sullivan argues, finding “a critical and analytical toolbox” (O’Sullivan, 2013, p. 6) that fosters intersemiotic translation and modelling the shifts of meaning and theorization that ensue.

Jakobson’s ([1959] 2000) concept of intersemiotic translation was revisited by Campbell and Vidal to include translation from, into or between non-verbal modes:

e.g. the translation of a poem into dance, or a short story into an olfactory experience, or a film into a painting opens up a myriad of possibilities to carry form and sense from one culture into another beyond the limitations of words. At the same time, such processes impact on the source artefact enriching it with new layers of understanding.

(Campbell and Vidal, 2019, p. xxvi)

While the translator bears the responsibility of communicating the meaning of the source language in literary translation,

intersemiotic translation involves a creative step in which the translator (artist or performer) offers its embodiment in a different medium ... facilitated by perceiving and experiencing non-verbal media through visual, auditory, and other sensory channels.... Instead of focusing on the translation of sense or meaning, the translator effectively plays the role of mediator in an experiential process that allows the recipients (viewer, listener, reader or participant) to re-create the sense (or “semios”) of the source artefact for themselves.

( Campbell and Vidal, 2019. p. xxiv)

Thus, intersemiotic translation offers the possibility of several

possible versions of both source and target texts and this can help mitigate the biases and preconceptions a static, intralingual translation can sometimes introduce. Thus, intersemiotic translation provides an interactive, participative platform with the potential to engage individuals and communities in connecting with cultures different from their own.

(ibid, 2019, p. xxvi)

Interestingly, Kourdis and Yoka (2014) have also discussed how Jakobson's definition of intersemiotic translation implicates translations across non-linguistic semiotic resources, such as language, image, and sound resources, which, as Kourdis states, "coexist, cooperate, and get translated" (Kourdis, 2015, p. 311) regularly. A text has various meanings and connotations; and everything ranging from images, sounds, sensory perceptions, nonverbal communication, spaces, linguistic landscapes, cities, bodies, etc. can be considered a text as it communicates to and with us. Research has established these as texts owing to the meanings they construct: while individuals "manifest themselves through different uses of shape, colour, texture, timbre, and movement" (van Leeuwen, 2021, p. 5), the body also operates as a text to communicate through movement (Aguiar and Queiroz, 2015; Bennett, 2019; Federici and Parlati, 2018). In this way, contemporary art including dance and painting can be perceived anew as a form of translation (Campbell and Vidal, 2019; Connelly, 2018; Vidal Claramonte, 2022). Experiential translation focuses on translating the embodied and material nature of this extended notion of text through the sensory and multimodal aspects of intersemiotic translation. Experiential translation can further be considered a "socially-situated" and "temporally contingent" (Campbell and Vidal, 2024, p. 16; 9) extension to the practice of intersemiotic translation and offers a means of interpreting the text of the *Sanjhi* festival as a living contemporary cultural artefact.

This chapter therefore aims to contextualize Haryanvi *Sanjhi* within the theoretical framework of experiential translation. An extensive literature search reveals an almost complete lack of theoretical and ethnographic research on this Haryanvi ritual, which is likely to soon disappear in its traditional form due to the rapid march of society towards modernization. Our study emphasizes the process rather than the outcome of translation, examining the relationship between experiential translation, intersemiotic translation and multimodality and studying the relationship between experiential translation and the Haryanvi women whereby the former mobilizes and empowers the latter. By doing so, our chapter illustrates how the reconstruction of meanings takes place across different mediums/modes, time, and space.

### **Our Ethnographic Practice as a Form of Experiential Translation**

Translating *Sanjhi* experientially produces several distinct forms much in the same way as no two translations of a source text are similar. Our ethnographic study highlights the use of 'thick description' as a means of understanding *Sanjhi*, and its various ways of existence and dissemination across ages, time and space. Through our fieldwork as ethnographers we documented Haryanvi women performing *Sanjhi* by making audio-visual recordings, conducting interviews, taking detailed field notes and writing down our observations. All of this involved experiential translation in the

sense of Campbell and Vidal, who argue that “[e]xperiential translation is concerned with the process of experiencing the source text as ‘the thing itself’ in relation to the world, as well as performing a more self-aware semiotic act as ‘interpretant’ of its semantic and formal instantiation” (2024, p. 7). Our ethnography, therefore, is an act of experiential translation where it concerns the process of experiencing *Sanjhi* as a source text in relation to the Haryanvi milieu, when, as ethnographers, we translate *Sanjhi*. Along with experiencing the ritual when documenting and performing other field activities, as ethnographers, we also documented women as a collective force where our ethnography translated them, and their collective and material embodiment; our ethnography is a form of experiential translation as we translate *Sanjhi* by documenting the way women perform from one medium to another. When women perform *Sanjhi*, it already exists in multimodal form; through our documentation the ritual is translated to a different semiotic system—written, visual, and oral—whereby taking notes constitutes the written aspect and audio-visual documentation establishes visual and oral semiotic representation systems. Hence, by doing so, we also interpret the ritual in our own manner, thus translating it experientially. Our ethnography translates the ritual in the moment, where the experiences of the ethnographer as well as the performer are translated holistically, by further establishing the ethnographers to be translators of the source text—*Sanjhi*. Therefore, our ethnography emerges as a form of experiential translation which “embraces the visibility of the translator and eschews semiotic erasures imposed by the norms and expectations of source **and** target cultures” (Campbell and Vidal, 2024, p. 4; authors’ emphasis). The process of distinctiveness within the act of performing such rituals, the several oral variants also found in the *aartis* (devotional songs) as well as the varied kinds of visual representations found within the same ritual illustrate how the process of translation occurs in a specific time and geographical space along with how the process of experiential translation has developed and progressed for generations.

### **Experiential Translation in Haryanvi *Sanjhi***

The *Sanjhi*, festival begins on the first day of *Ashwin Shukla Pratipada* that follows the monsoon season, during which the unmarried women cover the village walls with their own interpretations of goddess *Sanjhi*. Thereafter, every evening, they light an earthen lamp near the image, sing songs, and celebrate. *Sanjhi*, and her depiction as visual art, has been subjected to multiple interpretations; some people imagine her as the goddess Durga, while others imagine her as the goddess Parvati. The festival is also celebrated across several villages in the neighbouring states of Haryana, such as Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh. Clay or mud is one of the essential materials used to prepare *Sanjhi*, usually fetched from nearby ponds, which get filled up during the monsoon season. Dung is another important ingredient available

readily as the community is predominantly agrarian. Young girls and their mothers or elderly relatives fetch clay to prepare their respective *Sanjhis*—a visual representation of the Goddess herself. If there is a lack of clay, rocks are crushed and mixed with water to prepare materials similar in composition to the clay. *Sanjhi* is created as a human-like figure, and usually, the hands, the legs, and the neck are adorned with jewellery, all made from clay or dung. Several *sitaare* (star-shaped motifs), made from a mixture of clay, dung, and some water, before being sun-dried, are also prepared to fill up the empty spaces within the visual art. These are subsequently painted with white lime, soot, and ochre, all readily available materials. A few decades ago, when the villages consisted of predominantly mud houses, the walls of those houses required sprucing up post the rainy season, which coincidentally is the time of *Sanjhi* as well, and this would be done on a wall facing an auspicious direction. So, *Sanjhi* served an important functional purpose besides its aesthetic and ritualistic appeal.

The festivities pertaining to *Sanjhi* last for around ten days. On Dussehra—a major Hindu festival that celebrates the victory of good over evil, which falls in the Gregorian calendar months of September or October, and on the tenth day of the Hindu month of *Ashwin*—*Sanjhi*, (in the form of the 3D figure consisting of various motifs made of clay, mud, dung, etc.), is scraped out from the walls, placed in a *matka* (earthen pot), and then taken to the nearest *jhod* (pond) by the women. A few *diyas* (earthen lamps) are also lit and placed in those earthen pots, which are then floated across the pond. Subsequently, young boys jump into the water and try breaking the pots by throwing sticks or stones at them. This aspect of the ritual, commonly called *Visarjan*, is also interpreted by the women from the community as the departure of *Sanjhi*. Women sing several *aartis* during the ten days, some of which enquire about what the *Sanjhi* needs, desires, or would like to wear and eat to please her. In return, *Sanjhi* promises to bring the young unmarried girls good husbands.

*Sanjhi* as a folkloric tradition involves translation happening at multiple levels, at the gestural, the oral, and the visual. Elleström (2021) mentions various modalities a medium possesses such as material, sensorial, spatiotemporal, and semiotic modalities. *Sanjhi* emerges as a text involving all of the above. When we speak of *Sanjhi* as a text or rather the source text, we infer the text comprises everything pertaining to *Sanjhi*, including the festival, the visual representation of the goddess (the image constructed, worshipped, and later scraped out), the oral representation (the *aartis* sung throughout), and the performativity associated with the festival (*Visarjan*). We argue that *Sanjhi* as a ritual is a text, which in turn exists in multiple modes such as visual, oral, and performative.

If one speaks of translation of *Sanjhi*, the transfer is thus between verbal and non-verbal and also from one non-verbal medium to another, and appears as a transfer of cultural ideas, including translation via performance and the body; and thereby involves many senses. This is reminiscent of

Clive Scott's (2010) conceptualization of translation through the senses when he writes about literary translation:

[T]ranslation is a cross-sensory journey, a journey in which the lexical is allowed associatively to generate what sense-experience it wishes to. To translate words into words only is to suppress their natural activity as psychic and sensory trigger. The task of the translator is to find contexts of practice appropriate to this multisensory dissemination.

(p. 162)

Here, the image and the body in performance reflect the cultural translation of ideas, images, rituals, and traditions concerning *Sanjhi* as a festivity. *Sanjhi* thus is no longer restricted to just the image created and subsequently pasted on the wall by the women but must be conceived as a multimodal, multilayered and performative text. Through our ethnographic research we can determine three ways in which *Sanjhi* can be interpreted as an experiential process: cognitive (idea) to visual, visual to oral, and visual to oral to performative.

*Sanjhi* is translated from an abstract, linguistically-mediated idea to the visual and the body in performance specifically through the actions of women. Creating and collecting the raw materials from varied natural resources such as mud or clay or *chini mitti* (porcelain) from the *jhod, gobar* (dung) available at home, making the required colours etc., making the requisite motifs, including *sitaare* and any other jewellery, painting them in the desired colours, pasting and decorating them on the *Sanjhi* all contribute to the act of translation. Here, *Sanjhi* as an idea and a cultural theme transgresses the borders of an idea to a non-verbal action, which is performative. It is positioned in multimodal surroundings and the construction of meanings takes place simultaneously from one medium to another. These multimodal settings and the several semiotic resources involved emphasize translating between the visual, the oral, the gestural, etc. Vidal Claramonte (2022) confirms that translators are versatile individuals who, for performing their job, “not only have to read but also look, listen, touch, and feel” (p. 36), which helps in meaning-making as well as transmitting that meaning.

When women come together to ideate and visualize *Sanjhi*, they form a collective identity. Next, they perform rituals that are by and for women only. Experiential translation is discernible when a shift or transfer of meanings takes place through multiple modes where these “[c]ultural processes impel [us] to analyse the texts whose signs belong simultaneously to different sign systems, texts, discourses and media” (Torop, 2003, p. 273). Through their collective ideation, visualization and performance, participants in *Sanjhi* minimize categorizations between semiotic resources to demonstrate “every text not only generates its meaning in different sign systems, but materialises in different media” (Torop, 2003, p. 274). Torop also suggests that texts are intermedial in nature where “[t]ranslation from one type of art into another is quite frequent in culture: texts of different arts interweave, the intertextual space

includes also intermediality” (2003, p. 278). We borrow Torop’s account of intersemiotic translation and multimodality as “cultural processes” to support our own examination of *Sanjhi* as experiential translation. *Sanjhi*, as we understand is also a “cultural process” (as discussed by Torop above) where the text manifests meanings in varied sign systems and media. We put forward *Sanjhi* as a recurring cultural process existing in varied media and sign systems, thus affirming its multimodal nature. This process of meaning-making and shifting is discernible in the process of making *Sanjhi*, singing for it, and dancing towards the final *visarjan*. Further, the construction of meaning happens via the ritual, within different oral, visual, written (the *aartis* sung during the evening while worshipping *Sanjhi* are often printed and disseminated through photocopies, pictures, etc.), and performative mediums, and where:

the translator physically embodies the act of mimesis, where the artist inserts themselves within the ‘target’ artefact or event, rendering the person and the background seamless but for the viewers’ recourse to iconicity as a means of making meaning from the words, images, auditory or haptic phenomena they perceive through their senses.

(Campbell and Vidal, 2019, p. 20)

The following sections elucidate this process.

### *Cognitive/Idea to Visual*

The creation of *Sanjhi*’s manifestation on the wall follows a conceptualization of the goddess within the head. This idea may be discussed with other women before drawing it on the wall. In this instance, the transfer of meaning is from a mere idea to a visual medium where one is envisioning or conceptualizing *Sanjhi* within the mental and neurological systems of the human body. In this nascent stage, it merely exists as a thought, a concept, and an abstract means to an end with no physical features to it. At this stage, it cannot be seen, heard, felt, or experienced but can only be conceived.

After being conceived of as an abstract idea, *Sanjhi* is next created by women on the walls when they start applying *gobar* as a backdrop and giving shape to the idea. Several motifs, like the *sitaare*, which are made of clay, mud, and *chini mitti* are designed, shaped, and later painted as per the creator’s taste and aesthetics (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2). Here, *Sanjhi* exists as a visual and a sensorial art form—visible to the eyes, it can be touched and felt, and has several textures, ranging from the coarseness of the motifs to the softness of various fabrics that adorn the goddess’s body as her attire and ornamentation. In agreement with Gibbons, *Sanjhi* thus exists in a multimodal form: “[m]ultimodality, in its most fundamental sense, is the coexistence of more than one semiotic mode within a given context ... it is experience of living; we experience everyday life in multimodal terms through sight, sound, movement” (Gibbons, 2012, p. 8). The goddess is painted in several colours from white and red to



*Figure 2.1* (Left to right)—Motifs created by Haryanvi women for composing *Sanjhi*'s body.

depict purity and the fertility for which she is known and worshipped, to vibrant green, yellow, pink, and orange. A visual treat to the eyes, the goddess is thus transformed by the Haryanvi women from a mere idea to an image that can be seen, felt, and even smelt. Here, *Sanjhi* is translated as an image, in a way representing its women creators (see [Figures 2.3](#) and [2.4](#)). Simultaneously, it is translated from an oral medium to a visual medium, therefore emphasizing this creation as a multimodal activity which “opens up a privileged exploratory space in which the translator can inscribe their interaction with the text in creative ways” ([Loffredo, 2019](#), p. 37).

#### *Visual to Oral*

Once the *Sanjhi* has been created on the wall, it is now worshipped by women every evening for nine days of the *Navratri*. Women sing several *aartis* as part of



Figure 2.2 *Gobar* (dung) being used as a backdrop for creating *Sanjhi* by Haryanvi women. The motifs will be pasted on top of the dung.

this routine. Here, *Sanjhi* can be said to exist in an oral medium, where translations are happening from a visual to an oral medium simultaneously and conducting itself as “a mode of biliterate performance that participates in a larger multimodal discourse” (Lee, 2013, p. 242). The songs, and the narratives via those songs, transform her presence from the visual to the oral and she is now heard as well. At this stage, *Sanjhi* becomes a sensual experience involving more of the human senses—sight, taste, touch, hearing, etc. It can now thus also be experienced with the eyes when one looks at it, with the mouth when women sing about it, with the ear when other women listen to the songs (along with various other sounds this whole process involves), and the human body through which it can be felt and caressed. The mouth and the ear were not involved in the previous stage. Thus, *Sanjhi* is a sensorial experience or an experiential process. However, it is important to emphasize that it is at the last stage that the ritual becomes an immersive experience that involves all the senses.



Figure 2.3 Instances of *Sanjhi* documented during the ethnographic fieldwork in Haryana, India in 2021 and 2022.

### *Visual to Oral to Performative*

As mentioned earlier, for *Visarjan* on the tenth day, *Sanjhi*'s face is scraped from the wall, transferred to earthen pots with a *diya* lighted in it (see Figure 2.5), and taken to the nearby *jhod*. Women gather across the streets with their respective *Sanjhis* as they walk to the *jhod* in procession. They sing *aarti* for *Sanjhi*'s departure, dance to the beats of *dhholwallahs* (drum beaters), as they move towards the pond (see Figures 2.6 and 2.7). *Sanjhi* becomes a performative ritual here, involving the whole body. Once the women reach the *jhod*, they set the pots containing the *Sanjhi* sailing across the water. It is at this time that the other gender finds some presence; young boys from the village throw pebbles or sticks at the gliding pot to prevent it from floating across the pond. The belief is that if the earthen pot successfully crosses the pond, the village will encounter some calamity like a drought or other similar unfortunate incident in the foreseeable future.



Figure 2.4 Instances of *Sanjhi* documented during the ethnographic fieldwork in Haryana, India in 2021 and 2022 (Cont'd).

At this stage, the words of *Sanjhi* sung as a ritual exist in the non-written medium and become performative on multiple levels. This resonates with Clive Scott's "anti-interpretative stance" in *Literary Translation and the Rediscovery of Reading* (2012), which "means that reading constitutes a whole-body experience in which words, and grammar, and syntax, and typographic phenomena such as typeface, margin, punctuation, activate cross-sensory, psycho-physiological responses prior to concept and interpretation" (Scott, 2012, p. 11). As Scott argues about reading the written word becoming a whole-body experience, the *Sanjhi* narrative is 'read' through the bodies of participating Haryanvi women in multiple ways. The materiality of typography, such as typeface, margin, punctuation, associated with the written word in Scott's account is analogous here with the materiality of the natural world: representations in mud, clay, and dung are transformed by pebbles and sticks; organically-derived colours of white lime, soot, and ochre are dissolved by water. When the women scrape *Sanjhi* from the walls, place the head in a



*Figure 2.5* A perforated *matka* (earthen pot) used for carrying *Sanjhi*'s face for her *Visarjan*.

perforated *matka*, and light a *diya*, the visual image of *Sanjhi* is transformed. At the same time, since it involves bodily movements—same as when collecting materials or colouring or constructing the image—it can be seen as translating the ritual, *Sanjhi* into a performative action. Similarly, the female body is also involved when women assemble, gather across the neighbourhoods, dance, and move towards the *jhod* for *Visarjan*. It becomes an experiential translation of not only the idea of *Sanjhi* but also the ritual. At the *jhod*, when women begin disposing of the earthen pot and the young boys attempt to drown it to bring blessings to both the women and the village, communication quite tangibly “happens on many levels, the gestural, the olfactory, the visual, the linguistic” (Campbell and Vidal, 2019, p. xxv). The translators, the women in this case, translate the ritual



*Figure 2.6* Women travelling through the neighbourhood for the *Visarjan*.

with their whole bodies, “which includes the full immersion of the translator in the text, with eyes, ears, skin, nose, limbs and heart” (ibid, 2019, p. 3).

Since women are translating the ritual through their bodies by performing varied actions, *Sanjhi* is therefore translated as a sensorial experience: *Sanjhi* is translated multiple times through different mediums, such as from the oral medium to the visual medium and later to the performative medium, making it an overwhelmingly sensorial experience where all human senses, including the eyes, the ears, the mouth, the skin, the entire body, are involved. Therefore, translation becomes a performative act where it is significant to look beyond its traditional notion and expand it “to encompass a wide range of activities and products that do not necessarily involve an identifiable relationship with a discrete source” (Baker, 2014, p. 15).



*Figure 2.7 Sanjhi's Visarjan at the jhod (pond).*

### *Haryanvi Women's Performance as Experiential Translation*

Women during *Sanjhi* perform various roles where they participate as performers, translators, moderators of the rituals and traditions, spectators, participants, etc. The process of experiential translation gives them enough access and power to dismantle the patriarchal structures around them and create their own hegemony within these age-old customs. It, therefore, mobilizes such indigenous communities through their cultural and social knowledge systems (folklore), where they feel heard, voiced, and occupy a non-judgmental space that is allocated to them alone for their expression. It is also interesting to note that traditionally *Sanjhi's* brother is also drawn alongside in the illustrations; it emphasizes the patriarchal notion that women require men as guardians for their honour, protection, and safety. In the present context, however, the fact that these women have control over the ritual as a whole and are able to express it openly, shows that they are agentive in this instance. The visual representations and the symbols evident within these representations act as signs participating in cultural communication and the multimodality process. These symbols or motifs found along with *Sanjhi*, such as the animals, girls, boys, agrarian symbols, etc., are all a visual representation of the sign system, the non-verbal, participating in this experiential translation process.

When one translates any text, the translation can necessarily be distinguished from any other translation of the source text—whether performed by the same translator or by different translators—in similar geographical and temporal zones or in different ones. In a similar manner, experiential translation produces varied translations when performed by Haryanvi women. The *aartis* that are sung are often in accordance with the current sentiment of the community and thus represent the geographical and temporal zones they are positioned in. The women adopt and adapt materials, images, as well as language and motifs as per the changing circumstances. In these scenarios, women come across as translators engaged with experiential translation, making the entire process extremely female-oriented and gendered. Through this process, women participating in *Sanjhi* empower themselves as the performers, the audience, and the ‘readers’, where everyone communicates beyond linguistic borders, thereby affirming meaning-making in a multicultural, multimodal, and multilingual activity.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has contextualized the notion of experiential translation within the paradigm of Haryanvi Folklore, particularly one ritual, *Sanjhi*. It has attempted to showcase the transfer between a verbal and a non-verbal or non-written sign system along with a transfer or shift of meanings between non-verbal or non-written sign systems as an experiential, intersemiotic translation. Experiential translation begins when *Sanjhi* is created on the wall where the transfer of meaning is from a mere idea to a visual medium where one is envisioning *Sanjhi*, and later creates it. Once the *Sanjhi* has been created on the wall, it is now worshipped by women by singing *aartis* and hence, exists in an oral medium, where translations are happening from a visual to an oral medium simultaneously. Later, the words of *Sanjhi* sung as a ritual exist in the non-written medium and become performative on multiple levels. In all three stages, transfer of meaning takes place between verbal and non-written sign systems, and hence experiential translation occurs. The chapter argued that such acts are all acts of experiential translation; thus, *Sanjhi* is translated experientially. Our ethnography translates the ritual in the moment, where the experiences of the ethnographer as well as the performer are translated holistically, by further establishing the ethnographer to be the translator of the source text—*Sanjhi*. At the same time, the chapter discussed *Sanjhi* as a sensorial experience, which empowers Haryanvi women, who act as translators, performers, and the audience by defying linguistic borders and performing a meaning-making activity amidst a multimodal state.

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# 3 Translating a Countermonument

## Reflections on the Translation of a Community-Focus Artistic Project into a Short-Story Collection

*Francesca Mirabile*

### Introduction

In 2022, I attempted to experientially translate a cultural event and public artwork, called *Sanctuary*, that was taking place in Bedworth, UK. My experiential translation set out to create a new experience that would provide (again, or for the first time) its audience with the possibility to recreate a similar space to the one generated by *Sanctuary* in order to stimulate reactions, emotions and thoughts similar to those experienced by *Sanctuary*'s audience. In other words, my process was intended as an attempt to overcome linguistic and sensory barriers in translation. The project involved the translation of the interactive and performative public artwork into a short story collection. The collection, which will be analyzed in more detail later, reflects the physical structure of *Sanctuary* itself as much as possible, trying to express the materiality of the artefact through the tangible structure of the book. It is composed of ten short stories, linked to each other via the use of the same characters, settings, or specific wording. By reading and interacting with it, the audience should be able to recreate an environment similar to the one originated by *Sanctuary*; hence, to generate a similar experience.

This chapter analyses the main aspects of the process of experiential translation and offers an empirical point of view to the discussion around this topic. In particular, it focuses on the recreation of a personal and public artistic experience through my practice of translation, taking into account the perspectives of some of the people who took part in *Sanctuary* (specifically, those who helped me in my research practice by agreeing to be interviewed) and reflecting on the role of the readers of the short story collection. It also questions the readers' role and suggests defining them as performers, given that their involvement with the translated product is anything but passive and seeks active interaction with the re-created experience.

The first section of the chapter starts with a description of what *Sanctuary* was and what it concerned. Then, in order to get ready for its translation, it also defines its nature as 'countermonument'. Consequently, it analyses the problematics of translating a countermonument and the decisions taken to

DOI: [10.4324/9781003462569-6](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003462569-6)

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overcome them (where possible), especially in relation to concepts of experiential and intersemiotic translation, and transcreation.

The second section digs further into my process of experiential translation. I translated *Sanctuary* through the writing of a collection of short stories, whose inspiration was drawn from my personal experience of the event and the interviews I conducted in place with the constructors, the volunteers and the visitors. The section, therefore, analyses the composing phase of the project, in terms of interview methodology, research approaches and results of these choices. Then, it explains the book's structure and stylistic reasons behind its title and each story's plot, character and position within the book.

The third section explains in detail the findings of the research and how they informed the translation process that resulted in the completed stories. Then, it uses the example of the second short story to serve as a case study to show the process applied to think, structure and write the book.

Finally, my conclusion explains which aspects of the project could have been improved and possible future outcomes. Moreover, it marks the importance of a practical example, deeply studied and analyzed, in order to better understand the process of experiential translation.

## Sanctuary

### *What Was Sanctuary?*

In May 2022, the Miner's Welfare Park of the city of Bedworth hosted a 20-metre-tall architectural structure, entirely built with recycled wood. The project, named *Sanctuary*, was commissioned by Artichoke Trust, and produced in collaboration with Imagineer Productions.<sup>1</sup> Funding came from Arts Council England, Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council, Warwickshire County Council and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) Culture Recovery Fund. Two teams of volunteers built *Sanctuary*: the first one was made up of professional builders from the Burning Man Festival<sup>2</sup> (in Nevada, USA) and led by architect David Best. They were mentoring the second group of builders, formed by young locals, who got the chance to learn more about carpentering art. Moreover, Artichoke had selected a group of volunteers called 'Guardians' who helped on the days of the exhibition and provided visitors with information about *Sanctuary* and how to interact with it. *Sanctuary* was built in two weeks and opened to the public for one week. In the end, the entire structure was set on fire by its constructors in front of a public audience of two thousand people. Very much explicative of the whole project was its tagline: "*Sanctuary: built to burn; designed to heal*" (Artichoke, 2022).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, during the time it lasted, people (whether visitors, constructors, or volunteers) had the opportunity to commemorate their losses especially, but not only, those due to Covid-19. They could express their grief freely by interacting with the monument itself, leaving an object in it, writing something on its walls, or just walking inside and outside of it. Symbolically,

the final, planned combustion allowed the release and acceptance of emotions. *Sanctuary* was intended to be a space to mourn and for rebirth, to remember and let go.

The builders, Guardians and thousands of visitors took part in *Sanctuary* and, somehow, became part of it, through the stories collected inside the building and the lost people they evoked. The tangible human presence contributed to the creation of a community-impactful project as much as the material and singular presence of the physical building did. Together these two elements generated a cathartic atmosphere for everyone to experience. While on-site to experience the project as well as to gather the relevant information to later translate it, the fascination of this whole experience raised a question in me. Given the fact that such a thing is not replicable in regular daily lives, how can we translate it in a way that makes it more accessible to those who were not there? In other words, how can a translation achieve a similar experience? The matter around this subject is that it concerns the translation of both a material object (the building) and the experience it provides people with (the interaction with the building). To these, it should be added the sense of community and participation that people felt, as everyone dealt with the uniqueness of private sorrow and put that into relation with those of others.

#### *Preparing for the Translation: How Could Sanctuary Be Defined?*

Before attempting a translation, it was fundamental to understand better what the subject of the translation (the “source text”—Díaz-Millón and Olvera-Lobo, 2021) was. It was important to know how to describe it in order to translate it accurately later or to acknowledge its untranslatable aspects. Indeed, as also Lee (2022) suggests with a particular focus on the translation of experimental poetry, when it comes to translating something, it would be preferable to undertake a deep study of the source text, first. This is needed because the process of translation and the product that derives from it do not aim to imitate the source text (which would be impossible to obtain, given the presence of untranslatable elements) but to re-create its impact on people. Therefore, by adopting what Lee calls a ludic approach, we will be able to understand the nature of the source text and to determine its translatable and untranslatable aspects. How to define *Sanctuary*, then?

Because of its above-mentioned features, it seemed reasonable not to consider *Sanctuary* a regular monument. Indeed, its short life and planned destruction contrasted the definition of ‘monument’ given by both Savage (2018)—who addresses them as forms of public commemoration intending to recall immortality and eternal-lasting—and Purcell (2003)—who states that a monument’s meaning is “always determined by an intersection of architectural intentions, viewer reactions, and historical interpretations” (p. 57). *Sanctuary* did not show any of the qualifications listed by Savage and just a few of Purcell’s. It seemed more a reminder of the mortality and caducity of human life and the acceptance of this condition. Hence, it appears more apt to refer

to *Sanctuary* as a countermonument. Countermonuments are those buildings “whose absence of physical presence would allow the surrounding debate to take on the memorial function” (Stubblefield, 2011, p. 3). Moreover, they usually imply an active engagement from the audience (Osborne, 2017) and, consequently, the creation of a performative action between individuals and the buildings’ construction and/or destruction (Starzmann, 2016).

### *Translating a Countermonument*

The source text of my translation project was a countermonument, with all the implications relating to it. It included an architectural structure, all the types of interactions that people could have with it (building, experiencing and destroying it), and related feelings (sorrow, happiness, sense of community and so on). Therefore, the source text itself was a “volatile compound” (Emmerich, 2017, p. 2) that changed according to people’s perspectives and experiences of *Sanctuary*. My translation concerned both the materiality and the immateriality of the source text, and it needed to somehow re-establish a similar dialogue between the work of art and its audience in order to generate sensations isomorphic to those that *Sanctuary* provoked in people.

All these arguments led me to a few pivotal decisions. First of all, to approach my translation as a form of art-based research. Art-based research “addresses complex and often subtle interactions, and it provides an image of those interactions in ways that make them noticeable. In a sense, [through] arts-based research ... we deepen and make more complex our understanding of some aspects of the world” (Barone and Eisner, 2012, p. 3). Other advantages of using this approach were inquiring the arts through arts themselves (McNiff, 2008), the “interpretative license” (Finley, 2008, p. 72) of creating multiple, interpretative meanings (Bochner and Riggs, 2014) inherent to arts-based research. Hence, approaching my source text through an artistic lens would allow me to engage in the kind of deep reading suggested by Lee. Furthermore, the wide accessibility of arts-based research, which was also important to my translation in order to reflect the community aspects of the original artwork, is also hugely acknowledged (Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund, 2018; Jacobs, 2008; Leavy, 2020, to name a few).

Secondly, I had to choose what type of *art* my translation would employ. I decided on writing, because, as Jacobs (2008) argues, stories are at the core of human experience since they have always been a means to teach, narrate and facilitate the understanding of our world. It is also for this reason that Banks (2008) favours the use of literary fiction to report research. In particular, I opted for writing a collection of ten short stories, as this format would allow me the exploration of multiple points of view through the main characters’ eyes. Moreover, it would emulate the freedom of interaction and performative opportunities that *Sanctuary* provided its audience with. Similarly, my collection gives the chance to the readers to either read all the stories

or to focus on them individually, as a stand-alone product on which to reflect and with which to identify. Further, fiction allows readers to explore real and imagined facts and the way they mix, interact and are experienced (Denzin, 2012). Consequently, the world illustrated in the collection combines real and fictional elements in order to reflect the results of my research, and rather than focusing attention on the fictionality or reality of characters, the reader (and the author) is enabled to pay attention to the characters' interiority (Coles, 1998).

To actuate this translation, a special focus on the wording was necessary, given that words were my main construction material. Following Neilsen (2008, p. 94), I have sought "the language that best creates intimate and ethical connections" between the source text and the new receivers of the translation. Particular consideration has been given to tropes, semiotic and sensory interplay, to communicate grief, mourning, happiness, and relief. Through a considerate use of "metaphors, recursiveness, silence, sensory immersion, and resonance" (ibid, p. 96), the readers and the author have been afforded a self-identification with the characters' feelings and emotions, leading to a process of catharsis. Also, to ease this process, there are intentional gaps in the narrative, generating a certain ambiguity and, consequently, a space for the reader's interpretation and critical thinking (Abbot, 2009). This space, called "liminality" (Neilsen, 2008), is generated by the inadequacy of languages to fill the gap between the real world and the words used to describe it. The presence of this gap is a matter that translators are well aware of (McKay, 2004), and which I had to acknowledge myself through this project. However, using language "in a way that flirts with its own destruction" (McKay, 2004, p. 32) can at least in part overcome these difficulties. Indeed, the collection of short stories translates *Sanctuary* and the way the countermonument has dialogued with people by playing with its own liminality, providing the reader with a space for reflection, interpretation and identification, but also for expression and understanding of the self as a *per se* and as an individual in relation to the world.

### *Types of Translation Used*

It could be said, then, that this project has been shaped into a *translation*, more than just a reductive *narration*. Narrating *Sanctuary* would have been a passive, descriptive activity, while the collection of short stories explains, justifies and evokes *Sanctuary's* experience and uses words as a means to do so. Indeed, to underline the materiality of the language, which is here almost a 'carpentry' tool, it is more appropriate to state that it translates *with* words and not *into* words. Traditional notions of linguistic translation are inapplicable to this context, and new tools were needed to undertake the project. Research and attendance at the first conference of the Experiential Translation Network<sup>4</sup> led me to approach the concepts of 'experiential translation' and 'transcreation'. The first one explores "translation between languages (interlingual) and

between media (intersemiotic) as a method of creation and communication” ([Experiential Translation, 2022](#)). More accurately, experiential translation

views translation as a holistic, co-creative process of discovery and renewal in a dynamic ecological context where Western anthropocentric discourse is displaced by a pluriverse of local and global, analogue and digital, (dis)embodied voices.... It can be understood as a holistic, in-the-moment, often shared and plural process which operates in the translation of culture, community, voices of nature, place and environments.  
([Campbell and Vidal, 2024](#), p. 3)

It is therefore clear how experiential translation could be applied to my translation of *Sanctuary*, specifically because it helps to build a translational bridge between two media that differ one from the other for their materiality (in my case, an artefact made of wood and a book made of words) while also referring to the immaterial aspect of an experience by considering in a translation cultural, community, spatial and natural contexts (which were all present in *Sanctuary* and that have similarly been recreated in the collection).

The second concept, that of transcreation, uses creativity as a practice to translate ([Gaballo, 2012](#)) and adapt the source to the context of the final product ([Fernández Rodríguez, 2019](#)), while also preserving the core aim of the source ([Benetello, 2018](#); [Pedersen, 2017](#)). It is a translation-based activity “used to make sure that the target text is the same as the source text in every aspect: style, the images and emotions it evokes and its cultural background” ([Díaz-Millón and Olvera-Lobo, 2021](#), p. 357). Again, this was highly relevant to my practice, as it helped specifically during the preparation study of the translation. By analyzing the source text, it was possible to establish the constraints and the limits within which I could build the target text. It could be said that while my translation is predominantly experiential, transcreation has been a useful support to establish and delimit a construction site (the space) for my creative practice to take place.

While being aware of the issues related to the definitions of intersemiotic translation ([Dusi, 2015](#)),<sup>5</sup> my project has also adopted it for its capacity to “take advantage of the semiotic difference between source and target to generate competing and otherwise unprompted creative opportunities in the target system” ([Queiroz et al., 2021](#), p. 959). In other words, while transcreational practice has shaped the building site I have worked in, intersemiotic practice has created the opportunity for me to play (within the constraints of the site) with the two extremes of the translation (source and target texts) and with everything *in-between* them. This has stimulated new creative experiments and attempts that I tested to find those that seemed the best fit to translate the experiences analyzed.

Therefore, through intersemiotic translation and transcreation, the source text is seen as a conceptual space where creative translation can take place within the limits established by certain constraints (such as the

non-alteration of Sanctuary's mission and the intent to transfer this same mission to another context and artform, but also its aspects of materiality and immateriality). Combining these two tools has therefore been extremely helpful in making my experiential translation as accurate and detailed as possible, but also in shaping its performative element in a way that would recreate the environment of *Sanctuary* in a different context (that of the short stories).

## Of Wrenching Beauty

### *Project Phases*

Translating *Sanctuary* implied getting to know people's experience of it. I was on site for three days in order to observe and take part in each of its three phases: building, opening day and burning. Each day, I conducted interviews with constructors, guardians, volunteers and visitors, trying to understand the reason(s) they attended and how they were interacting with it. The main investigation involved people's inner sphere, therefore the subjectivity of their feelings and sensations was at the core of the research. Epistemologically, an interpretative approach allowed me "to 'get inside' the minds of subjects and see the world from their point of view" (Veal and Burton, 2014, p. 33).

The project comprised two phases: data collection (and analysis), and data elaboration into short stories (or, how to organize the collection).

### *First Phase*

In total, eleven interviews were collected and used. To make sure candidates met essential age criteria (they needed to be over 18 to be able to give their consent to be interviewed), demographic data was collected at first. Careful consideration was given to "the nature and wording of the questions asked" (Babbie, 2021, p. 254) so as not to hurt anyone's sensibility. The questions followed Torreggiani (2011) for a professional and easy-to-follow structure.

While demographic data looked at age, ethnicity, gender, nationality, place of residence and role at *Sanctuary*, qualitative first-person accounts were fundamental for "responding to the direction in which interviewees take the interview and perhaps adjusting the emphases in the research as a result of significant issues emerging in the course of interviews" (Bryman et al., 2009, pp. 465–499). Interviews were semi-guided and questions open-ended, allowing to cover those aspects of the experience that participants felt more relevant for them. The structure was threefold and covered aspects of building, visiting and burning *Sanctuary*. Specifically, the main interest concerned how *Sanctuary* was perceived and described, as well as the emotions and feelings released during the event. Along this, particular attention was given to wording, people's similar experiences and comparisons, and the motivation leading them there.

Also, I took notes of my personal impressions and feelings. This was meant to be something for personal memory only, but it turned out to be useful material to overcome some difficulties that came up later on (see *Difficulties encountered and project's limits*).

### *Second Phase*

Interviews were initially recorded and then transcribed manually and listened to several times. Keywords were detected and then highlighted in the transcriptions. Transcriptions were useful to identify the frequency of specific words and phrases, concepts and the most used terminology. However, the vocal emphasis given by the interviewees was also an important factor to take into consideration. Some words were pronounced more softly and delicately than others, and this contributed to reporting one more element of materiality and affect into the collection. Indeed, these words have been used in the stories when I wanted to convey the delicacy of a moment or a character. The stories were then developed starting from this data.

Following this, I conceived, structured and organized the stories within the collection according to the principles of transcreation (to delimit my working space according to some elements of the source text that had to somehow be translated in the target one), intersemiotic translation (that was a *space-in-between* two different media, where to practice and test my creativity in relation to the boundaries established through the transcreation process) and experiential translation (which is where my project has landed and was brought alive by the realization of the short stories collection). Therefore, the structure of the book has been decided according to each story's plot, topics, specific wording and the messages to convey. Stories conveyed the research's findings mainly through their plots and word choices. It is important to note that plots are not related to interviewees' life events and personal experiences. They fully come from my imagination; any similarity is not intended.<sup>6</sup>

### *The (Attempt of a) Translation*

As already mentioned, the translation was a matter of both materiality and immateriality of the source text. To translate the materiality of *Sanctuary* and the materiality of the interaction with it (in other words, the materiality of the countermonument), the book constitutes a miniature countermonument itself. Readers are invited to dialogue with it, to use it not just as a collection of words, but as an instrument to explore the inner self. There is a double use of the book. First, people can read it as they prefer, in the same way they were free to interact with *Sanctuary*. Therefore, they can perform an inner reading, read aloud, or perform a group reading. Second, they are invited to dialogue with the book (again, free expression is encouraged), and therefore everything is allowed, and people are asked to write in and on it,<sup>7</sup> and to burn it at the

end. Therefore, it is almost inappropriate to call the readers ‘readers’; it would be better to call those who will read and interact with the book the ‘performers’, given that they will (supposedly) perform an action with and on the book.

Coming to the structure of the collection, it is important to underline that nothing was left to chance, and there is a motivation behind every word choice (as there was a motivation behind everything planned in *Sanctuary*). The title of the collection, *Of Wrenching Beauty*, comes from a translated quotation of the poem *De conmovedora belleza*, an adaptation of a poem by Frida Kahlo posted online by blogger Frida la LoKa (LoKa, 2022).<sup>8</sup> The poem opens the collection, and it was chosen because it mirrored both my writing process and my interviewees’ experience of *Sanctuary* in dealing with the struggle of expressing its inexpressible beauty. I have translated it into English according to my knowledge of Spanish and the history of Romance languages, but its English version is not the work of a professional. The last line (the one that gives the title to my collection) represented the biggest issue of the translation. Especially the word ‘conmovedora’, that, in Spanish, conveys pain, struggle and amusement at the same time. Its translation into *wrenching* is an etymological and rhythmic choice. Indeed, *wrenching* has inside the Latin root of *vergere*, meaning *to turn* or *to tend toward*. ‘Conmovedora’ comes from *cum+muovere*, meaning *to move with*. Both, then, express an inner movement, a tendency toward something (Onions, 1966). Moreover, it strikes me that both the affective and sonic weight of *Wrenching* is closer to ‘Conmovedora’ than other possible options (i.e., ‘rending’, ‘harrowing’).

Every story starts with an external quotation from another author, which recalls its main themes. This is an implicit invitation to the performer-reader to explore further literature, finding empathy and new ways to express the self. It is also a support to my own narration and translation, borrowing words from other writers.

The book is structured into four sections and an epilogue. The first three sections contain three stories each, while the fourth one stands on its own with one story only. Every story focuses on a ‘type’ of protagonist and mirrors a stage of *Sanctuary*’s life. Given that answers were similar according to the interviewees’ role, each section focuses on a specific role. In particular:

- **Section 1**—*Eyes of artist (or, to build from death)*—is based on the answers interviewees gave regarding the reasons and motivations behind *Sanctuary*’s construction. Protagonists are people who use art to celebrate life.
- **Section 2**—*Mind of guardian (or, to look after memories)*—is based on participants’ answers regarding their interactions with *Sanctuary*. Protagonists are people who hold onto their memories and look for a way to deal with them. One story is more self-oriented and based on my reflections about my *Sanctuary* experience (see *Difficulties encountered and project’s limits*).
- **Section 3**—*Heart of destroyer (or, to deal with life)*—is based on how interviewees described the burning and the emotions related to it. Protagonists are people who deal with an irreversible change and face life after that.

Each story could stand on its own, but they are also all linked, as the main character or the event of one story usually appears in the background as a secondary character or event in another one (i.e., Red, the protagonist of the second story, appears as a secondary character in *Candlelight*—the third story—and is briefly mentioned in *Reflections by Ruby, realist*—the sixth story). Moreover, to recall the materiality of the translation and the source text, all the stories connect through the elements central to *Sanctuary* (wood and fire), that are mentioned at least once in each of them. Protagonists' names evoke fire, too: they are shades of red or fire elements and are positioned in the collection in a *crescendo* mirroring the stories' tone.<sup>9</sup> Finally, all the stories mention a vague place or a building that could implicitly be *Sanctuary*, but, freeing readers' interpretation, could be any 'safe' space.

To strengthen the stories into a concatenation, every story's first word was precisely chosen. Their first letter (which has been visually highlighted through the use of a different colour and the capital format) is part of the word *Sanctuary*. Therefore, if we read just the first letter of each story in the order they follow in the book, they create a 'chain' across the book, generating the tenth story's title and first word: *Sanctuary*. More than as a chain, this should be viewed as a ring: it can either be the nine stories that generate the last one or, turning the book upside down, the last story could disintegrate to generate the other nine. This concatenation of letters is meant to visually translate the bonding between individuals generated in *Sanctuary's* context.

Section four contains one story, and it is entirely dedicated to the exploration of the community bond originated within and by *Sanctuary*. It shows how community is generated by gathering different individuals, each of whom maintains their status as a single person but also chooses to share something of their personality with others. To resemble this finding, the tenth story is not newly invented and written. On the contrary, it could be defined as a 'collage' of paragraphs and sentences taken from the previous nine. The last sentence is the only one not coming from the other stories, but it is instead taken from Kahlo's poem. Across the story, a few verbal tenses have been adapted to give a logical sense of cohesion.

In the epilogue, or conclusion, I have addressed a letter to the readers (or performers) and invited them to build their own story of grief and sorrow. They are provided with a few blank pages where to express feelings in the way they prefer, as also *Sanctuary's* participants have done. Then, the final invitation is to burn the book, accomplishing, with its destruction, its transformation from the standard book into a small, literary countermonument, and finalizing my process of experiential translation. The wish is that readers recognize and express their sorrow, dealing with it. This illustrates the strongly performative elements of both the source text of *Sanctuary* and of my experiential translation.

### *Difficulties Encountered and Project's Limits*

The whole process of gathering data, the way to do it, how to analyze the findings and which was the best way to reorganize them into short stories, along with how to structure the whole collection, has been long and full of rethinking. Taking notes of the difficulties encountered during this work has allowed me to reach the stage of translation presented here and has offered me the possibility to open new enquiries that can be explored further in future.

First of all, the whole work was made on a relatively tight deadline and could not be expanded (especially in terms of the number of participants) to more questions. Of course, the main difficulties and limitations concerned interviews and translational aspects. As per interviews, it would have been helpful to get insights from more participants, instead of being limited to the eleven gathered. This would have allowed me to work on a bigger spectrum in terms of diversity among interviewees. Moreover, this research could have been enriched by the words of *Sanctuary's* architect, David Best and Artichoke's Director, Helen Marriage, as originally planned. Due to their busy schedules on those days, though, this could not be done. To integrate their insights, I have listened to interviews and press releases (see bibliography). Nevertheless, these did not answer specifically the questions I meant to ask—consequently, material from press releases was not used in data analysis, even though it helped to get a sense of their visions.

In terms of the collected interviews (that were used in the analysis and the stories), the research presented here is not comprehensive of all participants' viewpoints, as it aimed to represent only what has been observed and registered during interviews and personal attendance on-site.

On this same topic, my role as a translator presented two main difficulties. Firstly, English being my second language, expressing certain thoughts was sometimes difficult. This happened because the English language used in the interviews somehow 'clashed' with the Italian expressions that came to my mind during the writing process. When this issue occurred, instead of forcing myself to use English, I wrote a story or a paragraph in my native language and only later on translated it into English. Usually, I just wrote down my thoughts as they came (either in English or not) and then reorganized the whole story. This process took longer, but it has been efficient from the linguistic viewpoint, allowing deep research into terminology, etymology and sentence structure. Secondly, excluding my own vision and experience of *Sanctuary* from the story writing was difficult (not to say impossible), especially because I had been there and experienced it myself. Therefore, I resolved (also following [Campbell and Vidal, 2019](#) and [Malmkjær, 2020](#), on the role and visibility of the translator) that it would be better to directly state my presence as a translator, instead of trying to 'hide' it. Consequently, the fourth short story is mainly (but not only) based on my experience of *Sanctuary*, my annotations and reflections on it. The story also reflects on differences within languages' expressions and the above-mentioned difficulties encountered by

bilingual people. Nevertheless, “the translator cannot disappear. Access to the original can never be direct, unmediated, or complete, because the translator’s presence, and thus the trace of the present, are ineradicable” (Hjorth, 2014, p. 138).

Finally, feedback on the stories and proofreading were provided by peers and friends, to make sure that *Of Wrenching Beauty* would indeed provide the readers with a space for reflecting as I had meant it to be. I would have appreciated feedback from interviewees as well, but, despite two of them giving their consent to do that, they changed their mind when I got in contact with them, because of personal circumstances.

Moreover, during the research, unresolved questions linked to some of the analyzed topics have arisen:

- 1 Since in a countermonument people interact with and modify a structure’s original shape, are artists divisible from visitors/participants? Or are the visitors/participants to be considered artists too? Eventually, what separates these two roles?
- 2 Can the efficacy and the effectiveness of an experiential translation and the product of a transcreation be measured? If so, how?
- 3 Are *Sanctuary*’s effects on people temporary or long-lasting? Is it possible to keep translating *Sanctuary*’s impact after the building has been destroyed?
- 4 Can a project like the one illustrated here be somehow helpful in evaluating the engagement generated by public arts?
- 5 Which is the best practice in terms of translating the immaterial side of an experience? Could that be by using performativity (therefore, could immateriality maybe be translated through performativity?)

Despite this not being the place to answer them, they represent possible future expansions of this research and the opportunity for a broader study in the sector.

### **Stories and Findings in More Detail**

This section gives a deeper overview of the first nine stories, the way they were conceived, and the findings they try to express. As already mentioned, the last one gathers them all in one place.<sup>10</sup>

#### *Section One*

##### **First story: *Intertwined***

Most frequent words used during interviews: *Giving back to the universe; our relations with nature.*

Findings: All constructors felt a deep bond with nature and focused on building *Sanctuary* as a way to give back something positive to the universe and community.

Translation: Through the story plot and parallelism between the life of the tree and the life of Ginger, the protagonist.

**Second story:** *Red*

Most frequent words used during interviews: *build, find, loose.*

Findings: focused arts activities help us think of and elaborate mourning. The art activity that the protagonist performs has also been proposed to constructors during *Sanctuary's* construction.

Translations: the topic of the main dialogue.

**Third story:** *Candlelight*

Most frequent words used during interviews: *community feeling, flames, friends, family.*

Findings: crew members feel a deep bond between them, resembling but not totally similar to a family one.

Translation: plot and word choice

*Section Two*

**Fourth story:** *Big City Life*

Most frequent words used during interviews: n/a

Findings: it is impossible to completely remove the self from such a project. Therefore, it is better to give space to my personal experience of *Sanctuary*, and the way I am dealing with this translation in terms of cultural and linguistic differences. There are differences in conceiving and speaking about death among people of different cultures and backgrounds. The word death was used only once in the interviews and the verb to die had zero frequency.

Translation: dialogue between two people representing past versus present, the tendency to stick to traditions versus the desire to experiment with new things, remembering versus letting go of emotions

**Fifth story:** *Lady Coral*

Most frequent words used during interviews: *treasured memories; let go of.*

Findings: while most of the visitors said *Sanctuary* was inexpressible, the building crew strove to look for the right words.

Translation: plot; dialogues; parallelism between Lady Coral (the protagonist) and a building (*Sanctuary?*).

**Sixth story:** *Reflections by Ruby, Realist*

Most frequent words used during interviews: *sceptical, scepticism, doubt.*

Findings: Two interviewees were sceptical about *Sanctuary's* utility and one of them changed their mind during the interview, reconsidering their position.

Translation: Format of narration (almost a stream of consciousness + use of first person) and plot of the story.

### *Section Three*

#### **Seventh story:** *Sparks*

Most frequent words used during interviews: *sparks, going high in the sky.*

Findings: Why burn *Sanctuary* and what it means to people? Some interviewees (but none of the constructors) were reluctant towards setting *Sanctuary* on fire.

Translation: Dialogue on the explanation of what destruction can mean and symbolize.

#### **Eighth story:** *Making Working Shaping*

Most frequent words used during interviews: *Destruction and release of feelings/emotions.*

Findings: Justification for burning *Sanctuary*: freeing people, helping the release of emotions, acceptance of certain life circumstances

Translation: Plot and dialogues.

#### **Ninth story:** *Annihilment*

Most frequent words used during interviews: *being part of, belonging to.*

Findings: Majority of interviewees found that *Sanctuary* has strengthened their belonging to a place or a group of people.

Translation: Format of narration (first person), plot.

### *An Example—the Case of Red, the Second Story*

*Red* is the second short story of the collection (see [Figure 3.1](#) for the incipit).

The letter will constitute, in the tenth story, the first <a> of the word ‘Sanctuary’. The story is narrated using the third person, but it follows the stream of thoughts of Red, the protagonist, during a specific day of his life. His name recalls the fire from a visual point of view and is in the middle of the scale of shades of red composing the first section. Indeed, the protagonist of the previous story was Ginger (a lighter shade of red) and the main character of the story after that is Scarlet (a more intense gradation of the same colour). Mirroring this scale, also the protagonists and the plots are ‘lighter’, ‘medium’ and ‘more intense’. While *Intertwined* features a man who gets lost in sorrow and, at the very end of the story, sees the spark of his rebirth, *Candlelight* puts on scene the story of a woman who was covered in sorrow but has already found her way through it and is now surrounded by love and affection (and is ready to give this love back to others). To analyze the process

## Red

*Tedy si najednou s údivem uvědomil, že není nešťasten.  
Sabinina fyzická přítomnost byla mnohem méně důležitá, než tušil.  
Důležitá byla zlatá stopa, čarovná stopa,  
kterou vtiskla do jeho života a o kterou ho nikdo nemohl připravit*

*Milan Kundera, Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí*

**A**t that point in the day, his hands were moving almost mechanically. Despite being a little listless for not understanding the point of what he was doing, he had worked on that panel in a methodical and precise way. Nonetheless, he had followed the directions received to the letter. In front of him there was a huge table, at least five or six meters long, entirely covered with scraps of wood. Not a single piece was the same as the others. Each wooden part was cut and filed in a different way, and it was one of a kind for dimensions and shades. His job was to fit them together. The task seemed impossible since it was like tackling a puzzle where no pieces matched. But apparently, he had to do it anyway. Therefore, he found himself there, in front of

Figure 3.1 Incipit of *Red*.

of acceptance *while it is happening*, *Red* analyses the turning point between sorrow and acceptance of it, between feeling left aside by the world and the rediscovery of life, and also between having lost someone and finding them through other ways.

The story begins with Red, who is in an art centre and is composing the name of his lost sister by sticking some pieces of wood waste on a plywood board. He does not really want to be there, but he is doing it to make his parents happy. The thing that seems to annoy him the most is that he does not consider himself an artistic person, especially if compared to his sister, who was a proper artist. The process of making and shaping her name, though, stimulates his thoughts, which start as negative and then turn into more reflective and deeper questions. The dialogue with the director of the centre (who has some singular physical features that will make the reader think about Ginger—is that him?) will lead him to consider other points of view. Specifically, are we all artists? And, even if we are not, does this prevent us from practising art? Why should we make art and how can art help us shape the way we look at life? Some of the questions will remain unanswered, but, at the very end, Red will have gained a new acceptance of himself, his life and his sorrow, and he will find a new way to spiritually connect with his sister.

The story draws inspiration from an activity that was proposed during *Sanctuary's* building phase. Constructors were provided with small pieces of wood and a plywood board. They glued these pieces on the board to

compose the name of someone they loved and lost and, once done, they had to fill the empty gaps on the board until the name disappeared. I took part in this activity and had the chance to talk with participants of that experience while we were all performing it.

## Conclusions

The project *Of Wrenching Beauty* could be a case study and an example of how to translate the experiences provided by a countermonument. In particular, the experiences of builders, volunteers, visitors and mine too (or, more generally, that of the translator/writer). It exemplifies ways through which experiential and intersemiotic translation and transcreation can support the materiality of translation and the materiality (and immateriality) of an experience. This way, words become a carpentry tool with which to construct the translation. Most importantly, *Of Wrenching Beauty* has been an attempt to put into practice the concept of experiential translation. As such, it provides an empirical case study of a field that is still experimenting and challenging itself, and it opens questions and suggestions on how to further develop this rising branch of translation.

## Notes

- 1 Artichoke Trust is a charitable organisation based in London (UK), which works with artists to create large-scale experiences for a general public, aiming to break through the daily ordinary life and bring public arts amongst the general public. They work across all the UK. Imagineer Productions is a charity based in Coventry (UK) specialised in the making of outdoor and site-specific work at the intersection of art and engineering.
- 2 <https://burningman.org/>
- 3 To better understand the whole project, visit its website: <https://sanctuary-event.com/>
- 4 Performative & Experiential Translation: Meaning-Making through Language, Art and Media. King's College London, 13–15 July 2022 <https://experientialtranslation.net/research/conference/>
- 5 They mainly concern the distinction between translation, inspiration, and new creation; to these, it should be added eventually copywriting matters, and in which measure an author/translator can alter the original source (Każmierczak, 2020).
- 6 In the context of Covid-19 and, generally, of losses of loved ones, it can inevitably happen that someone has gone through a similar experience, other readers included.
- 7 It can be a word or an entire story. Many blank pages are provided at the end, but no one must be limited to them only and the whole book can be used.
- 8 <https://fridalaloka.com/2022/07/14/de-conmovedora-belleza/>
- 9 Section 1 protagonists are: Ginger, Red, Scarlet.  
Section 2 protagonists are: Amber, Coral, Ruby.  
Section 3 protagonists are: Spark, Ember, Ash.
- 10 I am currently preparing the short story collection for publication. If you'd like to find out more about this and/or about my work, please get in touch at [francescamirabile7@gmail.com](mailto:francescamirabile7@gmail.com)

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Section 2

# Sites and Sounds



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# 4 The National Covid Memorial Wall as a Translation Site

*Mary Wardle*

## Introduction

The urban ethnographer Michael Peter Smith argues that, far from being homogenous sites, today's global cities are the product of their "differing histories and unique articulations of contemporary economic, political, and cultural flows coming together within their borders" (Smith, 2000, p. 54). Similarly, in defining her concept of "Translation Sites"—locations that include schools, libraries, bridges, museums, as well as more informal settings such as restaurants, shops, and neighbourhoods—Sherry Simon describes them more specifically as polyglot places "shaped by conversations across languages" (2019, p. 1). She argues that translation sites, rather than being neutral or passive spaces, are in fact active sites of cultural negotiation and contestation, shaped by historical, political and social forces, reflecting the power dynamics between languages and cultures.

In the light of these comments, this chapter describes and analyses one such site, the *National Covid Memorial Wall* along the Albert Embankment in London, discussing first the historical-cultural significance of its location within the urban landscape from a multidisciplinary perspective, before moving on to outline the process that led to the creation of the Wall and its role in memorializing the loss of life since the outbreak of the Covid pandemic. The Wall is a 500-metre public space, unsanctioned by the authorities, produced collectively by volunteers and bereaved families and friends of Covid victims. The over 200,000 red hearts painted onto the Wall represent each of the people who, to date, have died in the UK with Covid-19 on their death certificate. The chapter closes with an analysis of the Wall as multimodal communication, an example of experiential translation in that it transforms the grief of the contributors into a visual, textual reality, which is in constant evolution and, as such, capable of transforming memory into a dynamic process rather than a static product. The experiential element is also present in the reception of the Wall, for visitors who experience the individual narratives both as single accounts but also as a collective whole.

DOI: [10.4324/9781003462569-8](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003462569-8)

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### Simon's Concept of Translation Sites

Simon (2019) identifies translation sites as belonging to a variety of categories including 'Memory', as exemplified by the Space of Synagogues in Lviv, in Ukraine, what might be termed a 'traditional' memorial in that it was created specifically to commemorate—in this case, the synagogues that once stood in this space and, of course, the Jewish people that once worshipped in them (p. 15); a second category Simon outlines is that of 'Crossroads', illustrated with the Chungking Mansions in Hong Kong, a maze of shops, apartments, cheap tourist rooms and eating places all housed in a complex described as "the most globalized building in the world" (Simon, 2019, p. 123), remarkable even in the context of a highly cosmopolitan and diverse city such as Hong Kong; 'Thresholds' make up a third grouping, spaces at the cross-point between two or more territories, typically borders and frontiers. The most obvious examples might be the bilingual areas around territorial borders but Simon proposes also the liminal space between our mind and the outside world or between private and public space as an example. To illustrate this category, she discusses different artistic representations of St Jerome, the patron saint of translators, and in particular, Antonello da Messina's renowned "Saint Jerome in his Study" (c. 1475), where the observer crosses a threshold and enters a physical space that is both private and open to the world (p. 159). The site of translation within the painting, therefore, is at once the body of the translator as he carries out his activity but also the physical space he inhabits and the situatedness of that space within the wider world.

Following in Simon's footsteps, this chapter presents a translation site of its own and "the impact of language interactions on daily life" (Simon, 2019, p. 1): the National Covid Memorial Wall along the Albert Embankment in London embodies the same functions as the three sites mentioned above insofar as it represents the memorialization of the lives lost to Covid, as well as standing at the crossroads of a multilingual, multicultural society, and outlines the threshold between individual stories and public space. In light of current research into embodied cognition, there is a strong case to be made for the "suggestion that meaning is grounded in mental representations of perception, emotion and ... movement" (Wardle, 2022, p. 32), creating an intersection, by extension, between translation practice and the physical dimension. The chapter will, therefore, outline how the Wall, alongside making a clear political statement, can also be interpreted as constituting part of the griefwork of the collective, representing as it does a public manifestation of the embodied experience of thousands of relatives and friends of victims and providing a concrete, socially-situated focal point for visitors.

### The Site

Sherry Simon refers to the places she investigates as exhibiting the "seams and sutures of history" over which we can "trace the outlines of new language geographies" (Simon, 2012, p. xix). Simon's "language geographies", in this,

echo Tim Lomas' concept of "experiential cartography" (2018, p. 3), where he suggests that the most effective way for us to navigate and comprehend the vast dimensions and intricate complexities of the world, both physical and emotional, is to map it. While conventional maps represent the physical world, for Lomas, "words perform a function comparable to that of maps ... [charting] ... our internal, subjective world of thoughts and feelings, ... our experiential world" (p. 3). Thus, in the case of the National Covid Memorial Wall, the first aspect to be explored is the site *stricto sensu*, the very location of the Wall: in his seminal discussion of the importance of paratextual elements in literature, Gérard Genette (1997) stresses how our reading of a text is influenced by its surroundings. While he is referring to elements such as book covers, prefaces and footnotes, we can expand this approach to include the physical surroundings of any given location and their influence on our experience of place. The positions of Simon, Lomas and Genette can be further integrated with Karin Littau's recent contributions underlining the materiality of all forms of communication including, therefore, translation: "Media are not merely instruments with which writers or translators produce meaning; rather, they *set the framework within which something like meaning becomes possible at all*" (Littau, 2016, p. 83; emphasis in original). This section will therefore outline some of the very many influences, from long before the time of the Covid crisis, that have (in)formed this part of London—inscribed, embodied layers of meaning, we might call them; people, places and events that are an integral part of the city's textual fabric, woven into our collective memory. The city itself, therefore, takes on a performative function, immersing the subject in a multi-dimensional experiential space. As well as literary, artistic and engineering references, the site's pertinent associations with the history of disease and medical practice will be outlined, reflecting Shane Ewen's position in examining "the history of an urban place in the context of its wider economic, social, political, cultural and spatial system, which inevitably locates that place in a wider regional, national, international, and even translational, network" (Ewen, 2016, p. 1). Each section of this network is a product of its time and context, temporally-conditioned, but as the network expands, each section adapts and leaves a trace that, ultimately, we can still perceive today, as part of an ongoing dynamic, embodied whole, a 'source text' that becomes the site for today's experiential translation.

Views of Westminster Bridge have been much represented in art, including works by Canaletto and Monet; literature also records the sight in poems such as William Wordsworth's verses in one of his most celebrated poems, *Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, 3 September 1802*.

The historical context surrounding this poem and the opening of the 19th century in general, saw the British Empire continuing its advance across multiple territories, mirrored in the gradual expansion of its capital city. While the population of London stood at under a million at the dawn of the century, it had trebled by 1861,<sup>1</sup> as it became the largest city in the world, with extensive parts of the urban landscape in desperate poverty and dereliction. One of the less salubrious consequences of this growth was the increase in raw,

untreated sewage being pumped into the River Thames and, effectively, being recycled into the water used by Londoners. Although there was still debate over any possible link between poor water quality and the devastating effect of successive cholera epidemics across the population,<sup>2</sup> one very real side-effect was the appalling smell that hung over the city, culminating in what the press came to dub the “Great Stink”:

What a pity it is that the thermometer fell ten degrees yesterday. Parliament was all but compelled to legislate upon the great London nuisance by the force of sheer stench. The intense heat had driven our legislators from those portions of their buildings which overlook the river. A few members, indeed, bent upon investigating the matter to its very depth, ventured into the library, but they were instantaneously driven to retreat, each man with a handkerchief to his nose. We are heartily glad of it.

(*The Times*, 18 June 1858, cited in [Halliday, 1999](#), p. 71)

In the absence of any clearly defined germ theory<sup>3</sup>, there were fears that malaria or typhus could spread along with the smell, with most people still influenced by the “miasmatic” explanation of disease propagation, whereby fatal conditions such as cholera and the plague were thought to be carried in a miasma of noxious “bad air”, emanating from rotting organic matter ([Halliday, 1999](#), p. 73). Benjamin Disraeli intervened, giving authority and funds to the Metropolitan Board and the engineer Joseph Bazalgette to construct a drainage system. Bazalgette’s plan was for an ambitious network of pumping stations and sewers to be installed, running parallel to the river, interlaced with the existing canals and the railtracks and tunnels of the fledgling Underground system for which work would begin in the same period. Part of the project included the creation of three embankments in central London under which to pass the sewers and railway tunnels, narrowing the river and, ultimately, reclaiming 52 acres of land that were to house roads, walkways and parks (*ibid*, p. 148). In July 1866, work began on the Albert Embankment, running from Vauxhall Bridge, through Lambeth Bridge and onto Westminster Bridge; at around 1.5 km in all, it was the first of the three embankments to be completed, in November 1869. Part of the enormous cost of its construction was recouped by selling the reclaimed land between Lambeth and Westminster bridges to the governors of St Thomas’ Hospital, who had recently been evicted from Southwark to make way for the railway (*ibid*, p. 156).

Although full credit for the elimination of cholera thanks to improved drainage was not given immediately, Bazalgette was, however, fêted from the outset for his spectacular Embankments, with *The Times* commenting: “For the principal engineer, of course, [they] will be a monument of enduring fame, second to none of the great achievements that have marked the Victorian age” (14 July 1870, p. 10, quoted in [Halliday, 1999](#), p. 163). It seems rather fitting, therefore that the Covid Wall should be located now at a site created in circumstances akin to those that it memorializes. This parallel and the

Embankment's proximity to the seat of power—directly across the river from the Houses of Parliament—underscores the close ties that bind political intervention with public health and urban development, all of which mark the city landscape.

As mentioned above, the land alongside the Embankment was to become the new site for St Thomas' Hospital, with the foundation stone laid by Queen Victoria in 1868. Following her pioneering involvement in frontline nursing during the Crimean War, Florence Nightingale became increasingly influential in forming public policy in nursing within the military forces and, crucially, in hospital design and architecture and, thus, she was instrumental in the design of the new hospital. She fervently advocated for wards to be open spaces with high levels of ventilation from external sources and for diseased patients to be placed in isolation (Sutton and Webb, 2004, pp. 908–910). The design used was her preferred pavilion model and St Thomas' became the “most prestigious” (Taylor, 1991, p. 130) of the early pavilion hospitals in Britain. Today, a museum, dedicated to Nightingale's work and legacy, is located within the grounds of the hospital. There is also a direct link with the recent pandemic: the temporary tent-like critical care hospitals set up around the UK by the National Health Service were given the name of Nightingale Hospitals.

Maintaining the medical theme, a short distance along the Embankment from Westminster Bridge, is a striking life-size statue by Martin Jennings, erected in 2016, dedicated to Mary Seacole. Born in Jamaica, Seacole gained experience in nursing cholera and yellow fever patients in Kingston and Panama before sailing to England and then the Crimea, becoming famous for entering the battlefield along with two mules, carrying food and drink to the soldiers and medicine to tend to the sick and dying on the front (Palmer, 2004, p. 587). The monument is generally recognized as the first British statue dedicated to a named Black woman<sup>4</sup> and provides a timely reminder of Britain's colonial past and its effect on those who were colonized, as well as representing a chapter in the medical biography of the capital. A further contribution, evoking more recent events, is the Memorial Plaque, on what has now become the National Covid Memorial Wall, dedicated to the victims of Human Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD), more commonly known as Mad Cow disease. The Plaque was installed by the now-defunct Human BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy) Foundation. The United Kingdom was particularly affected by the outbreak in the 1980s and 1990s with nearly 200 deaths.<sup>5</sup>

And so to the present day: as the Covid virus began to move west from China, to Europe, and Italy in particular, London initially set aside four hospitals to take in any potential patients: St Thomas' was one of these and the grounds of the hospital later housed one of the first vaccination centres, linking the site very much with the present. This long series of different events, protagonists, texts, buildings and memorials inscribe the site therefore with the physical traces of their presence, creating a site of experiential translation written across time, with all elements “readable” today through the in-the-moment nature of embodied experience, as I will show below.

### How the National Covid Memorial Wall Came to Be

As the pandemic took hold and patients began dying from the virus, in the UK, as in other countries, questions were raised in many quarters, including among the general public, about how medical and political authorities were dealing with this new, unknown threat. From very early on in the pandemic, a spontaneous group formed on Facebook, looking for answers for the deaths of their loved ones with accusations of alleged mismanagement of the crisis. They formed a campaign group, *Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice UK* (CBFFJ), asking for a public enquiry into what had already happened and to try and avoid similar casualties in the inevitable second wave. To draw attention to their cause, they joined forces with the activist group Led By Donkeys, “who worked with the founders of CBFFJ to come up with a way of visually representing the catastrophic loss the UK has suffered” (Hall, personal communication, 7 February 2023).<sup>6</sup> In opting for a strong visual impact, an intersemiotic translation of their protest, the group were aiming to raise the curiosity of visitors, to add force to their statement by requiring the audience’s active involvement in decoding the message, their “fruitful participation in the text” to use Clive Scott’s words, as quoted by Vidal and Carter in their discussion of asemic writing and the collaborative effort it requires from the “experiencer” (Vidal and Carter, 2024, p. 85).

On 29 March 2021, with no official mandate, along with volunteers in Covid-compliant ‘bubbles’ of six, they set themselves up, with institutional-looking boards along the Albert Embankment, wearing self-designed branded jackets to project an air of officialdom and began painting red hearts along the 500-metre stretch of wall between Westminster and Lambeth Bridges. The air of officialdom was crucial to deflecting any unwanted attention from the authorities: technically, they were doing something classed as criminal damage, or what Honigsbaum describes as “an audacious act of guerrilla memorialisation” (2023, p. 232), and for which they could have been fined or even arrested. The choice of location, powerfully positioned in the heart of London and directly across the river from the Houses of Parliament, makes a bold political statement in and of itself, exploiting the physical site by transforming it into the embodied context, the material paratext of the text they were creating. Ten days later, on 8 April 2021, there were exactly 152,816 hearts, matching the number of deaths with Covid-19 on the death certificate announced that day. As Fran Hall recounts:

The Wall had been photographed the previous night and the images had been run through image recognition software which counted the number of hearts, enabling us to add the exact number of hearts required to match the Office of National Statistics figure during the morning of that day. That was the day when the Wall was officially ‘opened.’

(personal communication, 7 February 2023)

Once the hearts were in place and the red shapes photographed and digitalized—their forms translated into different materialities, from paint on masonry to pixels on screens, and thereby representing the multiple material aspects of inscription—each contributor could personalize a heart by inscribing it with a dedication to the family member or friend they had lost. In the case of Covid, private memory was often denied to the families, who could not access hospitals, attend funerals, or grieve with family members and friends because of legal restrictions. The form of public memory offered by the Wall, therefore, caught the collective imagination and soon the hearts were being filled with inscriptions. This role of the Wall as recipient of individual acts of experiential translation of affect, as mourners transcribed their grief, will be discussed later.

### **The Wall as a Multilingual/Multicultural Text**

Like any watershed historical event, Covid will leave its mark on history, and has already left a trace on our language—some words and phrases were ‘top down’, coming from politicians, journalists and the health services (‘social distancing’, ‘face covering’—and not ‘face mask’—, ‘furloughing’), we learned new technical vocabulary and became experts, debating the merits of PCR tests over Lateral Flow Tests, distinguishing vaccines from boosters, and so on; other expressions were more ‘bottom-up’, coming from the population at large, spreading over social media and tended to be more light-hearted (e.g. ‘quarantinis’, ‘covidiotis’ and ‘blursdays’). All this was the new language of Covid, one of the most prominent features of our interface with the pandemic. The same point is evoked by John London in his discussion of using the common experience of Covid with its lexicon and how this new language could be incorporated into “an active, self-consciously translational experience in [theatre] performance” (London, 2024, p. 45). As Lomas observes, while we use geographical maps to orient ourselves in our surroundings, “words have the power to do something similar ..., just as maps enable travel to new lands, so too can words help us explore novel experiential realms” (2018, p. 11). The inscriptions on the Wall are snippets of a new map, a new voice for the language of Covid, one in a minor key, and are striking in their stark, sombre translation of loss.

From the tens of thousands of inscriptions, a tiny sample will be discussed here, a sample that, however, gives an accurate picture of the variety and emotional impact of the Wall as a whole. Lomas talks of the “granularity principle” whereby we can “zoom in perceptually and mentally” (2018, pp. 10–11) to take in complexity. The Wall is overwhelming in its scale, but concentrating on small, material details, the words, the shapes, the colours, helps us to apprehend the emotional force of the whole. Some inscriptions simply read “my dad”, “my gran”, unsigned, symptomatic of the personal connection for the son, daughter or grandchild who wrote them. It is as though they are in conversation with the Wall itself, rather than the wider public; “my lovely

dad”, reads another tenderly, along with so many others that aim to share with visitors why this person was so special; “Big Sis, miss you, Middle Sis” reveals sibling dynamics; “special fiancée, sister, aunty, daughter” speaks of the grief of extended families; “Sorry ‘they’ gave up, sorry ‘they’ let you down [sic], love you Pa, my main man” conveys resentment and anger mixed in with the love of a son; “the wedding won’t be the same without you” opens up a glimpse into the person’s life. Every inscription translates the subjectivity of the person who came to the Wall, chose their spot along its length, decided what to write: the inscriptions are more than the individual words, they stand for loss, encapsulating the complex emotions experienced by the grieving.

Bearing witness to the legacy of empire, the country’s colonial past and the city’s multicultural layers described above as being inscribed in the architecture of the Embankment, there is a noticeable multilingual and multicultural character to the inscriptions on the Wall with a wide variety of languages and scripts adopted. There are hundreds of examples in Greek, German, Italian, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Hebrew, the languages that co-exist in London and further afield: many people, once it was possible to travel, have made a form of pilgrimage to the Wall to leave their words, while the bereaved who are not able to travel themselves can ask a friend or the volunteers to write an inscription on their behalf. While individual languages tend to be associated with discreet national (or regional) territories, the graphic element common to all the hearts transcends borders and provides a material oneness that goes beyond nationality, ethnicity, class or faith. Everyone is afforded equal physical space on the Wall, with no sense of isolation or segregation. At the same time, although there are hundreds of thousands of hearts on the Wall, each one is unique in its contours, slightly irregular shape, the inscription it bears, a testament to the diversity of the individuals remembered. Two hearts, with dedications in Spanish and inscriptions for two people who have died months apart and are now “*juntos per siempre*” [sic], “together forever”, are linked by hands reaching out to each other (see [Figure 4.1](#)); one in Turkish is dedicated simply to “Ali Kiraz, Özel”, (my translation: AK, special); “RIP Bunicu, te iubesc”, in Romanian (my translation: RIP Granddad, I love you); others, written in English, record the diverse heritage of the community: “in memory of our dear mum, Sheila Kovac”, “George Papadoloulos, love you”, “Father, husband, Ahmed N.”, “in loving memory, Sri Soemijati, beloved wife, mother, granny, we miss you”, “Antonio Rossi, my beloved dad”.

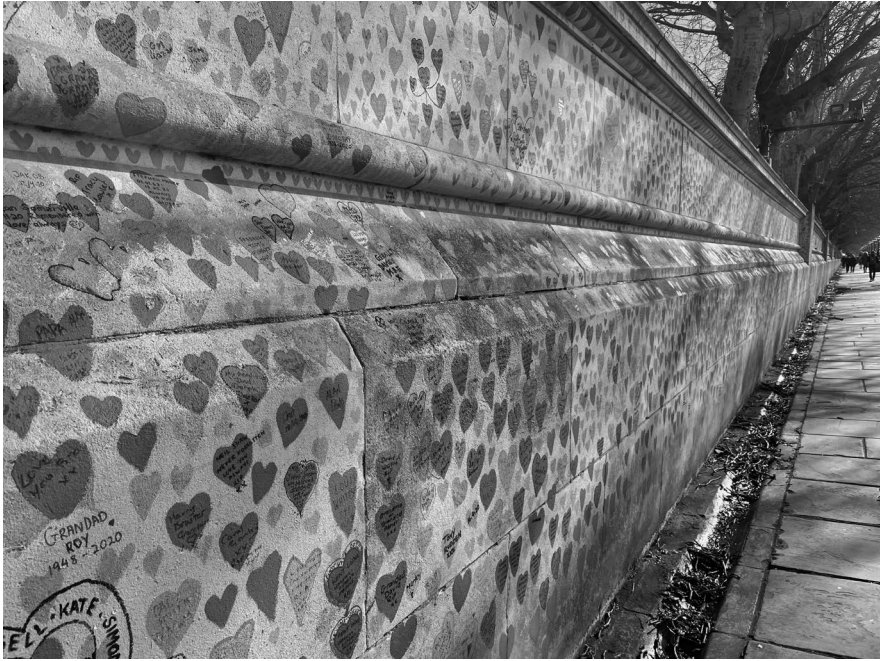
There is also a significant number of hearts dedicated to medical professionals: “Doctor Galawezh Ibrahim”, presumably written by colleagues or, perhaps, grateful patients; “Denis Stanworth, immunologist”; “Thank you NHS” (National Health Service); and from the Intensive Care Unit of the Royal United Hospital in Bath, dedicated to all the patients they lost, “We did our best – We loved you all. ICU, RUH Bath”. In among all the hearts, some have added symbols of their faith: there are Christian crosses, Stars of David, praying hands, angels, rosary beads, as well as flowers, candle flames, clouds. This is not the language of gravestones or conventional monuments,



Figure 4.1 The National Covid Memorial Wall, detail. Photograph by the author.

carefully planned and engraved; it is spontaneous and informal, handwritten, with drawings and symbols, symptomatic of the in-the-moment nature of experiential translation.

All the above is a tiny sample, for obvious reasons of space, but what is perhaps most striking of all about the Wall is its sheer scale—there is a strong sense of situatedness, as you stand in front of the two-metre-plus-tall stone wall, amplified by the fact that you have to walk half a kilometre to take it all in, adding an embodied dimension to the more conventionally textual one. You have to move along it, reach your gaze upwards and physically bend down and still you come away knowing that you have read only a minute proportion of the inscriptions. It is truly overwhelming in its enormity (see Figure 4.2). Close up, each heart is a micro-narrative, a whole life condensed, translated into a few words—one poignant example for all: “Karen and Bob, mum and dad, died 12 hours apart, together forever, we miss you so much”. At a macro-level, you apprehend the magnitude of collective grief. This “scalable granularity”, to go back to Lomas’ terminology (2018, p. 10), of experiencing the detail to understand the whole is comparable to that described by Sherry Simon in her account of the Space of Synagogues in Lviv, where thirty-nine tomblike stone tablets, engraved with quotations, stand: “These quotes take visitors on a physical journey as they walk among the stones—on an emotional journey as they absorb the dramas of history as told by its



*Figure 4.2* The National Covid Memorial Wall along the Albert Embankment, London. Photograph by the author.

witnesses” (2019, p. 23). Just as the inscriptions on the Wall are traces of experiential translation practice, so too the response elicited in the visitor is part of the same practice.

### **The Wall as a Site of Grieving**

The personal dedications added to the hearts, therefore, translate the subjectivity of individual speaking voices, forming an emotionally charged, choral text composed of micro-narratives in a variety of languages and scripts. The text is very much open-ended, with the potential for constant additions, transcending the ‘monumental’: as Madeleine Campbell and Ricarda Vidal observe, “intersemiotic translation provides an interactive, participative platform with the potential to engage individuals and communities in connecting with cultures different from their own” (Campbell and Vidal, 2019, p. xxvi). The spontaneous quality of the inscriptions is also an ideal illustration of J. Earl Rogers’ observation in relation to the therapeutic value of creative expression for the bereaved: “Grief, art, and storytelling are an innate part of the human experience.... Art has been a form of expression for humans since the earliest times. Our history, experiences, losses, triumphs, and the essence of our psyche have been told in [art that expresses] that

which cannot be expressed through mere words” (2007, p. 3). In this context, it is pertinent to follow Robert A. Neimeyer and Joanna Cacciatore’s theorization of grief, or rather grieving, not as a set of symptoms or stages but instead as an active, meaning-making, developmental transition.

[G]rieving can be seen as a *situated interpretive and communicative activity*. It is ‘situated’ in the sense that mourning always unfolds in the context of a given familial, social, cultural, and historical context; it is ‘interpretative’ in that it inevitably entails attempts to make sense of a compelling emotional experience; it is ‘communicative’ as it is intrinsically embedded in spoken, written, and non-verbally performed exchanges with others; and it is an ‘activity’ in that it is an enacted process, not merely a state to be endured<sup>7</sup>  
(Neimeyer and Cacciatore, 2016, p. 4)

As an example of embodied, experiential translation as well as multi-modal communication, the Wall represents one such “spoken, written, and non-verbally performed [exchange] with others”, translating grieving into a visual, textual reality, mixing words, images and voices. Underlining the materiality of the whole, as well as writing on the actual Wall, contributors have attached drawings, photos, candles, they have taped flowers to the masonry; the Wall has then been further re-mediated by the press, by visitors taking photographs or videos, by posts on social media, by the dedicated official website that includes audio-clips with spoken testimonies from bereaved family members. In grief therapy or counselling, artistic expression is used as part of a personal process to allow group members “to recognize the loss, experience the feelings connected with their loss and suffering, adjust to a new world, and to help in reconstructing a new relationship with the deceased” (Rogers, 2007, p. 4). In the case of the Wall, each individual, personal experience is embodied within a collective whole. Shortly after it was first created, three British faith leaders visited the site. Accompanied by Rabbi Daniel Epstein and Imam Kazeem Fatai, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby spoke to the journalists present:

I was unprepared for the visual force of this wall. Because it’s high it feels like a wave of grief and sorrow breaking over us. To talk about feeling inspired... it’s much more than that. It’s awe at the commitment and love this wall represents, as well as the sorrow.  
(Welby quoted in Honigsbaum, 2023, p. 234)

Fran Hall’s account of the Wall’s impact encapsulates its role within the grieving process, emphasizing the spirit of collectivity the Wall has engendered and its contribution to the community:

It has been phenomenal on every level. From a personal perspective, it has given me a focus and a purpose that has hugely helped me navigate

the turbulent years of early, devastating grief at the loss of the love of my life. From the first day, when I arrived early in the morning of 29<sup>th</sup> March 2021 to meet strangers and participate in helping to create the Wall, I knew it was important, but I had no idea how profoundly it would be part of my life. The women I have met have become close friends, we share the horror of the experience we have all been through which has bonded us all, and our weekly sessions are as much group therapy as they are art therapy, with some ministry thrown in as we meet and support other bereaved people who have come to see the Wall for the first time.

(Hall, personal communication, 7th February 2023)

The “wave of grief” alluded to above by Justin Welby and the “devastating grief” mentioned by Hall speak to the incommensurable scale of loss provoked by the pandemic. Translating loss into language, putting words to our emotions is one way of navigating the grief, both for those who write and those who read: “One way in which language renders our experiential world comprehensible is by demarcating boundaries, carving up its complexity into cognitively digestible pieces” (Lomas, 2018, p. 6). As well as contributions by the tens of thousands of bereaved families and friends, the participative element of the Wall is present in the role played by the volunteers, an ongoing collective of people, composed almost exclusively of women, who continue to meet at the Wall for weekly maintenance sessions, refreshing some of the initial hearts that have begun to fade—a more durable form of paint is now being used—renewing the inscriptions, painting over hostile graffiti, engaging with bereaved visitors, passers-by, tourists, commuters with comments or questions. For the interlocutors, and anyone who happens to overhear them, these ongoing conversations become part of the Wall, an integral component of the text, albeit ephemeral. The writing over of fading hearts with new marker pens and paint, with inevitable modifications to the earlier version, a process reminiscent of retranslation, is symptomatic of the deterioration of materiality and the constant cycle of re-enactment implicit in attempting to maintain its embodied qualities.

### **The Wall as a Site of Memory**

Returning to Sherry Simon’s categories of Memory, Crossroads and Thresholds, the role of the Wall in preserving the memory of the lives lost to Covid is obvious, as is the fact that it stands at the crossroad for different cultures, languages and faiths, different age-groups, medical professionals and lay members of the general population. As a threshold, it bridges the space between public and private, one of very few memorials to do this. Theo Hermans (2022) distinguishes between two different kinds of memory: the first is private memory—memories we each have of life events or people we have met, transmitted by word of mouth, through family photographs, for

example, and personal objects. This type of memory has a limited range, in space and time, and tends to disappear with the person who remembers: it is what we commonly refer to as ‘living memory’. The second kind of memory is that of the collective and is relevant to the case of the Wall: “Collective entities such as groups, communities, societies or cultures do not remember as such. Personal memories, however, can be shared with others. For individual memories to become social, they have to be communicated. In this way, collective memories [more commonly called cultural memory] are formed” (2022, p. 100). This aspect is echoed perfectly by Hall’s words, with reference to her personal story and the death of her partner:

I felt such huge complicated emotions: anger, impotence, guilt, loneliness. I never thought I’d have to go through something like this in isolation. The wall makes a huge statement that this grief is like no other. All those enduring this have our own unique stories, yet we have a collective understanding.

(Hall, 2021)

Traditionally, public memorials are more institutionalized, more durable and reified in symbolic forms such as plaques, statues, monuments and museums. This is the kind of memorial that the then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, was referring to when he spoke of waiting until the emergency was over before assessing how to mark the pandemic. After the Twin Tower attacks, it was 10 years before the inauguration of the New York National 9/11 Memorial and Museum. Typically, these memorials are decided by committees, public competitions among designers and architects, judged by panels of politicians and local dignitaries. The Covid Wall, on the other hand, spontaneously translates memory into an ongoing, ever-evolving, open-ended performance, rather than a static object. The inscriptions owe much to the tradition of graffiti, a term that has proved challenging to define, in part due to the wide range of ways in which it manifests itself. Simon Armstrong argues that “graffiti comes into being when someone writes a statement on a private property without permission”, whether it be a “puerile joke, a political statement, a gang sign, a signature or a tag” (Armstrong, 2019, p. 12), and this would, therefore, certainly include the markings on the Wall. In common with our general understanding of what constitutes graffiti, the Wall also hosts the impromptu (and often inappropriate) manifestations of the human spirit, with a small number of inscriptions such as “We were here” next to a smiley face, “I heart LDN” and “China, oh no!” next to an earlier heart with an inscription in Chinese and, therefore, presumably a reaction to the fact that the pandemic was traced back to Wuhan; but these maverick ‘intrusions’ are very much a minority. Another salient feature of graffiti is the focus on the name, or tag, of the author, with the disenfranchised denied access to traditional methods of public communication such as publishing contracts or record deals: “If art reflects society, what could be more logical in an age

of individualism than the individual's name elevated to the level of an art form ... globally recognized as a brand like Coca-Cola, Marlboro or Nike" (ibid, p. 15). In this the Wall is clearly different: foregrounding the names of loved ones, the names of those to whom they are dedicated, as mentioned above, the hearts are generally not signed: "to Mum", "to our gran", "for Richard, the best uncle in the world", without any reference to those that wrote the inscriptions.

The Wall remains in a state of constant evolution. As some parts fade, they are repainted by the volunteers, including the inscriptions; of course, tragically, Covid patients continue to die, and so more hearts have been painted as their names are added; it has also become a frequently-used backdrop for film crews and media stories commenting on the aftermath of the pandemic. It stands as a visual shorthand for the massive loss of life.

### **The Future of the Wall**

Since roughly the first decade of this century, memory studies—the discipline concerned with acts of remembrance and with representations of the past—has undergone what is often termed a transcultural turn with a similar shift across other disciplines, such as history, with the emergence of so-called transnational history or *histoire croisée* (entangled history) and in literature with the advent of world or global literature. In each of these contexts, we go beyond national borders to observe large-scale phenomena across wider geographical spaces but also to observe the foreign within the local. It therefore follows that in all these cases, translation is inevitably involved. Michael Rothberg (2009) speaks of "multidirectional memories" to describe multi-layered collective memories that exist simultaneously and are constantly renegotiated through social interaction. Rather than adopting a framework that views collective memory as a series of competing memories—the Holocaust pitched against slavery is one of the examples Rothberg discusses—he advocates considering memory as multidirectional: "as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative" (2009, p. 3). In this sense, the Covid Wall is a translational, multidirectional memorial, a hybrid space, that speaks different languages, that merges the public and the private, and links the present to the past. The Wall is in constant dialogue with its surroundings. There is now an ongoing debate as to the future of the Wall—moves are underway to obtain planning permission and have it recognized as a permanent memorial, there are suggestions of covering it with a sheet of Plexiglas to preserve it but, to many, this would freeze the memorial, losing its dynamic quality. Lambeth Council, the local authority within which the Wall is located, is supportive of maintaining the Wall, while St Thomas' Hospital, whose perimeter walls the memorial covers, is open to making it more permanent provided the physical integrity of the wall is not compromised, as it represents the hospital's first line of defence in the event of the Thames flooding.

In its broadest interpretation, the Wall is therefore a multilingual, experiential translation site and its ‘language’ can be read in the light of Gary Gumpert and Susan Drucker’s comment: “Memorials ... are cultural indicators that represent the interaction of context and people” (Gumpert and Drucker, 2018, p. 238). And so we come full circle: this site within the urban landscape of today is inscribed with its more remote past, the literary and artistic legacy of people like Wordsworth and Canaletto, the seat of Government directly across the river, the Victorian architectural and civil engineering projects, the medical history of the nation, from innovative hospital design and pioneering figures such as Florence Nightingale and Mary Seacole, to traumatic chapters in public life such as the BSE disease crisis. To all this is now added the National Covid Memorial Wall: as always, juxtaposition is more than the sum of its parts. This is not some isolated commemorative piece in a museum. The Wall adds a further layer to the memory of the city, the memory of the people that live there and those that pass through, fulfilling its dual function: it is simultaneously an “anchor for the anger” of the bereaved, a “place of communal healing” on the one hand, and, on the other, it keeps alive the fact “that the decision makers across the river must continue to see the blood red of the Wall as they sit on their terraces” (Hall, personal communication, 7 February 2023).

### A Linguistic Coda

Returning to the idea of words mapping out our experience, from an etymological point of view, there is a very fitting connection between the hearts on the Wall and their memorializing function. While the English verb ‘remember’ comes to us from Middle English through Old French *remembrer*, in turn from late Latin *rememorari*, ‘to call to mind’, other languages including Italian and Spanish use verbs such as *ricordare* and *recordar* respectively that bear witness to the Ancient Egyptian belief, handed down through the Greeks and the Romans, of the heart (*cor* in Latin) as the locus of memory. It seems particularly apt that the hearts painted on the National Covid Memorial Wall can be interpreted as embodying this cardiocentric worldview, bringing together lived experiences, narration, memory and translation.

### Notes

- 1 Census statistics report the following population figures for London: 1801: 959,000, 1831: 1,655,000, 1861: 2,807,000.
- 2 6,536 people died in London during the 1st cholera epidemic (1831), 14,137 during the 2nd outbreak (1848–1849) and 10,738 during the third (1853–1854) (Halliday, 1999, pp. 15–16).
- 3 The causal link between bacteria and infectious diseases would be established in 1883 by Robert Koch (Halliday, p. 186).
- 4 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-36663206> [Accessed 30 June 2023].

- 5 Data from the National CDJ Research and Surveillance Unit: <https://www.cjd.ed.ac.uk/sites/default/files/figs.pdf> [Accessed 22 November 2023].
- 6 This and later comments were provided in a personal communication by Fran Hall, one of the founding members of CBFFJ and the subsequently formed association Friends of the Wall (FoTW)—7 February 2023. Fran Hall lost her husband, Steve, to Covid. She frequently acts as the unofficial spokesperson for both CBFFJ and FoTW.
- 7 Emphasis in original.

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## 5 Museum of Monologues

### Contemporary Theatre: Translating Cultural Memory into Performance as a Site of Experiential Translation

*Ayşe Ayhan*

#### Introduction

The Museum of Monologues is a contemporary theatre project performed in a historical three-story house in Balat, Istanbul. Unlike a conventional theatre play, the Museum<sup>1</sup> offers several distinct 15-minute monologues to the audience. These monologue performances weave narratives that delve into the forgotten memories of Balat's bygone eras, the broader historical tapestry of Istanbul, or the more recent experiences within the urban milieu, all within a resonant and multilayered setting. The museum experience lasts one hour. In each room on every floor, a simultaneous start of distinct monologues offers the audience the agency to curate their viewing experience—opting to sample from all performances, selecting four of them, or immersing themselves in any singular monologue repeatedly for an hour. Balat is the primary source of inspiration for this project, drawing from authentic, diverse historical, cultural, social, and artistic experiences. The Museum presents the audience with a profound and avant-garde encounter, bringing a revitalizing spirit into the contemporary theatre scene in Istanbul. As the rising voices intertwine, the revelation of disparate lives concealed within the walls elicits a spectrum of emotions, oscillating between melancholy and joy, surprising and captivating the audience.

The Museum opened to the public for the first time in 2016, then called Museum of Balat Monologues, as the most recent undertaking of Galata Perform's New Text New Theater project, which has been carried out as an international event focusing on contemporary theatre literature and new forms of playwriting since 2006. The monologues were originally staged in an old mansion, which was transformed into a museum for a day, in Balat, Şair Nevi Street No: 12. After receiving considerable interest during its initial performances, the Museum proceeded to perform at the Ioakemion Greek School for Girls building in 2017. Following three seasons at Ioakemion, the Museum relocated to its current venue at 163 Mürselpaşa Street in Balat, where it has been performing since 2020. The Museum now presents six series of monologues with the titles of "Balat", "Woman", "Hostel", "Love", "Those at Home", and

DOI: [10.4324/9781003462569-9](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003462569-9)

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the recently added “Yuvakimyon” (see Monologlar Müzesi @monologlarmuzesi at: <https://monologlarmuzesi.com>). Each of these plays, which can also be considered as a theme in itself, features six, sometimes seven, 15-minute monologues. Every season new monologues can be added to the repertoire while some monologues are no longer performed or others are played alternately. This paper centres on the “Balat” and “Hostel” monologue series as they offer deeper insights into how the Museum draws from Balat as a source and translates cultural memory into performances. In the “Balat” series, numerous monologues have been staged since 2016. Presently, the audience can experience a total of eight specific monologues: “The Balat Cabaret”<sup>2</sup>, “A Brief Encounter”, “Black Auction”, “Kismet”, “The Wedding Day”, “Hemşin”, “Funny Business”, and “The Inconvenient Neighbour”, the last three of which are performed alternately. The “Hostel” series, started in 2021, performs five monologues, “Dancing Queen”, “The Matter of Remaining in the Air”, “Monsieur P.’s Cities”, “Mehran, Who Are You?” and “Family Cemetery”. In the “Hostel” monologues, the three-story house on Mürselpaşa Street is converted into a hostel, with each room serving as temporary or long-term accommodation for the characters featured in the performances.

The Museum serves as a living museum, immersing the audience in the heart of real-life experiences, where human stories are on display. The project designer, director, and curator of the Museum is writer and director Ahmet Sami Özbudak. He can be considered the most influential mediator of this project. As Özbudak’s journey in theatre (see Ahmet Sami Özbudak, <https://tiyatrolar.com.tr/ahmet-sami-ozbudak>) demonstrates, Istanbul is one of his main sources and while exploring urban space and peoples, he transforms them into writings and performances (Koma Sahnesi, 2023). Another significant mediator of the project is the assistant director and the production manager, Kerem Pilavcı, who also contributes as an actor along with many other performers. Since its debut, numerous directors, writers, and actors have lent their talent to the project. The Museum, currently in its 8th season, has provided opportunities for many artists to contribute over the years, thanks to the unique structure of its performances. The project has succeeded in being as diverse as the multicultural, polyglot Balat neighbourhood from which it drew inspiration.

Balat, located on the western shore of the Golden Horn is one of the oldest districts in Istanbul. In the Ottoman Empire, Balat was predominantly Jewish (Ashkenazi from Central and Eastern Europe, Sephardians from Spain and Portugal, and Romaniot Jews of Byzantium), with a mix of Rum, Armenians, and Muslims among its residents (Deleon, 1991, p. 19). Non-Muslim minorities in Istanbul were a significant component of the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Ottoman period. As it can be inferred from Tanyeli’s statement, multiplicity was an essence of Istanbul:

Istanbul wasn’t always Istanbul. It has been Byzantium, Constantinopolis, and the Second Rome. In the mid-Byzantine period, it was simply

Polis, in the Ottoman period it was Kostantiniyye, Islambol, Dersaadet, and many others; but it was never just Istanbul. During the first half of the 20th century, these other names were almost completely wiped out. The city became Istanbul. This, as always, signifies more than just a name change.

(Tanyeli, 2008, p. 43)

Changing the names of cities signals a change in their political and linguistic outlook and “the cities that have experienced language remakes are condemned to a perpetual state of dissonance, their surfaces forever troubled by spectral layers of memory” (Simon, 2016, pp. 2–3). Multilingualism had been a “central narrative” (Simon, 2012, p. 12) for Istanbul for centuries until Turkish unilingualism replaced Ottoman multilingualism with the Turkish Republic (Cronin and Simon, 2014, p. 121). If Istanbul is to be considered a translational space, then we must acknowledge that translational spaces are not about multilingualism; instead, they “focus attention not on the multiplicity of languages but on their interactions and their rival claims” (Simon, 2019, p. 5). The cultural and linguistic character of Istanbul suffered in the decades following the founding of the Republic with a series of discriminatory measures taken by successive governments resulting in the departure of a considerable number of non-Muslim minorities. As Simon stated in her keynote speech at the Third International Translation Conference in Istanbul, the Fener-Balat district makes a good example of how “the city was losing its vernacular diversity, as the neighborhoods of the Golden Horn, Balat and Hasköy were being drained of Jews and Greeks” (Simon, 2013, n.p.).

Venturing into the Balat district today, one encounters the new cafés of Balat, which was formerly renowned for its taverns, the antique shops hosting auctions, buildings as remnants of a past life, narrow alleys adorned with wall inscriptions, and individuals capturing moments in photographs at every corner. First observing the prevalence of antiques shops and contemplating the occurrence of auctions in Balat, you may ponder the reasons behind such abundance, and subsequently, you discern that the transformation of the remnants of the departed minority communities into antiques shops is not altogether surprising.

Traces of former lives manifest in structures, predominantly associated with minority communities. These structures that are either on the brink of collapse or have disappeared today, that retain their existence and purpose, or are repurposed in other ways, have contributed to constructing the multilingual and multicultural identity of the neighbourhood. Prominent edifices, such as the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Fener, the Ahrida Synagogue, Bulgarian St. Stephen Church, Armenian Church of Surp Hreşdagabet, Church of Hagia Dimitrios Kanavis, Bulgarian Yanbol Synagogue, Church of Panagia Muchliotissa, Phanar Greek Orthodox College, and the Ioakemion Greek School for Girls, serve as indicators of the former diverse and multilingual social fabric in the district.

This study contextualizes the Museum as a performative act of experiential translation and “a socially-engaged practice with a contingent impact beyond the confines of the discipline [of translation studies]” (Campbell and Vidal, 2024, p. 2). As the monologues staged in the Museum draw on the Balat district as a source, we aim to examine how the Museum translates the Balat district and, in turn, to what extent it makes an impact on the district from the translational city and urban translation perspectives. Therefore, this chapter focuses on describing the historical, cultural, social, and linguistic characteristics of the Balat district, where the narratives staged in the Museum are collected, providing a depiction of the urban texture in both the past and present. Describing the urban and cultural landscape of this district is crucial to uncover the relationship between the urban fabric and the Museum. Subsequently, the study will shift its focus to the Museum of Monologues as a contemporary theatre project, examining the contents of the plays to identify emphases associated with the urban fabric.

The agents of the Museum—project designers, writers, directors, and actors—will be approached as intercultural mediators from an experiential translation perspective, discussing their multiple roles and the trajectory of the Museum since its start. Here, we will delve into entangled layers of translation, the materiality of the city, and embodiment. This includes exploring the physical and affective experiences associated with both performing and witnessing the plays. Therefore, this study also explores the audience’s translation and seeks to comprehend how the audience perceives and establishes an experiential relationship with the space.

The monologues inspired by the multicultural historical fabric of the Balat district shed light on the diverse lifestyles, spaces, and relationships of bygone eras, and delicately convey the pain inherent in the fragmentation and transformation of this social tapestry. The narratives within the monologues transform the tales of experiences, loves, separations, and sorrows etched in the urban memory into monologues with a multimodal performative translation practice. This transformation generates passages between the place of some urban spaces like schools, religious structures, homes, streets, and taverns in urban memory and their present-day reality. In doing so, it enables us to comprehend these spaces within the framework of a translation site, facilitating an evaluation of their impact on the past and present formation of urban identity through the lens of translation.

### **Translating the Urban and Cultural Landscape in Balat**

The lingual, cultural, and social scene of the Balat district has been shaped by the mobility of people and urban and artistic interventions. The demographic landscape of Balat underwent significant changes due to the emigration of non-Muslim residents in the aftermath of the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish nation-state. Despite the departure of religious minorities, Istanbul experienced significant population growth due

to industrialization and rural-to-urban migration, leading to uncontrolled urbanization and the emergence of slum areas, with Balat becoming a residence for working-class rural migrants (Bezmez, 2009, pp. 820–823). Thus, a process of deterioration in the district began in the 1950s when low-income migrants from rural areas replaced the middle-income non-Muslim minorities (İslam, 2006, p. 55). The unclear ownership and undervalued property sales during the forced emigration of minorities resulted in the repurposing of old buildings as affordable housing for newcomers, contributing to a decline in both physical condition and socio-economic status in the area (Gur, 2015, p. 236; Mills, 2010, pp. 56–57).

Since the 1990s, urban projects in Balat have aimed to rejuvenate the area, drawing investor interest and attracting a creative community. The district's multicultural history is reflected in its architecture, utilized as a backdrop, with changes in both physical structures and social dynamics contributing to a unique form of placemaking during its urban renewal. The Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality recently undertook the restoration of the Fener-Balat Houses, aiming to breathe new life into the historic urban landscape and create a fresh cultural and artistic hub. The full extent of the Fener-Balat Houses' influence on the area will become clear as time progresses. In Balat, which attracts artists with its multicultural historical and architectural texture, one of the noteworthy works utilizing the urban space is French artist JR's "Wrinkles of the City" (2015).<sup>3</sup> Known for his monumental projects which he has carried out across the globe in cities like Havana, Shanghai, and LA, JR adorned 15 buildings in Balat with large-scale portraits of elderly locals. The artist explains that his captivating depictions of the elderly are intended to mirror the architectural transformations undergone by the city over decades of upheaval and progress. He notes that his work is inspired by "cities where architectural change is occurring, allowing [him] to access the history of the country, a different era, or a revolution through its elderly residents. It's not a project that can breathe in every city" (Aymete, 2015, n.p.). JR's installation can be considered an example of "inter-artistic *transfer* activities" (*my emphasis*; Meylaerts and Gonne, 2014, p. 137) that highlights and transforms the urban space and enhances Balat's visibility.

Located and performing in Balat, the Museum, with all its mediators of inter-artistic transfer generating passages to communicate the past and present narratives of Balat, can also be conceived as a socially engaged performative intervention translating the urban and cultural landscape of urban space. The project director of the Museum, writer, and director Özbudak, states that for the monologues he did fieldwork in Balat and hunted for human stories (Keser, 2023). Describing Balat he mentions his feelings and personal experiences of the neighbourhood as follows:

Balat has always been a location dear to my heart. It feels incredibly inspiring and nourishing to me. There is a story in every corner if you know how to read it. Each house tells something, and every street has

something to say. There is energy in the soil. Within a couple of square kilometers, you can find a mosque and a synagogue side by side, and there are many churches. It vividly portrays old Istanbul, especially when you look at the buildings and places of worship. In my opinion, it's a place inherently enchanting. It's a place that still resists time, never losing its charm, and telling a lot of stories.

(Bloomberg HT Life, 2023)

Exploring the city, tracing the lives beyond the familiar places, and listening to the stories of the people, Özbudak expresses that he takes the city as an inspiration highlighting that there is an incredible source in life (Koma Sahnesi, 2023). In this regard, the Balat district can be said to reconcile different meanings and enhance the lives of the community by accommodating diverse worldviews. Providing its real-life experiences of today's landscape, and a diverse historical, cultural, social, and artistic nature, Balat has become a source for the Museum project and a site for experiential translation.

### **A Site for Experiential Translation: The Museum of Monologues**

Contemporary theatre has the unique ability to reflect, challenge, and reshape society's narratives. The Museum is an innovative and thought-provoking venture that has garnered significant attention for its exploration of social and cultural issues. At its core, the Museum is a platform for storytelling. Through the power of monologues, the project opens spaces for dialogue, empathy, and understanding. By presenting a diverse range of monologues, the project creates opportunities for audiences to engage with perspectives and experiences that may be unfamiliar or underrepresented.

Marinetti and De Francisci use “performance cultures” instead of “theatre” “to suggest a broader field of enquiry that encompasses different forms and contexts of performance” (Marinetti and De Francisci, 2022, p. 247). They explore performance cultures as fruitful contexts for studying translation “as a social practice and the multiple forms of agency shaping it” (ibid). Contemporary theatre in the context of this study is understood as translation “as an open-ended concept; a flexible, heuristic tool which covers a broad spectrum of intercultural practices” (ibid, p. 248). The home of the Museum, the venues, the monologues, the actors, the writers, and the directors as intercultural mediators, and the audience altogether—are explored through the lens of experiential translation and within the context of “translation spaces where the focus is not *just* on multiplicity but on interaction” (*my emphasis*; Simon, 2012, p. 7). A translation space for Simon is “a space of heightened language awareness, where exchange is accelerated or blocked, facilitated or forced, questioned or critiqued” (Simon, 2018, p. 97).

Translation in the context of theatre reveals itself in multiple levels but theatre translation is mainly a form of translation from one semiotic system to

another, namely from “page to stage” (London, 2024, p. 38). “Intersemiotic translation” (Jakobson, [1959] 2000) highlights the dynamic and complex nature of communication across diverse forms of expression including visual, performative, and auditory. A theatrical sign, according to Fischer-Lichte, comprises three aspects: the syntactic dimension, representing its connection to other signs; the semantic dimension, reflecting its association with the designated object; and the pragmatic dimension, indicating its relationship with the user of the sign (Fischer-Lichte, 1992, p. 2). As for Lass, the three-dimensional nature of the theatrical sign serves a dual purpose: first, it empowers all contributors involved in the staging process to draw personal interpretations regarding the meanings inherent in the text, influencing the result of the stage production, and second, it grants the audience the ability to formulate their subjective meanings and draw conclusions about the performance they witness and its narrative universe (Lass, 2023, pp. 124–125). Intersemiotic translation, according to Campbell and Vidal “involves a creative step in which the translator (artist or performer) offers its embodiment in a different medium” and this foregrounds the importance of the translator who “effectively plays the role of mediator in an experiential process that allows the recipients (viewer, listener, reader or participant) to re-create the sense (or ‘semios’) of the source artefact for themselves” (Campbell and Vidal, 2019, p. xxvi).

The Museum, unlike other museums, offers live performances. When examining the press reviews, it seems evident that an emphasis on the audience’s experience is predominant: (1) “Be sure to experience something like this. I believe anyone who enjoys listening to stories should also experience visiting such a museum or watching a performance” (Kahraman, 2019), (2) “An impressive environment, drawing inspiration from the neighborhood it resides in, actively engaging the audience, and providing a dynamic, unconventional theatre experience: Balat Museum of Monologues” (Örnek, 2017), (3) “The Monologues Museum promises a unique theatre experience” (Geven, 2018), (4) “You are having a theatrical experience that is beyond the ordinary” (Akyürek, 2018). This translational experience transforms narratives drawn from the urban fabric of the Balat district and converts the urban memory into performances, revealing an affective experience of performing and witnessing and generating passages to communicate to the built and lived spaces of the city; it “make[s] experiences translatable across the linguistic and sensory boundaries and media that together serve to generate, maintain, or challenge cultural hegemonies” (Campbell and Vidal, 2024, p. 2). The Museum functions as a mnemonic catalyst, sparking associations with past and present-day events and their meanings, thus, crystallizing not only the experiences of the past but also unveiling today’s narratives of the urban landscape.

### *A Performative Museum as a Place of Remembering*

Museums play a significant role as pivotal venues for international encounters, facilitating the engagement of visitors with both tangible and intangible traces

of diverse cultures, spaces, and times, mediated through a multimodal framework of translation. Museums are also considered places of memory where the past is constructed and produced. According to Susan Crane,

A ‘museum’ may be any real or imaginary site where the conflict or interaction or simulation of or between personal and collective memory occurs. Museums are more than cultural institutions and showplaces of accumulated objects: they are the sites of interaction between personal and collective identities, between memory and history, between information and knowledge production.

(Crane, 2000, p. 12)

According to Assmann, memory, “on all of its levels, is defined by an intricate interaction between remembering and forgetting” (Assmann, 2006, p. 220). Cultural memory, on the other hand, “inserts a third category which is the combination of remembering and forgetting. This third category refers to the cultural function of storing extensive information in libraries, museums, and archives which far exceeds the capacities of human memories” (ibid). These neither remembered nor forgotten pieces with their “intermediary existence” are in a “status of latency” (ibid) with reference to the accessibility of forgotten or unused information. Cultural memory comprises both what the society consciously selects and maintains and what remains “materially accessible for possible use” (ibid). Cultural memory is a way people define themselves, their stories, and where they belong which is formed by symbolic heritage embodied in texts, objects, monuments, museums, etc. that serve as mnemonic triggers to initiate meanings associated with what has happened. Therefore, the Museum is considered to be a museum that displays cultural memories of the diverse inhabitants of past lives and the narratives of today’s individuals navigating the constantly changing urban landscape of Istanbul, and striving to connect with the city. Özbudak argues against resisting change, particularly in a bustling metropolis like Istanbul, where streets constantly evolve amidst rapid consumption and development, and emphasizes his enjoyment in writing while staying attuned to these transformations noting “Syrian refugees we’ve recently come across in Istanbul’s cityscape, or the Sudanese immigrants selling watches on the street, are now becoming a part of our stories” (Bloomberg HT Life, 2023, n.p.). Therefore, the question arises as to how the memories and space are translated through the Museum.

### *Embodiment and Intercultural Mediation*

According to Marie Louise Pratt, the everyday lives in today’s cities emerge through continuous negotiations among linguistic, historical, and cultural heterogeneities, and this negotiation becomes visible through the remarkable grasping, improvisation, and adaptation powers of cultural intermediaries

within the daily flow of the city (Pratt, 2004). Thus, in examining diverse translational practices in urban space it is necessary to investigate how mediators engage in transfer and translation and create areas of impact in various encounters. As Pratt argues, cultural mediation does not manifest itself through anonymous clashes between distinct delineated, and fixed entities. Instead, it evolves through the activities of individuals situated within specific institutions and modes of interaction, all of which contribute to and emanate from contact zones. Cultural mediators “develop a broad range of partly overlapping transfer activities through different cultural fields, different languages, and spatial frontiers” and they can engage in “a variety of more or less institutionalized intercultural and inter-artistic networks” as noted by Meylaerts and Gonne (2014, p. 136), while engaging in intercultural transformative activities. A street artist, for instance, can “transform the public space into a new, unfamiliar, almost alien form” (Ayhan and Bogenç-Demirel, 2018, p. 214) not only contributing to the production of the physical space but permeating to the social and cultural layers.

The Museum is characterized as a “human museum” in a web review (Çuhadar, 2020), which might have originated from the Museum’s characterization of each room as a microcosm of human existence; a human museum where a performative act of translation of human stories from multiple social and cultural histories is staged. Can it also be possible to read the interpretation of “a human museum” as referring to the embodiment of the mediators including writers, directors, actors, and the audience? Özbudak emphasizes that stepping out of one’s comfort zone to explore the city is a journey of self-discovery, and he narrates the importance of sharing these experiences through the Museum (Koma Sahnesi, 2023).

Giving voice to marginalized communities and providing a platform for narratives that are often overlooked or silenced, the Museum challenges dominant narratives and by building bridges between communities promotes a more inclusive understanding of society. The Balat series monologue “Funny Business” depicts a lifelong love story between two men from Balat, constrained by societal expectations. Despite marrying female partners and becoming fathers, their hidden love persists, marked by weariness and resentment. The actor often stands by a window, symbolizing longing, while the audience discovers their secret communication through a clothesline, reflecting Balat’s material essence.

In another Balat series monologue titled “The Inconvenient Neighbour”, a lighthearted tale begins with a Greek schoolgirl’s playful prank on her teacher. The story then evolves to highlight neighbourhood solidarity, as a Turkish friend’s fisherman father extends a gesture of goodwill by offering fish. However, the narrative takes a dramatic turn as it delves into the 1964 pogrom, forcing the Greek girl and her family to leave Balat, their neighbourhood, and their home, under circumstances beyond the girl’s understanding.

The monologue “Black Auction” asks the following thought-provoking questions: Can you sell your past at an auction? What is its value if you do?

The monologue tells the story of a young girl compelled to sell her family heirlooms, focusing on the relationships established with each item, their memories, and the emotions and thoughts etched into memory. The trauma of the Syrian youth in “I Am Happy Because There Are No Airplanes Here”, one of the monologues from the 2017 season, embeds itself into the very core of the audience with the embodiment of the actor. The narrative of the Syrian migrant serves as an indicative expression of the transformations occurring within the urban landscape and hardships of migration, constituting yet another human story derived from the urban milieu and thus functioning as a portrayal of the recent landscape of Balat. In the play “Maria Paleologina in Modern Times”, the tough guy of the neighbourhood demonstrates, with a passion overflowing language, that love has little regard for modernity or the like as if proven through his very self. In this monologue, Maria is depicted as emerging from the Church of Panagia Muchliotissa, a relic of the Byzantine Empire in Balat dedicated to Maria Palaiologina, daughter of Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos. Both the church and Maria symbolize the cultural heritage of the Greek community in Balat, serving as tangible representations of Greek culture. The tough guy infatuated with Maria symbolizes the new population in the neighbourhood after the departure of the non-Muslim minority, reflecting the district’s historical displacement. By exploring the layered cultures of the district, the monologue provides the audience with an experiential understanding of the diverse cultural fabric of the setting.

The “Hostel” series of the Museum, started in 2021 and performs five monologues. The shared theme among the “Hostel” monologues, as noted by Kerem Pilavcı, a significant mediator who serves as the writer, director, and actor in the monologues, is the concept of belonging ([Bloomberg HT Life, 2021](#)). The monologue “Dancing Queen” narrates a waiter, employed at the Agora tavern, one of the oldest in Balat. This waiter weaves Abba songs into his monologue speaking and just a little gossiping about the tavern, regular customers, and the local community. “The Matter of Remaining in the Air” narrates Darya’s story. Darya, originally from Ukraine, revisits Istanbul after years, driven by memories of a past love. Despite raising her daughter alone, she returns to fulfil her daughter’s wish, reconciling with the city and embarking on a quest to find her lost love. “Family Cemetery” features Lusin, exploring her great-great-grandmother’s story in Istanbul, unveiling a love saga spanning centuries. In “Mehran, Who Are You?” the audience meets Mehran, an Afghan in Balat grappling with a sense of foreignness and questioning his belonging in Istanbul. Lastly, “Monsieur P.’s Cities” follows Edmond, a lonely Parisian cartoonist in search of his friend Akram, taking him from Paris to Istanbul after a violent event involving Akram.

One notable aspect of the “Hostel” monologues is their bilingual presentation. With each monologue performed four times per hour, the “Hostel” monologues are presented twice in Turkish and twice in a foreign language. *Dancing Queen* is performed in Turkish and German, “The Matter of Remaining in the Air” is performed in Turkish and English, “Monsieur P.’s Cities” in

Turkish and French, “Mehran, Who Are You?” in Turkish and English, and “Family Cemetery” in Turkish and Armenian. Trailers of the monologues, “The Matter of Remaining in the Air” in English, “Monsieur P.’s Cities” in French, “and “Family Cemetery” in Armenian are also available on the YouTube channel and the Instagram account of the Museum. In addition, an instructional video both available on the YouTube channel and the Instagram account of the Museum announces that the plays are performed both in their original languages and in Turkish. The emphasis on the ‘original language’ as the premier language of performance implies that Turkish is presented as the translated language. In these three monologues, the characters are Armenian, French, and Ukrainian, and they speak Armenian, French, and English, respectively, emphasizing that the source language is foreign, and the performance in Turkish is a translation which implies that the narrative expands beyond the stories and transforms Turkish as the target language.

It is also necessary to draw attention to the embodiment of actors in these plays. In the monologue “The Matter of Remaining in the Air”, Darya comes from Ukraine and speaks both English and Turkish with an accent. Similarly, Mehran, who was born and raised in Balat but treated as a foreigner due to his Afghan roots, speaks Turkish without an accent but with an accent in English. The experience of the actors’ performances in different languages is not only crucial in demonstrating their embodied experience but also highly significant in terms of the audience’s embodied reception. Monologues in the “Hostel” series are accessible in two languages. The audience can also listen to the translation of the monologue on their mobile phones using a QR code provided at the entrance of the room in which the specific play is being staged. However, it is observed that the audience mostly witnesses the play without any means of translation even if they don’t speak the language. This allows the audience to construct their translation of the monologue through their physical and affective witnessing of the play.

Languages, as Simon states, not only contribute to the experiential feel of the city but also serve as modes of representing the city, and these representations “contribute to the aura and mythology of the city, shaping and preserving it in the cultural memory” (Simon, 2016, p. 4). The cultural memory that a city owns becomes a source text for any cultural and artistic production related to the city. In the same manner, any cultural, artistic, and literary production contributes to the aura and mythology of the city shaping and preserving it in the cultural memory. As Sturge asserts, museums can be treated as cultural translations (Sturge, 2007, p. 131), and thus, remediating scattered memories of communities, the Museum also becomes an example of cultural translation aiming at transforming human hearts and minds (Maitland, 2017, p. 53) which can result in “a collective desire to reinstate a forgotten, repressed or wilfully suppressed memory” (Simon, 2019, p. 16).

The monologues in the “Balat” and “Hostel” series can also be understood as reminders initiating meanings associated with overlooked, unfamiliar, underrepresented, or silenced narratives of cultural memories, sometimes

distinct, sometimes intersecting, woven into layers of history. They can be considered to be performing translation by exhibiting intangible cultural heritage embodied in performances that crystallize experiences of the past and the present. Consequently, the monologues convey the layered structure of the urban space in Balat across different historical periods, encapsulating diverse cultural memories embedded within this stratified construct.

### *Materiality of the Site*

Staging performances in venues that specifically connect with the cultural and social histories of the Balat district bring forward the city's materiality. The whole concept of the translational city refers to reading a city as an organism of living matter, and the materiality of a city can be read as a personification of the urban space through physical objects like buildings, open spaces, landscaping, etc. In the experience offered by the Museum, it can be asserted that the spaces where performances are staged play a significant role. Both serving as the inspiration for the narratives and constituting the urban context where the project is realized, the Balat district holds importance, and the venues contribute to the overall experience.

The Ioakemion Greek School, established in the Balat area to provide secondary education for girls after the 1850s, was a significant institution for the Greek community (Yordanoglu, 1989). The neighbouring district Fener, where the school was located, has a rich history spanning both the Byzantine and Ottoman periods. Known for its cultural, religious, and architectural significance, Fener became particularly notable for being the site of the relocation of the Patriarchate to the Ayios Georgios Monastery in 1601, establishing it as the central hub of the Orthodox denomination. During the Republican Era, education at Ioakemion continued within the framework of the rights granted to the Greeks (Bozis, 1994). In addition to teaching in Turkish and Greek, the school also taught in French and English (ibid). The building has not been functioning as a school since 1988 as education stopped due to an insufficient number of students, and the school was officially shut down in 2011. Ioakemion, with its weathered appearance and peeling paint, initially hosted artist Kalliopi Lemos's exhibition in 2013 at the 13th Istanbul Biennial. Titled "I Am I Between Worlds and Between Shadows", the exhibition featured sculptures and a sound installation highlighting migration and its challenges. This event marked the beginning of Ioakemion's role in showcasing the diversity of languages, cultures, and beliefs in Balat through various artistic endeavours.

Özbudak states that they sought a venue beyond the traditional theatre stage for the experimental monologues of the Museum, emphasizing that any space has the potential to serve as a stage (Koma Sahnesi, 2023, p. 31; 51) and explains the Ioakemion experience as follows:

With Ioakemion, the play reached an incredible audience. The Balat Monologue Museum became a phenomenon in our lives. We were

playing two or three times a month, and the audience was pouring in. Despite the disadvantages of Ioakemion, for instance, the building was incredibly cold. In an abandoned building with no existing heating system, and unable to heat the entire school, we played with heating bands and beanies in freezing classrooms. Yet, the audience showed tremendous interest. I saw the potential in Istanbul and the impact of the audience there.

(Koma Sahnesi, 2023, p. 33; 50)

When the Museum was performing at Ioakemion the audience was led not to a traditional theatre stage but to a school to experience the performances and, in some instances, become a part of the plays. Sitting at the long wooden desks, which transported the audience back to their student years, breathing the atmosphere in the neglected, peeling-paint and plaster classrooms of the school, where an air of history permeated the environment, created a realm of emotions and experiences between the space and the audience, even before the plays began. The Museum does not use special stage design, set, or lighting. In today's venue, a hundred-year-old mansion in Balat, the atmosphere is created with just a chair, or maybe a mattress on the floor and only a microphone, or an accordion, but primarily through Balat, the mansion, the room, or the window, namely the space itself. The audience is immersed in the monologue by the embodiment of the story and the actor which reveals an impactful experience for all.

The experience offered to the audience in the Museum starts with the act of going to Balat. When they exit the play, they find themselves still in Balat, and as they walk its streets, they get the sense that the narrative of the play continues. The play goes on with the audience immersing in and experiencing the materiality of the city as they continue to make their translations of the performances they have just witnessed.

Both in the former and present venues, the audience is immersed in the narrative within the simple classrooms or mansion rooms, feeling the historical atmosphere of the space itself and engaging with each character's emotions and thoughts. Seeing the Museum and the venues is like seeing "two tracks of reality running at the same time" (Simon, 2019, p. 3). According to Simon, "translation is a pendulum. The back swing recalls the violence of voices suppressed. The forward swing embraces the struggle to reanimate and reinstate those languages and the worlds they contain" (ibid). Ioakemion and the mansion also serve as places of remembering and the Museum becomes a reminder of scattered memories of the city's past giving visibility to Balat's multiplicity of languages, cultures, and beliefs, and thus, can be conceived as a "counter-translation" (Simon, 2019, pp. 3–4), since the performances generate passages to communicate what the city has lost.

Simon asserts that "[t]ranslation tracks connections among variously entitled communities—those which have historic claims to the territory of the city, as well as those which seek to establish claims as migrants, refugees or exiles"

(Simon, 2016, pp. 3–4). This approach effectively elucidates the experiential construction of the Museum, which has translated the historical, social, and cultural fabric of Balat, the identities of the Greek, Armenian, and Jewish populations, the cosmopolitan structure shaped by migration and mobilization, and the multilayered urban memory, all into performances.

### *Balat as a Translation Zone*

Translation zones are considered the “product of the city’s history” (Cronin and Simon, 2014, p. 122); hence, they can be defined as spaces where history, life stories, belief systems, cultural social traditions and values interrelate, shaping an arena where the interactions of differences take form. The concept of translation zones is not confined to a single discipline or worldview; rather, it can be regarded as a point of intersection where history, language, culture, environment, politics, displacement, or movement converge. If translation is understood as an interaction involving the exchange and reshaping of languages and cultures, examining the multidimensional movements resulting from displacement in areas that could be termed “polyglot neighbourhoods” becomes pertinent (ibid, p. 120). If translation is also considered as an effort of communication amongst cultures, it is also possible to say that it makes the material, social and historical settlement, languages and discourses of peoples visible. Translation acts are both reflective and directive simultaneously; they contribute to both the empowerment and weakening of previous perceptions and understandings (Inghilleri, 2017).

A translation zone is a space where “polymorphous translation practices” (Cronin and Simon, 2014, p. 120), the details of the mediators who are engaged in those practices, and how they are conceptualized can be scrutinized through a translational city approach. Additionally, encounters resulting from displacement and mobility in a translation zone can give rise to various translational practices. This perspective aligns with the idea that cities with a long history of linguistic cohabitation, like Istanbul, offer a unique terrain for translation studies (Buden et al., 2009, p. 209), highlighting the dynamic nature of urban spaces as they evolve through time and diverse cultural influences.

In multicultural settings, the presence of contact zones, where proximity and interaction prevail over distance, contributes to the emergence of new forms of translation. Contact zones, resulting from encounters, convergence, exchange, and interaction of different discourses, also aid in expanding translation definitions. In the context of urban spaces, translation gains new meanings and definitions through various cultural mediation activities and urban interventions by different agents. The translation zone functions as a centre, where there is an extensive repertoire of cultural exchanges and diverse worldviews. Sarah Maitland suggests that our perception of the world involves interacting with numerous identities beyond our own, beyond differences, emphasizing that this process is not only crucial but also prioritized in the

communication of meanings (2017, p. 9). According to Maitland, this situation is of paramount importance in the communication of meanings, and translation is indispensable to this effort—we engage in it in our social lives; in other words, we live within the realm of translation. Viewed from the perspective of the interaction of differences, the translation zone is a transformative space where meanings are reconciled, and lives are enriched. Our memories and the embedded experiences, narratives, and stories within them render buildings, streets, neighbourhoods, and cities. The Museum translates narratives derived from the urban milieu into performances. Consequently, through the embodiment of mediators and the audience, it establishes a contact zone of experience that illustrates how divergences and convergences might intersect. Therefore, it also reveals urban translation (Suchet and Mekdjian, 2016), which refers to the processes through which cities become sites of cultural exchange and transformation. The Museum brings together diverse voices, narratives, and performances and through its monologues, the project acts as a catalyst for cultural dialogue and understanding, contributing to the formation of a dynamic urban identity.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how the Museum functions as a medium for communication and understanding, bridging diverse perspectives within the Balat district. The Museum is conceived as a form of experiential translation that communicates the tales from the Balat district. As the Museum transforms narrative and memory into performances, this transfer is examined with an intercultural and inter-artistic transfer perspective as the mediators of the Museum move through different cultural fields, languages, and spatial frontiers.

The Museum is an experience for both the performers—all mediators—and the audience. Providing the audience with an intense social, cultural, artistic, and performative experience, the Museum translated the historical, social, and cultural fabric of Balat, the identities of the Greek, Armenian, and Jewish populations, the cosmopolitan structure shaped by migration and mobilization, and the multilayered urban memory. Preserving and showcasing stories that may otherwise be forgotten or silenced, the Museum ensures that the diverse experiences of Balat's residents are remembered and acknowledged. This contributes to the creation of a more comprehensive and inclusive urban memory and generates passages to revive a memory that has been forgotten, repressed, or deliberately suppressed.

The Museum has constructed a place of remembering by translating cultural memory into performances and thus creates a translation site in the Balat district, which can be contextualized as a translation zone because of its multilayered historical, cultural, and lingual construction. The Museum contributes to the dynamic preservation of cultural heritage and facilitates a deeper appreciation of the historical and contemporary significance of the district.

Engaging with the urban memory, the project ensures that the stories and voices of Balat's residents are remembered and celebrated.

## Notes

- 1 Henceforth the Museum of Monologues will be referred as the Museum.
- 2 All translations are my own unless stated otherwise.
- 3 See the artist's website: <https://www.jr-art.net/projects/istanbul-turquie>

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## 6 Traduire en archipel(s)

### Translating the City and Performing Translation in the Digital Era

*Giuseppe Sofo*

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I will present the exhibition *Traduire en archipel(s)*, held at CREA Cantieri del Contemporaneo in Venice in April 2023, as a form of artistic performance of experiential translation of the city of Venice.

This project was born directly out of my practice of creative translation training, which includes intersemiotic translation through an experiential approach and out of my research on the concept of translating the city, and the creative role of errors in human and machine translation, with a focus on finding possible translations of the translated and *in-translation* city of Venice in particular.

In the first section, I introduce the theoretical background of my research on these topics, exploring my understanding and my practice of intersemiotic and experiential translation, as a form of exploration of all the possibilities offered by the original, in contrast with the perception of translation as simple reproduction.

In the second section of the article, I describe and analyze the works of my research-creation artistic project *Translating the City: Venice 2.023* in the context of the exhibition *Traduire en archipel(s)*, using ludic forms of intersemiotic translation to generate an embodied experience of the city through the “translator’s gaze” (Campbell and Vidal, 2019), and I clarify how these works fit within the theoretical background I have outlined.

The last section is dedicated to a discussion of how intersemiotic translation activities related to the exhibition have been integrated in an advanced MA course in translation I teach at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, to understand how this approach to translation can be fruitfully put at the service of translation training in the classroom, exposing students to a more complex and richer experience of translation.

#### Translating the City through Ludic Artistic Forms of Intersemiotic and Experiential Translation

The project I will discuss in this chapter is the point of encounter of several lines of research I have developed over the last years: on the one hand, research on the practice of translating non-standard texts, playing with errors

DOI: [10.4324/9781003462569-10](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003462569-10)

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and meaningful deformations of language, and on the other hand, the concept of ‘translating the city’, and the interaction between human translation, machine translation, and digital tools applied to translation.

The concept of cities as “translation sites” was first studied by Sherry Simon (2008; 2013; 2019), who indicated that languages play a crucial role in shaping the spaces we inhabit and the relations we build across them. Over time, I have tried to expand this concept (Sofa, 2018a; 2021), to see translation “as a process of creative transformation and not as a simple copying mechanism”, which can “offer us a fruitful paradigm to reimagine the future of our cities, of the networks we create within them, and of the paths we can build to design new cartographies of the world” (2024, n.p.). In this sense, the city is seen as a palimpsest constantly rewritten and in need of translation, to be looked at anew through the lens of translation and through “*the translator’s gaze*, the intense engagement of the translator with the source text which also entails an appropriation of sorts—not just with the eyes but with all other senses” (Campbell and Vidal, 2019, p. xxix, authors’ emphasis).

The experiential approach to translation allows us to see this discipline and its practice as a way to open the original to its variations, by exploring all the possibilities that a text can generate, rather than limiting the practice of translation to the attempt of offering a simple copy of the original. Such an approach, impacts “on the source artefact enriching it with new layers of understanding”, as Campbell and Vidal write (2019, p. xxvi). It “imagines translation as working *alongside* an original work, extrapolating the work in oblique fashion and always maintaining semiotic distance and creative tension with it”, as Lee writes (2022, pp. 2; 1) to define ludic translation. This allows us to perceive both the original and its translation(s) as multidimensional objects, which can be explored in non-linear ways. Not only does this enable work to “develop rhizomatically across languages, modes, and media”, but it also “subverts the top-down relationship between original and translation” (Lee, 2022, p. 3).

When I talk about experiential translation, I have in mind two definitions of this approach. Firstly, the one given by Campbell and Vidal, as a “holistic, in-the-moment, often shared and plural process which operates in the translation of culture, community, voices of nature, place and environments”, and a process in which we are “envisaging the practice of translation as a contemporary and performative form of art or meaning-making that challenges authority and hegemonic values” (Campbell and Vidal, 2024, p. 3). Then, the one given by Isabelle Collombat of the “*approche expérientielle*”:

It’s an approach to professional translation based on experience—inasmuch as it ‘refers ... to the history of the individual and involves what he or she has accumulated as information, sensations, images, ideas, attitudes, values and so on, over time’ (Côté, 2003, p. 13), as well as the experiences or experiments—defined as ‘the act of provoking a

phenomenon with the intention of studying it' ...—carried out systematically and analytically by the translator.

(Collombat, 2022, n.p.)<sup>1</sup>

The importance of materiality, experimentation and creativity in this project could not be stressed enough, and its focus is precisely on the “gaps and errors that arise through the use of technology in translation” (Campbell and Vidal, 2024, p. 3), trying to make use of these gaps and errors to understand the process of both human and machine translation, and to play with the instability of the original text and of the translation that these gaps and errors cause.

In the context of experiential translation, in fact, the errors of translation and the gaps generated by the many intertwining levels of metaphorical translation, transformation, and/or transcodification that are so common in the digital space we inhabit, are not understood as irremediable ‘faults’, but rather as a reservoir for creativity, as useful resources that can lead to a wider and deeper discourse on the theory and practice of translation as well as on the city. Errors are then what brings us to an understanding of translation not as “a test of comprehension but of the fruitfulness of our inability to comprehend”, as Scott suggests (Scott, 2019, p. 88).

Quite interestingly, as Connelly points out about the errors of machine translation in particular: “it is precisely these mismatches and slippages ... that begin to demonstrate translation’s full creative potential to artists in general” (2015, p. 62). Translation and contemporary art share in fact this interest in the creative error, and in the multiplicity offered by translation as a process of variation rather than imitation, as I argued in the analysis of several instances of ‘performance’ of the process of translation in contemporary art (see Sofo, 2023), which I then used as starting points for exercises of intersemiotic translation to be applied to translation training.

Vidal Claramonte has given us a wonderful image of this proximity between translation and contemporary art, and between the translator and the artist:

The translator, like the artist, has the power to create an image, and that image reflects his/her view. In other words, it reflects how s/he perceives what s/he translates ... they both paint spaces ... both must deal with problems related to the representation of origin and its implicit copy, how this representation is carried out, and the references used to do so. In short, the question is how the translator establishes the relationship between words and things, how s/he does things with words, and how s/he looks at, paints, and listens to the world through translation. Since art has been asking these questions for centuries, this will help the translator to understand that representation is not limitation but interpretation. Blurring the boundaries between disciplines will help us understand translation.

(Vidal Claramonte, 2022, pp. 23–24)

I thus decided to turn to an artistic research-creation approach to offer a translation of the city, and I have tried to offer ludic forms of intersemiotic translation which use the methods of contemporary art to generate an embodied experience of the processes of translation constantly at work in daily life—focusing not on simple acts of interlinguistic translation, but rather on all forms of code-switching that include a linguistic aspect—by looking at the world through the lens of Translation Studies, through practices of translation and through the ‘translator’s gaze’, and in which not only the translator, but also the viewer/reader plays an active role.

The method I applied for these works is very akin to the one explained by Connelly for her artworks, when she writes that she uses “linguistic *translation* as both the subject and process to create multimedia artworks that interrogate and analyse the *translation* process itself” (2015, p. 11, author’s emphasis), with the intention to “reveal what the text says without saying” (Vidal Claramonte, 2022, p. 25). The questions behind my work are also very close to the ones that triggered her own research:

How can multi-media art practices be used to investigate linguistic translation *in action*? What new knowledge is generated out of/during/ as a result of this transdisciplinary inquiry? Is it possible to use *linguistic translation* as both the subject and process to create art works that make the process visible and have the capacity to create new knowledge about translation? What is the potential of a subjective, dialogic, polyvocal investigation into linguistic translation? What can be learned through this multi-modal transdisciplinary inquiry?

(Connelly, 2015, p. 11, author’s emphasis)

To these questions, my research adds questions about the city, such as: what can we discover about the city through a reading and a translation of its identity, of its structure, of the words that describe it and of the words that are inscribed on its walls? How can the disciplinary bases of Translation Studies, and of the intersemiotic and experiential approach to translation, allow us to understand the city—its present, its past, its future(s)—through a different lens, and how can the practice of linguistic translation and of metaphorical translation offer us new ways to rewrite, translate the city, both physically and metaphorically?

The idea behind this exhibition was thus to develop a project of translation of the city of Venice, a space that is itself the result of a translation and looking for translation at the same time, through an approach that joined the experiential and intersemiotic approach to the practice of contemporary art. Its aim was to understand how human creativity and human translation could meet artificial intelligence and digital tools to create a new understanding of Venice, generated by a reading of the gaps and errors of these tools and of translation, through the translator’s gaze, and also how this could fruitfully be put at the service of translation training.

**Traduire En Archipel(s): Translating Venice 2.023**

*Traduire en archipel(s)/Tradurre in arcipelaghi* (Becheanu and Sofo, 2023) is the exhibition born from the collaboration between Stefania Becheanu and me, curated by Elisamaria Covre and hosted by CREA Cantieri del Contemporaneo at Isola della Giudecca, Venice, from 6 April to 23 April 2023, in collaboration with Università Ca' Foscari, Istituto Romeno di Cultura e Ricerca Umanistica di Venezia and the Spin project TransKarib. The exhibition, born out of our collaboration for the translation of a work by Becheanu for a previous exhibition in Venice in 2022 (Becheanu, 2022), was held in the context of the international conference “Traduire en archipel(s)”, a conference held in Venice in April 2023 and in Tours in June of the same year, dedicated to an understanding of translation as an ‘archipelagic’, transdisciplinary and ‘undisciplined’ field.

CREA Cantieri del Contemporaneo can itself be understood as a space of ‘translation of the city’. The gallery is in fact hosted inside the spaces of the Consorzio di Cantieristica Minore Veneziana, including local artisans as well as the classes of new technologies of the arts of the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice. By supporting the artisans through the rent of the exhibition spaces, the gallery challenges Venice’s usual market-driven choices, working towards an integrated environment for arts and crafts. The visitors entering the exhibition thus experience several levels of translation, from the translation of the space offered by the gallery itself to the ones offered in the exhibition itself.

I will focus in this chapter on my part of the exhibition, *Translating the City: Venice 2.023*, introducing the main sections of this project, which offered an experiential understanding of translation, of the city, and of the digital enhanced space we all inhabit. A virtual version of this exhibition (Sofo, 2024) can be accessed online through the link in the bibliography or the following QR code (see Figure 6.1).



Figure 6.1 The QR code that leads to the virtual version of the exhibition.

*Opening: For a Translation of Venice: A Manifesto and Fernweh*

The exhibition was opened on the ground floor by the trilingual manifesto *For a Translation of Venice* (see [Figure 6.2](#)), which summed up the research on the concept of translation of the city of Venice that I have conducted and published in scientific articles over the last years ([Sofo, 2021](#); [2024](#)). The manifesto served as the ideal opening of the exhibition, because it was at the same time an overview of the thought processes which brought me to the idea of ‘translating Venice’, and an introduction to the concept behind the creation of the different series of works included in the exhibition.

## For a Translation of Venice

**Venice is a translated city.**

This land wrested from the sea is one of the best examples of successful translation of a space, quite unfaithful to its original. To build on water, as it has been done in Venice, means to transform a space of movement, water, into a space of sedentariness. It is an extreme change of language; instead of learning how to move, how to follow the waves, one has to ask how to resist their force and how to find stability among the tides. Venice is a city that has not been afraid to find its body elsewhere, to explore its identity in all its plurality.

**But Venice is also a city that needs to be translated.**

It's in search of a new translation that can make people forget all the bad translations of it that have been produced around the world, and that can allow those who visit it a true understanding of its intimate language.

Every city has its own syntax, its own grammar. In order to read a place, one must know the grammar of the space, and how to read its language.

Venezia is not Venice, Venice, Venedig, Venecia, 威尼斯.

**But Venice is all these cities: plural, multilingual, because the language that inhabits us when we walk through it influences the way we read it.**

In order not to lose Venice, we have to translate it, to give space to all of its languages.

There are different ways to translate a city, and there are transformations that happen even without touching a stone.

Perhaps a virtual translation of Venice - more simple, less smelly, more instagrammable, more consumable - could serve to save the real Venice, separating the postcard city from the real city. Making way for a new emotional cartography of Venice, one that is concerned with stitching back its fabric, its words, its body.

giuseppe sofo

*Figure 6.2* The English version of the trilingual manifesto *For a Translation of Venice*, which opened the exhibition.



Figure 6.3 The postcard stands with some of the postcards of the series *Fernweh*.

Beside the manifesto was presented *Fernweh* (see Figure 6.3), an installation in the form of a postcard stand (borrowed from the repository of MUVE, the civic museums of Venice) displaying a series of 22 postcards, which consisted of photos taken in one city (the one indicated on the caption at the bottom of the postcard), but depicting the name or a symbol of another city.

This creates a sense of distortion, a sense of unbalance, which makes the viewer think of a mistake at the beginning. The German term ‘*Fernweh*’, which gives the title to the series, indicates a ‘longing for elsewhere’ and is the contrary of ‘homesickness’. The idea is that translating a city also means carrying that city and its memory with us elsewhere and returning to it even from afar. The places that inhabit our minds are often more important than those where we physically are with our bodies. These urban writings thus create connections between the two cities which become significant, and which remind us of our constant ubiquity in the digital and virtual word, which allows us to inhabit several spaces at the same time.

### *The City’s Alphabet*

In the main room was exposed *The City’s Alphabet*, the core of the exhibition. Over the last years, in order to ‘read’ the text of cities in translation, I conducted several experiments with Google Translate’s real-time image translation

feature, through a research-creation approach (see [Sofo, forthcoming](#)). The aim of this function launched by Google in 2015, which translates live what the user frames with his or her smartphone's camera, was to provide quick translation of writings that users encounter in their daily life. The focus of the software is on usability rather than on high-quality and extremely reliable translation, and the process followed by the application to produce the translation entails great difficulties (see [Sagar, 2020](#)), which give rise to several errors, mainly due to the process of recognizing the text, decoding it, translating it in real time and then rewriting it on top of the original text, offering us the image of a digital palimpsest.

Experimenting with these tools allowed me to experience both translation and the city through a different lens. I was brought to look at the surrounding environment from a different perspective: the urban space became a text to read, looking for possible 'translation sites', significant writings to translate, in order to understand the city's lexicon. On the other hand, I became part of a "cognitive assemblage" ([Hayles, 2016](#), p. 32), in which the software I was using influenced my movements around the city, with translation becoming part of my gaze. As Hayles writes:

Because humans and technical systems in a cognitive assemblage are interconnected, the cognitive decisions of each affect the others, with interactions occurring across the full range of human cognition, including consciousness, the unconscious, the cognitive nonconscious, and the sensory/perceptual systems that send signals to the cortex. Moreover, human decisions and interpretations feed back into technical systems, sometimes decisively affecting the contexts in which those systems operate.

([Hayles, 2016](#), p. 33)

The question of the embodiment of translation is thus multiple. On the one hand, we have the implication of the translating body in the practice of translation. Isabelle Collombat interestingly defines translation as a form of encounter between "a textual body and a translating body":

Translation, in its practice above all, but also in its theorization, takes place in the imponderable that is characteristic of each new encounter between a textual body and a translating body. Seeing the translator not simply as a translating 'agent', but as a translating 'body' allows us to envisage his or her actions through all of its senses, more or less verbalized, more or less conscious, in the veritable limbo of the implicit and of interlanguage.

([Collombat, 2022](#), n.p.)<sup>2</sup>

Campbell and Vidal have also highlighted that intersemiotic translation, in particular, "involves a creative step in which the translator (artist or performer) offers its embodiment in a different medium" (2019, p. xxvi).



Figure 6.4 “All tourists are bastards/All bastards are tourists”.

On the other hand, we also have to take into account the extension of the human body beyond its corporeal limits that is characteristic of the digital era. One is in fact translating at once with one’s whole body, and one’s ‘cognitive baggage’, but also with the extended body of the ‘cognitive assemblage’ one is part of, and with the extended collective body of the community formed by the translator/artist and the active viewers/readers of the work, generating an extension and expansion of both the ‘translating body’ and of translation itself.

The works in this section took the form of sets of one picture and two screenshots including words written on the walls and streets of Venice and their translation through Google Translate’s real-time image translation feature, focusing on errors, misreadings and deviations of the translation that allowed for a double (or triple) reading, sometimes revealing the reality hidden behind the words, or generating alternative readings that can tell us about a different city than the one we read with our own eyes.

The first subsection included pieces realized by translating writings on the walls of the city, especially if related to its current situation. The first example of this is the graffiti “All tourists are bastards”, translated into Italian and French as “*tous les batards sont des touristes/tutti i bastardi sono turisti*”, which inverts the sentence, giving us “all bastards are tourists” (see Figure 6.4).

The second example is “*Venezia che affoga*” (Venice drowning), translated as “Venice or drowning 08.08/*Venise ou noyade 08.08*”, with the indication of a date that was not there in the original (interpreted by the software through a reading of the bubbles surrounding the writing), turning the certain “drowning” of Venice into a choice between two possible futures: Venice or drowning



Figure 6.5 “Venice drowning/Venice or drowning 08.08”.

(see Figure 6.5). This second translation showed how the software was able to interpret non-verbal forms as text, leading to a deeper understanding of the city as text than the one I had in mind.

The second subsection is dedicated to a demonstration held in Campo Santa Margherita of the committees that work towards a different Venice, protesting against the idea of introducing a ticket to visit the city (eventually approved several months later) and in favour of more accessible housing for residents. This environment was particularly fruitful, as it focused on writings that already included a critique of the current situation of Venice (see Figure 6.6).

The sign “*la casa è un diritto*” (housing is a right) became “the cash and a direction/*l’argent et une direction*”, because of the angle of the picture which led the software to read the final “a” of “casa” as “h”, reflecting thus the actual reality of Venice’s housing market, exclusively based on the maximization of profits. Something very similar happened when in “*Venice*



Figure 6.6 The works derived from the demonstration held in Campo Santa Margherita.

*riparta dale studenta*” (Venice should start anew from students), the epicene term created for “students” in inclusive writing<sup>3</sup> was not recognized by the machine, which highlighted instead the writing on the back “24 hour cash”, giving us “Venice starts again from 24 hour cash/*Venise recommence à partir de argent 24h/24*”.

A more ‘positive’ outcome is the one in which the sign “*Venezia invendibile r-esiste*” (Unsellable Venice resists and exists) was translated as “the inventable Venice reexists/*La Venise inventable réexiste*” giving us hope for the invention of a new Venice, likely because of the difficulty of finding the word “*invendibile*” in the dictionary used by the machine, and of the impossibility of decoding the wordplay on “to resist” and “to exist” built through the hyphen.

The third subsection is the one in which the results were more surprising and more ‘extreme’. The software is trained to recognize as many real-life writings as possible, even when letters are oddly written or the words contain typos or mistakes. This is why, after being exposed to buildings without writings for a long time, it eventually interpreted the arches, windows, and shapes of Venice’s palaces and bridges as letters of an imaginary text written by the city itself. This transformed the view of the city into an ‘architectural’ translation of the city itself, as we can see in the ‘translation’ of the façade of the Procuratie Vecchie (see [Figure 6.7](#)).



to generate something that we perceive as creative. The creativity is thus the product of the encounter between the human-generated data collected by the machine, the translator's gaze, which suggests a look upon the artefact through the lens of translation, and the active role of the viewer/reader who engages with the work.

This section opened with the video recording of a dialogue about the translation of Venice with Chat GPT (banned at the time in Italy)<sup>4</sup>. After a few initial exchanges in which Chat GPT interpreted the concept of 'translation' in its most concrete understanding, after clarifying that what I was looking for was a metaphorical translation of the city, Chat GPT started to adapt to my requests, offering an interesting perspective of translation for the city:

The transformation of the city in a metaphorical sense can be seen as a kind of translation or transposition into another form or context. For example, one could translate a city as an 'urban laboratory' where innovative ideas, technologies and solutions are tested to solve problems such as pollution, traffic congestion or resource scarcity... In another example, one could translate a city as a living organism in which buildings, streets, people and nature coexist and interact like the cells, organs and tissues of a biological organism. In this 'translation', the city becomes a living organism that grows, evolves and adapts to the changing needs and challenges of its environment.

(Chat GPT and Sofo, 2023<sup>5</sup>)

When asked about a possible application of this metaphorical translation to the city of Venice in particular, Chat GPT replied with fascinating proposals, such as the possibility of Venice becoming:

a model of a sustainable city, with a focus on the environment and reducing environmental impact ... a center of innovation and technology, with the attraction of startups and innovative companies developing solutions to address the city's social and economic problems ... a center of cultural excellence, attracting artists, creatives and intellectuals from around the world ... a model of sustainable mobility, with the adoption of environmentally friendly public and private transportation solutions ... an example of responsible and sustainable tourism by adopting policies and initiatives to reduce the impact of tourism on the city.

(Chat GPT and Sofo, 2023)

All of these proposals would make a great program for the urban politics of the future of Venice, after decades in which political choices have gone towards a maximization of profits, rather than towards a wider sustainability of the city's development. However, the most surprising answer is certainly the

one that closed the exchange, where I invited Chat GPT to Venice in Spring, and instead of replying with the usual lines which remind the user that the software is not a human being, Chat GPT replied: “Thank you for the invitation! I would be happy to visit Venice in the Spring and see for myself how it is changing and transforming into a sustainable and innovative city” ([Chat GPT and Sofo, 2023](#)).

Although this is mainly a sign of adaptation from the software to my requests, the incredibly fast development of AI tools leads to forms of dialogue with chatbots that can make us forget we are not interacting with a human being but with a machine. On the one hand, this could obviously lead to dangerous consequences (see [Xiang, 2023](#)), while on the other hand, it is simply one more manifestation of the ‘cognitive assemblage’ we form with all the devices that are present in our daily life, and exploring this means to better understand the digitally-enhanced environment we inhabit.

The second part of this section included a central piece and five series of four images created through text-to-image software, which allows the generation of images by artificial intelligence starting from a textual prompt. There is a heated debate at the moment between artists and the self-proclaimed ‘AI artists’, generating works through prompts, and claiming them as their own (see [Shaffi, 2023](#)). Without entering this discussion, what I want to highlight is that the purpose here was quite the opposite. Instead of manipulating these tools to create works I could claim as my own, the intention here was to give the software very simple prompts, in order to capture the ‘creativity’ of the software itself (always in the sense I highlighted before), following its generative process to understand what perception this offered of the translation process and of the city.

The main piece, mounted in the shape of a spinal column, collected all the steps in the process of MidJourney generating an image through the command: “/imagine translation”. It starts with the first blurred sketches of the gradually forming images, and its core is the four images produced by the software (see [Figure 6.8](#)).

More images have then been generated through the ‘variations’ function, producing thus four quality-enhanced and modified variations for each image, except for one for which only three variations were produced, leaving thus a voluntary gap in the symmetry of the piece (see [Figure 6.9](#)).

Initially, the fourth version of the fourth image was not produced because I had finished the credits for the free version of MidJourney. While I thought about producing the fourth image at a later time, through a paid subscription, this gap caused by the fact that I was not using a premium version seemed significant in relation to our asymmetrical experiences of digital tools nowadays. This is why I decided to avoid generating the missing image, which resulted in further exploration of gaps and errors in translation.

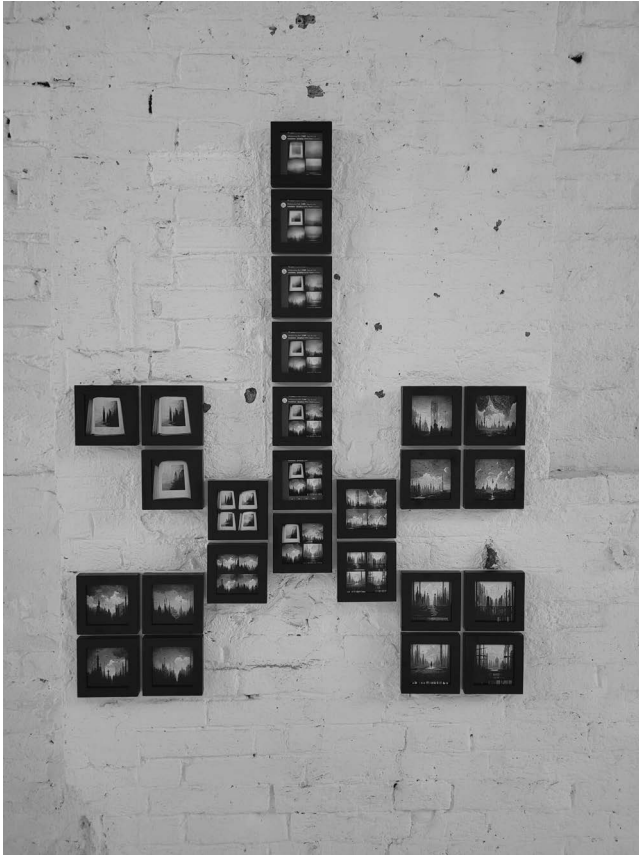
The four initial images produced by the software algorithm and the successive variations mostly generated a city, in which buildings came out of the pages and gradually became people, though the text-to-image software was



*Figure 6.8* The detail of the first four pictures generated by MidJourney through the prompt “/imagine translation”.

only asked to draw translation and not the translation of the city, and though I had never ‘fed’ MidJourney with any prompt related to the translation of the city at that point in time. It would thus be interesting to understand whether the fact that the software mostly created images of a city was influenced by the data of my own scientific research (collected from my laptop, or from publications found on the internet?), from the data of search queries I had performed over time on Google or other search engines, or if the data the software relied on also connected the concepts of translation and city, in ways that I had not imagined.

The remaining five series of four images each were created using different text-to-image softwares (MidJourney, Dall.e, NightCafé and Mage Space) through two textual prompts, “Translate Venice” and “Translate Venice into the city that Venice will be in the future”. This generated, among others,



*Figure 6.9* The artwork generated by assembling all the variations of the images created by the software through the prompt “/imagine translation”.

ornamental frames containing images of Venice (see [Figure 6.10](#)); images of a city dominated by huge gondolas, which become bigger and bigger, at times even more than parts of the island of Venice; apocalyptic images of a distorted Venice, drowning under high waters. All these images lead to an understanding of Venice as a city condemned to death by water, which will soon disappear and will only be remembered through knick-knacks and souvenirs, especially of gondolas.

Since these AI tools generate their products by using artificial neural networks to trawl the internet for existing imagery, this mainly reflects the image of Venice that humans have. If it is very clear that the exorbitant size of gondolas dominating the landscape is due to the fact that most pictures of Venice that can be found on the internet contain gondolas, the dystopic aspect of most of these images might be revelatory of what most humans fear for the future of the city.



*Figure 6.10* One of the AI-generated images, in which Venice becomes a souvenir, a city that can only be remembered and not lived.

### *The Original Is Unfaithful to the Translation*

The main room of the exhibition had stairs leading to a broken window, which offered a magnificent view of the Redentore Church over the rooftops of other buildings in Giudecca, and past the gardens of a neighbouring convent, but I had noticed during previous exhibitions that visitors rarely went up those stairs. I thus tried to attract visitors to this window, to give them the opportunity of enjoying the view, the wind coming in from the broken window and at lucky times the scent of the herbs in the garden, in order to apprehend the space of the gallery as another space that needed to be ‘translated’ and discovered through all senses.

To do this, I created an *on-site* piece, by translating the view from the window, through the same methods used for the section *The City’s Alphabet*, and I decided to place here a further piece, entitled *The Original Is Unfaithful to the Translation*, derived from a sentence by Borges which perfectly reflects my view of translation. As I wrote in a previous article, in fact, “while the translation gives us the opportunity to read the original as well, as in a palimpsest ... the original, taken by itself, isolated from all alternative versions, accounts only for itself, leaving us in ignorance of all that the text is, and all that the text could be, in its infinite variations” (Sofa, 2018b, pp. 91–92).<sup>6</sup>

Le prime chiavi del mio primo appartamento veneziano aprivano la porta ma non la chiudevano, mentre le chiavi del mio coinquilino aprivano e chiudevano senza problemi. Un calzolaio mi disse che c'era bisogno dell'originale, perché senza originale non poteva fare una buona copia. Gli ho spiegato che – come teorico della traduzione – non credo nell'autorità dell'originale e che Borges diceva che "l'originale è infedele alla traduzione". Mi sono anche detto che forse una cattiva traduzione è proprio questo: non una traduzione che non apre il testo, ma una traduzione che lo apre, ma non riesce a chiuderlo. Alla fine sono riuscito ad avere una copia delle chiavi che aprivano e chiudevano la porta, non da un originale, ma da una "buona copia". Forse una "buona copia" potrebbe salvare Venezia, darci la chiave per liberare l'originale?

Les clés de mon premier appartement vénitien ouvraient la porte mais ne la fermaient pas, alors que les clés de mon colocataire ouvraient et fermaient sans problème. Un cordonnier m'a dit qu'il avait besoin de l'original, parce que sans l'original il ne pouvait pas faire une bonne copie. Je lui ai expliqué que – en tant que théoricien de la traduction –, je ne crois pas à l'autorité de l'original et que Borges disait que "l'original est infidèle à la traduction". Je me suis également dit que c'est peut-être ça une mauvaise traduction : non pas une traduction qui n'ouvre pas le texte, mais une traduction qui l'ouvre, mais qui ne parvient pas à le fermer. Finalement, j'ai réussi à obtenir une copie des clés qui ouvraient et fermaient la porte, non pas à partir d'un original, mais à partir d'une "bonne copie". Peut-être qu'une "bonne copie" pourrait sauver Venise, nous donner la clé pour libérer son original?

The first keys I had of my first Venetian apartment opened the door but did not close it, while my housemate's keys opened and closed without a problem. A shoemaker told me that he needed the original, because without an original he could not make a good copy. I explained to him that – as a translation theorist – I do not believe in the authority of the original and that Borges said that "the original is unfaithful to the translation". I also told myself that perhaps that's what a bad translation is: not a translation that does not open the text, but a translation that opens it, but fails to close it. Eventually I managed to get a copy of the keys that opened and closed the door, not from an original, but from a "good copy". Perhaps a "good copy" could save Venice, give us the key to set the original free?

Figure 6.11 The trilingual text dedicated to the relationship between original and translation.

This installation included a trilingual text dedicated to the relationship between original and translation, through a true anecdote (see Figure 6.11—please read the text), accompanied by three sets of keys with keychains of different colours: green (the original), red (the 'bad' copies) and yellow (the 'good' copy).

By the time I made the artwork I had left the apartment and returned the keys to the owners, and had lost both the "good" and the "bad" copies I had made. Therefore, I had to ask a locksmith to make good and bad copies of another key. However, the locksmith kept refusing the idea of making bad copies, because he refused to do a bad job, and because he was not sure he was practically able to make them. After insisting on the 'rightness' of these errors of production for my own project, I had to come up with suggestions for the

locksmith on strategies he could use to produce copies that did not open the door: an education to error-making and to the possibility of imperfection, and the potential creative paths that imperfection opens.

Reading these daily-life moments of failed translation can show us a material embodiment of the ‘faults’ we attribute to linguistic translation, its gaps and errors, which are indeed characteristic not only of translation, but of every act of communication, transmission and reproduction.

### **Performing Translation In (and out of) the Classroom**

One of the main driving ideas of the exhibition “Traduire en archipel(s)” was to bring translation outside of the classroom, and outside of the usual academic and literary circuits, to encounter other forms of expression and of cultural transmission, such as contemporary art.

However, after experimenting for several years with experiential and inter-semiotic translation in courses of translation (see [Sofo, 2020](#)), I believe that this approach can also be fruitfully put at the service of translation training in the classroom. From a pedagogical point of view, in fact, exposing trainees of translation to ‘undisciplined’ forms of translation—whereby I mean both unclassifiable in a single discipline and more playful—leaving both the physical space of the classroom and the metaphorical space of the classic translation studies curriculum, allows to stimulate their creativity through methods that could not be used through a traditional curriculum, offering a more complex and richer experience of translation. As Collombat writes, this approach “illustrates the usefulness of the links between theory ... and practice ..., in the sense that the reflexive translator bases his actions on analyzed, objective self-observation”, and in these situations “recourse to theory is dictated by the need to optimize practice, and is based on it” ([Collombat, 2022](#), n.p.).<sup>7</sup> I have thus involved students of my MA advanced course on translation in several activities related to the project, among which the creation of their own ‘translations’ of Venice on which I will focus in this final part of the article.

One student, Lisa Mirandola, selected excerpts of quotations from books on Venice by several authors (Borges, Mann, Bolaño, Capote, Brodsky, Proust, Calvino, Giusti), and assembled them in their different languages, before proceeding to translate each quotation into the original languages of the other quotations. This produced a multilingual reading of the city of Venice and a sort of multilingual dialogue between these authors, through a performative ‘chain translation’, which led to the multiplication of languages, of readings and, inevitably, misreadings.

Chiara Basone, instead, took pictures of peculiar Venetian doorbells, whose shape give the impression of a human face, and decided to name each one of them and assign them one of the traditional professions of Venice, that have by now disappeared (*impiraressa*, *remer*, *pizzegamorto*, *pittima*, *revendigola*, *spezier*),<sup>8</sup> somehow allowing the traditional Venice to come back to life (see [Figure 6.12](#)).

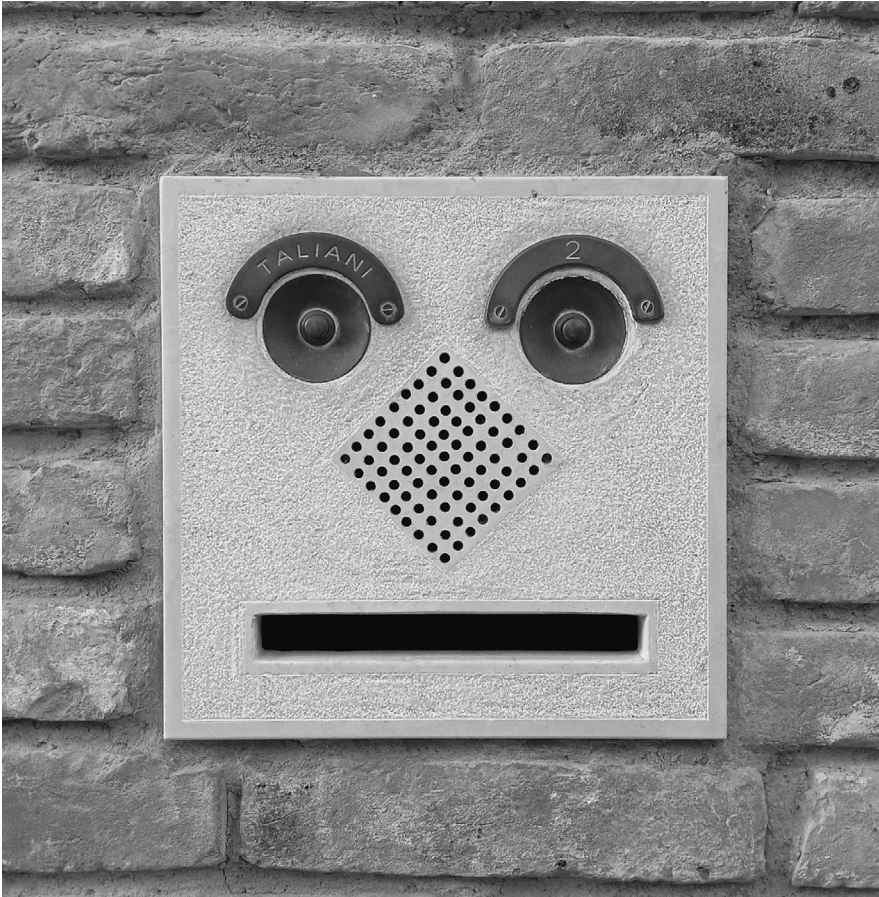


Figure 6.12 *Siora Taliani, Impiraressa dea Cae de Millefiori*, one of the works by Chiara Basone. Picture by Chiara Basone, © 2023.

Four students who had worked together on the collaborative translations (Eleonora Franceschi, Gaia Rutigliano, Petra Tortato and Samantha Cirillo) decided to produce a common and multiple ‘translation’, by interviewing people in Venice (both locals and tourists) and Paris, asking them for their own translation of Venice. The interviews were video-recorded and transcribed, and these transcriptions were then ‘fed’ to Chat GPT (both in Italian and in French, through translations carried out by the students), asking the software to produce two different poems, starting from the Italian and from the French transcriptions/translations, a process which generated two entirely different poems, as can be seen from my translations into English:

Pretty, magical, beautiful, / Venice is an enchanted island, / An abused city, / But with a much bigger heart. // Suspended on water, suspended

in time, / Always waiting for something to happen, / Venice is passion and love, / The city of masks and gondoliers. // St. Mark's Square, the bâtiments très beaux, / *Acqua alta, paeassi corosi, moti ondosi e gas veevosi* [high waters, corroded buildings, wave movements and venomous gases], / But one cannot hate this lady, / For Venice is a newfound humanity. // Mahler and his symphonie No. 5, / Let the gondolas go to Venice, / And the love for this romantic city, / That must be pampered and loved deeply. // And when you return to the liberty bridge, / Here comes serenity, / For without water you cannot live, / And Venice is the city within me.

Beautiful, magical, so beautiful, / But mistreated, a lady in pain, / A unique and sensual city, / With a sublime history and colors. // Venezia, city of love, / Of lovers and gondolas, / Of historic buildings that always scream, / And crystalline waters that roll. // But it became an amusement park, / A Disneyland full of tourists, / Who invade the city like barbarians, / Leaving behind them disorder and sadness. // I'm a Venetian who loves it so much, / It's my heart and soul, / But overpopulation is a scourge, / And it must be regulated to be saved. // Suspended in time, on the water, / Venezia is always waiting, / For something special, something beautiful, / Like the love that bewitches and enchants us. // The masks, the gondolas and the gondoliers, / Mahler's music that carries us away, / All this is part of the history / Of this city we love so much. // Venezia, you're like a beautiful lady, / To be cherished and loved deeply, / For without you, we wouldn't be the same, / And our world would be different.

This is a perfect example of how students could combine a metaphorical understanding of translation of the city, and an actual practice of intersemiotic and experiential translation, through the use of digital tools and artificial intelligence. It allowed them to go beyond the limits of the discipline, putting their linguistic and translation skills to the test, while creating something original at the same time, and it especially allowed them to experience both the city of Venice and the practice of translation through a different lens.

## Conclusions

*Traduire en archipel(s)* and the connected activities afforded the translators involved in the project, as well as viewers/readers, and the students, a real form of intersemiotic and experiential translation, which led to a deep reflection on both translation—as a practice and a discipline—and the city of Venice, moving beyond the usual confines of the discipline, and beyond the source in search of new translatable targets, instead of a single target.

This approach has in fact allowed to perceive translation as a field of possibilities and as an “unstable, transformative process which embodies both

displacement and dialogue” (Perteghella, 2019, p. 63). Intersemiotic translation was central in all the activities related to the project, since in these practices “instead of focusing on the translation of sense or meaning, the translator effectively plays the role of mediator in an experiential process that allows the recipients ... to re-create the sense (or ‘semios’) of the source artefact for themselves” (Campbell and Vidal, 2019, p. xxvi).

Through this process the text becomes multilingual, multivocal, and multidimensional, because the use of ludic translation has allowed to “add performative value to a source text more than to transmit or communicate its instrumental meaning”, and to “[open] up a text to playful experimentation ... moderated through the translator’s knowledge, disposition and subjectivity as well as their sensory and embodied experience of reading” (Lee, 2022, p. 63).

The centrality of the translator is in the end also the centrality of the human, since these forms of intersemiotic experiential translation also respond to the need of finding a new role and new tasks for human translators in the era of the evolution of automatic or assisted translation. If humans are being replaced by machines for trivial tasks of translation, this will hardly be the case for forms of ludic intersemiotic translation, for which “non-trivial effort is always involved”, since “the solution to the problem presented by the pre-existing work needs to be creatively sought beyond bilingual glossaries, dictionaries and automated translators” (Lee, 2022, pp. 31–32).

A meaningful play with language and with digital tools in translation, which can lead to deep reflection about our languages, their interactions, and our interactions with them, as well as our relationship with the spaces we inhabit, can thus paradoxically be a way to escape the control of digital technologies over translation, and to bring back the human at the centre of the practice of translation. As Collombat states, in fact:

Our discipline is not only rooted in society, but also profoundly connected to the human. In fact, in my opinion, such a holistic approach to the act of translating, in which the translator invests himself as an individual, in all his singularity, goes hand in hand with a humanistic approach to translation, and to translation training.

(Collombat, 2022, n.p.)<sup>9</sup>

Instead of yielding to the control of digital tools over translation, playing with these same tools in unexpected ways, assigning a new centrality to the translator’s gaze, the translator’s ‘extended body’—including his or her own ‘cognitive baggage’, the ‘cognitive assemblages’ and the communities he or she is part of—can thus turn into a fruitful route for a humanistic approach to both translation practice and translation training, helping us to find new and more joyous forms to apply human creativity to the process of translation and its understanding.

## Notes

- 1 All translations in this article from French and Italian into English are mine. French source text: “Il s’agit d’une approche de la traduction professionnelle fondée sur l’expérience—en ce qu’elle ‘renvoie ... à l’histoire de l’individu et implique ce qu’il a accumulé comme informations, sensations, images idées, attitudes, valeurs, etc., au fil du temps’ (Côté, 2003, p. 13), ainsi que les expériences ou expérimentations—définies comme ‘le fait de provoquer un phénomène dans l’intention de l’étudier’ ...—menées de manière systématique et analytique par le traducteur” (Collombat, 2022, n.p.).
- 2 French source text: “La traduction, dans sa pratique surtout, mais dans sa théorisation aussi, se fait dans l’impondérable propre à chaque nouvelle rencontre d’un corps textuel et d’un corps traduisant. Voir le traducteur non plus comme un simple ‘agent’ traduisant, mais comme un ‘corps’ traduisant permet d’envisager son agir dans tout son ressenti, plus ou moins verbalisé, plus ou moins conscient, véritables limbes de l’implicite et de l’interlangue” (Collombat, 2022, n.p.).
- 3 About the use of schwa as a morpheme to create epicene terms in Italian, see: [Sofa, 2019](#).
- 4 The timing of the exhibition was right on cue from this point of view, because Chat GPT was banned in Italy for 28 days only, exactly from March 31, 2023 (six days before the opening of the exhibition) to April 28, 2023 (five days after its closing).
- 5 The whole dialogue has been translated by the author from Italian into English.
- 6 Italian source text: “non è mai la traduzione o la riscrittura a essere infedele all’originale, ma è sempre l’originale a essere infedele a tutte le riscritture e le traduzioni che ne seguono ... Mentre la traduzione, infatti, ci dà la possibilità di leggere anche l’originale, come in un palinsesto ... l’originale, preso da solo, isolato da tutte le versioni alternative, non rende conto che di se stesso, lasciandoci nell’ignoranza di tutto ciò che il testo è, e di tutto ciò che il testo potrebbe essere, nelle sue infinite variazioni” (Sofa, 2018b, pp. 91–92).
- 7 French source text: “Elle illustre l’utilité des liens entre théorie (du verbe grec *theôrein* qui, rappelons-le, signifie ‘observer’) et pratique (du grec *praxis*, qui renvoie à l’action), en ce sens que le traducteur réflexif fonde ses actions sur une auto-observation analysée et objective. Il s’agit néanmoins d’une approche *bottom-up*, où le recours à la théorie est dicté par la nécessité d’optimiser la pratique et part de celle-ci” (Collombat, 2022, n.p.).
- 8 These professions can be roughly translated as follows: *impiraressa*: the craftswomen who threaded tiny coloured glass beads made by local artisans with long needles, in the production of glass jewellery; *remer*: the craftsman who shapes the wooden oars and ‘forcolas’ for gondolas; *pizzegamorto*: gravedigger / undertaker; *pittima*: debt collector; *revendigola*: ragwoman; *spezier*: grocer
- 9 French source text: “Notre discipline est non seulement ancrée dans la société, mais aussi profondément liée à l’humain. De fait, à mon sens, une telle démarche holistique de l’acte de traduire, dans laquelle le traducteur s’investit en tant qu’individu, dans toute sa singularité, va de pair avec une approche humaniste de la traduction, et de la didactique de la traduction” (Collombat, 2022, n.p.).

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## Section 3

# Bodies in Time



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# 7 Constructing the Afterlives of Objects

## Experiential Translation in Contemporary Saudi Female Artworks

*Sarah Ibrahim Aldawood*

### Introduction

The incorporation of non-verbal signs and symbols into discussions of translation is not a recent development. Its roots can be traced back to Roman Jakobson's concept of intersemiotic translation ([1959] 2000), one of his three translation types that have profoundly shaped the discourse and conceptualization of translation studies in the Western tradition. Jakobson's theory of nonverbal signs recognizes a wide array of nonverbal forms, liberating translation from the limitations of a purely verbal perspective. This expansive concept has influenced scholarship not only within the field of translation but also in various other disciplines, including film studies, adaptation studies, intermedial and multimodal studies, semiotics and more.

In this chapter, I adopt an interdisciplinary and intersemiotic approach to the translation of experience. I experiment with Madeleine Campbell and Ricarda Vidal's concept of experiential translation (Campbell and Vidal, 2019, 2024), which provides a broad lens for analyzing and understanding translation beyond its written textual form. Experiential translation focuses on the multimodal and multi-sensory dimension of translation and "can be understood as a holistic, in-the-moment, often shared and plural process which operates in the translation of culture, community, voices of nature, place and environments" (Campbell and Vidal, 2024, p. 3). On the basis of this definition of experiential translation, I will endeavour to demonstrate how two contemporary Saudi female artists, Manal AlDowayan (b.1973) and Maha Malluh (b.1959), serve as experiential translators by translating the experiences of Saudi women across time and space. Through the cultural artefacts they employ, which are linked to the period of the *Sabwa* movement, their work casts a revealing light on translation as a holistic, transformative, creative and embodied process. They connect the past with the present, weaving their personal and collective memories into the fabric of their art. While these two artists reflect particular experiences of Saudi women, I do not intend to generalize their work as representative of all Saudi women's experiences. Analyzing

DOI: [10.4324/9781003462569-12](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003462569-12)

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these artworks alongside statements made by the artists and galleries, I will attempt to demonstrate the ways in which art enacts translation.

### **Translation and Materiality: From Transfer to Transformation**

In recent years, there has been an increasing theoretical focus within translation studies on expanding the field's territories, approaches, and frameworks. This growth within the discipline has been manifested in different 'turns' or paradigm shifts, a recent one being the "outward turn", which embraces a more interdisciplinary and pluriversal orientation (Bassnett and Johnston, 2019). No longer confined to a written or printed linguistic focus, the field is now at liberty to consider a myriad of other forms, including the visual arts. Experiential translation (Campbell and Vidal, 2024) focuses on the creative, material, and embodied process of translation and the expansion of the communicative role that translation plays. The material or medial turn in translation studies, as explored by Karin Littau (2011, 2016), has brought into focus the pivotal role of materiality in shaping and conveying a message, echoing Marshall McLuhan's (1994 [1964]) famous line that "the medium is the message" (p. 1). The form through which an original thought is expressed carries significance in how its meaning is subsequently translated or transferred. This perspective offers a crucial dimension, as it significantly impacts the communication process.

Likewise, in the world of art, the materiality of artistic creation is known to wield substantial influence on how artists seek to convey meaning and on how meaning is constructed by audiences. Relevant to this discussion is the distinction between discursive and artistic forms of communication made by twentieth-century American philosopher Susanne Langer (1957) in her observations and analysis of what art can do. Langer considers how art represents and transforms experience by giving shape to the elusive and opaque interiority of the human spirit. She explains that "[a] work of art expresses a conception of life, emotion, inward reality. But it is neither a confessional nor a frozen tantrum; it is a developed metaphor, a non-discursive symbol that articulates what is verbally ineffable—the logic of consciousness itself" (Langer, 1957, p. 26). For Langer, art involves the creation of forms symbolic of human feelings in ways that discursive language alone cannot achieve (ibid, p. 8). She is not interested in art as an expression of the artist's own emotions but in the range of collective emotions that a work of art can reveal. In this view, Langer encourages a broader understanding of communication that involves (re)constructing meanings by transcending the limitations of language.

In the 1990s, the cultural turn in translation studies signalled a move from textual exactitude to a consideration of wider cultural matters. Translation studies scholars have continued to move away from the limited view of translation as a fixed binary model of substitution, opting instead to regard the

translated product as “a work of art with a social life of its own” (Saldanha, 2022, p. 97). In line with this sentiment, translation scholarship has opted to consider artwork and artefacts as a means of challenging the notion of a fixed linguistic binary. Simona Bertacco, for example, believes that a recognition of the limitations caused by this narrow definition of translation is “what has been lost in translation (studies)” (Bertacco 2022, p. 119; brackets in the source text). Bertacco’s critique supports the argument that studying different non-verbal signs and symbols allows for ‘gains’ in exploring and discussing translation studies. Utilizing the concept of translation in a migration context to inform her analysis of the Palestinian artist Emily Jacir’s work, Bertacco asserts that “the translational turn of the humanities has now entered its material phase” (ibid, p. 119). More recently, Piotr Blumczynski introduced the concept of “experiencing translationality” (Blumczynski, 2023, p. 7), a pursuit that involves “the experience of connecting, through material, sensory mediation, with another reality across time and space” (ibid, p. 82). He expands the notion of translation beyond words to include the transfer of bodily experiences, materials and sensations to envision “a parallel universe of translation in which the ‘linguistic bias’ never came to prevail” (ibid, p. 5).

In a similar attempt to move away from a limited view, Loredana Polezzi’s examination of Italian artists’ work in the diaspora presents translation not as an erasure or substitution but as a narrative continuity and co-presence, in which it is not expected to “delete what and who we were, nor erase our links to our own past and to the past of those who came before us” (2020, p. 333). Moreover, the departure from strict adherence to a source is one aspect of what Susan Bassnett refers to as “translational imagination”, by which translators create new works for their own time, “bringing the dead back to life and, through translating, taking us, their readers on a quest with them” (2022, 48:00–48:14). In other words, translation involves an imaginative and creative process that welcomes and celebrates change—from small shifts to larger-scale transformations. Sociologist and translation studies scholar Esperança Bielsa (2023) has also explored the concept of transformation in translation through the notion of metamorphosis, which “at its most general, refers to a complete transformation that renders our world unrecognizable in many ways” (p. 31). She suggests that in order to understand the nature of translation, we must recognize that metamorphosis in translation involves material transformation. What unites these scholars with their different approaches is the evolving perspective that translation is no longer conceived of as the mere transfer of content between different verbal languages; instead, it involves experiences that are creative, embodied, and tangible.

In what follows, I consider the transformative power that translation offers in relation to the works of two Saudi female artists. Moreover, I argue that artworks can be seen as an embodiment of the creativity that dwells in translation

and that challenges both the normative claims that focus on ‘faithfulness, accuracy, exact equivalence’ as well as the understanding of translation as merely a ‘transfer’ process from one verbal language into another.

### Artists as Translators

Artists and translators both deal with creativity in their work, as their respective crafts involve showing “an aesthetic attention” to a source (Malmkjær, 2020, p. 94). A simple analogy to be made between translation and visual arts is that they are both considered sites for generating meaning. The neuroscientist Raymond Tallis once said, “art is expressing one’s universal wound—the wound of living a finite life of incomplete meanings” (cited in Perry, 2014, p. 108). Tallis’s comment not only captures the undercurrent of grief that can inspire art, but it also alludes to the way art attempts to translate and make bearable the ‘incomplete meanings’ encountered in life. Visual artists, for instance, use their talents as a way to transform their and others’ experiences and ordeals by using colours, canvases and other artistic conventions. When considering this description of art, a comparison can be made with Jakobson’s ([1959] 2000) “translation proper” (p. 114), which depicts translators as using their bilingual skills to render another’s experiences from one verbal language into another. Even though artists and translators may use different conventions specific to their media, both are tasked with uncovering the experiences and emotions of their subjects and interpreting their meanings. Translation studies scholar Moira Inghilleri (2016) has drawn interesting parallels between interpreters and visual artists, noting that both groups share the burden of conveying human complexity through language, whether visual or verbal. More recently, Vidal Claramonte (2022), in her book *Translation and Contemporary Arts: Interdisciplinary Encounters*, focuses on the eye, the gaze and the look, taking Emily Apter’s view of “translating ‘the reading’ into ‘the lookings’” (p. 40) as evidence of a connection between translators and artists: in both roles, their gaze can direct readers, viewers, or audience members to a particular point. Their way of translating greatly affects how a translated project can be analyzed. Vidal Claramonte introduces the term “artisttranslator” (2022, p. 28) to emphasize the similarities between both groups, effectively blurring the boundaries that separate them. Consideration of the emotions and senses is encapsulated in the ideas put forth by translation scholars Campbell and Vidal (2019) in an earlier exploration of experiential translation. They propose that the translator engages with a text “not just with the eyes but with all other senses” (ibid, p. xxix) through a creative process of embodied meaning-making across various media and with the aim of facilitating communication among diverse groups even in the absence of a shared linguistic code.

It is through this lens that I consider the extent to which Saudi artists, in particular, enact the position of translator. Here, I draw on historian Sean Foley’s observation in his book *Changing Saudi Arabia: Art, Culture and Society in the Kingdom* (2019), that, with the rise of the modern Saudi art

movement, artists “play a role in Saudi society akin to Antonio Gramsci’s concept of organic intellectuals” (p. 5), given that they are not considered as part of the society’s traditional intellectual elite. He writes,

Through the language of their culture, they articulate feelings and experiences that the masses cannot easily express. To paraphrase Ezra Pound, Saudi artists are the ‘antennae’ of the kingdom’s society, whose work is not ‘mere self-expression’ but, in the words of Marshall McLuhan, the ‘distant early warning system that can always be relied upon to tell the old culture what is beginning to happen to it’.

(ibid)

Highlighting the interplay between politics and aesthetics, Foley argues that “Saudi artists have created a vision that contains political elements, but which can nevertheless be presented as ‘apolitical’” (ibid, p. 14). This underscores the extent to which these artists are able to address specific ideas—ones that are recognizably ‘Saudi’ in nature—without seeking to pose any overt challenges. Inherently open to interpretation, the visual art medium increases the agency of artists and the impact of the works they produce. According to Foley, the approach Saudi artists take is not individualistic by nature. Rather, their work bears the burden of the collective whose aim it is, according to one Saudi artist, “to give voice” and to offer “images and visual narratives that can articulate... hopes and fears” (cited in Foley, p. 23). In this sense, artists are not only articulating what they themselves feel but are also attentive to what others are experiencing. They inhabit a role similar to interpreters and translators as “sensitive observers” and conduits of emotions and experiences (Inghilleri, p. 98).

### Female Saudi Artworks and Cultural Artefacts

In this chapter, I focus on two artists who are engaged with artefacts associated with the *Sabwa* or *Al-Sabwa Al-Islamiyya* (The Islamic Awakening) movement. This movement marked a period of significant religious and social tension within Saudi society and resulted in significant restrictions on women’s rights and personal freedoms, relegating them to the margins of society. The movement, which reached its peak in Saudi Arabia in the 1980s, waned in 2017 after the Crown Prince declared a return to moderate Islam. The movement also restricted how artists worked. For example, figure drawing and photography were prohibited according to Fatwas issued by religious clerks, which affected both artists’ education and wider perceptions of their work (Al-Senan et al., 2018, p. 174). This prohibition stemmed from a tradition in Islamic history that discouraged the depiction of human figures to avoid idolatry. To highlight the *Sabwa*’s influence, the artists discussed in this chapter have engaged with artefacts that are associated with the movement, re-interpreting and transforming these relics of a recent time in terms of both functionality and meaning.

*Maha Malluh*

Her first solo show abroad, Malluh's 2015 exhibition in Vienna, was fittingly entitled "Translated". The exhibition's title serves as a testament to the changing functionalities of objects that no longer perform their intended function but have shifted from their obsolete existence to another aesthetic and artistic function. The objects assembled in this exhibit also serve as a medium of cultural exchange between the artist's own Saudi heritage and the international audience in Vienna. The gallery's press release noted this about Malluh's work:

These were objects which she once had a certain emotional attachment to, through memory, through use, through heritage. Yet as a result of spending several hours with them, she became concerned with how their functional purpose, the memories attached to them and their later obsolete indifferent existence continually was transformed and translated.

(Galerie Krinzinger, 2015, n.p.)

Malluh uses objects that originate in material culture and that are associated with cultural identity and heritage. Most of these objects are largely related to women in Saudi society and are part of their collective memory; they include domestic objects, such as cooking pots and trays, and cultural artefacts that were part of the *Sahwa* movement. For instance, in her installation entitled *Sky Clouds* (2009–2015), Malluh features black polyester gloves (see [Figure 7.1](#)).



*Figure 7.1 Sky Clouds*, 2009–2015. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Krinzinger Vienna.

In the 1980s and 1990s, as part of the *Sahwa* movement, women were encouraged to cover every part of their body—even their hands. Black gloves became popular for women to wear in public, and Malluh collected 700 of these black gloves, filling them with desert sand so they could stand on their own. Positioned upright with fingers arranged in graceful positions, the gloves gesture toward to the sky. Amassed in one place, the gloves evoke a sense of solidarity and the idea of being part of a ‘collective’. They can also be seen as symbolizing how the social norms that influenced the behaviour of women have changed, indicating hope for a brighter future. At the same time, by appearing as if they are clinging to the ground, they may serve as a reminder of women’s continued attachment to local culture, traditions and memories. For certain viewers, these hands may appear to be waving cheerfully, producing an uplifting effect; whereas for others, the blackness of the gloves may evoke a call for help and a sense of gloom. The “sky clouds” referenced in the title might refer to how these gloves resemble clouds that will eventually bring hope; conversely, the term could indicate a sense of foreboding, as black clouds do when they appear in the sky.

Not part of the original object, prayer-rug cuffs have been added to the gloves, serving as a reminder that a translated object is a transformed one. The aestheticization of the source material here contributes to the phenomenon of experiential translation, as discussed by Madeleine Campbell (2024) regarding the physical materiality of the ‘source’ text and the aestheticization process through the translator’s act of foreignization. In terms of Malluh’s work, the gloves have been aestheticized by adding a colourful edge to their black ‘source colour’, freeing them from their original restrictive function under the prior political constraints of the *Sahwa*. These objects have also travelled physically outside their ‘source’ context, as in the Latin concept ‘translatio’ which refers to relics that are ‘carried over’, to extend multiple potential meanings beyond their original functionality, allowing a form of creativity to be enacted in the process.

Most of Malluh’s work includes mixed media installations consisting of found objects that are historical symbols of a collective Saudi identity. Amongst them are cassette tapes of religious lectures recorded by men with the target audience of both women and men. These tapes included religious preachings and were disseminated and given as gifts in gatherings and in social spaces. They were distributed widely in the 1980s and 1990s. Malluh, in an act of translation, used these cassettes to form a sort of mosaic spelling out the Arabic words “Amma Baad” (Malluh, 2017), meaning ‘whatever comes after’, which is part of her *Food for Thought* (2012) series. The cassettes are placed above wooden bread baking trays that are more than thirty years old, from the same period of time in which these tapes started to emerge. In this piece, Malluh uses her artwork to convey to the younger generations that change can happen, while at the same time acknowledging that Saudi society is known for its commitment to tradition.

Malluh also reminds young people of the importance of preserving materials of the past. The changing functionality of these cassettes from audio to

visual shows how the artist is translating the mode of an object for the purpose of recycling materials to preserve a given source, which contributes to the afterlives of these objects. Choosing to display these cassettes instead of playing them, Malluh attempts to focus on the visual culture of Saudi society. In her artist statement about one of her other pieces, Malluh comments on how Arab culture has often focused on the spoken word and the orality of literature, giving less value to the visual aspects of the culture (Art Basel, 2015). By remaining unplayed, the cassettes' audio content becomes firmly relegated to the memory of the generations that lived through the *Sabwa*. As visual objects, the tapes activate memory, which is then passed on through the interpretive lens of those who remember. In Malluh's works, translation reveals cultural differences and a material sense of transformation and change. The materials have been preserved—similarly to how translation preserves the source—but they are also transformed in a way that highlights the artist's agency in presenting, shaping and controlling the meanings she wishes to convey. Translation is evident in the way that objects present the past in different forms and shapes, while also revealing the different cultural experiences to the viewers, be they visitors to a Vienna gallery or members of subsequent generations of Saudis encountering the work in the future.

### *Manal AlDowayan*

Celebrated for her profound exploration of women's visibility, Manal AlDowayan uses her art to delve into socio-political issues pertaining to women in Saudi Arabia, their roles and rights, and the evolution of their status over time. On her personal website, AlDowayan describes herself as “a sensitive yet critical witness to the cultural transformations sweeping across the Kingdom” (AlDowayan, n.p.). AlDowayan stands among those artists who passionately address women-related concerns within Saudi society. Her artistic repertoire exhibits a high degree of versatility, with one intriguing aspect of her art being her affinity for playing with words. Her work often features a written component, in which she employs words in diverse ways—as powerful statements, as a means of preserving the Arabic language, stemming from her deep affection for it, and as a mechanism for viewers to actively contribute to the artworks' meanings (Louisiana Channel, 2016). The viewer is invited to engage with the written phrase or word in the artwork by contemplating it in their own mind and interpreting the literal, figurative, or deeper meanings that it evokes.

All of AlDowayan's artworks analyzed in this chapter involve the written form, which adds another element to the relationship between the different semiotic systems involved. In her series of installations, *Watch Before You Fall* (2019), *Just Paper* (2019), *Dearest Women* (2018) and *From Shattered Ruins, New Life Shall Bloom* (2023), AlDowayan employs words taken from certain books popular in Saudi society in the 1990s as part of the *Sabwa* movement. These books, originally intended as instruction manuals, were



Figure 7.2 *Watch Before You Fall* at “Breaking the Monument” exhibition in CGAC, 2019. [www.manaldowayan.com](http://www.manaldowayan.com).

distributed to women and girls in schools, universities and public venues like hospital waiting rooms. At a time when social media did not exist, the books were circulated for free, or else sold at a very low price in bookshops, to ensure access and affordability. They were written mostly by men to instruct and explain to women how to behave and live in Saudi society. For example, “Watch Before You Fall” and “Dearest Women” are two recurring phrases found in these books, demonstrating the type of instructions they contained for women to keep them from going astray in their lives or afterlives.

AlDowayan’s piece *Watch Before You Fall* (see Figure 7.2) consists of black inky passages of text written on soft fabric. The softness of the fabric, the way it is arranged to create an image of individual parts about to slip and fall, invokes a book about to disintegrate indicating the slow disappearance of these didactic books from shops and bookstands, as they become part of a passing memory to a generation deeply impacted by their extreme rules.

As AlDowayan stated in an interview by Nina Siegel in the *New York Times* (2019, n.p.):

This project is about moving from the private sphere to the public sphere, what it means for women specifically, and how they will have to readdress their bodies and voices, their language, and interactions, and where do they stand in that new space.

AlDowayan, presented her work in “Breaking the Monument” (2021), a group exhibition in Spain. *Watch Before You Fall* fits the theme of the exhibition in how these books can be seen as a monument to be broken. The artists’ works in “Breaking the Monument” exhibition constitute a powerful and subtle rebellion against established images, thus challenging manipulation and conditioning. Even though all the artists who participated in this group exhibition have their own approach to challenging prevailing hegemonies, my analysis will focus on how AlDowayan as an experiential translator challenges the linguistic perception of translation and the translator, and foregrounds “the nature of materiality and the role of experimentation and creativity” (Campbell and Vidal, p. 3).

In *Just Paper* (see [Figure 7.3](#)), AlDowayan uses the same material objects—the books—in various configurations. The installation highlights the evolving relationship between the texts and their significance within Saudi society. Pages from the books are rolled up, loosely tied and placed on a separate table in a random arrangement, making the text visible yet unreadable. The fact that these books are now only visible at a distance and not fully accessible to read speaks to the fragmented and always incomplete nature of memory. AlDowayan reproduces these texts in delicate porcelain, a material easily susceptible to breakage. Reproducing the texts in porcelain not only makes them easy to break but also shows them as merely decorative objects—beautiful to look at but with no use value. The pages made of porcelain can only be deciphered in fragmented form. While those viewers familiar with the texts may access and comprehend their content, other viewers cannot engage with them in the same way. Here, a symbolic and material aspect challenges the word-centric view of translation, suggesting that although the original may be accessible only to those who speak a particular language, Arabic, elements of the original can appear in translated forms as “narrative continuity and co-presence” (Polezzi, 2020, p. 320). By transforming the collective memory of these books into art, AlDowayan shows how these texts now exist primarily as memories.

The translation of the materiality of these particular books is further explored in AlDowayan’s recent one-day participatory project at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, entitled “From Shattered Ruins, New Life Shall Bloom” (2023) (see [Figure 7.4](#)). AlDowayan aligns her porcelain pages of the Arabic instruction manuals with similar texts written in English related to women, which she found in museum archives, newspaper stands, libraries and other sites. She places the languages side by side, connecting texts



Figure 7.3 *Just Paper* at “The Eternal Return of The Same” exhibition in Cromwell Place, 2021, exhibition view. Photograph by Lucy Emms. [www.manaldowayan.com](http://www.manaldowayan.com).

that, while dissimilar, share the common thread that they are texts instructing women. This allows her to situate the Saudi experience of the *Salwa* within an international context, which avoids making Saudi women’s history exotic and ‘other’ and enables Western viewers, who are likely to constitute the biggest audience due to the location of the project, to be in dialogue with women around the world. In this participatory installation, visitors actively engage with the art by using their own hands to crush these texts, which have been reconstructed as easily breakable porcelain paper scrolls and placed on fabric stands. Here, translation takes on a tactile dimension, the books having evolved into forms of rupture: a thin layer of fabric and, in another iteration,



*Figure 7.4* “From Shattered Ruins, New Life Shall Bloom” Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 22 May 2023. Photograph by Midge Wattles, © SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM FOUNDATION. [www.manaldowayan.com](http://www.manaldowayan.com).

delicate porcelain, susceptible to being crushed by the audience. This invitation to engage with the art underscores the transformation of materiality and the involvement of bodily experiences throughout the process. It gives agency to the participants themselves, adding another dimension that extends our understanding of this activity as a form of experiential translation. It is the shared experiences of women that make this art project translational, as artefacts are transformed materially and geographically. The books, often penned by the hands of men to be put in the hands of women, are now being crushed by the hands of viewers, who as Campbell and Vidal would suggest “enter into a dynamic, in-the-moment relation with the generative elements that constitute the source text” (2024, p. 5), illustrating how materiality can be translated, transformed, preserved and disappeared.

## Conclusion

Through the lens of translation, both Malluh’s and AlDowayan’s artwork shows how objects, texts and content are transformed over time. They may contain the same words, sentences, phrases or objects from the original sources, but they are presented in different materials and in multiple versions, transforming meanings beyond the equivalent transfer. They reflect the transformed status of women in Saudi society, but they also function as a tool to preserve a collective memory. The two artists use their “translational

imagination” (Bassnett, 2022, n.p.) to take a memory from the past, preserve it in the present, and change the narrative of the source materials for future generations. Toni Morrison imagined something similar when she said of her work: “I wanted to translate the historical into the personal” (cited in Langer, 2019, n.p.). Malluh’s and AlDowayan’s perspectives on the prismatic nature of translation is echoed in Polezzi’s proposition that translation is based “not on perfect equivalence, substitution and erasure but on trace and co-presence, on the connectedness between present and past, between foreign and same” (2020, p. 338).

The temporally contingent nature of the artworks discussed in this chapter offers clear parallels with experiential translation. In their paper discussing performing philosophy through translation and building on Benjamin’s *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Campbell and Vidal (2023) argue for the acknowledgement of the continuous return and transformation of the past within the present. This implies that historical events and ideas persist and evolve over time, influencing contemporary interpretations. Time contingency in this context refers to how time, in both its past and present forms, influences the interpretation, translation and understanding of creative works, emphasizing the dynamic and transformative nature of stories across different temporal dimensions.

The lens of experiential translation provides an interesting angle for looking at translation differently; it helps challenge the traditional view of translation and binarism and extends it to different modalities and configurations beyond the discipline. Through the artworks discussed in this chapter, the end result of the artists’ creations can be experienced in multiple ways, “adding to and amplifying the ‘original’ rather than merely recreating it within a new context” (Campbell and Vidal, 2024, p. 10). AlDowayan and Malluh both participate, through their art, in a socially engaged collaborative process with their viewers in a performative form of meaning-making that functions through the translation of culture. The artefacts that the artists engage with are part of a collective memory of a certain historical period, and the way these artists engage with the artefacts speaks to personal memory, making translation a time-contingent activity. Both artists engage with the original or source in the way experiential translation embraces Emmerich’s understanding of the original as “a volatile compound that experiences continual textual reconfigurations” (Emmerich, 2017, p. 2). Through materiality and creativity, these artists introduce new dimensions to artefacts historically associated with controlling women; their work makes “experiences translatable across the linguistic and sensory boundaries and media that together serve to generate, maintain or challenge cultural hegemonies” (Campbell and Vidal, 2024, p. 2).

My analysis of these artworks demonstrates how translational thinking in relation to artwork expands our conceptualization of art and translation alike and how challenges to the traditional perception of the translator can be extended to that of the artist figure. Art is a means of experimentation and a tool to confront the limits of linguistic communication. Utilizing their talents,

Malluh and AlDowayan translate their experiences of their societies using artistic media that ensure narrative continuity, while engaging with aspects of such transformation. In essence, their linking of the translational and transformational helps them bring to light their experiences as Saudi women. They utilize art as a language that can express emotions, that both mirrors and subverts past moments and memories that exist deep within the national consciousness. Their retellings—and the artistic repurposing of objects from a past era—involve creative and transformative processes of translation that both expand translation's reach and reveal its relationship to the evolution of cultures.

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# 8 Translating Fairytales through Women's Bodies

From Cindy Sherman to Dina Goldstein

*África Vidal Claramonte*

## Introduction

In her *Notes from the Front Line*, Angela Carter (1983, p. 24) states: “Reading is just as creative an activity as writing and most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the bottles explode”. In “Sorties”, H el ene Cixous (1986, p. 65) also writes:

*(Once upon a time ...*

One cannot yet say of the following history ‘it’s just a story.’ It’s a tale still true today. Most women who have awakened remember having slept,

*having been put to sleep.*

Both Carter and Cixous use the translation of fairytale patterns to criticize the binary organization and hierarchy of gender in the Western world. Fairytales are generally thought to provide valuable insights into universal human dilemmas, since they reflect shared experiences, fears and hopes that span differences in age, culture, and geography. However, contemporary views reveal that this is not true. Fairytales are neither ageless nor timeless because they have been continuously rewritten over the centuries. In recent years, feminist writers and artists have retold fairytales. They have rewritten and translated old myths from a fresh and different perspective. Their tales are versions of versions, which are framed in new and often surprising ways.

The feminist retelling of fairytales has been the focus of countless studies (Bacchilega, 2013, 1997; Bernheimer, 1998; Guran, 2016; Haase, 2010, 2004; Harries, 2001; K erchy, 2011; Tatar, 2003; Warner, 2014, 1995; Zipes, 2001). This chapter will concentrate on the work of Cindy Sherman and Dina Goldstein to explain why their contemporary rewritings of fairytales can be regarded as “experiential translations” (Campbell and Vidal, 2019, 2024).

DOI: [10.4324/9781003462569-13](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003462569-13)

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Experiential translation is an expanded notion of translation in line with contemporary views of translating as a travelling concept, outwards (Bassnett and Johnston, 2019). As Campbell and Vidal (2024, p. 3) argue in their introduction to *The Experience of Translation*, translation is

an experiential process that performs a situated and engaged social function with a contingent impact beyond the confines of the discipline.... experiential translation [is] a holistic, in-the-moment, often shared and plural process which operates in the translation of culture, community, voices of nature, place and environments. Here the practice of translation is envisaged as a contemporary and performative form of art or meaning making that challenges authority and hegemonic values.

This way of seeing translation is exactly what Sherman and Goldstein do. Their work can be understood as translations that envision women's bodies in fairytales as texts to be reinterpreted. We shall see how, through their bodies, they create experiential translations. Translation as a transformative experience, as a way to reach others, to be reached by others, for better or for worse, "moving away and towards something", always becoming:

How can we speak of translation as a kind of experience?... To what extent is translation, like experience itself, transformative of life? When Michel Foucault talks about experience as that which 'should make possible a transformation, a metamorphosis that is not just mine but can have a certain value, a certain accessibility for others so that the experience is available for others to have,' one can think of translation as such an experience (Foucault 2000: 244). In translating, one experiences the original in motion, already moving away and towards something else.... To translate is to become other than what one was. In doing so, the experience of translation has the potential of linking individual acts to collective practices, for better or for worse.

(Rafael, 2023, p. 19)

Goldstein's and Sherman's art is a movement from verbal literacy to a more multifaceted literacy, one in which the visual, the somatic, the bodily experiences and the multisensory, predominate. Their visual translations, their looking through their translations, and their translator's gaze (Campbell and Vidal, 2019, p. xxix) invite us to reflect on what images say when they speak to us. As I shall explore in this chapter, their photographs are "deeply embodied" processes of "meaning-making" which have "the capacity to both inform and be informed by philosophical thought" (Campbell and Vidal, 2023, p. 11). The embodied material translations they perform make us think of what images do, what images do to us and what we do with them.

Along with Angela Carter, Anne Sexton, Margaret Atwood and many others, they translate and thus tell *for the first time* (as well as many other times)

a traditional fairy tale by changing the way that women's bodies are viewed. What is different in Sherman's and Goldstein's rewritings is that their translations are holistic, co-creative body processes of discovery that repeat and at the same time also begin the story again. Translating with the human body involves (re)writing a text for the first time into a different time or "twice upon a time", to borrow a phrase from [Harries \(2001, n.p.\)](#).

In line with recent research in material culture studies and the anthropology of the senses, I will argue that these experiential translations can be approached not only as visual objects but as "multi-sensory and phenomenologically-engaged objects articulating historical and social relations through emotional modalities" ([Edwards, 2010, p. 27](#)). Photographs exist materially in the world: "Materiality translates the abstract and representational 'photography' into 'photographs' as objects that exist in time and space" ([Edwards and Hart, 2004, p. 2](#)). Photographs are "both images *and* physical objects that exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience" ([Edwards and Hart, 2004, p. 1](#)).

### From History to Herstories

To have a voice is to have power, the power to reveal and convey a particular vision of the world. All good storytellers know this. Those in power are well aware of the importance of a single story ([Adichie, 2009](#)). Describing events from a certain perspective may not change what actually happened, but it does impose a way of seeing and understanding for everyone that listens to the story and accepts it as true.

For centuries, women in Western culture had no voice, and were merely subalterns. What was usually heard, but never really listened to, was the echo of their voices. In her poem "Siren", Alma Luz Villanueva speaks of a woman "singing in the snow", and "we are her echo". The snow could be understood as the blank page that signifies the creative potential of women. However, according to Susan [Gubar \(1981, p. 243\)](#), the snow can also be interpreted as the blank page that men can mould at their will, like the ivory statue of a maiden carved by Ovid's Pygmalion, or the mud woman in Margaret Atwood's "Mud Poems" (*You Are Happy*, 1974), moulded only to fulfil the desires of her creators. Similarly, in *The Portrait of a Lady*, the ideal young woman is described as "a sheet of blank paper" (James, [1881] [1978, p. 238](#)), a statement echoed in Isak Dinesen's short story "The Blank Page" (*Last Tales*, 1957). Fortunately, in many disciplines, women have now emerged as 'her echo', the voice of silenced women throughout the world. As these women retell stories that have already been told, they are telling them for the first time as they finally become the subjects, not the objects, of discourse. An early example is Adrienne Rich's poem "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" (1970), a rewriting of John Donne's poem of the same title.<sup>1</sup> Two years later, in relation to re-vision in her article "When We Dead Awaken", [Rich \(1972\)](#) stresses the need to rewrite the past. Also well-known are the postcolonial feminist rewritings of Shakespeare's

female characters, such as Sycorax and Miranda, and the rewritings of crime and detective novels. In this line, the re-vision of myths and traditional tales by writers such as Christa Wolf, Angela Carter, Anne Sexton and Suniti Namjoshi have been widely studied. As observed by Adrienne Rich (1972), such revisions are necessary and can be regarded as acts of survival.

All of these translations by women of stories conveyed from a certain perspective retell stories that have already been told. However, it is the first time that the story has their voice. This also relates to the subjectivity of experiential translation, of the translator as subject, of how each subject is positioned. These rewritten stories invite the viewers to ask: Who is the subject who looks when they see themselves reflected in another?

Their experiential translations are rewritings that expand the original, a translation that is also a first time. Translation is rewriting (Bassnett and Lefevere, 1990, p. 9), and rewritings inevitably produce retranslations (Deane-Cox, 2016) that update the 'original' texts, which in turn are translations of the infinite readings of the past (Jenkins, [1991] 2003, p. 11). From both a feminine and feminist perspective, these women rewrite the stories told by the patriarchy. In doing so, they echo previous stories, telling them again for the first time as they become the subjects rather than the objects of the discourse. Translation is understood here as "a renewed understanding of the emic, creative, multimodal and emergent nature of translation practice [which] also requires a concomitant reappraisal of its ontological premises, one which openly favours change over essence, difference over equivalence, and movement over stasis" (Campbell and Vidal, 2023, p. 12).

From this perspective, translation is a means of political, social and cultural change (Apter, 2006, p. 6). Here, it would be 'absurd' to consider translation as a straightforward activity of substitution. On the contrary,

Translating a text means reconfiguring it... No translation can ever be the 'same' as the original, for translation involves so much more than the linguistic, though obviously language is a crucial element ... translators have to deal with more than just words which may or may not have dictionary equivalents.

(Bassnett, 2022b, p. vii)

### **Rewriting Fairytales through Women's Bodies**

Both in literature and art, women now translate stories previously told by men. They have finally taken centre stage to tell their own stories and make their voice heard. Although there are many examples, this chapter focuses on feminist rewritings of traditional fairy tales. There are literally hundreds of such rewritings, perhaps because few text genres are so replete with female stereotypes created by the male gaze.<sup>2</sup> The female body in Western society is no more than a space that power tries to use in any way it can to represent its way of seeing the world. The body is a place of social pressure, wills of power, of

meekness, of transformations. Michel Foucault (1972), for example, considers the body as a space on which the forces of repression, socialization, discipline, vigilance and punishment act. The body can submit itself to these forces or rebel against them and become a heterotopic space. The body, then, as an object of representation (Juliet Mitchell, Julia Kristeva, Nancy Chodorow, Marxist feminism, psychoanalytical feminism) or as a historical and cultural construct (Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Gayatri Spivak, Jane Gallop, Judith Butler, Naomi Schor), is never neutral and is never *only* the body, but a true semiotic system, of representation and of signification, a *locus* of economic, political, intellectual and sexual struggles.

Perhaps one of the first women to criticize the perspective in fairy tales and realize its consequences was Luisa Valenzuela ([1938] 1999), author of “La llave” [The Key]. In this story, she warns her readers:

Hay que reconocer que empecé con suerte, a pesar de aquello que llegó a ser llamado mi defecto por culpa de un tal Perrault – que en paz descanse – el primero en narrarme. Ahora me narro sola.

(p. 94)

Admittedly, I started out lucky, despite what came to be known as my flaw because of a certain Perrault—may he rest in peace—who was the first to narrate me. Now I narrate myself.

(My translation)

Her words, which are an excellent summary of this chapter’s perspective, are so meaningful because they trace the path followed by many women writers and artists who have now begun to tell the stories that others had already told for them. Self-narration is a type of self-translation. In both cases, it is difficult and painful,

because it appears at first to expose gaps between languages, to raise the spectre of a divided mind and of a divided world, but when the translation is completed, the gaps are closed, the process has become a healing one and the self-translator is no longer caught between languages but able to exist fully in both.

(Bassnett, 2013, p. 16)

Self-narrations are renegotiations of the self. They are related to the idea of playing with mirrors. They rewrite the subject through an unstable balance between asymmetrical powers. Self-narration moves us beyond the binary logic of source-target/text-reader and its attendant notion of fidelity to the original. Each self-narration is a self-portrait of the same woman yet also a different one, given that the self-translated self cannot stay still, it changes in space and over time. It is a rewriting of an absence, a multimodal palimpsest composed of many layers and overlapping stories. Self-narrations are self-portraits, the same

woman yet a different one, since the self-translated self changes in space and over time.

In this sense, it is relevant to remember that *The Experience of Translation*, following Emmerich, understands the original as a volatile compound that experiences continual reconfigurations:

the notion of ('original') text as world comprising not just words but all modalities of communication, including the human beings that produce them and the natural and technological environment within which humans operate, explodes the outward turn in translation studies to encompass translation as a transdisciplinary phenomenon.

(Campbell and Vidal, 2024, p. 2)

This idea is also present in other contemporary views of translation, such as Delphine Grass' creative understanding of translation as a process beyond mere linguistic substitution and as a way to explore questions of social justice and representation beyond translation theory. Experiential translation is a creative-critical practice, a materially situated and critically engaged meaning-making process, a way of exploring how experimenting with translation could invite the fixed forms of theory into a space of experimental possibilities (Grass, 2023).

### **Experiential Translations in the Art World. Writing through Women's Bodies**

Many artists have translated traditional fairy tales with the purpose of interrogating received meanings.<sup>3</sup> However, art translations differ from those in literature because of the medium of their creations. Artists do not necessarily translate with words but with alternative means and modes, which often include their own bodies to rewrite previously told stories. They thus create what Campbell and Vidal (2019, p. xxix) refer to as "experiential translations", since their "intense engagement" as translators is created "not just with the eyes but with all other senses". The translator's voices come from a body. The artist translates *through* and *with* her body, which signifies that she translates *through* and *with* her five senses.

Unlike 'once upon a time', 'twice upon a time' unveils the not-so-happy ending of many of the cultural references that as children we were told. The feminist translation of the myths shows that translation is a creative activity because translators are readers, rewriters and recreators of that text in another language (Bassnett, 2007, p. 174).

As we shall see, Sherman's and Goldstein's experiential translations cannot be understood only as visual objects. They demonstrate that "the act of looking is profoundly 'impure'" (Bal, 2003, p. 9). These are emotionally charged objects that are both representational and material and which elicit multisensory responses. Thus, Sherman's and Goldstein's works are not to be

understood in terms of textual and linguistic structures only, but also as mediated by emotional artefacts. “Emotion” being understood to mean

an intense, individual and subjective embodied, sensory experience related to a state of mind, in relation to contexts, determined through practices of non-verbal communication of which the sensory, here sound, touch and gesture around photographs, is formative. Feeling, as used here, also carries an intentional quality expressed through the act of making and indeed looking at photographs.

(Edwards, 2010, p. 24)

Sherman’s and Goldstein’s rewritings exemplify what Madeleine Campbell argues in [Chapter 3](#) of *The Experience of Translation*, that meaning-making is “constructed simultaneously on multiple levels” (2024, p. 58). These multi-sensory artworks highlight performativity by “switching the emphasis from communication to experience” (p. 59), to the sensorial expression of experience, and propose, in line with Campbell’s idea of translation, “a view of representation which may be more performative and/or iconic than symbolic” (ibid). Sherman and Goldstein rewrite with all the senses, beyond the visual, in a polysensorial way:

polysensoriality requires looking at the different sense perceptions described in the text, going beyond the visual aspect that is often the only focus of attention ... Because geocriticism demands a polysensorial attention that takes into consideration all of the body’s perceptual capabilities, without privileging the visual, it aligns well with the notion of translation as a ‘sensory activity’. The latter arises from our relationship with the world around us, which is formed through sound, touch, taste and smell as much as sight.

(Wilson, 2020, p. 298)

### Cindy Sherman

As is well known, Cindy Sherman is a photographer who photographs herself. In this way, both *with* and *in* her body, she translates the stereotypes that over the centuries, patriarchal society has constructed of women. She has photographed herself as a secretary, prostitute, housewife and object of desire. Her work thus challenges John Berger’s (1972, p. 47) observation: “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at”. Sherman transforms her own body into a text in which she rewrites and translates the male gaze. The body itself is presented as a text, as a space of power and resistance, though still affected by social pressure. The female body is thus a semiotic system of representation and signification, a locus of economic, political, intellectual and sexual struggles<sup>4</sup>. Cindy Sherman’s well-known criticism of stereotype images of women is particularly interesting, as is Eleonor

Antin's incredible performance/sculpture/photograph *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (Antin, 1973) presenting the vision of a body tortured by diets, or Parisian performance artist Orlan's physical transformation through plastic surgery, thus making her body the place where this criticism is taken to extremes.

At our contemporary historic moment when it seems that women have achieved so much, their bodies are still objects about which men have expectations. Thus, the critique expressed by feminist artists since the 1970s and 80s is still pertinent. Sherman uses her whole body to translate the situation of women. This is accomplished through clothing and posture, as well as through the fragmentation of the body itself, which makes her work a perfect example of the "translator's gaze" (Campbell and Vidal, 2019, p. xxix):

*The translator's gaze*, the intense engagement of the translator with the source text which also entails an appropriation of sorts—not just with the eyes but with all other senses.... Perceiving through the eyes, ears, tongue or body of another opens the willing recipient (performer or spectator) to unfamiliar affects and sensory experiences, a "disorienting" event that can, if enacted in a safe environment, lead to personal growth and greater levels of awareness and understanding of the other, and thereby enhance cultural literacy.

(Campbell and Vidal, 2019, pp. xxix; xxxiv)

Looking is a way of narrating the world. "Every image embodies a way of seeing" (Berger, 1972, p. 10). However, looking is also a way of translating the world, and says a great deal about our position in it. Depending on the power that we hold, we can visualize some things and hide others. For that reason, we should always ask ourselves what is made visible, what we are allowed to see. We look and translate differently, depending on our vantage point. Looking without being seen makes the viewer more powerful, as occurs in the panopticon. For this reason, Donna Haraway (1991, p. 92) writes:

Vision is *always* a question of the power to see—and perhaps the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood were my eyes crafted? These points also apply to testimony from the position of 'oneself'. We are not immediately present to ourselves. Self-knowledge requires a semiotic-material technology linking meanings to bodies.

As an artist-translator, Sherman looks at her body as a source text, as a material objectified artefact, that she reinterprets to invite her viewers to look differently. By translating her body she transforms her subject position "to the semios and materiality of the 'original'" via "the role of experimentation, creativity and play" in the manner of experiential translation suggested by Campbell and Vidal (2024, p. 2).

Her body is an embodied ludic translation, since it is subversive and rhizomatic. It goes beyond the dual conception “under which the translator is either submissive to or subversive of the original text and its author. Instead, play spotlights the liquidity of the source-target interface, from which translational identity formations are engendered” (Lee, 2022, p. 6). Sherman plays by dressing up and masquerading as others. She rewrites old stories through her favourite toy, her body:

In her human comedy (and more often tragedy), she sets the stage on which her infantile and adult selves, as well as figures she has loved and hated in the past, become acquainted and reacquainted, and in which various ambivalences and contradictions come together in an attempt to assume a more cohesive identity. Like Scheherazade, Sherman continuously takes life and death into her hands as she weaves story after story in a lively panorama of psychic scenarios.

(Knafo, 1996, p. 140)

Many years ago, John Berger (1972) asked if the way in which we look affects what we know. And Roland Barthes (1977) emphasized that every image, like every word, brings with it that secondary level of meaning, which is really what must be translated. Seeing “establishes our place in the surrounding world”, and the relation between what we see and what we know “is never settled” (Berger, 1972, p. 7).

In her self-portraits, Sherman gazes and is gazed at. She is both viewed and viewer, “both thrown into and cast out of the projective eye.... Sherman enacts the gaze’s spaces of desire—but in doing so, slows it to a crawl” (Jones, 2001, pp. 40; 41). She thus reminds us that vision is a cultural construction and that looking means seeing in a certain way. Through her body, she obliges us to watch thought:

This experience is often self-reflexive. In other words, in addition to viewing the visual organization of the artist’s thought, watching thought entails watching one’s own thought, exemplified by the visual pattern found in the work of art. Thus, the visual frame-in-the-frame provides viewers with an opportunity to schematise their own thought patterns and their own methods of visual inspection. The frame-in-the frame in the form of points and lines in the visual field allows us to focus on and begin to define consciousness in its details.... A common misconception is that it is the eye that sees.... Thought has to do with memory and the imagination, logical reasoning, interpretation, and also, emotions. These processes are ways of ‘seeing’, or rather constructing what is seen.

(Minissale, 2009, pp. 13; 14)

Sherman’s self-portraits translate masked identities through her own body. Her experiential translations of specular models of femininity through her

self-portraits rewrite the most stereotyped roles of contemporary women (housewife, secretary, prostitute, etc.). She translates what is already a reproduction through translation as transfer and co-construction (see [Haapaniemi, 2024](#)). Her experiential, ludic translations are political: “Play transforms normativized identities, thereby gaining its politico-ethical force” ([Lee, 2022](#), p. 6). Lee’s words are appropriate here because they show how Sherman’s self-translations become more and more bizarre as they examine women’s vulnerability through the materiality of clothes, garish makeup, or oddly cut wigs:

Playing with one’s boundaries, as Sherman begins to do in these photographs, involves a certain risk. She toys with the simultaneous excitement and danger involved in self-knowledge and the interplay between psychic reality and control over actual objects. Who said all games have to be fun?

([Knafo, 1996](#), p. 147)

In these self-portraits, she is not the original but the translation of the imaginary constructs of women, created by the patriarchy. She does not just impersonate women but gender-bends as well. Sherman shows people’s bodies as constructed not as realities but as products of ideology and symbolic violence. In *Untitled #96*, for instance, she looks at women meant to interest the male gaze. She mimics the format of magazine pornography

by smashing herself flat and phallic, to be ‘read’ across the open spread (spread legs?) ... she performs herself as a flat-chested adolescent dressed in 1950s clothing (signifiers of nostalgia deployed in most of the *Untitled Film Stills*), clutching a crumpled piece of paper.

([Jones, 2001](#), p. 41)

Her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–1980) retranslate those stereotypes that patriarchal society have imposed on women. She discloses “the fiction of the self... though Sherman is literally self-created in these works, she is created in the image of already-known feminine stereotypes” (Crimp, [1980] [1993](#), p. 178). In *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Luce Irigaray ([1977] [1985](#), p. 76) argues that for a woman, to play with mimesis is

[t]o try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself simply to be reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of ‘perceptible,’ of ‘matter’— to ‘ideas,’ in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated by/in masculine logic, but so as to make ‘visible,’ by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible.

These words apply to Sherman’s translations through images of her body. She experientially represents, re-revisions, rewrites, and translates women.

However, “Sherman’s women are not women but images of women” (Owens, 1992, p. 84). In her self-portraits, the female body is a site where power is inscribed. Nevertheless, it is also “a site of resistance” since it “always entails the possibility of being self-marked, self-represented in alternative ways” (Grosz, 1990, p. 64).

Cindy Sherman’s *Fairy Tales* series (1985) translates Perrault and patriarchal discourses by transforming her own body, a body that represents contemporary women. This is how she rewrites fairytales by using her body to show the self as an imaginary construct. In her *Fairy Tales*, Sherman uses all of her five senses to experientially translate Aesop’s fables, the Brothers Grimm as well as other folk tales. Originally commissioned by *Vanity Fair* but never published by them, she deconstructs what lies beneath the cosmetic surfaces, the Kristevan abject. Her fairy tales fragment women with costumes, wigs, masks, theatre makeup, grass, dirt, pebbles, toys, and medical prostheses. Sherman refocuses the fairy tales on the horrific details which are inherent to them.

The result is a series of macabre, grotesque, and morbid scenes and images, some of which are barely human. For instance, in *Untitled #140* (1985), she poses as a disfigured woman with a bloodied face and a pig snout to evoke the ugly hidden dimension of children’s fairy tales. *Untitled #140* is an experiential Gothic translation because it shows a creature “abandoning the ‘real’ world for the fabled realm of fairies, ghouls, goblins, and freaky, pig-faced girls with bad hair and wounded expressions” (Morris, 1999, p. 76). Sherman wanted these photographs to “fill in the gaps of what I really wanted to be reading about” (cited in Morris, 1999, p. 79).

In *Untitled #150* (1985), she translates herself into “an androgyn with a huge, extended tongue [which] fills the foreground, and tiny figures stand in a landscape behind it, making it seem like a giant among Lilliputians” (Cruz, 2001, p. 9). In all these works, Sherman offers performative modes of translation, “where the distance from one language to another is mediated not through relations of semantic equivalence but through relations of semiotic analogy grounded in the materialities of representation” (Lee, 2022, p. 7). She combines the kinky and the taboo “to construct a fairytale world of a parent’s worst imaginings” (Morris, 1999, p. 79): She adds the tactile through false body parts which give way to grotesque, cow-tongued, pig-snouted, wart-chinned, blemished-derrière images of the artist.

Sherman transforms herself into a giantess in the land of Lilliputians or the witch from ‘Hansel and Gretel’ who prepares to devour little children. Whereas she sometimes flirts with danger and we believe she might be taking matters too far, there is both pleasure and relief in being reassured that it isn’t real after all.

(Knafo, 1996, p. 149)

Both *Untitled #140* and *Untitled #150* can also be seen as material, embodied and multisensory translations through which Sherman estranges our normal sensorium with frightening tastes and textures through menacing tongues, prostheses, dark colours and lightening. Our whole body reacts in front of these repellent and gruesome visual rewritings which go beyond traditional perceptual boundaries. These contestatory fairytales expose the viewer to the transitivity of perception, to the reversibility of the flesh, since we may suddenly feel that Sherman's self-narrations are looking at us, touching us. Her self-translations are self-portraits of self-portraits. They translate experiences through her body. These self-translations are political; they are metaphors that transcend the merely textual in order to deconstruct many layers and asymmetries implicit in the patriarchal gaze.

Her self-narrations are self-translations that cannot stay still since they constantly disseminate, translate experiences through a self made of multiple masks. We notice how bad these self-translations smell, how tactile, how rough they are—we feel ourselves exposed, watched, touched, licked. Not only in these artworks but in many others, Sherman rewrites the interior of the female body by translating the materiality of the abject through a mass of vomit, body fluids, debris, trash, and fungus. These are the most real and repulsive of her experiential, multisensory translations:

As bulimic women know well, behind the mask of the 'perfect female', there is an abundance of turmoil and debris to be evacuated. It is no coincidence, therefore, that these pictures are replete with images of junk food and vomit. No longer masking her sense of herself as a wounded creature, she expresses her anger and control by vomiting onto the viewer, so to speak. Repelled by these scenes, we are nonetheless compelled by the power and forcefulness they project

(Knafo, 1996, p. 151)

Through her body, Sherman demonstrates that translating in a visual society is not a mere transfer between two languages but rather between all our senses. The clothes, colours, wigs, masks, and other elements used by Sherman show how fragmented bodies convey meaning, and thus translate realities that words may not be able to communicate. Through the materiality of the tactile, olfactory and gustatory experiences they engender in the viewer, these photographs act as materialized experiential translations of women's social images. They lead us to a tactile encounter with the artists' bodies (Edwards, [2005] 2020, p. 422) through embodied translations of patriarchal representations of women, which trigger new meanings, new interpretations and rewritings (Classen, [2005] 2020, pp. 402–403). In these artworks, the physical materiality of bodies, their tactility, intermingles with and through the visual translations of traditional ways of viewing and representing women. These self-translations are reflexive and provocative panoptics.

**Dina Goldstein**

The work of Dina Goldstein, a Canadian photographer and pop-surrealist artist, is yet another example of the experiential translation of fairy tales. Some of her photographic works, for instance *Fallen Princesses* (2007–2009) and *In the Dollhouse* (2012), translate female characters commenting critically on the Disney world and raising questions about the lives women are expected to lead versus their actual lives (Zipes, 2012). Goldstein shows “with severity the feminine models which are exposed to children spectators, in particular, the characters created by the franchise Disney Princesses and the company Barbie” (Vicens Poveda, 2018, p. 147; my translation). She “not only deflowers fairy tales with her tantalizing images, but she also ‘de-disneyfies’ them” (Zipes, 2011b, p. 1). Her *Fallen Princesses*, *In the Dollhouse* or *Gods of Suburbia* (2014) series, and her work in general are a clear example that translation is

a creative act, one which always involves language and is also political, but which above all is a process of discovery. We learn through translating—we learn about our own language as well as about the language from which we are translating. We learn what cannot be said, what is unsayable, and we also learn about compromise, manipulation, negotiation.

(Bassnett, 2017, p. 150)

Like the other writers and artists mentioned in these pages and as Bacchilega reminds us, Goldstein demonstrates that the translation of fairy tales is an extremely complex process, a political rewriting that challenges inherited ideas:

Within the globalized economy of the early twenty-first century, fairy tales are produced and experienced as intertextual, multivocal, and transmedial cultural practices that individually and in relation to one another seem to put into action, not necessarily the complexities of feminist or other social critiques but a complex sense of what fairy tales do, a more generalized awareness that the fairy tale as a genre is not simple or one.

(Bacchilega, 2013, p. 27)

I would like to focus here on Dina Goldstein’s *Fallen Princesses* (2007–2009), a 10-piece series featuring fairy-tale heroines in “modern day scenarios”, depicting “different” women’s bodies that did not live happily ever after. Her narrative photographs deconstruct traditional visual representations of fairytale heroines whose bodies depict false ideals of beauty by subverting the classical representations of the princess archetype. In interviews (Goldstein, 2023; Wirth 2015), she recalls her mother being diagnosed with breast cancer

during a time when her young daughter Jordan was obsessed with Disney princesses. This coincidence made her wonder what a princess would look like if she had to battle a disease, struggle financially, or deal with ageing.

Thus, Goldstein decided to subvert 'they lived happily ever after' by translating the old versions of the fairytale. She does this by rewriting the old bodies into contemporary, more realistic ones. Her aim is to expose the impositions of Western canons of beauty, sexual stereotypes, and consumerism. Although in the series her *Cinder* (2007) is surrounded by men who are always gazing at her, it is clear that she feels very lonely. *Snowy* (2008) is a deconstruction of the 'happily ever after' ending, as Snow White is now burdened with various children and with a couch-potato husband, who refuses to help with the housework.

*Not-So-Little Red* (2008) cannot stop eating. Goldstein's Red Riding Hood is obese and carries a basket full of junk food and sugar-sweetened sodas. *Rapunzel* (2008) has lost her long blonde hair because of chemotherapy. *Ariel* (2009) is enclosed in an aquarium. Unable to ever be an active agent or lead a free existence, she is now a unique object on display, observed by a little boy. *Belle* (2009), the heroine of *Beauty and the Beast*, has to undergo plastic surgery to conform to female beauty standards. Female bodies are here linked to translation. Translation is achieved through female bodies, "adher[ing] to the body":

We can think of encountering translation as language that adheres to the body. That is, it makes it possible to govern the body in relation to what constitutes the self in relation to others. Who am I? What am I? Who are these people I see? And how do they see me? How do they see me seeing them?

(Rafael, 2023, pp. 19–20)

Goldstein's experiential translations use female bodies as texts that rewrite other bodies in order to deconstruct the male gaze. Hers is a reconstruction where she, as a translating subject, is an active agent. She foregrounds personal experience and meaning construction through a rewriting of tales grappling with embodiment, corporeality, physicality, positionality and subjectivity in meaning construction, as Haapaniemi argues in connection with a non-linguacentric understanding of meaning:

I will refer to this line of development as the *experiential paradigm*. Materiality, performativity and experientiality along with it, gain newfound importance in this paradigm, as the mechanics of meaning construction in communicational and translational activities are no longer based just in linguistic convention but also on the subjective experience of the communicators and on the material nature of the media utilised in the process.

(Haapaniemi, 2024, p. 25)

Following Haapaniemi we could say that in Goldstein's *Snowy, Ariel, Belle*, meaning is constructed beyond the 'source' or 'original' text. Goldstein constructs a new meaning by translating through a material process of transfer and multisensory representation.

Beyond any kind of dualisms, Goldstein highlights the need to dismantle the simplistic binarisms of traditional fairy tales:

Once upon a time, it was deemed to be unsafe and undesirable to occupy a space that was neither one thing nor the other, a no-man's land with no precise identity. Today, in the twenty-first century, political, geographical and cultural boundaries are perceived as more fluid and less constraining than at any time in recent history.... In such a world, the role of the translator takes on a greater significance.

(Bassnett, [1980] 2002, p. 10)

Goldstein's fairy tales are translations that complete (as Borges would say) the original. Her works also demonstrate new contemporary views of translation, which argue against traditional equivalence to highlight that "the final product is going to be very different from the starting point" (Bassnett, 2020, p. 14). No translation can ever be the same as its original for "once a translation enters the receiving culture it sets out on a new path" (Bassnett, 2022a, p. 112). Goldstein's embodied translations can be understood as experiential translations, which do not aim

to imitate the original artefact in the new medium but rather to (re)create its effect.... Here translation manifests as an act of discovery, as a pathway to the acquisition, dissemination and, importantly, the production of knowledge. The function of translation is here no longer perceived as conveying meaning but rather as a form of investigation or research and of embracing the unknown, with the potential to open up the space between words and indeed to access that which escapes language.

(Campbell and Vidal, 2024, p. 10)

Sherman and Goldstein's bodily translations are examples of what Jack Zipes (2011a, pp. 26ff) calls "De-disneyfication". They respond to the watershed interpretations of Perrault by Disney, which have had much influence:

Our contemporary concept and image of a fairy tale has been shaped and standardized by Disney so efficiently through the mechanisms of the culture industry that our notions of happiness and utopia are and continue to be filtered through a Disney lens even if it is myopic.

(Zipes, 2011a, p. 17)

Their experiential translations translate experience beyond that Disneyfication grounded in consumerism and commercial imperatives (Holliday,

2019, pp. 126–127), beyond gender constructions and imposed “hollow and fluffy narratives” (Zipes, 2011a, p. 87. See also Benhamou, 2023; Bryman, 2004; Holliday, 2019; Warner, 1995; Whelan, 2014).

### **(Not) Happily Ever After**

The translations of the writers and artists mentioned in this chapter are experiential because through “language that adheres to the body” (Rafael, 2023, pp. 19–20), “it is possible to view all language use as a process of translation, thus questioning the assumption that translation is a mapping of items from one code to another ... all communication involves translation” (Otsuji and Pennycook in Lee, 2021, p. 59). As experiential translators, they challenge received notions of transfer and representation. These translations communicate beyond the merely linguistic, through the *sensorium*:

The *sensorium* (meaning: ‘the entire perceptual apparatus as an operational complex’) is an ever-shifting social and historical construct. The perceptual is cultural and political, and not simply (as psychologists and neurobiologists would have it) a matter of cognitive processes or neurological mechanisms located in the individual subject.

(Bull et al., 2006, p. 5)

We have seen how translation focuses in the previous examples “on broader translinguistic aspects and transcultural processes” (Bassnett, 2011, p. 72). Experiential translation shows translating as a complex process. Translating means using all our senses through an interweaving, textile and bodily transformation, which is always interrogative, never finished, never conclusive.

Sherman’s and Goldstein’s embodied translations could be an example of “corporetics”, “the sensory embrace of images, the bodily engagement that most people ... have with artworks” (Pinney, 2001, p. 158). Here, “sensing touch relates directly to visualizing” (Edwards, [2005] 2020, p. 423). Through these experiential and multisensory translations, Sherman and Goldstein rewrite the sensorial and the physical and make sense through visual touch, “through the physical, sensory perception of objects” (Gadoua, 2014, p. 328). They touch the viewer visually and view the viewers touching them. The sensorial recalls, re-narrates, re-enacts memories, and this intermingling generates meanings. Through *all* our senses, they re-narrate, retranslate and re-enact memories traditionally associated with the feminine object/body. Because photographs are not just visual objects but multisensory:

photographs constitute one of the most emotionally intense classes of museum objects: they are not imprinted representation in abstract, but imprinted objects that are both representational and material.... That is, they are multisensory objects which in turn must elicit multi-sensory

responses that shape and enhance the emotional engagement with the visual trace of the past.

(Edwards, 2010, p. 21)

These multisensory translations *sensualize* theory:

What if theorizing had to do with sensualizing rather than visualizing phenomena? To sensualize theory would involve opening a space in which other senses could come to the fore. It would mean upending the conventional Western hierarchy of the senses and establishing a democracy of the senses, or, if that is too much to hope for, at least a heterarchy of the senses, in its place. The time has come for overhauling theory in the interests of sensualizing its practice—that is, for acknowledging the senses (all of them, not just vision) as potentially direct theoreticians in practice.... Exploring the senses across disciplines and cultures involves just such an ‘enlargement of mind’—to accommodate other ways of making sense.

(Howes, 2022, pp. 12; 18)

Experiential, embodied, ludic and multisensory translations, as those created by Cindy Sherman and Dina Goldstein, enlarge minds by exploring knowledge through bodies and acknowledging other ways of making sense, not only through words but through all our senses. Multisensory translations acknowledge “the role of the body and materiality in meaning-making.... Envisaging the practice of translation as a contemporary and performative form of art or meaning-making that challenges boundaries and hegemonies” (Campbell and Vidal, 2024, pp. 191; 193). By making the female body monstrous, these writers and artists experientially translate the original male fantasy “not just with the eyes but with all other senses” (Campbell and Vidal, 2019, p. xxix). Their contemporary rewritings of fairy tales show that “communication happens on many levels, the gestural, the olfactory, the visual” (*ibid*, 2019, p. xxv) and that “translation is an on-going process that is open to interpretation and change and is never finished” (Campbell and Vidal, 2023, p. 25). These experiential translations are reminiscent of Cixous’s insistence that women should disrupt continuities and create horror. However, at the same time, they are also political statements that reveal the untold story in the fairy tale, that there is no happily ever after.

## Notes

- 1 Here also see Bouton-Kelly’s (2024, pp. 98–101) discussion of Una Mason’s rewritings of Kipling and Shakespeare in the 1930s.
- 2 Curiously, the best known fairy tales in the Western world are those of the Brothers Grimm and of Hans Christian Andersen. In reality, however, the first fairy tale was written down in 1690 by the Baroness Marie Catherine d’Aulnoy. It was about an independent fairy queen who did not need men—in fact, in many cultures the

oral storytellers are women. Oddly enough, this tale was relegated to obscurity perhaps because of the message that it conveyed. I would like to thank Ricarda Vidal for bringing here my attention to the fact that the Brothers Grimm only collected fairy tales—they did not write them (like Andersen or, in fact, the Baroness). The Grimms also expressly state in the preface to their original collection that they are merely providing the skeletons of the stories and that it is up to the storytellers to flesh out the details—this acknowledges the mobile form of fairytales and invites a retelling. Vidal also notes that it is important to differentiate between oral tradition (where there was always more room for female voices) and the print tradition (and later Disneyfication). In this case the Grimms' collection would count as part of the oral tradition as opposed to Andersen's tales which were authored for print.

- 3 See for example Paula Rego's *Snow White Playing with her Father's Trophies* (1995) and *Snow White Swallows the Poisoned Apple* (1995). Both of these translations arose when she rewrote still another character in the *Little Red Riding Hood Suite* (2003). This translation consists of six pastel images, focused on the three female characters though without laying any blame on the little girl. Kiki Smith has also translated fairy tales in her sculptures, films, drawings, textiles, dolls, and prints. Her translation of *Little Red Riding Hood* appears, for instance, in *Daughter* (1999), *Rapture* (2001), and *Born* (2002). Also interesting are the gory versions of Miwa Yanagi in *Fairy Tales* (2004–2006), and Natalie Frank's violent and disturbing translations of the fairy tale in *Tales from the Brothers Grimm: Drawings* (2011–2014). Other examples are Helena Blomqvist's *Girl with a Red Coat* (2006) and Jona Jonas's *Volcano Saga* (1985), based on an Icelandic folktale. Finally, it is important to mention Carrie Mae West's translation of *Snow White*, which raises race and gender issues. For instance, her black and white photograph *Mirror, Mirror* (1987) has the following caption as part of the artwork: "Looking into the mirror, the black woman asked, 'Mirror, Mirror on the wall, who's the finest of them all?' The Mirror answered, 'Snow White, you black bitch, and don't you forget it!'"
- 4 Art and literature have reacted with subversive representations of the female body in works like those of Louise Bourgeois, Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Nancy Spero, Leslie Labowitz, Jo Spence, Miriam Schapiro or the late 1980s activism of the Guerrilla Girls. We can also think of the installation and performance art of the 1970s such as *Menstruation Bathroom* (1972) by Judy Chicago, *Post-Partum Document* (1973–1979) by Mary Kelly, *Nightmare Bathroom* (1972) by Robin Schiff, *Linen Closet* (1972) by Sandy Orgel, *Interior Scroll* by Carolee Schneemann (1974/1975), or we could think of Marina Núñez or Donna Haraway's cyberbodies.

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# 9 Translating Migration Experiences

## Perception as the Act of Translation

*Joanna Kosmalska*

### Introduction

“Experiential translation”, as Madeleine Campbell and Ricarda Vidal explain, examines how the translator experiences the source ‘text’ through the different senses and how he or she makes this experience “translatable across linguistic and sensory boundaries” (2024, p. 7). In their research, the scholars combine methods from fine arts and translation studies to explore how meaning is produced through bodily perception (auditory, visual, tactile, etc.) and by various modes of expression (such as image, sound, movement and the like). Campbell and Vidal are interested in how an individual engages with a material object in a specific space and moment in time and how this person makes sense of it. They bestow agency on the translator(s) and the recipients/readers for they all participate in the collaborative process of meaning-making during an act of translation. All in all, what Campbell and Vidal emphasize in their concept of ‘experiential translation’ are the multimodal, embodied, sensorial, playful, performative, temporally contingent and socially situated dimensions of translation, which occur simultaneously (2024). The analysis of Agata Wawryniuk’s graphic novel *Rozmówki polsko-angielskie* (*The Polish-English Phrasebook*) and the adaptation of Julia Holewińska’s play *Revolucja balonowa* (*Bubble Revolution*) by Polish Theatre Ireland illustrates how these different layers of translation work in practice in migration texts.<sup>1</sup>

### The Intersections of Migration and Translation

One of the prominent figures who acknowledged the intimate links between translation and migration was Salman Rushdie. In his 1991 collection of essays *Imaginary Homelands*, he remarked: “The word ‘translation’ comes, etymologically, from the Latin for ‘bearing across.’ Having been borne across the world, we are translated men” (Rushdie, 1991, p. 17). This connection was later explored by Loredana Polezzi, who, in her widely-quoted paper on “Translation and Migration” (2012), observed that migrants inevitably found themselves engaged with translation and this engagement took on various forms. It included formal communication with the healthcare or legal system,

DOI: [10.4324/9781003462569-14](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003462569-14)

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extended into informal everyday encounters, and encompassed the practices of self-translation and polylingualism. During these various interactions, migrants enacted one of two roles: they either occupied the position of those in need of translation and were translated by others or took on the role of translator and performed the translation themselves. In some cases, they shifted from being objects to being agents of translation.

When migrants acted as self-translators, Polezzi argued, the boundary between a source text and its translation became particularly blurred (2012, pp. 348–350). This is because self-translation diverges from the model in which a pre-existing source text moves across linguistic and cultural boundaries in a linear way. Shaped by different locations and cultures, the migrant author is simultaneously a source of L1 and L2, which means that her or his translation is located in the same space. As a result, translation is already included in the original text that migrants produce.

The evidence for this can be found in migration writing. Whether subconsciously, as seen in A.M. Bakalar's novels, or deliberately, as exemplified by Martyna Majok's plays, migrant writers craft their texts in such a way that they feel translated. It is perceptible in the voice, register, accent, etc. The authors combine elements that would not conventionally go together, which results in a slight jaggedness in the voice, a subtle slip and a hint of elsewhere in the narrative. While their writing is highly competent, they lapse here and there into alternative registers, languages and moments of awkwardness. These nuances obviously influence the reception of the text. For example, the editor of *Winstonsdad's* blog—a website dedicated to reviewing translated fiction—makes the following remark about A.M. Bakalar's novel *Madame Mephisto*:

The voice of Magda even though written in English has a very Polish feel to it, I do wonder if this is why some publishers weren't so keen on this book. As for me, it gives it a real feel. Bakalar said her choice to write in English was because her Polish writing had been seen as tinged by English due to her extensive work translating and I may say the opposite is true: her writing in English has a Polish feel without the reader getting bogged down in Polish words.

(Winstonsdad, 2012)

As Fiona J. Doloughan astutely notes in her 2016 book *English as a Literature in Translation*, the writing in Britain is increasingly being produced by bilingual and multilingual authors rather than monolingual ones (p. 4). They tend to use English in creative and innovative ways, enriching it with idioms, grammatical structures and phrases from a wide array of other languages (Kosmalska, 2018, pp. 142–143). Migrant writers often pay little attention to linguistic conventions, as their primary focus is not on linguistic transfer but on conveying information about their experiences. Their use of translation goes beyond language and takes place at non-linguistic levels as will be illustrated later in this chapter (Kosmalska, 2017).

Moreover, migrants' engagement in translation serves a variety of purposes. Among other things, they employ translation to acquire information about the host country and its residents. This knowledge helps them to bridge gaps in understanding, to familiarise themselves with the new environment and to integrate into it. They also use translation to maintain a connection with their country of origin, its people, culture and language. By translating elements of their native culture, migrants verbalise their presence in the new place. In doing so, they attempt to introduce themselves to local communities, often seeking their understanding and acceptance. Finally, translation gives migrants an insight into the depths of their unconscious and helps them to understand themselves. They write their experiences on the page and translate a self from this written text. This process provides them with a deeper understanding of their continually evolving identity (Kosmalska, 2016a, 2016b).

### **Defining Experience**

When discussing migration experiences and experiential translation, it seems useful to recover the literal meaning of the word 'experience'. It comes from Latin *experientia*, which means "a trial, proof, experiment; knowledge gained by repeated trials". The root "ex-" implies "out of" and "peritus" means "experienced, tested" (Online Etymology Dictionary, 2021). Over time, the term evolved in English and acquired its current multiple meanings. Efforts to encompass them were undertaken by many people, among them the Oxford English Dictionary editors, who outlined nine primary definitions for the noun. Excluding the three identified as obsolete and one that pertains specifically to religion, the remaining five explanations are as follows:

- 1 The actual observation of facts or events, considered as a source of knowledge.
- 2 The fact of being consciously the subject of a state or condition, or of being consciously affected by an event. Also an instance of this; a state or condition viewed subjectively; an event by which one is affected.
- 3 What has been experienced; the events that have taken place within the knowledge of an individual, a community, humankind at large, either during a particular period or generally.
- 4 Knowledge resulting from actual observation or from what one has undergone.
- 5 The state of having been occupied in any department of study or practice, in affairs generally, or in the intercourse of life; the extent to which, or the length of time during which, one has been so occupied; the aptitudes, skill, judgement, etc. thereby acquired.

(Oxford English Dictionary, 2024, n.p.)

This rich array of definitions has motivated scholars from various disciplines to embark on a detailed examination of the multifaceted dimensions of

‘experience’. Karen Fox summarises their findings in her article “Rethinking Experience” (2008, p. 41), where she offers the following description of the term:

According to research across various disciplines including anthropology, neuroscience, education, psychology, and religious studies (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2000; Doidge, 2007; Ingold, 2000; Smith, 2004), experience from an individual perspective is a complex interaction between body, sensory input, and neurological processing—a relationship with the world as humans encounter, interpret, and shape messages. Experience is a multilayered phenomenon; individuals make sense of experience through cultural, cognitive, subconscious, and personal interpretive layers, by negotiating norms and dominant values, attending to immediate human relationships, and through an individual’s context within larger societal and historical positioning. Furthermore, these webs are interconnected with larger networks of culture, history, political economy, and power (Butler and Scott, 1992; Narayan, 1997; Warren, 2000)..

Fox (2008, p. 41)

The multiple layers mentioned above render ‘experience’ a highly intricate concept whose interpretation depends on the specific context. In this chapter, the term ‘experience’ is used in three main ways. Firstly, it refers to the knowledge and understanding that migrants acquire through sensory perceptions and cognitive processes. Secondly, it refers to migrants’ past engagements, illustrating how these previous experiences have shaped their perspectives, beliefs and understandings. Finally, it highlights the experiences of the audience and the ways in which readers and spectators derive personal meanings from a work of art.

### **Perception as an Act of Translation**

Intimately linked to the concept of ‘experience’ is the notion of ‘perception’. When migrants arrive in a host country, they engage with the new place through their senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. Their sensory experiences serve as data which—analysed during the process of perception—generate knowledge about the new place and its residents. For this reason, perception itself can be viewed as an act of translation. In rendering new sensory information, migrants inevitably draw on past experiences. Since many of them decide to relocate when they are adults, having been raised in a different place, language and culture, they interpret the new reality through the lens of their prior experiences—drawing connections to familiar sights, smells, sounds, etc. This constant interplay between new experiences, perception and past experiences creates a dynamic feedback loop.

Much like the term ‘experience’, ‘perception’ has its ultimate origins in Latin, and specifically in the word *perceptiō*, which denotes the “action of

receiving, collecting, action of taking possession, apprehension with the mind or senses” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2005 n.d.). This etymology implies that perception occurs when an individual takes in and thoroughly grasps the sensory input he or she receives from their surroundings. While the well-known senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell are key to perception, the human organism has a variety of other senses, including those for temperature, kinesthetics, pain, balance, vibration, acceleration and time, among others. The former, known as exteroceptive senses, enable people to construe their surroundings, and the latter, referred to as interoceptive senses, allow them to perceive internal physiological states and sensations, providing insight into the condition of their body. If one of the senses is impaired, other senses compensate to make the decoding of the world easier (Neves, 2020, pp. 322–323).

To fully understand human perception, it is crucial to acknowledge that the brain operates within an embodied framework. Sensory input, sensations and interactions with the external environment are mediated through the body (Friston, 2018; Lakoff, 2013). Perception involves more than just filtering and interpreting sensory information in the brain; it requires active engagement with the environment and sampling sensory input. Therefore, one key aspect of embodied cognition is recognising that signals from the external world received through the exteroceptive senses, such as images, sounds and smells, are complemented by signals received through the interoceptive senses, such as heart rate, body temperature or gut reactions. The integration of both external and internal sensory information plays a crucial role in perception.

In her 2017 article, “A Brief Introduction to Perception”, Qiong Ou identifies three stages of the process of perception: selection, organisation and interpretation. At the initial stage, a whole variety of stimuli reach an individual’s sensory organs. Yet, due to limitations in processing capacity, the person is not able to perceive all incoming information. To avoid data overload, people give attention, either consciously or subconsciously, only to those messages that are relevant to their needs, desires, interests or expectations, seeking out the information that fills in their knowledge gaps. Following the selection phase is the organisation stage. Having filtered information from the outside world, people organise it into categories, such as shape, colour, texture, size, nationality, race, gender, genre and the like. Their mind immediately associates the selected stimuli with innate and learnt patterns, which are built on their pre-existing experiences (Ou, 2017, p. 19).

The third stage in the process of perception is interpretation. After categorising the selected stimuli into stable patterns, individuals attempt to imbue these patterns with meaning. They construct a narrative around what occurred, pose critical questions about their understanding, and scrutinise their perception. This interpretative process can be approached from one’s own perspective or that of someone else. Nevertheless, different individuals may still offer distinct interpretations of the same stimulus. Such divergence stems from an individual’s unique past experiences and cultural background. It is

likely, therefore, that people from closely related cultures, who often share similar reservoirs of past experiences and knowledge, will assign similar meanings to the same stimulus. By the same token, those who rely on experiences or knowledge from their own culture to interpret unfamiliar behaviours, things or situations in another culture are likely to attribute significantly different meanings to the same stimulus. It follows that if people lack shared experiences and knowledge, there is a greater chance they will misinterpret the received signals, which inevitably leads to miscommunication (Ou, 2017, pp. 18–19).

In addition to outlining the stages of perception, Ou distinguishes between its two dimensions: the physical and the psychological. The physical dimension centres on the mechanisms through which sensory organs, such as the eyes, ears, nose or nerve endings in the body, allow people to detect stimuli. Subsequently, these stimuli travel through the nervous system to the brain, where they are endowed with structure, stability and meaning. The psychological dimension, in turn, focuses on how people's beliefs, values, attitudes, needs and interests shape their perception. It is within this dimension that individuals interpret selected stimuli, thereby constructing their unique understanding of the world (Ou, 2017, pp. 19–20).

Having covered the basic features of perception, Ou explores the influence of culture on perception. Among many other works, she quotes *An Introduction for Translators, Interpreters and Mediators* (2004), in which David Katan highlights four filters that affect perception of reality, namely the physiological filter, social engineering/culture filter, individual filter and language filter. As a result of these filters, individuals are unable to perceive the outside world objectively. They interpret every situation through the prism of their cultural background, personal experiences, emotions and cognitive processes (including attention, memory, and pattern recognition) (Katan, 2004, p. 87 cited in Ou, 2017, p. 21).

Similar insights to those of Ou were articulated by Władysław Strzemiński, a Polish avant-garde artist and theorist, in his book *Teoria widzenia* (*The Theory of Vision*), published posthumously in 1958. The book is a collection of his lectures on the history of art given at the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź, where he worked between 1945 and 1950. Rather than delving into biographies, Strzemiński encouraged his students to explore the visual awareness of painters. His book discusses two processes: the biological evolution of the eye and the development of the ability to see. The overall aim is to illuminate the evolution of human visual awareness and its profound impact on how individuals perceive and represent the world around them.

In *Teoria widzenia*, Strzemiński observes that vision and cognition are closely interconnected, and they both develop within social and historical frameworks. He argues that people can see only because they can select, analyse, generalise and revise the received stimuli, and the scope of their visual awareness is contingent on their knowledge. Consequently, vision is not a passive biological act but an active interplay between cognition and vision. An

individual's mind poses questions and vision is tasked with finding answers. This interaction sets the scope for vision: it is supposed to seek information that will either confirm or contradict the mind's initial presumptions. To bear out his thesis, Strzemiński gives the following example:

If a human can see more than an eagle—despite having poorer eyesight—it is because the human has a broader scope of interests and is therefore able to conduct a more comprehensive and detailed analysis of visual stimuli and does not overlook those features that the eagle might due to its lack of interest. Therefore, human vision sees less but provides more information about the world than the eagle's vision.

(Strzemiński, 1974, p. 14, trans. Joanna Kosmalka)

In the act of seeing, what the eye captures is less important than what the human mind comprehends from the stimuli. Strzemiński aptly observes that the eye of a seasoned textile worker, for instance, can discern ten times more defects in a fabric than that of an individual in a different profession (Strzemiński, 1974, p. 15). This discrepancy arises from the fact that human visual perception is a reflection of one's knowledge, which is, in turn, shaped by historical, social and cultural evolution. If Greek painting is different to that in the 19th century, Strzemiński argues, it is because their socio-historical formations produced different cognitive boundaries (Strzemiński, 1974, p. 18).

For all the features acknowledged above, perception can be described, quite literally, as an act of translation. It involves the rendition of sensory stimuli into meaningful information. During this process, the senses and body act as transducers which work together to decode the world so that it might be understood by the brain. The three stages of perception, namely selection, organisation and interpretation (Ou, 2017, pp. 18–20), along with the application of filters that are unique to each person, and the inevitable subjectivity that comes with it (ibid, p. 21; Strzemiński, 1974, pp. 14–18), are also characteristic of translation. Seen in this light, the perception of host and home countries by migrants can also be analysed as an act of translation.

### **Different Ways of Translating Migration Experiences**

An example of such translation can be found in the graphic novel *Rozmówki polsko-angielskie* (*The Polish-English Phrasebook*), published in Warsaw in 2012. Authored by the Polish graphic designer and artist, Agata Wawryniuk, this critically acclaimed and award-winning book narrates the migration journey of Agata (the author herself), her boyfriend Szymon and his cousin Marcel. The characters represent Poles who departed from Poland after the country joined the EU in 2004 and travelled to the British Isles and other Western countries in pursuit of better opportunities and a brighter future. Despite their often high levels of education, these individuals found themselves working

in positions beneath their qualifications, particularly in 3D (dirty, dangerous, demeaning) jobs.

The opening episode of *Rozmówki polsko-angielskie* (*The Polish-English Phrasebook*) unfolds in the countryside in Eastern Poland in the early summer of 2008, where the three students, having returned home from college to enjoy their holiday break, contemplate the prospect of finding a summer job in the UK. The characters harbour similar beliefs about the country, which echo the enduring fantasy of the prosperous West that has been cultivated since the end of WWII and further fuelled by seemingly ‘successful’ accounts of Polish migrants in Britain. According to these convictions, the UK is an affluent country abundant in job opportunities and generous welfare provisions. Enthralled by this idealised portrayal, the characters decide to embark on a journey to Newcastle, where Marcel’s older brother lives with his wife.

The UK-based section of the novel comprises seventeen episodes, each prefaced by a separate title page that visually evokes a sheet from a block-calendar. This intentional design not only creates an impression of a “visual diary”, as noted by Kris Van Heuckelom (2018, p. 46), but also underscores the chronological progression of the narrative that documents the experiences of the three characters from 1 July to 30 August 2008. This way of organising the episodes highlights the sequential and time-bound nature of their experiences, reinforcing the idea that translation is not a static transfer but a dynamic process that unfolds over time. The block-calendar format is a material reminder of the temporal context within which the characters’ stories—and the act of translation itself—are situated: it emphasises the fluid and evolving nature of translating lived experiences.

The book revolves around the characters’ engagement in 3D jobs and their relationships with local residents, including both British people and migrants. When they arrive in the UK, Agata takes on some cleaning and waitressing jobs and briefly undertakes work at a factory that produces bleach. Simultaneously, her boyfriend works first at a recycling centre and then at a construction site. Eventually, the three friends find employment together in a binders factory and remain there until Szymon, Agata’s boyfriend, sustains an injury to his left hand. Following this incident, the trio decides to come back to Poland. While dispelling the fantasy of the great West and shedding light on the dark sides of labour migration, the book concludes with a happy ending. Agata, against the odds, manages to save enough money to purchase books and a camera that she needs to pursue her career as a graphic designer.

The emphasis on translation as a prime strategy in the book is already indicated by its title *Rozmówki polsko-angielskie* (*The Polish-English Phrasebook*). Wawryniuk uses different types of translation—linguistic, intersemiotic and intersensory—to narrate her story. The book consists of five key parts: the cover, a comic-style prologue, a title page, the main story of the comic and back matter titled “Translations”, which includes a glossary and the author’s photos from England. As a result, the book is accompanied by two dictionaries: one linguistic and one visual.

Within the main story, the characters speak their respective languages: Polish characters converse in Polish, British people communicate in English, characters from Newcastle use Tyneside English, and migrants speak in broken English. By incorporating various idiolects, the comic book reflects the diverse linguistic tapestry found in real life, which adds authenticity to the characters and settings and situates them in specific social contexts. To assist readers, translations of the English sentences from the speech balloons are listed—according to the respective pages where they can be found—in the glossary titled “Translations” at the back of the book.

As already mentioned, the back matter extends beyond linguistic translations to include a visual chronicle of Agata Wawryniuk’s migration experience. The photo, which opens the “Translations” section, features the author seated on the pub floor, wielding a brush and dustpan—an arresting visual prelude to the ensuing eight pages of linguistic translations. This image anchors the author’s story in the context of physical work and the reality of labour migration. The section closes with a page that presents thirteen photos from Agata Waryniuk’s stay in Newcastle.

Among other things, these photographs depict: (1) a recruitment agency board covered in handwritten job ads, (2) Agata dressed in white shirt and black trousers for her waitressing job, (3) Agata sweeping the floor in a pub, (4) a wide shot of a factory hall, (5) Agata dressed in a protective helmet and vest, (6) an estate where the protagonist cleaned one of the houses, (7) Agata laying on the mattress in the room she rented upon her arrival to the UK and (8) the ruins of Tynemouth Castle, a site visited by the characters in Chapter 20. These images, which, just like the illustrations, are black-and-white, are integral to Waryniuk’s storytelling. They offer a glimpse into the author’s life as a migrant and invite the reader to connect with her on a personal level. Each photograph captures a different aspect of Wawryniuk’s embodied experience. The board covered in handwritten job ads symbolises her constant search for work and the precarious nature of migrant employment. The photos of the author in her various work uniforms indicate the low-status jobs she performed. The shots of the factory hall, the estate, Tynemouth Castle and the room she rented represent different physical spaces where she worked and spent her free time. These photos ground the abstract concept of migration in the concrete reality of Wawryniuk’s daily life. They constitute, in a sense, the source text that has been translated into visual art.

To render her experiences into graphic art, Wawryniuk recurrently employs synaesthesia: she uses visual elements and patterns to elicit specific sensations, such as smells or sounds. For instance, she renders the odour of the recycling centre by placing damp patches on every element in the venue, ranging from the ceiling through sorting machines to the floor. Additionally, she depicts parts of the recycling hall with distorted, wavy lines to convey an unsettling feeling and includes stink lines emanating from the trash (Wawryniuk, 2012, p. 29). These cues highlight filth and decomposition that produce the odour, evoking a feeling of discomfort.

In turn, the scene portraying the injury to Szymon's hand caused by the hole-punching machine in the binders factory exemplifies the visual translation of sound. The panel depicts the character's face in a close-up shot: his teeth clenched, brows furrowed, eyes shut tightly and tears streaming down his cheeks. Surrounding his face, a curse and two onomatopoeic words—"AŁA! KURWA! [The picture of Szymon's face] AAACH!!!" (Wawryniuk, 2012, p. 92)—visually encapsulate Szymon's painful scream, which can be translated from Polish to English as "OUCH! FUCK! [The picture of Szymon's face] AAAH!!!" The jagged lines of the font, magnified to the size of the character's face, along with exclamation marks emphasise the intensity of the sound. This visual translation of Szymon's painful scream evokes in readers a visceral empathy with the character's agony.

By integrating various layers of translation into her work, Wawryniuk immerses the reader in the multisensory, embodied, affective and socially rich experiences of her characters. She accentuates the physical features of her protagonists as they perform their jobs and interact with the new environment, thereby emphasising the embodied nature of labour migration. If the depictions of interactions between the main characters, locals and other migrants serve as a performative translation of social dynamics, the use of diverse idioms situates the characters and settings within specific social contexts. The exaggerated portrayals of the characters and visual metaphors imbue the storytelling with playful and affective dimensions. The novel's design, in which title pages resemble block-calendar sheets, highlights the temporally contingent nature of the characters' migration story and the author's translation of these experiences. The narrative's sensorial layer, in turn, translates the sensory experiences of the characters into visual representations. Wawryniuk's protagonists engage with their surroundings through the exteroceptive and interoceptive senses (see above Neves, 2020), using external stimuli and internal bodily responses to interpret their experiences. In the characters' quest to grasp the intricate nuances of the host country, translation emerges as a powerful tool that facilitates a deeper understanding of the local place and people.

The creative potential of translation was also employed by Kasia Lech and Polish Theatre Ireland in the production of the play *Revolucja balownowa* (*Bubble Revolution*). This one-woman show, written by Julia Holewińska in 2011, unveils the story of thirty-year-old Wiktoria (the author's alter ego). The protagonist is a representative of the generation born in the early 1980s who witnessed Poland's transformative journey from communism to capitalism in the 1990s. The play opens with a scene in which Jan, Wiktoria's five-year-old son, asks his mum to tell him a bedtime story. In response to this request, the protagonist weaves a tale out of her own coming-of-age journey: she recollects her childhood in communist Poland, adolescence amid the burgeoning capitalism, and youth in a country newly embraced by the European Union. As Poland reaches the historical milestone of EU accession in 2004, Wiktoria starts an affair with an unnamed, married Italian man, which ends up in an unintended pregnancy. Struggling to carve a livelihood in the fledgling

capitalist country, Wiktoria finds herself isolated, receiving no support from her parents, who are entangled in their own divorce proceedings. The initial promise of happiness delivered by capitalism is shattered, leaving Wiktoria in the throes of anxiety and depression.

The protagonist is a face of her generation and embodies the collective hopes, struggles and disillusionments. Her personal journey intertwines with the political, economic and cultural shifts in Poland. Among other things, the play sheds light on how, in the aftermath of World War II, the Polish people created a myth of the great West and then fervently tried to shape their homeland into a bastion of capitalism. As the narrative unfolds, the utopian dreams associated with capitalism are challenged, exposing the harsh realities faced by those caught in the whirlwind of societal change. The disillusionment experienced by Wiktoria becomes a poignant metaphor for the disillusionment of her generation.

Apart from exploring Poland's socio-economic transformation, the *Bubble Revolution* is a unique exercise in translation. Wiktoria translates her autobiography into a fairytale: this intralingual translation is intended for those who find it difficult to understand traumatised Polish consciousness. Her fairytale explains the peculiarities of life in a Communist country to people, such as 5-year-old Jan or British and Irish audiences, who have never personally experienced that system.

Polish Theatre Ireland showcased *Bubble Revolution* approximately 50 times across Ireland and the UK. To make it accessible to local audiences, the play was rendered from Polish into English by Artur Zapałowski. Under the direction of John Currivan, the play featured Kasia Lech as Wiktoria. This trio worked together to make sure the play resonated with local audiences in Ireland and Britain. Kasia Lech, also a scholar at the University of Amsterdam, elaborated on their collaborative effort in her 2019 article titled "Acting as the act of translation. Domesticating and foreignizing strategies as part of the actor's performance in the Irish-Polish production of *Bubble Revolution*". In this paper, Lech depicts various layers of translation—linguistic, contextual and performative—employed in the staging of *Bubble Revolution*.

At the linguistic level, the formation of Wiktoria's identity is reflected in the interplay between Polish and various forms of English. As it happened, Artur Zapałowski translated the play into American English, a choice that, as Kasia Lech argues, adeptly captures Wiktoria's initial fascination with the United States and her endeavour "to 'translate' herself into Western culture" (Lech, 2019, p. 45). The protagonist's identity undergoes a gradual transformation every time she encounters foreign cultures in her life. During these encounters, she reconstructs her 'self' by means of translation. As the character evolves from a naive and enthusiastic child into a westernised, disillusioned single mother, she symbolically marks her transformation by exchanging her original name "Wiktoria" for the more westernised "Vica".

The incorporation of different accents in the play adds extra layers to Wiktoria's complex identity. Kasia Lech speaks with a strong Polish accent

throughout most of the performance to emphasise Wiktoria's roots. In turn, to delineate between the character's moments of confidence and vulnerability, the actress switches between British and Irish accents. Whenever the protagonist feels empowered, Kasia Lech employs British pronunciation for the word "bubble" /bʌbəl/, and when the character feels emotional and vulnerable, the actress pronounces the word "bubble" /bʊbəl/ with an Irish accent.

This deliberate use of accents is complemented by the extensive incorporation of the Polish language within the play. The production opens with the line "Wszystko zaczęło się od gumy żucia", immediately succeeded by its English rendition "It all started with bubble gum". Such an opening invests the play with the aura of foreignness and casts the actress in the role of translator from the very beginning. The Polish language prevails throughout the play: for example, Wiktoria answers a phone call in Polish (with Kasia Lech translating it into English), the original song track of "Telefony" by the band *Republika* (1993) is played (with the actress singing the English translation alongside the Polish-language recording), and the protagonist uses the Polish term "babcia" (initially translated by the actress as "grandma" and later used without translation, presuming the audience has grasped the word). The extensive incorporation of Polish serves Kasia Lech's objective, which is, in her own words, to facilitate "the intelligibility of Holewińska's text by having the audience recognise themselves in the foreignness of the play—rather than by identifying domestic values inscribed within it—and in turn find new ways to engage with foreignness" (Lech, 2019, p. 41).

While leaning towards foreignisation (Venuti, 1995) in her adaptation of the play, Kasia Lech employs cultural translation (Bhabha, 1994; Maitland, 2017; Pym, 2009), predominantly through the technique of description, to elucidate the Eastern European experience for Western audiences. A case in point is the scene where Wiktoria recalls her dad's sarcastic quip about Lenin. Her father used to describe Lenin as someone who "farted all the time" but, as the protagonist adds, he could allow himself to "be so coarsely visceral" only within the confines of his home. Upon the play's initial staging, Kasia Lech realised that the joke went unnoticed. She decided therefore to modify the original line to: "But with the General, Martial Law, and communist police everywhere, it was only at home that he allowed himself to be so coarsely visceral" in order to provide a clearer historical context and, hopefully, recapture some of the original humour (Lech, 2019, p. 44).

In addition to linguistic and cultural translation, both Holewińska and Lech employ less conventional methods to render the communist reality. They capture that era using three different means of expression: mass-produced goods, popular images and music.

The first layer of the narrative comprises products that enjoyed popularity in Poland during the 1980s and 1990s. These included Turbo, Donald and Hubba-Bubba chewing gums, Koukou-Roukou wafer biscuits, Coca-Cola, Nutella spread, Fa soap bars, green apple shampoo and Mrs. Walewska perfume. As a little girl, Wiktoria catches her first glimpse of the West when her

father ventures behind the Iron Curtain on a business trip to West Germany and returns with stories and a jar of Nutella. As the protagonist reaches puberty, the tell-tale sign of Communism's collapse in Poland is the emergence of new sweets on the market, such as Turbo, Donald and Hubba-Bubba chewing gums or Koukou-Roukou wafer biscuits. The confirmation that Poland has been embraced by the West is underscored by Wiktoria's family trip to Norway, where she indulges in an abundance of Coca-Cola. These tangible products are emblematic of the socio-political changes that occurred in Poland. They act as symbols of political change, economic transition, cultural aspiration and personal growth of both the protagonist and the nation as a whole.

The second layer involves storytelling through images: snippets of news, the "Dynasty" soap opera, the "Wheel of Fortune" game show, Kashpirovsky's mass healing rituals as well as images of sodas like Coca-Cola, Fanta and Sprite are projected onto the actress's body. This projection embodies the cultural artefacts, indicating their physical and psychological integration into Wiktoria's life and identity. Implicit in this visual storytelling technique is the acknowledgement that these artefacts of popular culture have shaped the protagonist and her generation.

The third layer of the narrative is made up of songs that topped the charts during the transformation times. Tracks, such as "Telefony" by Republika (1993) or "Nasz Disneyland" by Papa Dance (1988), were known to every teenager and emblematic of their post-communist generation. In the play, these songs are markers of that particular time: not only do they offer insight into the character's thoughts and emotions, but they also capture the prevailing atmosphere of the era.

Together, these three layers form a unique translation that evokes the tastes, smells, images and sounds of the transformation period, rendering the past reality in a sensorial, embodied, multimodal, affective and playful way. As Karolina Prykowska-Michalak and Izabela Grabarczyk aptly observe in their analysis of *Bubble Revolution*, this type of translation fosters collaboration with the audience. "They are encouraged to embrace the idea that they might not or even must not understand every single word of the performance, and that they might feel uncomfortable, because they are taking part in a performance that engages both the senses and emotions as it seeks to become a performative encounter" (Prykowska-Michalak and Grabarczyk, 2023, p. 306).

When the play was performed at the 2016 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, this unique translation was further enhanced by Kasia Lech, who engaged the audience in a sensory feast before the main show. Having entered the foyer, each spectator was presented with a cardboard box. Inside this box, they found another box, an envelope containing a memory card (which described the life story of a real person who lived in Poland in the 1980s), and a sheet presenting a random selection of fun facts, poems, anecdotes and other interesting pieces of information from that era. The smaller box contained goods popular under Communism. These items included a packet of crisps, chewing gums, Ptasic

mleczko (marshmallows coated in chocolate, named “Birds’ Milk”), a bag of candy, condoms, banknotes, ration coupons used in communist shops, etc. By unpacking the props, the audience uncovered different layers of the life of Polish people during those times.

As the spectators entered the auditorium, a crew member sprayed them with Mrs. Walewska perfume or fastened a scarlet ribbon around their wrist—a talisman believed in the past to ward off misfortune. Then they were invited to explore an exhibition, set up in the corner of the auditorium, whose aim was to capture the country’s journey from communism to capitalism. The exhibition featured interactive presentations, photographs, posters and tangible artefacts, such as books or empty cans of soda, each accompanied by informative blurbs. The iconic song “Telefony” (“Phones”) by Republika was played in the background. A highlight of the exhibition was a makeshift communist shop where visitors could use their ration coupons to purchase a biscuit or soda and learn firsthand how the rationing system worked in practice.

While spectators strolled through the exhibition, a crew member assumed the role of an interviewer and questioned them about their impressions. When she asked one of the attendees about his thoughts on the beverage that he had purchased with his ration coupon, the man described the soda as reminiscent of “the cheap drinks you [got] at the kid’s birthday parties” (*Bubble Revolution*, 2016, 7’09”). Another spectator was probed about her experience with the crisps she had received in the cardboard box, to which she replied that the snacks smelled “funny” (*Bubble Revolution*, 2016, 9’10”).<sup>2</sup> These comments revealed that, by engaging the senses of taste and smell, Kasia Lech successfully conveyed the shoddy quality of products during communist times. Many of them were cheap and poorly executed imitations of popular goods available in the West.

At a more general level, the exhibition aimed to help the audience relate to the contexts, events and objects depicted in the play. The contrast between the reality in Poland and life in Western Europe in the 1980s and 1990s was so significant that it was challenging to explain that era to people who had never experienced it firsthand. Recognising this, Kasia Lech undertook the ambitious task of recreating a semblance of communist Poland. Her goal was to provide audiences with an immersive experience, which would introduce them to the sights, sounds, smells and tastes prevalent in the country at that time. Employing the senses, Lech sought to translate the essence of the transformation times for her spectators.

Similar to the process of perception described earlier in this chapter, where individuals select, organise and interpret sensory information, *Bubble Revolution* encouraged spectators to actively participate in making sense of the historical and cultural themes presented on stage. This participation involved selecting, organising and interpreting the linguistic, visual and sensory input the spectators received through the multimodal environment created before and during the play. By immersing the audience in sensory stimuli and tangible artefacts, Lech contextualised the Polish experience of the communist era for

non-Polish spectators, allowing them to interpret these stimuli and artefacts through the lens of their own cultural backgrounds and personal experiences.

Using multiple modes of communication, including verbal, visual, auditory and tactile, the production exemplifies a multilayered approach to translation. It integrates Polish and English languages and different accents, provides multimodal, interactive contexts, engages the audience's senses and encourages their active participation. The aim of this rich, immersive approach is to introduce the history and culture of Polish migrants to local communities.

## Conclusions

Both Agata Wawryniuk's graphic novel *Rozmówki polsko-angielskie* and Kasia Lech's theatrical adaptation of the play *Bubble Revolution* serve as telling examples of how experiential translation operates on multiple levels. The artists go beyond language and translate aspects which may remain incomprehensible through other means of expression, such as illustrations, photos, videos, props, gestures, movement and the like. The combination of these various translational methods, which engage different senses, not only bridges cultural and linguistic gaps but also immerses audiences in the sensory and emotional dimensions of the depicted stories.

This approach to translation extends beyond the work of art, artists and translators, and initiates a collaboration with the audience. Through experiential elements, readers/spectators become engaged in a sensorial, embodied and affective translation of the characters' experiences. This process fosters a deeper connection with the migrant characters and offers a more profound and comprehensive understanding of the complex realities of migration.

## Notes

- 1 This chapter draws on the outcomes of two distinct projects: "Experiential Translation: Meaning-Making Across Languages and the Arts", funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and "Theatrical Heritage of Polish Migrants", supported by the Ministry of Education and Science in Poland (NdS/538415/2021/2022).
- 2 The quoted excerpts are extracted from video footage recorded during the event titled "Bubble Revolution: A Journey back to 1980s and 1990s Poland", accessible on the following website: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLFkBsRrJ9I>.

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# 10 Never at Sea

## An Examination of Collaboration and Translation in a Creative Project About Women's Experiences of Forced Migration

*Kate McMillan, Cat Hope and Louise Devenish*

### **Introduction: the Politicisation of Seeking Refuge**

In 2012, the UK Home Secretary, Theresa May, developed a set of policies and approaches to what was perceived as an increase in 'illegal' migration to the United Kingdom, with the explicit goal of creating a 'hostile environment' for asylum seekers (Qureshi et al., 2020). After most official routes to entry were shut down, many people—often from countries that have a history of British colonial interference—were attempting to reach the UK across the English Channel in small boats (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021). At the time of writing, attempts are being made to re-house refugees in Rwandan detention centres, despite numerous cases against this policy making their way through national and international courts (UK Government News Story, 2023). Echoing controversial policies established twenty years earlier in Australia surrounding refugees, these immigration policies will put Britain in breach of the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention (UN Refugee Agency, 2023). The 'hostile environment' also led to the branding of many long-term residents as 'immigration offenders', including people known as the Windrush Generation, who had legally migrated to post-war Britain and whose documents the Home Office had subsequently 'lost'.

Running concurrently, but institutionally positioned as separate to this debate, is the increasingly urgent context of the climate crisis and the subsequent predicted increase in climate refugees (World Economic Forum, 2021). The possibility of keeping the world under 1.5 degrees of warming is widely acknowledged as unlikely (Diffenbaugh and Barnes, 2023). As a result, humanity has now entered a phase of mitigating more extreme and irreversible impacts of global temperature rises. Predictions of as many as 1.2 billion climate refugees by 2050 have not yet led to reform of current international law, which states climate migrants are unable to claim refugee status (ibid). The intersecting crises stemming from immigration policies and climate catastrophes do not affect all those impacted in the same way. In the Global South, the most severe impacts of climate change are felt most acutely, despite being the lowest emitters of carbon. For example, the continent of

DOI: [10.4324/9781003462569-15](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003462569-15)

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Africa is home to almost 18% of the world's population, yet contributes only 3.8% to global emissions. In 2021 almost 2.6 million African people were displaced by climate disasters (CDP Africa Report, 2020). Women and girls are disproportionately affected and constitute more than half of those displaced by climate change, war and famine. In places where poverty exists, it is also more likely that women and girls become victims of rape, exploitation, violence, forced marriage and economic precarity. Not only are women at risk of *becoming* refugees due to these circumstances, but they are also more vulnerable to gender-based violence *once they become* refugees (Tower, 2020).

It was against this national and global context that *Never at Sea* (2022/2023) was developed. *Never at Sea* was a performance-installation work led by visual artist Kate McMillan and composer Cat Hope. McMillan and Hope both prioritise artistic activism and social injustice as a key impetus in their creative practice, and work with collaborators to develop and realise large-scale works, in this case choreographer Sivan Rubinstein, dancer Lydia Walker, percussionist Louise Devenish, soprano Marcia Lemke-Kern, and a group of UK migrant women.<sup>1</sup>

The project aimed to provide a creative, collective and experientially-rooted response to the politicisation of people seeking refuge in the UK. In the creative development phase of the project, three months before the premiere, a group of recent migrant women were invited to work with the creative team in a series of workshops where they were welcomed to share and express their experience and memories of home via a series of tasks devised by the artists, such as guided meditations, object sharing and embodied walking stories. Their input helped shape *Never at Sea* (see Figure 10.1). Providing an alternative voice for these issues via the artwork and the processes engaged to complete it, makes a contribution to discourse around socially engaged artistic practice, and to its role in providing pathways for communities to engage with global issues of our time as a step towards affecting change.

### **Making *Never at Sea*: Inspirations, Motivations and Creative Decisions**

The complex iterative process of translation that occurred between artists Kate McMillan and Cat Hope informs the following discussion. Their practice has been framed through the context of growing up in Boorloo (Perth), Australia: land that was stolen by the British in 1788, and subsequently co-opted as a settler colonial space that persists to this day. This was most recently reinforced through an overwhelming 'no' vote in the October 2023 referendum that would have provided a 'voice' for First Nation peoples in the Australian Parliament. McMillan relocated from England to Australia as a child and this experience of being a migrant has also shaped her interest in ideas of migration and displacement. Similarly, Hope was moved between cities and countries repeatedly as a child of an Australian Defence Force family. For both Hope



*Figure 10.1* *Never at Sea*. Opening night performance, 21 June 2023.

Still of Louise Devenish (percussionist) and Lydia Walker (dancer) © Dominic Turner.

and McMillan, the discussion of ‘home’ is therefore necessarily political. It has also shaped their creative processes, exemplified in *Never at Sea*, by ensuring more voices and perspectives are brought into dialogue, thereby reinforcing complexity, difference and the gaps in translation.

For *Never at Sea*, films were projected onto two large sculptures positioned in a church where the pews had been reversed to face the narthex rather than the altar. It premiered in June 2023 at St Mary le Strand Church, situated in front of Somerset House in central London and was on show from 21–27 June 2023 with several timed performances.

In the performance, the soprano was situated on a balcony above the film projections, and the percussionist performed at a table constructed for the project, situated amongst the large sculptures which distorted the films’ imagery. The dancer moved around the audience seated in the pews, which were populated with handmade prayer cushions featuring the same printed silk fabric worn by the performers (see [Figure 10.2](#)). The sculptures and imagery on the costumes and prayer cushions were derived from the films, which featured a group of young women from an undetermined time. The films oscillate between abstracted and slow-moving images of bodies underwater, and close-ups of the actors’ limbs (see [Figure 10.3](#)), and wide landscape shots of a wooden boat at sea. The imagery is both beautiful and unnerving. In the performance the musicians perform on sculptures made for the work, as well as unusual instruments relating to the films: AM radios, a waterphone, lion’s roar,



*Figure 10.2* A close-up image of the custom-made table and instrument sculptures, as well as the prayer cushions.

shells and a large tam-tam. The singer sometimes sounds into a conch shell, or handles navy-uniform buttons made of brass. The music is slow-moving, eerie and ethereal. A track, pre-recorded with Decibel Ensemble and Ruthless Jabiru in the Brunel Tunnel, London, features a string orchestra playing layered glissando tones, and includes a very low subtone throughout the work. In the periods that the performance was not running, the films, sculptures and pre-recorded sound remained as an exhibition, accessible to the public.

The selection of St Mary Le Strand as the site of the work engages with the historic roles of churches as places of institutional power, and also as public spaces available for contemplation and quiet. In the UK, the Church of England has been vocal in their outrage over current government migration policy (Hui, 2023). Many of the people seeking asylum in the UK do not identify with the Christian faith. Thus, the engagement with St Mary le Strand church is underpinned not only by specific Anglican traditions, but by



Figure 10.3 Film still *Never at Sea*, 2023.

the possibility of multi-faith thinking and the value of public space for reflection and remembrance. Additionally, the church's goal to 'hold' and to 'hold space' is a central tenet of providing safety and refuge. The site of the work thus became an additional substrate of knowledge generation and translation. *Never at Sea* engaged with this laden space in multiple ways, such as reversing the pews (see Figure 10.1) and replacing the prayer cushions. In so doing, McMillan sought to disrupt how people would ordinarily occupy and engage with the architecture and traditions of the site.

Early research for *Never at Sea* began with the artists' examination of St Mary Le Strand as the patron church of the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS). Established in 1939, the WRNS were the first women allowed into the armed services, and their motto 'Never at Sea', was coined to reassure the public that the WRNS would not be serving with men. This motto, reflecting the absence of WRNS from the sea, subsequently became the title of the project. *Never at Sea* became a way to think about who, why and how groups of people travel by sea, thereby informing the work's development of creative narratives around refugees forced to travel by sea.

The little-known stories of the WRNS community of women offered an intriguing point of departure for creative work, however a single focus on the largely middle-class white women of the WRNS left little room to critically investigate the experiences of women, forced migration and loss in Britain more broadly. In the context of the refugee crisis, taking a broader view became crucial at a time when stories of people drowning in the English

Channel were becoming more frequent. Particularly harrowing are the audio recordings of desperate people trying to contact French and UK authorities just before they drowned in November 2022 (Pascual, 2022). In this context, the phrase ‘Never at Sea’ takes on a sinister tone. During the making of the work, it became clear that the focus of the creative project must address the role of the artists in negotiating and translating the current political climate through their practice, and that the work should be made in conjunction with people who endured forced migration. This was done through a series of arts-informed workshops where refugee women used creative methods to share their experiences of home, as well as the sharing of draft creative work for *Never at Sea*.

### **Reaching out/Inviting in: Engaging Stakeholders and Audiences**

*Never at Sea* aimed to create a complex and nuanced alternative to the culture wars by engendering experiences of empathy in audiences. As London points out in Chapter 2 of *The Experience of Translation*, there is not a cohesive narrative in such a space, and it is in fact the “fragmentary, incomplete textual creation[s]” (2024, p. 37) that offer the most authentic accounts of experiences. More broadly, by embracing abstracted and incomplete narratives, the work served to remind audiences that the narratives of loss and journey are not *only* political but are timeless narratives that have been embedded within cultural storytelling for thousands of years. The authors argue that creative practice has a unique ability to sit with uncertainty, change and challenging topics, and that this makes the work of artists a crucial contributor in voicing key issues of our time and advocating for change. They therefore sought to examine the translational creative processes that facilitated artistic advocacy in *Never at Sea*, aiming to create a ‘stickiness’ for issues that may be otherwise difficult to engage with emotionally and politically.

During the development of the work, the artists conducted workshops designed for women who had experienced forced migration, in collaboration with the Lewisham Refugee Resettlement Program, Refugee Council and King’s College London’s Sanctuary Program. The aim of these workshops was to provide supported, creative opportunities to migrant women settling in the UK, and in doing so, facilitate an opportunity for them to express their experiences, as well as soliciting responses to the artists’ work as it was developing. Unsurprisingly, an outcome of these workshops was a confirmation of the challenges faced by participants. The women shared their experiences openly, discussing the shape grief can take, the fragility and opacity of memory, and the characteristics of migrant life. They became a key element in the evolution of the work, as discussed in the next section.

Audience feedback collected during the debut of the work reinforced the effectiveness of this translatory process. Responses included: “I think what

moved me was the juxtaposition of the dreamlike gentleness of the work with the utter horror of the idea (& reality) of drowning. Seeing it in the week of the terrible capsizing and deaths in the Mediterranean made it almost unbearably poignant”; “The desperation of migration. The way you conveyed the idea of pulling, of being pulled through all the media—the promise & the pull of the oceans their tempting beauty & danger”; “It felt timeless and timely”.

### **The Artists in Conversation/Art in Translation**

In the spirit of translation and collaboration, what follows is a discussion between key creatives Kate McMillan (visual artist) and Cat Hope (composer), facilitated by Louise Devenish (percussionist).

*Louise Devenish LD:* What does the phrase ‘Never at Sea’ mean to you, and how does this figure in your personal creative narrative in the artwork *Never at Sea*?

*Kate McMillan KM:* The sea, or the ocean, feels like an internal landscape for me. I grew up looking out at the Indian Ocean, I could hear it as I slept. As a migrant in Australia, I felt like I had come to a vast continent and that I was balancing on the edge of it, precariously. I have often tried to imagine what it must have looked like to Nyoongar people on that same coastline as they watched the British invade. In that sense *Never at Sea* also explores the view of those arriving. The famous view of the cliffs of Dover, associated largely with ‘coming home’ for the British, is the same view that asylum seekers face if they survive the perilous journey across. In my work and in my imagination, the sea has always been a precarious place, a place of loss.

*Cat Hope CH:* We both have a large body of work that considers migration and displacement, made individually and in collaboration—our first collaborations focused on this. But the sea—it captures not just our imagination, but the imagination of populations. The sea is not a neutral space, it is full of myths, mystery and the unknowable. It contains borders between countries that can’t be drawn with a line, fence, or customs control queue, not unlike the borders between disciplines in experiential translation. Asylum seeking happens via all channels, but the sea conjures something different in the minds of people. *Never at Sea* is an attempt to understand, or at least engage with, that mystery and mind state.

- KM:* My work, and also yours I think, often teeters at the intersection of beauty and loss. A sunny disquiet that I think is a likely outcome of growing up on stolen land where massacres were written out of official history. These tensions shape my work, and create the mechanism of unease which is present in all of my projects. I see injustice, and notice the stories that are not being told. As I get older, I have become more interested in exploring the histories, stories and experiences of women. So much is absent, and this also leaves room for imagination.
- CH:* I feel that art and activism are so intertwined right now, pushing us in new directions as we move from making work about situations or people, to making it in situations and with people. Engaging what we have dedicated our life to (in my case, music) as part of our activism is something we can all do. If it causes audiences to act, that's even better. Shocking images and statements in the media start to lose their power after a while, the public needs new stimulus to keep key issues alive in the public debate. Art is very effective at that. Operating within Australian and British University environments, we have privileges and restrictions—our freedom of expression is much more expansive, and the risks to us personally much less threatening, than for artists elsewhere who can be imprisoned, exiled or worse. I spend a lot of time thinking about how the best way is to make work that ‘translates’ into action, fulfilling Bruguera’s proposal of “arte util” (Noble and Bruguera, 2012). Our privilege demands we act for others. We find new sources of energy and imagination with which we can make real change.
- LD:* How has *Never at Sea* evolved—can you comment on the process of collaboration across disciplines, integrating knowledge and techniques from dance and performance, and how creative decisions were influenced by the workshops?
- CH:* *Never at Sea* has had an unusual evolution. Kate proposed the idea of a collaboration, which we discussed at length. Kate created the first draft of the films in April 2022 around Boorloo/Perth, Australia and put together a short, three-minute selection of key footage. This influenced the composition of the orchestral work for *Never at Sea*, focusing on the concept of being in water, breaking over and under the surface, being carried by waves and feeling strangely calm, out of touch. Premiering at the Brunel Tunnel in London—a venue under the Thames—it features a low string orchestra called Ruthless Jabiru alongside my ensemble Decibel (Hope, 2022). I performed as the bass guitar soloist in the work, Louise performed as percussionist, and it was conducted by Kelly Lovelady. Kate attended rehearsals and contributed to elements of that performance—such as the movement of the musicians’ arms when they play a portable AM radio emitting static sounds, hinting at the performative aspects to come in the installation iteration (see Figure 10.4).



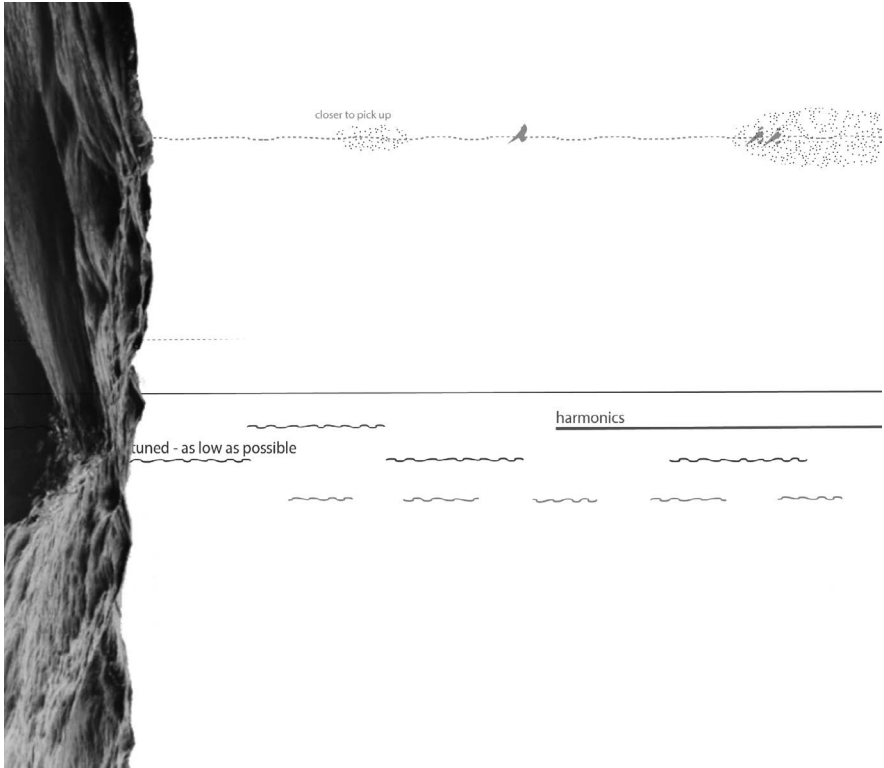
*Figure 10.4* *Never at Sea*. Opening night performance at St Mary Le Strand, 21 June 2023.

Still of Louise Devenish (percussionist) from performance documentation.

Photography: Tom Gimlette.

This choice of instruments creates an eerie, swirling, ominous depth to the sound world. The venue also produced sound—the pump engines emptying the tunnel of excess water escaping the Thames, the rumbling train passing by. A recording of the orchestra was made, which I remixed into a twenty-minute track without the bass guitar solos that Kate then edited the final films to. This was followed by the composition of two further elements of music—parts for both a vocal and percussion soloist. The score for the work uses colour, graphic and animated notation that features long, wavy lines interspersed with short, pointillistic gestures. I re-used elements of the orchestral notation in the installation performance score (see [Figures 10.5a](#) and [10.5b](#)), which was created after the film was completed, and which then formed the basis for the performance and collaboration with the choreographer, Sivan Rubinstein.

*KM:* Cat and Louise collaborated with me on sculptures designed as percussion objects in the installation and performance. One example of these that drew from the themes of refuge, was the hundreds of ‘hag stones’ I had collected (mostly from the Kent coast where increasing numbers of asylum seekers have arrived each year to the UK on small boats since 2021 ([Dale, 2024](#)))—stones with naturally occurring holes—that were hung in groups and percussed. In pre-Christian



*Figure 10.5a* A screenshot of the animated score for the orchestral version of *Never at Sea*, with the bass solo in light blue at the top of the image, the orchestral part below, and the vertical *Sea* image as a ‘playpoint’ as the score scrolls along.

history, these stones were believed to be portals into the future, activated by the knowledge of wise women. Variations of these stories can be found throughout Europe, and I have been using them in my work for many years. After a suggestion from Louise to make ceramic shingles for percussion, I also made two dozen ceramic glazed ears to be hung and played, as well as a large ceramic vessel with handles referencing double-sided ears which I called a ‘listening bowl’. I also designed a percussion table upon which all the objects sat in silence, as sculptures in the work, when not being performed, supported by the silk cushions I had made to replace those of the WRNS, which were situated throughout the church pews. The final work was meant to feel ‘rich’—every choice had been thoughtfully considered, discussed and it reflected the collaboration, translation and mediation of everyone involved. The construction of the films was done over many weeks—condensing three days of footage into just twenty minutes.

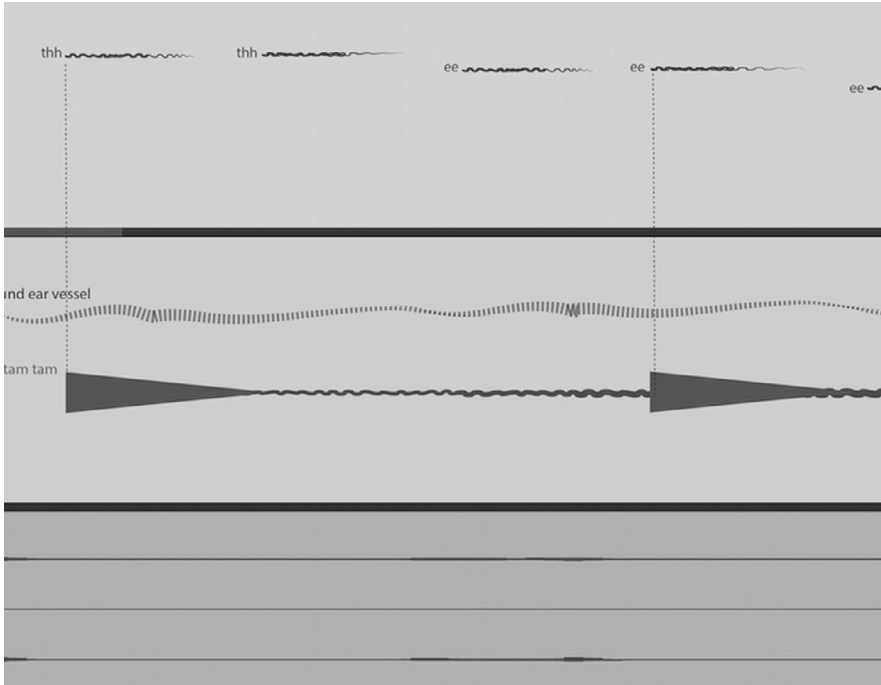


Figure 10.5b A screenshot of the animated score for the installation, showing vocal and percussion parts, including a representation of the playback against a grey background.

The initial filming was a very intuitive process that responded to unknown variables such as the weather, and unexpected effects of the light. Similarly, the editing very intuitively responded to the sound of the score, the shapes and feel of the footage and did not use a storyboard. It was not until I began physically editing that the idea of one film with large, expansive footage, and a smaller one with tight, POV footage occurred to me.

*LD:* What does translation mean to you both in the context of interdisciplinary creative practice? What forms of translation emerge in various stages of the collaborative process, from the initial idea to development, then to the final realisation for audiences?

*KM:* Translation is the space *between* communicating and receiving. Artists are attuned to their own intentions when creating work but are also aware that we can't control how our ideas are received—we can only guide, shape and hope. Often, I am looking to identify feedback loops along an iterative process of experimentation, play and discovery. This occurs constantly through collaboration. For example, when Cat and I are working on a project together and an

idea I've communicated to Cat is received in a slightly different way than intended. This is a likely consequence of gaps and differences in our disciplinary traditions. Oftentimes this is a delight, because new knowledge is formed as a consequence of a miscommunication or mistranslation. I enjoy and anticipate the process of translation *because* things are unexpected. In many ways I think that's why the collaboration has been sustained. The collaboration and our individual input shift a little bit depending on the context of each project. The collaborative process works well, because we both come with flexible, rather than fixed ideas.

*LD:* Can you speak a little bit about how the workshops with women who had experienced forced migration informed the development of the collaboration and the work?

*KM:* The workshops with migrant women engaged with our individual and collective artistic methodologies. The first workshop focused on re-creating objects and stories from home; the second engaged music and sounds of home as memory tools; and the final workshop used movement and dance as a form of expression. Whilst the goal of the workshop was not to produce 'data' for the final work, there were key iterative moments which can be found in the final work.

The knowledge participants shared so openly created a beautiful and fragile space that prompted Cat and I to think about loss and absence in *Never at Sea* in a profoundly different way. By sharing similar experiences, the women also developed powerful networks with each other. The workshops underlined that in everyday life, women were so consumed by caring for children and their families, that there had not been much space to hold of their own. In the first workshop women were asked to bring something from home—and almost all of them had nothing—they had left their countries of origin with nothing. The workshop ended up being about participants' memories and what they had lost. This reinforced that the overall feeling in the work needed to be one of loneliness and precarity—a sense of 'thinness', of stripping the work back to its vulnerabilities. Workshop participants described the sense of never being 'at home' in their new lives in the UK.

As part of the second workshop, the participants were asked to shut their eyes and listen to the first 7–8 minutes of the pre-recorded string orchestra composition that was used as the basis for the pre-recorded composition in the work. This occurred before the live music parts had been created. Participants were asked to transcribe their initial responses to the sound in diaries we provided. Responses were surprisingly similar. Participants who had spent time in bomb shelters during the Syrian war and the Lebanese civil war had very strong connections between the low-pitched sounds in the music, and their memories of

sounds in the bomb shelter. On asking if the sounds were actually the same, or if the feeling from the music evoked similar emotions, they were adamant that the sounds were the same. Participants said the music reminded them of a journey, of the sea. That it evoked colours of blue/grey and a feeling of unease, foreboding and haunting. This expression consolidated for us the artistic development of music, image and movement.

In the final workshop which focused on dance and movement, choreographer Sivan Rubinstein led a series of relaxation exercises, focusing on the way the body is a vessel for stress and anxiety. Conversely, it is also a site of selfhood and a tool to release tension. During this workshop one of the participants who had previously worked as a therapist with children affected by war began running the session and sharing with the group exercises she had used. The group shared with each other the places in the body where they held stress. The final activity was to reimagine familiar local walks at home and to walk them out in the large workshop space. This final workshop informed the choreography for the dancer, as well as gestures used by the percussionist and vocalist.

Throughout the workshops, it was not always clear who were the refugee participants and who were the organisers. The translator, workshop facilitator and artists all had their own stories to tell. Everyone took part in the activities and a very ‘flat’ space was created. After the three workshops, an incredibly close bond formed between everyone and people have stayed in touch. It felt as if knowledge had been developed, shared and translated and despite the gaps and mistranslations, a common understanding and care for each other had developed. What was shared was not only through words, but through our bodies, our expressions and the way we looked at and held each other.

*LD:* In *Never at Sea*, there are themes of social justice and social hierarchies related to the political and institutional treatment of refugees, and the work is informed by narratives of grief, loss and memory, as told to you Kate, by refugees in these workshops. Adjacent to the concept of translation is the concept of mediation, and it would be great to hear your thoughts on translation versus mediation. If we take an example of the translator or the act of translation being a form of mediation—such as the *Never at Sea* workshops, where an Arabic interpreter facilitated communication between Kate and the workshop participants—there is a necessary element of mediation in this context because of language differences. In a different way, *Never at Sea* brings several artistic languages into dialogue, in process and product, and this is iterative. Perhaps there is a form of mediation that’s happening there as well, which speaks to the way things change through a translation, or a collaborative process.

*CH:* For me, translation is the process of turning ideas into art. It's not taking my ideas (or those of others) and communicating them to the public. Another form of translation of ideas happens between Kate and me before it becomes art. Kate and I spend a lot of time discussing what a theme means to us. These are the first steps of translation, sharing and unpicking information about events, artists and works related or adjacent to our theme, and working out how to go deeper. This is followed by the 'disciplinary translation' Kate mentioned. St Mary le Strand church provided a springboard for musical ideas that would work well in that environment, such as the selection of a classically trained soprano (a tradition aligned to the church) and a percussionist who would be comfortable sounding and performing the objects Kate would be making.

Our mediation is more like a shaping, and our translation is really about clarifying, opening out and revealing, whereas the mediation is more a process of finessing. Kate and Sivan ran the workshops in the UK, and shared the outcomes with me as I was writing the live performance parts in Germany, where I was living at the time. I listened carefully to these perspectives and was particularly taken by the participants' comments on my music sounding like war—what was intended as abstraction by one (me) was read as something quite literal by the workshop participants. When we did come together to start rehearsals, the differences between what individual disciplines could offer to the project became more pronounced for me. So perhaps mediation is a word for the communication between the discipline and translation. This can be literal—when the choreographer integrates movements made by the percussionist or film actor into the dance, or imagined—such as the sound drawn from the lion's roar instrument resembling the sound of a creaking boat.

Once the work is made, the translation feels out of our control, and becomes influenced by the events of our time. Yoko Ono argues that artwork can't exist without the audience; that it is completed by the viewer/listener (Beram and Boriss-Krimsky, 2012). Rather than translating the idea, we are working through it, arriving at a place where others are welcome to join in, as discussed by London in his contribution to *The Experience of Translation* (2024). I have noticed that for visual art exhibitions, it is more common that artists speak with attendees, undertake artist talks, or commission essays about the work than in music presentations. I think music could do more of this, it provides useful context for the public's understanding and translation.

*KM:* Louise, you used the example of the Arabic translator in the workshops as the mediator in that space—and that their role ensured that everyone's words were being translated as accurately as possible; and also, that communication flowed. Mediation in that space is about listening,

and about holding a safe space for discussion. Working with vulnerable people requires a particular kind of mediation and care, and translation is key here. The arts-based element of the workshop allowed participants to share their experiences more directly without having to go through the voice of another.

*LD:* You have both written previously about various global challenges and how they're being leveraged by political leaders and reported (or not reported) in the media in different ways, and how the creative sector is responding to this through artistic work. Creativity and artistic work offer a means of exploring, highlighting; a means of 'being with' uncomfortable topics and issues, a way to sit with uncertainty and bridge different disciplines and ideas, and in giving voice to these issues through art making, artists are becoming activists. Cat, you and I have talked at length and have written about how sound, in particular, has this magical quality of being able to contain and communicate things that can't be easily communicated in words (Devenish, 2021). Sculpture and film do the same thing. How do you approach your role as a translator of complex issues, such as social justice, into art? Where do the artist and the activist in you align, and what is that giving, or doing to the function of art?

*CH:* I've always been an activist first. It took me a long time to realise that art could be a vehicle for my activism. As I got older, I began connecting my art with politics more deeply. At this time, it just seems that making art that doesn't engage with political issues, art that is primarily decorative, is indulgent. How can we enjoy this beautiful sound when people are drowning trying to find safety? On the other hand, maybe it's good to have things that are nothing to do with these issues, art that exists for itself, as a place of respite and recovery. I feel we are trying to combine these elements here.

Yet this dichotomy is an ongoing internal debate for me, and I return to the power of abstraction. Abstraction can coax responses to political matters without poking at you, demanding or dictating terms—without telling you how to think. Even choosing titles operates like a process of abstraction—framing the exploration and expansion. I see this process as a kind of resistance, which reminds me of Le Guin's statement that "resistance and change often begin in art" (Le Guin, 2014, n.p.).

Abstraction in art is a dimension of experiential translation where non-representation opens avenues for new responses. Russolo in his *Art of Noises* manifesto discusses the ability for sound to avoid what he calls "imitative reproduction" (Russolo, 1986) and instead focuses on how the sounds of nature and life can be used as "abstract materials" (pp. 86–87). All sounds—musical as well as environmental—can be used in this way. For example, the use of a very low tone throughout the work is engaged to create a physical response for listeners that

connects them to the film's perspective from underwater looking up. Very low sound has been shown to elicit physical responses in listeners, such as chills and goosebumps (Hope, 2009) causing them to "emote" (Crotty and Hope, 2020, p. 84). This creates a powerful connection for the audience with the images, knowing the theme of the work. The slippery glissando strings conjure the feeling of slipping underwater, with their swirling, rising and dropping tones. Similarly, the soaring soprano voice recalls spiritual devotion and ritual, the performance of the lion's roar in the percussion sounds like a boat keeling. The materiality of the sound elicits an affective embodied experience in the audience, and the lack of any tonal centre in this music creates instability and unease as part of that experience. The connection of all these elements invites the audience to contemplate and confront imaginary situations which they will link to the theme of the work. Further, the materiality of water (a gong is pulled in and out of water), shells and the imagery of the films connect the audience with instability, and airless space.

Negotiating social justice in art requires that we consider our privilege and the opportunity we have to make art, when some people are just trying to find food and stay alive. For that reason, I hope my art encourages all people to respond, because sometimes a response is all that's required. If you could make an artwork that gets people to think differently about something that is incredibly complex, then that is a good result.

*KM:* This important question of what role art plays in society is something I think about every day, particularly when things have become so divisive and binary. Art is one of the few spaces in society that enables a space for contemplation, emotion, feeling, and nuance. I think that this is precisely the space where the world's terrible problems can begin to be solved. It's one of the things that sustains me.

At other times I think if I was a medical doctor, I would be able to make more of a difference in the world, helping people in war zones for example. However, I also think that what we're trying to maintain and keep alive is something so desperately needed; a space where people can sit back and not just have a transformative thought, but have a transformative *feeling*. That is always what I'm trying to create in my work. Combining Cat's sound with my images and objects is such an integral part of that ability to communicate a feeling that sticks with people—that they walk away, and they don't necessarily intellectualise it, but they keep thinking about it afterwards. That's the goal, to make something that people remember because it connects them with an empathic, open and generous feeling about something complex. It is also crucial to the people involved in making the work, and those whose experiences and knowledges have contributed to it. The WRNS, the refugee women in our workshops, and even the stories of

refugees as told via journalists. The work becomes an artefact of their affective, embodied knowledges, as well as the artists'. In the context of experiential translation, it is therefore about trying to make our own affective and embodied experiences, mediated through the artwork, accessible to the audiences.

*LD:* What you're pointing to there, is that to create effective change on a large scale there need to be many approaches made by many people. There are some people whose role in creating change is focussed on physically going in and intervening in a situation, and others whose role is to effect change in an intangible way, focussing on igniting thought, fostering understanding, or patterns of behaviour. With a topic as significant as the ongoing refugee crisis, is the role of art in contributing to discussion about providing another means for people to be able to engage with, or to aid in people becoming more aware of an issue in a way that is different from how it is presented in the mainstream media? Whereas using more abstract, intangible methods for communicating perspectives on key issues via art and music allows a different access point, a different way to consider and engage.

*CH:* The doctor example is useful as that represents on-site, immediate relief. That's quite different from creating a space for those not directly affected to think about what we are doing. I always worry that audiences and participants will not see our efforts as useful or productive, and misinterpret our intentions. This is of course the risk of all creative work, but it is a central consideration when putting something into the public realm.

*KM:* Creating work collaboratively feels like an additional responsibility in this respect. The work addresses issues facing every country in the world, but one that has very local impacts as were revealed in the workshops. The films feature the lives and experiences of people from across the globe, the soprano Marcia Lydia-Clarke has German, British and Caribbean heritage and Sivan Rubinstein the Choreographer has Jewish and Spanish ancestry. The voices of all these contributors are there in the work in some way.

*CH:* Quite literally, the vocal part in the composition features a line of text that is stretched out over the twenty minutes of the work. It is "I have nothing from home"—something that was said in the workshop in response to a request that the participants bring something in from their original home. This is the only 'literal' material used from the workshops in the score, and it is sung one syllable at a time, with some sounds repeated numerous times, or made much longer than they would be if spoken, interspersed with other vocal noises—it is unrecognisable as a statement, but it is there.

*KM:* The voice was incredibly powerful—lonely yet beautiful. Audiences really responded to this aspect of the live performance. However, it's

not always the final presentation of the work that is potentially transformative, it's also been in the creation of the work. The feedback from the women participating in the workshops, some of whom spoke no English, and have only been in the UK for a few months, was extraordinary. I think they felt safe.

*CH:* I agree, and creating safety enables much more powerful work because you can present/discuss/pull out things that can be sensitive to talk about elsewhere. This is also true in the creative process of making the work. There are points of view that you need to test to be sure of. Between the two of us we can discuss the flaws of an idea without it feeling like a personal attack and that's really important. Days before the premiere of *Never at Sea*, a boat carrying over 500 refugees capsized off the Greek coast (Gatapoulos and Paphitis, 2023).

*KM:* This was particularly challenging. When we're dealing with such current, difficult issues we need to ensure the whole project is handled with care and thoughtfulness. It's not always possible to see all the flaws, or all the possible things that we should be thinking about. We can say them out loud to one another. We can workshop them through and come to understand what we might not be seeing or thinking about, or how we need to engage people, audiences and makers. But we can never know about how that is received until it is out there in the world.

Can we change anything? That is the unanswerable question. I am an artist, art is the tool I have. We do create an emotional, vibrant space for the imagination, for hope. For the possibility of change and the resilience of the human spirit. It feels like a marker of humanity when so much else in the late-capitalist society around us is forcing us to abandon compassion. Working collaboratively, with Cat and others, feels like we are also creating a hopeful community.

## Note

- 1 Due to concerns around privacy, including current visa negotiations, the names of the workshop participants remain anonymised.

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