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Necessary misapplications: the work of translation in performance in an era of global asymmetries

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The moment the concept of translation is employed with reference to theatre or music and performance, i.e., to a form that includes but exceeds language, the concept becomes detached from its conventional sense and is made to travel, it acquires other dimensions, becoming what Gayatri Spivak terms ‘catachrestic’, a necessary misapplication. To consider translation across cultures or performance forms or idioms, i.e., across global and historical asymmetries, is to call into question the obstinate idea that translation can ever be about finding equivalences and equilibrium between languages or cultures. Rather, the work of translation is about drawing different world-making projects into one another in the textures of performance, transforming both the features of the performance as well as the required means of its appreciation. By way of a response to the performance *Legacy* (2015) by Ivorian choreographer and performer Nadia Beugré, the article reflects on the work of translation in an era of global incommensurability.

Keywords: translation; translator’s notes; asymmetry; representation; Nadia Beugré

The translator’s note

Translator’s notes constitute an understudied genre, often a curious mix of a descriptive appendix to the translated text, combined with self-reflexive observations on the philosophical challenges of translation. Some of the most challenging texts in translation theory take the form of the translator’s preface or afterword. They elaborate on the difficulties and problems of translating a specific text, on the choices made and principles followed by the translator in thinking through these problems, and they take the reader through what is at stake in the process of translation, highlighting issues that possibly only emerged in translation. Consider Martin Luther’s ‘open letter on translation’ (1530) written eight years after his famous German translation of the Hebrew and Greek Bible, wherein he calls upon his critics and fellow translators to recognize that to know what the right German words are,

we mustn’t consult the Latin text about how to speak German, as these donkeys do, but we must consult the mother at home, children in the street, and the ordinary man in the market-place, watch them mouth their words, and translate accordingly. That way they’ll understand, and see that they’re being spoken to in German. (Luther 2017, p. 17)

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In his open letter on translation, Luther not only explains his method of working and the collaborative nature of his translational undertaking, but also vocally advocates his position on translation as a form of active interpretation in the service of and in proximity to the idiom of a popular readership.

Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator' (1921), written as an introduction to his translation of Charles Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*, grapples with classic questions of translation studies. It speaks of the place of loyalty and kinship in the work of translation, of the tangential nature of the relationship between the original and the translation, of the afterlife of the text as encapsulated in its 'translatability'. Although Benjamin's enigmatic reflections on the task of the translator tend towards the metaphysical, they equally acquire a political, existential dimension. The foreignness of language is both a practical challenge facing anyone who works across languages, as well as the challenge of human coexistence at large.

Gayatri Spivak's extensive introduction to her translation of Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1976) is another instance of the peculiarity of the genre of the translator's text. Spivak's translator's preface arguably served as the manifesto to launch the project of deconstruction in the English-speaking academic world. It begins with a meditation on the preface itself, as offering 'both homage and parricide' (Spivak 2016, p. xxix). It adopts Derrida's gesture of reading and argues for the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of translation as reading, and reflects on the status of originals and origins in the task of translation. Even as it elaborates on the translator's reading of Derrida, leaving its own signature on the text, thus elaborating on and echoing Derrida, as it were, it is equally a theorization of the practice of translation.

If the translator's note consistently foregrounds both the pragmatic as well as the philosophical, the technical as well as the ethical dimensions of translation, it is interesting to ask how this task is undertaken in performance? Where might one find or trace the translator's notes in performance? The moment the concept of translation is employed with reference to theatre or music and performance, i.e., to a form that includes but exceeds language, the concept becomes detached from its conventional sense and is made to travel, it acquires other dimensions, becomes what Spivak terms 'catachrestic', a necessary misapplication (2012, p. 242). When we say that text, story, or tune translate into body practices, images, gestures, movements, scenes, we use 'translation' in the etymological sense of a 'carrying over', from one medium or site to another. We might speak of a particular translational attitude or approach, a way of shaping encounters and exchanges on stage by purposefully applying sensorial materials in ways that might be detached from their common, day-to-day usage. An everyday object such as a bucket or a chair becomes charged with possibilities of endless re-interpretation on stage, depending on how it is played with, how it is placed in the specific spatio-temporality of one performance moment. When we view a bucket on stage, we observe it with fresh attention to its material, sensorial qualities and to the ways it is used and positioned, or detached, bracketed as it were, from its 'original' functions in everyday life. We encounter the bucket with a heightened degree of awareness that what happens on stage with it is a process of translation.

What exactly is being translated? Performance grapples with issues related to translation on vastly different registers, of which linguistic translation is just one aspect. The work of translation ranges from the question of adaptation 'from page to stage', to the question of representation, casting, scenography, to the challenges of working across genres and media, cultures and times. The reflections on processes of translation are

often so closely bound to the practices of translation that it is not easy to relegate them in the manner of the translator's note to the end or beginning of a work. Indeed, it can be argued that the practice of translation and the reflection on processes of translation are often stitched into the protocols of performance. The translator's note is thus not an appendix or preface to the performance, but woven into the textures of performance practice. This implies that translation is part of the concerns of dramaturgy, for instance in the way choices are made around stage design or the composition of *mise-en-scène*. Common figurations such as the use of a narrator or commentator, who dwells at the border between stage and audience, are ways of giving a role to the translator, as it were. Theatrical devices such as the use of meta-commentary, compositional transparency and distance, can be considered as practices of translating integrated into the aesthetic of performance.

The work of translation in an era of global incommensurability

Obviously, such broad understandings of translation bear the danger of stubbornly remaining lofty metaphors and empty abstractions, attractive because of drawing so many different dimensions together, and messy and elusive for the very same reasons. To understand translation in performance as catachresis implies several things. It is to acknowledge that unlike linguistic translation, which oftentimes theoretically presumes the symmetrical comparability of languages, translation from text to stage, or from one genre, cultural practice or historical moment to another departs from an incommensurable relation between what is the 'source' and what is the 'target' language of translation, i.e., where they cannot be measured in the same way. That is somewhat different from the banal claim of untranslatability. Translation rather implies a shuttling back and forth between asymmetrically different terrains. Rather than being a process of achieving equilibrium, in the sense that translation tends to be conceptualized in machinic translation systems, where a word is translated back and forth between languages until it is no longer modified, the laborious, incessant shuttling work of translation in performance requires attending to how 'source' and 'target' differently impact upon each other and can become co-present without being equal.

The title of this double special issue, namely 'translation and performance in an era of global asymmetry', resonates with the title of another Walter Benjamin essay, originally published in 1936, 'The Work of Art in an Era of Mechanical Reproducibility' (1969). In Benjamin's essay, the status of the 'original' artwork in relation to its copy is called into question through media such as photography or film, simultaneously transforming both the technical qualities of the artwork as well as the means of its aesthetic appreciation. To consider translation in an era of global asymmetries is to call into question the obstinate idea that translation can ever be about finding equivalences and equilibrium between languages or cultures, to pay attention to how the work of translation in performance draws different world-making projects into one another, transforming both the features of the performance as well as the required means of its appreciation. Just as Benjamin's 'work of art' is potentially both noun and verb, both practice as well as the outcome of practice, so too 'the work of translation' can be usefully approached as the process of translating as well as the result of the process in performance. Benjamin uses the critical suffix '-ability' in relation to reproduction. Although often translated as mechanical reproduction, Benjamin's term in

the title of the essay is ‘Reproduzierbarkeit’, i.e., reproduce-ability, a grammatical preference which, as Samuel Weber (2008) cleverly suggests, carries the connotation of both ‘afterlife’ as well as ‘potential’. Similarly, in his essay ‘The Task of the Translator’, Benjamin refers to ‘Übersetzbarkeit’, i.e., the translatability of a text, where the work of translation is kept open-ended, it is less about how it can be translated once and for all, but how it can continue to be translated in the future. Translatability is the potential of a text to travel to other places and contexts, but also its afterlife, what will have happened to the text beyond the original.

If translation in performance is bound to asymmetry and incommensurability, then questions of an ethical-epistemological order become prominent. This is another implication of thinking translation in a catachrestic manner. How to give account, how to bear responsibility towards that which is translated, how to do justice to the original? Such questions situate the pragmatic dimension of translational practice in tandem with broader socio-political concerns. Just as any theory of language is implicitly also a theory of subject formation (consider for instance the close ties between speech act theory and embodied conceptions of the performative), one might argue that any theory of translation is implicitly also a theory of inter-subjectivity. Reflecting on translation is a way of reflecting on modes of encounter across differences, on self-reflection and self-transformation as resulting from the attempt to ‘cross over’ to a standpoint or time entirely different from one’s own. This makes translation into a critical concept in theatre and performance, where, perhaps more than in any other art form, there is a systemic concern with how humans relate to each other and to non-human others.

The insertion of ‘global’ in the title of this contribution and the special issue needs some qualification and comment. Globalization is often commonly thought of as a state of the world having overcome the need for translation, where borders are made redundant and communication made possible through a common lingua franca that creates an equalized playing ground for all. However, scholars have repeatedly argued that globalization is full of unevenness, contradictions and conflicts, making translation across cultures and social realities a fundamental necessity, though fraught with difficulties and conditions of non-equivalence (Ribeiro 2004). In that sense, the task of the translator in an era of globalization, read as global incommensurability, is one of doing justice to those at the most vulnerable and marginalized end, who tend to be rendered invisible, exploited and discriminated. But who is the translator that is invoked here? In the making of performance it is not one voice or person, but a collaborative effort and the signature and traces of many. It is of less significance to identify who the translator is, but rather a matter of paying attention to the moments and ways in which performers and theatre makers step out of their other roles to make a note on the process of translation. The present contribution is a theoretical consideration of some of the conundrums of translation in performance, where the translator shuttles across uneven, asymmetrical terrains, attempting to access those idioms and specific cultural practices that are barely present in the canon. It looks for ways in which the ‘translator’s notes’ are woven into the texture of performance. I use one specific performance (*Legacy* by Nadia Beugré) as a way to draw out my larger arguments, in the hope that the reader might be able to generalize the observations to other examples and contexts. The emphasis of my discussion remains on the question of translation in performance under conditions of non-equivalence, and how this plays out on stage.

Travelling translations

Nadia Beugré is a performer and choreographer from the Ivory Coast, currently based in France. She began her artistic career in 1995 with Dante Theater, a traditional dance theatre company in Ivory Coast. She later started an all-women's dance company *Tché Tché* together with the late Béatrice Kombé. The name *Tché Tché*, explains Beugré, means 'eagle' in the Beté language, a symbol of strength, elegance and glory, which resonated with the group's desire to spread their wings and pursue freedom through their quest for a new dance vocabulary. Beugré's work can be characterized as dwelling at the border between contemporary dance and physical theatre, between performance installation and participatory art, although from an African dance perspective, such distinctions are not made in the first place. Following Kombé's death in 2007, Beugré studied choreography at the *L'Ecole des Sables* founded by Germaine Acogny in Senegal, and followed a talent programme for choreographers with Mathilde Monnier at the *Centre Chorégraphique National* in Montpellier. Her work has toured widely across Europe, North America and the African continent. She also performed in choreographic works by Seydou Boro (Burkina Faso), Alain Buffard (France), Dorothee Munyaneza (France/Rwanda) and Boris Charmatz (France).

The performance *Legacy* premiered in 2015 at the La Bâtie festival in Geneva. It picks on a theme that is central to Beugré's oeuvre, namely the representation of the black woman and the recuperation of black women's histories in performance. Never does the black woman appear as victim or oppressed in her performances, but always as a figure of resistance, a source of life energy, transformational, intellectual and spiritual power. Themes from the history of the Ivory Coast and other parts of Western Africa also feature prominently in her work. Against the dominant representation of African American figures and their histories in the performance circuits of international venues and theatre or performance festivals, Beugré is committed to greater visibility and presence of artistic forms, narratives and idioms from the Ivory Coast specifically and Western Africa more broadly. Travelling internationally with her work necessitates a process of translation on several counts. For it is not as if the work was created originally for a homogenous Ivoirian audience, but rather that it emerged in the first instance with a specific kind of international viewership in mind, namely the visitors of performance festivals in Europe and North America. Beugré's artist profile reveals her knowledge and intimate familiarity with the domains of contemporary and modern dance as well as with the so-called 'traditional' dances of Ivory Coast, in a manner that confronts both the Eurocentrism of contemporary dance as well as the labelling of African dance as 'traditional'. Her own performance style has been described as 'a sensuous contemporary combination of African folk dance, urban and hiphop' (Kunstencentrum Vooruit 0000). Formulations such as these, often used in promotional texts and announcements or reviews, do not register what it requires to be able to translate across these different dance forms, in a way that is not tokenistic or additive. *Legacy* does not attempt to make specific West African performance idioms easy to digest for a Western audience. In a long scene, wherein Beugré communicates with a traditional healer and goes into a trance, there is no attempt to anthropologize and explain the background of the ritual performance to audiences. Rather it is inserted without commentary or caption, the words of the healer are not literally translated. Instead the viewer is

invited to sit with the discomfort of not immediately or fully understanding and thus recognizing oneself as an outsider to the ritual. Translation thus begins with bringing the viewer as close as possible to the original, instead of bringing the ritual performance more palatable to the viewers' standpoint, thereby reducing it to a cliché or to the least common denominator. This is commendable, but nonetheless a risky step. For the ritual is not performed as a verifiable or authentic 'original'. It is highly stylized in the unique dance and movement style of Beugré, it would arguably need as much translation to be presented to an Ivorian audience altogether familiar with the narrative, as it does to a European audience. The point is thus not to showcase or conserve a particular ritual form by supposedly leaving it untouched, or cotton-wrapping it with didactic commentary or deference, but to shuttle across these idioms and conventions that do not adequately encompass each other, in order to make them co-present, without resolving them into a naïvely assumed space of cross-cultural communication. Beugré's work as translator is evident in the way the asymmetry between 'traditional' performance forms and contemporary dance is dwelt in without being homogenized. It recognizes that dialogue and exchange on an equal plane between cultures cannot be willed into existence if the point of departure is one of profound asymmetry.

Translating histories

The performance *Legacy* deals with a moment in the decolonization struggles in the former colonies of French West Africa. It indirectly references a solidarity march that took place in December 1949, wherein hundreds of women – according to historian Henriette Diabete (1975) it was a multi-ethnic coalition of more than 2000 women – marched peacefully, walking 49 km to Grand-Bassam in the South of Ivory Coast, an important site of the colonial administration, including a prison. Throughout the 1940s, the French colonial rulers introduced a series of taxes as a way to enhance their income from the colonies. These included taxes on poor farmers and women selling their products in local markets. A group of anti-colonial protestors and members of the Democratic Party, who refused to pay these taxes and called for a boycott, were arrested in the Grand-Bassam prison where they began a hunger strike (Diabete 1975). The entirely unexpected march of scores of women from Abidjan to Grand-Bassam became a turning point in the decolonization movement in the Ivory Coast, leading France to acknowledge that the independence of its colonies in West Africa was imminent. Historical texts related to the Ivory Coast briefly mention the incident, citing how women sang and danced on the way to the prison, with several arrests and injuries. In her performance *Legacy*, Nadia Beugré pays homage to the women who fought for the independence of the country. Rather than telling the story of the event, which is, in fact only directly mentioned in the production notes and brochure, and indirectly suggested in the title 'Legacy', the performance uses the abstract and affective language of movement and music to commemorate an important though little-known event in black women's histories. Instead of retelling, and restaging the event, it turns the work of homage into a self-reflexive question. What does it mean to join a collective struggle for justice? What kind of stamina is required to be able to sing and dance one's way for nearly 50 kms? Instead of heroes and leaders, the performance presents a group of women who exhaust themselves running non-stop, and reveal themselves in all their strength and fragility. They move in unison and are yet recognizable as very different individuals and

bodies. The performance translates, i.e., carries over, the question of political mobilization onto the aesthetic register. It translates the question of how people were mobilized into collective action into a choreographic question, such as: what does it take for bodies to form a swarm, what does it take to bring energies together in a movement that is collective without being scripted or fixed? The performance achieves this for instance in the energetic opening scene, involving a group of performers running on the spot for nearly 15 min, responding to and following each other's calls and movements.

Beugré works with the professional dancer Hanna Hedman and the musician Manou Gallo in the performance, but *Legacy* also features a group of 12–15 women, locally cast from each city where the production is shown, who workshop together for a week with Beugré to develop a choreographic dimension which complements the core performers, introducing a local translation of the work. These performers are present throughout the performance. They move as one body, running on stage on the spot till they reach a point of physical exhaustion, gradually baring their breasts and throwing aside their upper body clothes. At a superficial level their presence might be read as standing in for the Ivorian women who danced and marched together to the Grand Bassam prison in 1949. Beugré however integrates the local performers in Brussels or Amsterdam, without arrogating to them the position of representing those, whom they know very little about. At different moments, they are invited to translate the historical event to their own circumstances, to seek out their own individual connections, both to the specific historical event, as well as to the larger question of recuperating black women's histories. This too is risky, in that it allows for a performer to relate the Ivorian event to the Surinamese or Caribbean context, acknowledging commonalities across very disparate historical circumstances, but it equally carries the danger of a loss of historical specificity. This translational approach can be extended to the debates around transculturalism in migrant or diasporic contexts, whereby the emphasis tends to be on making a certain cultural context legible to the diasporic or migrant location, and thus focusing on overcoming difference rather than staying with them. In my reading of the performance, however, Beugré is less concerned with achieving cross-cultural communication, at least not in the facile sense of being understood, but rather more with troubling the easy boundary lines that tend to be drawn between the contemporary and the traditional, or between historical events and the way societies view themselves in the present.

On a scenographic level, the performance employs the visually arresting image of hundreds of bras tied together, first in a huge pile, then opening out into a vast net, spread across and hung over the stage, casting its web-like shadows, and later enveloping the performer as a ritual shroud. The common association with the Western feminist credo of 'bra burning' of the 1960s is expanded, with the bras becoming symbols of the absent, unnamed women. Several other feminist references are interwoven into the performance, such as the myth of the Amazons, and the story of the eighteenth century Ghanaian queen Pokou, who sacrificed her son for the welfare of her people (Tadjo 2009). The translation of historical events into performance in *Legacy* might best be described as being undertaken with the ethos of paying homage, evoking the spirits of the past in order to imagine them as co-present and intertwined with (black) women's struggles today.

Do translations do justice?

What I appreciate most about *Legacy* in relation to the question of translation is that it does not assume that giving voice to marginal positions and subjects will in any way guarantee their emancipation or visibility. It is circumspect about equating the diasporic or migrant position of African artists living and working in Europe, with that of African women at large. To that extent it repeatedly foregrounds how the postcolonial migrant artist is not in the same position as the disenfranchised or marginalized that she seeks to recuperate for European audiences. This is evident in dramaturgical choices such as that of the performers being bare-chested for a large part of the performance, thus defying customs of decorum, or in the use of a recognizably unconventional movement idiom, that eclectically combines elements from different dance and movement forms, which bear the traces of an artistic training across continents. While she may serve as a translator of the multiple, misrecognized or understudied histories of black women in the Ivory Coast, subaltern speech is never equated with Beugré's own translation of it. There is thus an acute awareness, similar to the way that Spivak argues in her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988), that subaltern speech tends to only become perceptible when articulated, i.e., translated, through hegemonic voices and modes of representation. The migrant artist-intellectual thus bears responsibility as translator working in different directions: on the one hand, translating from the specific dance and storytelling and ritual performances of Ivory Coast to the formats of contemporary and modern dance and performance legible to international festival circuits; and on the other hand, translating the experiences of the migrant African female artist in Europe as a representative of an African context. In 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Spivak calls for integrity in the way intellectuals relate to the subjects they are politically or intellectually committed to. She cautions against the assumption that the norms of recognition that allow speech to be heard or read as intelligible operate in the same way for all. The postcolonial European assuming to be a placeholder for the marginalized of the world, may end up as a provider of authenticity, as a native informant (Spivak 1999, p. 6). Beugré's work is alert to these challenges. In *Legacy*, Beugré resists the seductive pressure to *pass as* subaltern or marginalized, even when she is simultaneously obliged to be a representative on behalf of the marginalized as a migrant African artist in Europe. It does not presume that alternative indigenous artistic practices will emerge magically by themselves and be intelligible to everyone. Thus, processes of translation across global asymmetries in the work are made to stand out, become visible, transparent and open to reflection. Such a translation, Spivak suggests, is both necessary and impossible, in other words, catachrestic (2012, p. 438).

To conclude and summarize: By seeking out the place of the translator's notes in performance, I have tried to address the challenge of theorizing translation, in its pragmatic and philosophical dimensions, as a practice of carrying over from one place to another in a context of non-equivalence or asymmetry. I do not wish to claim that translation is in itself a benign concept, for it is not. It can bring about specific configurations of visibility which go hand in hand with specific modalities of erasure. Translating into performance involves working with a source and target medium that can be compared but not appraised in the same way. I thus propose understanding translation in performance as a process of shuttling back and forth between asymmetrically different worlds, drawing them into each other.

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