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Translation as movement

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Revue Hybrid

Translation as movement

Canan Marasligil

- 1 The day I travelled from Amsterdam to Cairo, back in May 2019, I published these words on my Facebook and Instagram feeds, together with a photograph I took on my first night walking around my hotel:

i am happiest in airports and in train stations,
in those spaces where you wave goodbye from,
where:
you kiss your lover before you forget their faces forever,
you hug thin air (after all, don't you just reap what you sow).
i am happiest when i land on a place
i don't know
and where no one knows me.
where i may not have deciphered the language(s)
yet
my whole senses come alive in trying
– failing, succeeding and failing but still trying –
to capture an utterance of it.
all those sensations:
i live for.
(i find myself in movement.)

Fig. 1

Photo: Canan Marasligil.

- 2 Movement has always been part of me: my family's history of migration from Turkey to Europe spans over six decades.
- 3 In 1960, my father settled with his family in Germany, where he stayed until 1978. He went back to Turkey where he met my mother. In 1980, my parents moved from Istanbul to Brussels, with me. My father tells me he didn't want to raise me in Germany, where Italians were called *Spaghettifresser* and Turks were coined *Kümmeltürke*. He didn't want to be in a place where he could understand *that* language. I was one year old when we migrated to Belgium.
- 4 That same year my paternal grandparents and their children settled in Germany, my maternal great-grandmother, Omi, did the same move with her son, my great uncle. With no husband. He had told her to leave the country because of the military coup. The first time I met her was in our Brussels home. I was 13 years old. Omi came with her two grandsons she had been taking care of since they were little in Hamburg. Our common language was a broken German mixed with some Turkish words.
- 5 Broken and joyful, we were.
- 6 I was told we also have roots in Crimea and the Balkans. And if I would do a DNA test, probably more geographies would show.
- 7 It is no wonder that I find myself in movement.

Fig. 2

Photo : Canan Marasligil.

- 8 I took the photo above in the Eurostar train from Brussels to London in 2017. The moment I spotted the Turkish flag atop the building, I wished to capture it for my archives which had started to develop into a hashtag: #YearningforTurkish. This image later became part of an exhibition¹ I was commissioned to present, with the following accompanying text:

There is a language I was born into
 a language my mother, my father spoke to me in,
 they still do
 a language I use every day uniting with my many others
 moving, I see it everywhere I go
 a language I translate from.
 When I walk in cities,
 I see
 I feel
 I imagine
 this language.
 It is the language of my heart
 that I yearn for, constantly.

- 9 This “Yearning for Turkish” exhibition was one of the organic outcomes of an ongoing process of mine which has turned into an artistic practice that I have called *City in Translation*.
- 10 Strangely, I had to go to Copenhagen before I could ever start documenting and expressing this yearning for the language I was born into. I flew to Copenhagen from Amsterdam on Friday 17 April 2015, to start a writer’s residency² at the University. I took all my languages, experiences and sensitivities to Copenhagen and there, I

observed, learned, researched and gained even more experiences. That's where *City in Translation* developed into a project.

- 11 The city of Copenhagen became my first laboratory where the methodology for *City in Translation* has been developed and has continued to evolve until today. The basis remains the same everywhere I go: I walk in cities, being a flâneuse if you wish, camera in hand (and that is usually my iPhone), I photograph written languages, signs and symbols which appear in the spaces around me, including walls, rubbish left on the floor, people's clothes, advertising, shop names, objects in a window and more.³
- 12 In *L'Imaginaire des langues*, a series of interviews between Lise Gauvin and writer Édouard Glissant, Glissant tells how today, a writer who doesn't know any other language does take into account when writing, even unconsciously, the existence of other languages around her. One can no longer write a language in a monolingual manner, he says, "we have to take into account the imaginary worlds of languages"⁴ (my translation).
- 13 *City in Translation* has started as a personal activity before turning into an artistic practice bringing collaborations with institutions such as universities and publishing houses, motivated by my ongoing conviction – just like Glissant – that multilingualism is so much part of our contexts that it feeds us in many ways, sometimes without us even noticing its impact. My personal urge to look at cities through the lens of translation has been key in the development of *City in Translation* as a project, including my own biography as a translator (or: why I translate) which brought me to the various activities based on the traces people leave in urban spaces.
- 14 In *European Others. Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*, Fatima El-Tayeb writes:

The national often is the means by which exclusion takes place; minorities are positioned beyond the horizon of national politics, culture, and history, frozen in the state of migration through the permanent designation of another, foreign nationality that allows their definition as not Danish, Spanish, Hungarian, etc.
- 15 This state of being constantly "frozen in migration" through discriminatory practices on different levels – personal, institutional, economic, political – has also impacted on how multilingualism is experienced in cities. Being born in a family of Turkish immigrants and growing up in the heart of Europe in bilingual Brussels, I have developed a certain sensitivity as to why some languages have been less valued within those various institutions – be it school or the workplace – than others. My immigrant background has been highly influential in shaping the translator I am today, and also my urge to take translation *off* the page and into the streets.
- 16 Reading El-Tayeb's book has inspired me to start writing poetry, creating yet another movement: from an academic text to a poetic one. A necessary dialogue, very close to the act of translation itself.

frozen in migration

for Fatima El-Tayeb

i am unspectacular
 yet never commonplace
 in your imagination
 a curious contradiction
 i am not transient
 for your convenience
 in your education
 not even a mention

i am suspended in time
 with no accent
 except in your perception
 always under dominion
 at no time curious
 consistently suspicious
 you stow me in a place
 of your own comfort
 you not noticing
 i have been here
 for six decades
 does not make me invisible
 i will generate my own journey
 above your vocabulary
 remain in existence
 not just an appendix
 to your imagined curriculum
 i will create
 new idioms
 new expressions
 i was frozen
 in migration
 i will now melt
 into your conscience
 and stay

- 17 My reality is rooted in motion: between places, languages, emotions. It is constant and unpredictable. Throughout the years and through practising various methodologies around *City in Translation*, I have been able to affirm the following: 'I find myself in movement.'
- 18 In French, the word 'ou' changes its definition with only one accent:
 in its absence, 'ou' means 'or,'
 in its presence 'où' means 'where.'
- 19 I see this as a movement too: getting rid of the accent to transform place – "where," into a choice – "or." And it is one I have been embracing throughout this artistic practice: because movement is also creativity. Translation as well, is movement: physical and intellectual, between spaces and languages, across geographies, cultural and political contexts. It is also a movement between emotions: people moving each other. I have the privilege to have acquired a European Union member citizenship next to my Turkish one in my early twenties. Since then, my freedom for movement has been expanded greatly. Not everyone has that same freedom and one of my urges to translate the city comes from that acknowledgement and the need to use my own privilege to create spaces where creativity through translation can occur.
- 20 I wasn't always aware of my yearning for movement until I was constantly reminded that: in Brussels, I was never really 'home.' That my language was alien in this city where I grew up since my earliest memory. What they insisted on calling my 'mother tongue' came to me through body and gestures. I have been looking for *my* language in so many ways, because I was enjoined to reject *her*. That language I was born into has been made invisible for decades in these new lands where me and my family were just 'guests.' Now, through my artistic practice, I am trying to reclaim *her*, alongside many other languages I also do not know. I had no choice to learn and speak my hosts' languages, with time, I made them mine as well. In a sense, Turkish has become the

mother of all my tongues, and transformed me into the translator and writer I am today.

- 21 This constant movement has allowed me to turn my roots upwards, creating the possibility of being from nowhere so that I could belong everywhere. Navigating urban spaces looking for languages is one major way for me to achieve that. It has empowered me as a writer, an artist and as an individual, I have therefore developed ways to share this practice widely, with others, so that it can be a tool for empowerment, representation and reclaiming spaces, for more people. Being invited to various residencies by universities, local institutions, festivals or publishers, I have been able to experiment with the methodology of *City in Translation* in places such as Hénin-Beaumont in the former mining area in Northern France or Lancaster in England. The more places I get to work in, the more flexible the methodology becomes, including many ways to look at languages. For instance, while I started only documenting and working with languages that are not the “official” language of a city I am exploring, I have now moved to a more open definition, including the local languages since these can also be part of the translation process when it comes to the message and the context. Every place has its own political and cultural context which will impact how languages exist in a space. Sometimes, not all languages are immediately visible, and it is through engaging with local communities that I learn about the existing multilingualism of a place.
- 22 I strongly believe in the empowering role of translation, and the possibility for languages to make us imagine beyond imposed identities. I wrote the following poem a few years ago, also empowered by my reading of El-Tayeb’s book:

multi

i speak more languages than you do
 i feel in more idioms than you can
 i get angry in more curse words
 i perceive the world in more headlines
 my imagination
 knows
 no limits
 since i learned it was possible
 to dream in different languages
 to love in multiple poems
 to find freedom in multiplicity
 i do not wish to justify
 my existence
 to you
 anymore
 my presence on this soil
 is multiple
 and legitimate
 that impostor syndrome
 left the day i embraced
 my multiple self

Fig. 3

Photo: Canan Marasligil.

- 23 I would like to end this article by taking you back to Cairo, and most especially to a night when I spent hours with an incredible group of women for Iftar during Ramadan. While a few conversations happened in English, most of the evening was spent in Arabic. Apart from the Arabic words used in the Turkish and French languages, it is not a language I speak, read or understand. Yet: I have loved every minute of those exchanges. I have captured everyone's energy in a myriad of ways and it made me think about the challenges and opportunities of multilingualism, and how to move beyond the idea that communication becomes impossible when different languages are not understood by all (and therefore the very "exclusive/excluding" idea that to belong somewhere you have to know the language of that said place – to make matters worse: assuming that space has only one language, and assuming that language is only "spoken").
- 24 Surrounded by the sounds, gestures and scripts of a language you do not know, you make a choice:
- you can get frustrated and lament at the fact that you do not understand and allow your energy to turn so negative that you cannot engage with your surrounding anymore (or worse: shout at that person angrily that they should leave the space you are so certain is yours because of internalized nationalism and racism),
- or
- you embrace the unknown, you listen, you observe, you allow yourself to feel out of your comfort zone, you accept that you will miss certain things and that: is okay. You will be okay. You try to capture something that will speak to you, here and there: a gesture, a sound, anything that will trigger certain sensations in you. Then you can add yourself into the story, maybe that word you heard resembles one you know deep down in your history?

- 25 That street name for instance on the photograph above, sounds like my last name. I am free to make that association, to put myself into the story of that Cairene neighborhood in that way. Is this disillusion? No: it is creating narratives together, in openness and in solidarity. It is called: choosing love and acceptance, instead of hate and exclusion. It requires effort and imagination. It is exactly what my translation practice is about: in my daily life and throughout my work.
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NOTES

1. [Online] <http://www.cityintranslation.com/yearning-for-turkish> [accessed 6 April 2021].
 2. The residency was offered by the University of Copenhagen as part of their participation in the pan-European consortium Culture@Work. It was the first time that I took the time – one full month – and received funding to explore one city in translation.
 3. I have been documenting and archiving this process through Instagram @cityintranslation and the *City in Translation* website [online] <http://www.cityintranslation.com> [accessed 13 April 2021].
 4. « Aujourd'hui, même quand un écrivain ne connaît aucune autre langue, il tient compte, qu'il le sache ou non, de l'existence de ces langues autour de lui dans son processus d'écriture. On ne peut plus écrire une langue de manière monolingue. On est obligé de tenir compte des imaginaires des langues. » (Édouard Glissant, *L'Imaginaire des langues [Entretiens avec Lise Gauvin 1991-2009]*, Paris, Gallimard, 2010.)
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ABSTRACTS

Multilingual translator, author, artist in movement, Canan Marasligil tells her personal (hi)story which has taken her across languages, countries, cultures, cities, media, and genres, and explains how this movement feeds into a political stand which she continues to represent, and which translation also embodies for her.

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Keywords: movement, migration, translation, multilingualism, poetry, cities

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CANAN MARASLIGIL

Canan Marasligil is a freelance writer, a multimedia artist, a literary translator, editor, podcaster and curator based in Amsterdam. Her interest is in challenging official narratives and advocating freedom of expression through a wide range of creative projects and activities, from literature to film and comics. She is the creator of City in Translation, a project exploring languages and translation in urban spaces, and a co-host of the *Not Loud Enough* podcast, with migrationlab founder Laura M. Pana. Canan has worked with cultural organisations across wider Europe and has participated in residencies at the Free Word Centre in London (2013), at WAAW in Senegal (2015), at Copenhagen University (2015), at La Contre Allée in Lille (2017), at Lancaster University (2018) and Mine de Culture(s) in France (2019-2020). Find her online: www.cananmarasligil.net. Twitter: @ayserin. Instagram: @cananmarasligil.