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Contemporary Experimental Translations and Translingual Poetics

Sophie Seita

To write in a language that is not considered your own because you weren't officially born with it or within the borders that define its purview, its realm of belonging, is always to confront that question of belonging, of one's own tongue (the metaphors we use to describe nation states could give us pause, too). In other words, to use or not to use one's mother tongue is to signal or betray origin – or not. Words can also feel foreign when you write in a language that is supposedly 'your own', in which case, as the German poet and translator Uljana Wolf puts it in an essay on the Korean American artist and writer Theresa Hak Kyung Cha: 'The reading ist not master in its owl house.'¹ Through a displaced consonant, the owner becomes a wise owl in this ole house of the poem. How do we translate these old and new *hows* and *whys*, but also the *whos* of language? Masterfully, but without being mistress over them? In this chapter, I want to attend to the nuances and difficulties in reading and translating contemporary multilingual and translingual poetry. My main example is the poet I have translated: Uljana Wolf, who has traversed the language barriers between German, English, Polish and Belarusian in conceptually and linguistically innovative ways in her multilingual and politically engaged poems and translations.² I contextualise Wolf's experimental translational poetics by making reference to such innovative English-language and multilingual poets as Rosmarie Waldrop, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and M. NourbeSe Philip, some of whom have a first language other than English or who grew up bilingually. Wolf is very much in conversation with the work of these writers and with anti-colonial discourses more broadly. Their and my intention is to reconceive translation as a radically inventive and collaborative practice that complicates access to the 'foreign' it is usually supposed to facilitate.

As a critic who has written about transhistorical literary communities but also as a poet and artist, translation – for me – is another practical (or delightfully impractical) way to address the need for an inclusive contemporary experimental literary and artistic community. Translation is generative: it generates conversations and transnational communities. At least, ideally. Antena, ‘a language justice and language experimentation collaborative founded in 2010 by Jen Hofer and John Pleuker’, write in their ‘Manifesto for Ultratranslation’: ‘Who we choose to translate is political. How we choose to translate is political.’³ The subject positions of both *whos* matter: poet and translator. Analogously, John Keene, himself a translator from Portuguese, French and Spanish, argues that we need ‘more translations of work by women, by LGBTQ peoples, by Indigenous writers, by working class and poor writers, by writers with disabilities’ and ‘more translation of literary works by non-Anglophone black diasporic authors into English’.⁴ We need this diversity for a more inclusive present, but also with an eye to how the future might read the past, which is our present.

In a printed conversation in the magazine *ON: Contemporary Practice* in 2008, poet-translators Jen Hofer and Sawako Nakayasu discuss this very awareness of futurity and a revision of the past. For them, translation ‘intervenes in typical forms of canonization’ and runs ‘potentially even counter to it’, but only ‘if we manage to successfully navigate around its imperialist trappings’.⁵ While a critique of such trappings is not already halfway to undoing imperialism (if only), it can certainly change our habits of reading. We become more hospitable readers in spending time with work in different languages and with work in translation, moving away from monolingualism and the cultural monopoly of English. Thinking through Derrida’s writing on the conditions of hospitality, Derek Attridge describes what such ‘hospitable reading’ could mean for scholars, namely, to uphold ‘the unlimited, unpredictable force of unconditional openness to whatever might arrive’ in a literary work.⁶ Translators, he argues rightly, already practise this openness, because translation is a ‘peculiarly intensive mode of reading’.⁷

Before I analyse what it means to read and translate without being the wise mistress with her owl pen, with examples drawn from my own writing-as-reading practice as Uljana Wolf’s translator, I want to mention the recent translation anthology *Currently & Emotion*, edited by Sophie Collins and published by the London-based press Test Centre in 2016, which tries precisely to offer routes into such a new hospitable and translational reading. Translators are routinely

ignored or completely obliterated from acknowledgement in reviews or prizes. The translator's name usually appears in a smaller font, or sometimes doesn't even appear on the cover of a book at all. *Currently & Emotion* tries to rectify this cultural invisibility of the translator in bringing translational practices and voices right to the centre of our contemporary literary and political debates. It does this by foregrounding the creative work of the translator, briefly introduced by Collins herself, sometimes complemented by the source text, and framed by essays by translator-poets Erín Mouré and Zoë Skoulding. The anthology also expands traditional notions of translation and includes different *kinds* of translations (based on Roman Jakobson): firstly, the interlingual (translations from one language into another); secondly, the intralingual (English-to-English translations); and thirdly, the intersemiotic, which are translations that 'operate between different mediums'.⁸ I salute this broadness of definition, because it highlights that translation is just another form of writing, of creativity, rather than the lesser copy to the more brilliant and allegedly authentic original.

That said, there is perhaps a different responsibility to another text and language, which is not quite in place when I translate a picture into a poem. This has a lot to do with how we think about authorship and intellectual property on the one hand, and about language and identity on the other. But it also emerges from the widespread belief in equivalence: that a translated work in English *is* that German work. But whose work are we reading? In reading a translation, Kate Briggs cautions in her excellent book-long manifesto for translation, there is a difficulty but also necessity of 'holding and maintaining a relation with both writers, a sense of both writing practices, in their shared project and in all the important ways those projects differ, in the head, and somehow together'.⁹ I am really reading two works, two authors, when I read a translation. This double presence is especially the case with experimental work. It's this conceptual multiplicity, these constraints, responsibilities and possibilities, that fascinate me in translating the multilingual poetry of Uljana Wolf. And while the translator, as Briggs writes, might disappear from a reader's mind precisely because of her 'investment' in making the sentences seem 'right' and smooth for a reader's experience,¹⁰ in my own experimental translation of Wolf's experimental translingual and translational work, I was very invested in *not* quite letting the reader forget that they are reading a translation. Emily Apter urges writers and readers to endorse 'the importance of non-translation, mistranslation, incomparability and untranslatability' (and I will return to this

aspect again later with regard to M. NourbeSe Philip).¹¹ As a translator, I have the responsibility to translate both the translatable and untranslatable, and to decide which one is which.

Uljana Wolf's poetry cannot be seen outside her work as a translator (of poetry in English, Polish and Belarusian into German). To translate, she writes, means to practise 'transformations and good-byes'.¹² In its farewell to the original, translation, or poetry that is informed by translation, also represents a unique opportunity to question origins on more than a textual level. Developing a migratory poetics that engages with social issues, Wolf's work demonstrates how contemporary hyphenated identities can be expressed in poetry – by navigating the silences in the maps of German-Polish history, as in her first book *kochanie ich habe brot gekauft* (*kochanie i bought bread*), or exploring so-called grammatical and ideological 'false friends' and immigrant narratives in her second book *falsche freunde* (*false friends*), or the multilingual subversions of historically pathologised 'hysterical' women, of asylum seekers and of bilingual children in *meine schönste lengevitch* (*my most beautiful lengevitch*).

Considered within the 'transnational turn' in literary studies, Wolf's work lends itself to a critique of borders, nationality and 'mother tongues', but crucially this critique is performed not only thematically but also poetically, i.e. by way of neologisms, unusual syntax and prefixes, and by splicing a number of languages into the texture and prosody of her 'German' poetry.¹³ Such an approach to multilingualism – as a formal feature with political stakes and a concomitant rejection of an idealised originality – invites a similarly multilingual alertness and rigorous playfulness from a translator like myself. Let's look at an example. One poem from Wolf's latest collection *meine schönste lengevitch* begins, or shall I say, I begin, in English: 'i went to the tingel-tangel to angle lengevitch.'¹⁴ In German, 'angeln' means 'to fish' or 'catch a fish' – I went to catch language – but in English the word arrives at an angle, it is slanted, already corrupting language into a deliberately misheard, bilingual and hybridised lengevitch. The word 'lengevitch' in our book's title is taken from Kurt Stein's humorous poetry pamphlet, published in Chicago in 1925, which presents a Germanised and mispronounced version of the word 'language'. In this set-up of the German-English mash-up of Wolf's poem, the 'tingel-tangel' (a cheap dance hall) also suddenly gets tinged, tingled and tangled into sing-song in English; it rings differently, even though the word remains untranslated from the German.

Uljana Wolf's translingualism shows itself most often in small modifications of a prefix, by swapping vowels and inserting unexpected consonants into words. For example, 'sich äußerlicht zuerst' (which combines 'sich äußern', to express or manifest itself, and 'äußerlich', outward or external, but also contains the word 'Licht', light) becomes 'first transfires' in my translation, swapping the expected p for an f.¹⁵ Sometimes lines miss a full verb and have only the auxiliary, and since German grammar allows for the verb to appear at the end of a sentence, the syntactic guessing game requires reading textual and contextual clues – always with a sense of dilation or semantic hovering (see Fig. 5.1). A similar hovering occurs in 'tattooing' (Fig. 5.2 and Fig. 5.3).¹⁶ Since verb placement at the end of a line is uncommon in English, in my translations I introduced interruptions, absences and disturbances of the otherwise often happily flowing and flip-flapping rhythm of Wolf's prosodic investigations.

That Wolf would coin the term 'Babeltrack' for a series of poems is apt: the track is both the musical track, but also the track of the train of translation, huff-puffing its way through the landscape of multilingual 'valley-ripples of frog-throats'.¹⁷ What would a poetic Tower of Babel look or sound like today? Well, it might sound something like this: 'such crochet things, slings, loops and bubbles built in saliva, be-sputtered, a-babbled, meaning a sort of air-bubble-speak, cheering and clicking, balloon-like, without skeins'. And the last stanza of the sequence reads:

molars, myriad mobiles – star, and the child sleeps in her bed again, and around it a valley, volley or *voll* it may be called, where i practice my blicken through palm-gaps, berry bad and andersights, while the frog-track ripples through the banana valley, quack-quack, with its multi-tracked croaking surrounding the child, who grows, and i now at her bed, encircling attrition, the spot where structures collapse and where the surface cracks, something for becoming permeable, for a napping tooth to nag, with quadrants, querulants, for the babeltrack in the trail-vale, ribbit, repeat, repeat¹⁸

The poem's language needs this bubbly lace-making, spinning forth, making translational and translingual threads and loops.

In German, the first couple of lines read: 'molare, unzählige mobiles – stern, und schläft das kind im bett again, und liegt ein tal darum, wallt oder walleh, wo ich mein blicking durch palmen-lücken treib, berrybad und otherweiß'.¹⁹ In my translation, I was able

ANNALOGUE ON ORANGES

when it is time for oranges, ist keine zeit, no time at all, für nichts. i only eat oranges, at least they exist, even if not much else is, no things at all, not much. petite little boats and stringy thin skin! i suck on them for hours. keeps me busy. free run for the tongue, looking for thread between teeth, interlace-space, and rooms to own, not much. oranges or existence all round. oranges or residence all round. with weighty curtains and rooms that step together conspiring, brother, mother, doctor, and the wardress, daily a session, that's how they planned it all, wall to wall around my standstill arms. but oranges exist, as transportation, outside my window, orange busses, orange trains, over cobbled headstone pavement. rattling through the ages. and on my bed those glimmering signals—peel, swinging segments, white skinned bridges! i lay them out for hours. keeps me going drüber. while the wardress brings fresh water fresh sheets, all the unemptied glasses, cups. daily a warding off for repair, nicht wahr, that's how they planned it all. later ten rooms on each floor, servants galore, with bow and tie marriage and tea. marriage and in the evening a little riot, then tea. but when it is time for oranges, ist keine zeit, no time at all for thirst, für wasser, for being thus arranged. because oranges are their own maneuvering material. because trains, bridges, and little glimmering glitches keep me going unallayed. go lack go lack use to her. because oranges communicate through the ages. oranges or restricted residence all round. oranges or a rather limited range of vision. oranges or it's like we're in prison. just trees and animals, we're at the Ende der Welt. when it is time for oranges, ist keine zeit, no time at all, for world-endings, padlock-curtains, paper measures for sure. because oranges are center-residence for life. for a lack, for want, go go be good, of use to her. go sweep the chimney, so that the doctor comes again. that the doctor sees how organs wander. through the ages. that's what they figured: that they wander and then go astray. get stuck in the body, block vocal tracts, good manner tracts. o range of things. because storage, and organs, organs. because collect yourself, then wander. glimmering bright and lacking. against

I, a native something-or-other-girl

“solide

“geistige Nahrung and she digested

mit affektiver athletik

und orangenpoetiqqqq

or as you say

ein organ haben

“Starting from or with an orange, all travels are possible.
All ways of the voice that lead across it, are good.”

or as you say

eine parole haben :

you tell me what it means

or french

a lengevitch on parole

(dry up in mid-speech

stuck : repeat :

a) ich have krämpfe in my calves
b) my teeth klappern

Figure 5.1 Uljana Wolf, ‘Annalogue on Oranges’, in *Subsisters: Selected Poems*, trans. by Sophie Seitla. Belladonna, 2017.



Tatting-Shuttle.

is called *süstikpitsi süstikpitsi* syllables repeat like little shuttles
 through secret eyelets etc. in how many endless loops does she dream
 of departure in how many languages do the ropes of the sailor
 (as a matter of lace) coil & is it called working on the little ship
 in departing translation but t t in french (my little lip)
 like a slip of the tongue s l s l sloped breakwater is it a frivolité
 in the sense of care free (tho with so much care was made) or
 fragile (because the end très fragile bends) or
 crumbled because of latin friare like crumbling
 of the indo-germanic tribe from vdrilling belongs (to it)

[with tools sharpened and laced, handle it, cut, then hit, kill, the board, bordure, bordello, bread crumbs]



Tatting-Shuttle.

heißt sie *süstikpitsi süstikpitsi* wiederhole die silben wie schiffchen
 durch heimliche ösen usw. in wie vielen bögen träumt eine
 vom ablegen in wie vielen sprachen winden sich (tat
 sache) die seile des seemanns u heißt sie nach dem übersetzen
 arbeit am schiffchen abrr eben auf französisch (mein kl. bisschen)
 wie ein versprecher prrr prrr wellenbrecher ist sie eine *frivolité*
 im sinne von leicht fertig (wo das so bedacht gemacht) oder
 zerbrechlich (weil das ende très fragile wände) oder
 zerrieben weil doch lateinisch *friare* wie zerreiben
 der indogermanischen sippe von vbohren (dahin) gehört

[mit scharfem oder spitzem werkzeug bearbeiten, pflügen, schlagen, iöten, Brett, bord, bordell, brosame]

Figure 5.2 Uljana Wolf, 'Tatting', in *Subsisters: Selected Poems*, trans. by Sophie Seita. Belladonna, 2017.

or in some	languages or regional dialects	“spitze”	also means	oder heißt in manchen	ihrer mund-	oder landarten	speichel
“pierce”	& “spit”	&	now no longer with sealed lips	„spitze“	u speien „spitzen“	u nu das mündige	an spitze
the lace-stitching girls:	form holes	between		stickenden mädchen	sind zwischen weißen fäden		gebildete
white threads	or form silences	between	strains of saliva	löcher	oder zwischen	speichel fäden	gebildete
or	an unformed silence	also disputed	i need to	stille	oder ungebildete stille	auch gebrochen	ich muss mal
puke	cecilia	i have to	swallow it &	brechen	cäcilie sagt ich	muss es runter	schlucken anders
conversely	lace would mean “spitting”	silently in stitches		rum heißt	spitzen „speien“	in schweigend verstickten	
for (botched up)	hours	having a pinch of hunger	would then mean	(vergeigten)	stunden	einen hunger leiden	aber heißt
“to stuff				„spitze			
lace”				schlingen“			

Figure 5.3 Uljana Wolf, ‘Tatting’, in *Subsisters: Selected Poems*, trans. by Sophie Seita, Belladonna, 2017.

to add another alliterative word to the first section ‘molars, myriad mobiles’. The noun Stern (star) in German reads in English both like a noun and a verb – the mobiles and molars star in this dreamscape of the child, of Wolf’s ‘multilingual fantasia’ to quote from an earlier section in the poem.²⁰ I chose to un-translate or back-translate Wolf’s blicking into ‘blicken’ (‘looking’, ‘glancing’), which is the word Wolf hints at in her anglicised version of it. To me, ‘blicken’ in English sounds a bit like ‘blinking’ and maintains the state of sleepily peeking through language. Whereas Wolf approximates ‘blicking’ and ‘lücken’ (gaps), my ‘practice’ and ‘blicken’ in turn approximate sound-wise such glancing through palm gaps. Wolf’s choice of the word ‘otherweiß’ (half English, half German) turns ‘otherwise’ into another white baby tooth and drop of milk which she’s been describing earlier in the poem, which I then inverted and translated as ‘anderersights’. These *other sights* function yet again as a comment on Wolf’s poetic practice of multilingual blinking: to *see* the gaps within and between languages.

Translation can make something lucid temporarily, as is so wonderfully captured in Juliana Spahr’s and Jena Osman’s *Chain* issue on ‘Translucinación’, a topic suggested to them by Cecilia Vicuña, who took the word from Andrés Ajens. It is this ‘chain’, this ‘dialogue’ that translation invites with its ‘relentless utopian drive’ to enable intercultural ‘rigorous conversation’ and exchange.²¹ But the title also captures a view of translation I very much agree with: that as an experimental and conscientious translator I must ‘not treat the original work as a completely knowable object’.²² In the afterword to my translation of Wolf’s *Subsisters*, I write:

Uljana and I share a belief that translations of poetry cannot attempt a pure or perfect congruence, but must instead afford an investigation of the slippages, moments of misunderstanding and ambiguity, from which a new articulacy emerges. Uljana’s work enacts the ‘plurilingual poetics’ that Caroline Bergvall detects in Rosmarie Waldrop and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, arguing that ‘[d]isplacement is not here envisaged as exile but as the very condition for a positive understanding of relocation across and against the unifying, mythicized, and frequently exclusionary principles of national language and of monolingual culture.’²³

In many cases, of course, border crossings aren’t just linguistic; they have real consequences that might threaten someone’s livelihood. In one moving and chilling section in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*, in a chapter prefaced with a photograph of Cha’s

mother and that describes the experience of emigrating to the US, the narrator states matter-of-factly:

I have the documents. Documents, proof, evidence, photograph, signature. [. . .] Somewhere someone has taken my identity and replaced it with their photograph. [. . .] They ask you identity. They comment upon your inability or ability to speak. Whether you are telling the truth or not about your nationality. They say you look other than you say. As if you didn't know who you were. You say who you are but you begin to doubt.²⁴

In an experimental chapbook-long essay on Cha's work, Wolf draws attention to a multilingual and postcard-sized stamp Cha made as part of her mail art activities. The stamp is framed by an imperfectly oval border of words in French, in whose centre we read the words 'tom ècac' in mirror image. Once used as a stamp the 'mot caché' (hidden word) reveals itself, although now the oval-shaped French frame becomes illegible. Wolf becomes fascinated by this material imprint of what she reads as a politics of translation. That there simply is 'no right way of reading, no right way round' and that something within us always remains 'in another language, unreadable, untranslatable; unmissably hidden in the middle'.²⁵ Wolf, whose own practice is addicted to (and addictively concerned with) teasing out multiplicities within words, with their punning and political potentials, also detects the author's Korean family name, Cha, in the word 'caché': a word that remains 'displaced, unheard(-of)' and one becomes perhaps 'a reader of the experience of displacement'.²⁶

Such displacement is at the heart of much translingual writing and becomes especially tangible when it thematises that language-learning and translation are always political. *Dictée* is written in English, but also contains French, Korean and Chinese, and its opening chapter includes a French and English dictation exercise:

Ecrivez en français:

1. If you like this better, tell me so at once.
2. The general remained only a little while in this place.
3. If you did not speak so quickly, they would understand you better.

[. . .]

Traduire en français:

1. I want you to speak.²⁷

And to speak we must understand what we're saying, we want to make ourselves understood, we want to ferry meaning over to the other who receives it. Experimental poetry, of course, makes this ferrying, this crossing, a cross with multiple directions; less concerned with clarity.²⁸ Rosmarie Waldrop, a German-born poet writing in English who has translated numerous poets from French and German into English, uses the experience of language-learning for a broader reflection on language in her poem 'Mallarmé as Philologist, Dying': 'When he leaves the room, he recaptures a memory called meaning. A matrix where a word is carried by a foreign language. Say "th". Say the whole word: "death". The *Box for Learning English by Yourself and Playing* is broken, the string to push the puppet's tongue between his teeth.'²⁹ Language is always a broken puppet, whether you own it or not, and that's the point. This interest in the rules of language and what they might offer a poet as a material for play is also evident in Waldrop's book *Split Infinites* – a pun on the supposed grammatical error of the split infinitive. Now, many poets could be interested in this as a metaphor, but for someone thinking multilingually, this title situates the book in a pedagogical context, as something specific to a language that had to be learned, first as a rule, and then intuitively, rather than the other way around.

In Waldrop's *Lavish Absence: Recalling and Rereading Edmond Jabès*, a meditation on his work and its ethical imperative, on questions of exile, but also on the processes of translation more generally, there's one part that offers an insightful model for translation (and indeed any writing): 'I look at my translation: "The book never actually surrenders."' This now seems inadequate. The adverbial form weakens the statement, makes us read over it rather than pause to ponder its strangeness and implications. In 1973, I did not see this sentence as I see it today. This pleases me in as far as it shows my reading and interpretation are not frozen.³⁰ In a 2005 interview, Waldrop reflects further on embracing the impermanence of the 'right answer' or 'correct' translation, as an aesthetics or politics that is deeply connected to identity: 'I think "not belonging" is a condition of the artist. A fundamental lack as generative power. One wouldn't have to be a literal exile. The distance is built into the act of creation, the questioning, the constructing of "counter-worlds".'³¹ Waldrop entertains such philological, philosophical and political possibilities of translation both in her poetry and in her translations.

Part of ‘the joy of the demiurge’, i.e. that of the translator, is ‘to make [the work] mine at all cost’, in ‘the knowledge that I do not actually touch the original within its own language’.³² Waldrop uses another metaphor for translation which I find incredibly apt: translation is the process the original ‘undergo[es]’, just like the ‘weather[ing]’ of a statue. This statue, which might miss a nose, whose shapes are slightly eroded, either sharper or softer, are all the more fascinating because they are *suggestive*. They don’t suggest a perfect and complete whole, but the lack leaves something for the imagination to do. Wolf, too, wants a translational ‘messiness that does not so much rely on inability (because you have to be able to make the better kinds of mistakes), but an inseparability. The pleasure of setting the foreign material to work poetically in the target language, like a shimmering lack/Lack’ (Lack means lacquer, varnish or finish in German).³³

Waldrop concludes her essay by negating that ‘in the beginning was the word’ but rather the creative ‘act’, or as Wolf puts it in English in her second collection *falsche freunde (false friends)*, ‘they begin the beguine’; in other words, the translator and poet begin to dance with words. In ‘dancing double speech’, a poem from *Subsisters* I have already quoted above, this dance of the double of poet and translator is literalised: ‘in the cloakroom every woman received a twin language with identical clothes, a dabbling double. [. . .] behind us word-rabbits scampered out of ashbery’s hat. to the ballroom then, to circumdance my twin’. Such circumdancing requires precisely to invent new words, to splice words together, to mess around with language. Wolf’s title ‘doppelgeherrede’ literally translates as ‘walking double speech’ or ‘doppelganger speech’, but in my translation I turned ‘walking’ into ‘dancing’, given that, as Wolf explains elsewhere, ‘it matters to me to walk alongside the original poem, i.e. to follow its running, striding, jumping more than its riddles, answers, and callings’.³⁴ That essay’s guiding conceit is to play with the English idiom ‘to lead someone down the garden path’ as a false friend of the German ‘in die Irre führen’. To match Wolf’s creative ‘translantic’ process here, I have similarly mistranslated the German idiom ‘auf eine falsche Fährte locken’ literally, as ‘tempting someone to follow the wrong footprint’. I therefore also re-titled the essay ‘Faux-Amis Footprints’ in my English version, waving back at Wolf’s second collection and its fascination with false friends and inter- and intra-lingual punning.

Puns and wordplay, of course, always have particular cultural connotations; sometimes they are also time-sensitive. Some of Wolf's poems, like 'on classification in language, a feeble reader' ('fibel minds (von den wortarten)' in German), refer to East Germany, for example; a context not even overly familiar to her German readers. But in this gap of not-shared experience lies a great potential for the poet and translator. In her commentary on the Austrian poet Ilse Aichinger's use of idioms, Wolf argues that '[i]n their informality and folksiness, idioms in any language are the epitome of being included, of belonging, of "having a say" in a matter, and because they require initiation and consensus, people want to be able to understand them. Aichinger withdraws from this totality of language by being other-tongued, in that she takes idioms at their word (like children might), or, to use a Benjaminian term, in that she de-forms (*ent-stellt*) them, i.e. through literal misunderstandings and defamiliarizations she makes new poetic routes available.'³⁵ I hope that my work offers an answer in the affirmative to Dirk Delabastita's question when he asks if – through continuing wordplay in a different language – 'a translation [can] unearth new meanings in the source text and so become constitutive of it'.³⁶

Wolf's work certainly calls for such constitutive unearthing ('it's digging-dark in this poem, in which tongue could it possibly roam?'). We could say, then, that it is – to borrow a phrase from Rebecca Walkowitz's recent book of the same title – 'born translated'. Just like born-digital literature is made in the context of the Internet and the computer, as their context of production, distribution and reception; so, too, does the born-translated text already *contain* the thought of translation. Translation is not merely an 'afterthought' or 'secondary or incidental to these works', but rather 'a condition of [the text's] production'.³⁷ While Walkowitz thinks primarily of novels that already know they will be translated or will participate in a global and increasingly networked market, I see born-translated experimental poems as aware of their own cheerful unoriginality and their problematic inscription into cultural and national codes and traditions, and as emerging from multilingual or translational reading that informs their writing. But Walkowitz also acknowledges that some of these recent works are 'written as translations', perhaps pretending to be written in another language or 'written from translation', thus 'pointing backward as well as forward, they present translation as a spur to literary innovation, including their own'.³⁸ It's precisely this translational thinking that is germane to

what Wolf, Cha and Waldrop are doing in their work. In one of the essays on translation in the volume *Currently & Emotion* mentioned earlier, poet and translator Erín Mouré writes that ‘we must give our own linguistic borders a porosity that lets the works of others in other cultures into our own’.³⁹ Translation, for Mouré, ought not to smooth the passage from one language into another, but rather leave the edges of both languages permeable and open to transformation. In other words, our own language ought to be transformed after we’ve been translating someone else. Wolf, too, asks how her language can be affected by something foreign. It’s not just by using a foreign word, she suggests, but a transformation happens through the serious engagement with other languages. Translating such translational thinking, in turn, requires a conceptual leap; it means that we need to translate the compositional process as much as the effects of the poem’s surface.

The titular sequence of Wolf’s selected poems, ‘Subsisters’, explores the simultaneous excess and lack within subtitles as a topos for translation. Ostensibly enabling understanding in a different language, subtitles present the translator’s interpretation of the original script, within the circumscribed economy of a set word count. ‘Subsisters’ features a supposedly ‘original’ poem (based on a number of 1940s Hollywood films noirs) and its translation as subtitle, but such boundaries blur as Wolf translates herself translating – a Möbius strip of multiple, equally valid versions of one another. Wolf’s structural, linguistic conceit also serves to critique the gender roles in the depicted movie scenes. The ‘subsister’ becomes the subtitle’s subversive sibling. Via small displacements, the poetic subtitles turn the movies’ virtuous and somewhat stereotypical female figures into confident, witty and independent heroines. The cognitive surplus and simultaneity that one experiences when watching a film with subtitles are in fact at the heart of Wolf’s plurilingual thinking. In my translation, I’ve added another layer to this multi-directional conversation: a supposedly ‘English’ version, which, in turn, reworks material from my translations of the previous two poems (rather than directly from Wolf’s German).⁴⁰ In this way, it continues the thinking-through-translation that Wolf’s work so beautifully demonstrates, thus, as she puts it, ‘turning slippage into multilingual spillage’.⁴¹ I both translated the poems and their own distortions and twists as they move from ‘original’ to ‘original with subtitles’. But I mainly translated the concept: what it might mean to misread or over-read or to make multilayered and deliberate mistranslation a generative method for new poetry.

Kate Briggs discusses the possibilities given to translators when they encounter a section or word in a foreign language in the text they are hoping to translate. One option is, of course, to leave the word or sentence untranslated; another is to translate it but pretend it's in a different language (i.e. ask the readers to accept the fiction that they are really reading German or French when what they're reading is English); or the third option, and one I'm most drawn to, is to 'make the language itself stutter. And stammer' in a 'strange tremble' that indicates that this is no smooth passage.⁴² As Wolf writes: 'when language stutters it always multiplies – in a state of possibility'.⁴³ Or, as Anne Carson suggests in her introduction to her constraint-based translation project *Nay Rather*, which translates the same Greek fragment by using only words found in, for example, Beckett's *Endgame*, Bertold Brecht's FBI file or London Tube signage: 'What follows is an exercise, not exactly an exercise in translating, nor even an exercise in untranslating, more like a catastrophizing of translation. I shall take a small fragment of Greek lyric poetry and translate it over and over again using the wrong words. A sort of stammering.'⁴⁴

A stammer is the refusal to be entirely legible. In a recent conversation on translation in *Bomb*, Don Mee Choi writes: 'That line – "I refuse to translate" – in *Hardly War* just came to me in the process of working on the book slowly. I'm unbearably slow. I didn't ask myself what it meant because I already knew what I meant. It's not any different than Yi Sang's protagonist saying he wants to stay endlessly lazy. I refuse to perpetuate the official narratives of the Korean War, which thingifies. I think of refusal as one of the most highly effective modes of resistance. I refuse to be faithful.'⁴⁵ Christian Hawkey responds that 'Perhaps this evasion, or "madness," as you write, is a strategy of resistance – a refusal to be legible ("right to opacity" – Édouard Glissant) while simultaneously demanding to be read. A colonial relation, or a way out or through that unjust relation. A thing not thingified. A "nothingness," as Fred Moten writes.'⁴⁶ Here's Wolf again in my translation:

My relationship with Belarusian is an interlinear translation with dashes and variants that reads like a hiking map, on it the field, the glove. All possibilities of expression are housed in it, disarrayed situations of saying, invisible layers under the fur. For that reason my relationship with Belarusian is multilingual. For that reason my relationship with Belarusian stutters: not because language is a peasant, as the *generalissimo* says, but because it's many pathways, channeling.⁴⁷

M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* is another constraint-based translational project, similar to Carson's formally but with a different ethical imperative. In it, Philip translates the story of the slave ship *Zong*, whose captain gave the order in November 1781 that about 150 Africans be murdered by drowning so that the ship's owners could collect insurance money. The poetic text solely uses the words and phonemes of the only extant public legal document related to the massacre, creating a multilingual, multi-layered, and moving fragmentary piece. In the afterword, Philip explains her poetic process as a problematic translation: 'I murder the text, literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunctions overboard, jettisoning adverbs: I separate subject from verb, verb from object – create semantic mayhem, until my hands [are] bloodied, from so much killing and cutting' and then like a 'seer' or 'prophet' 'read the untold story that itself by not telling'.⁴⁸

Wolf was recently commissioned to translate an excerpt of *Zong!* into German. In an essay about that commission, she asks under which conditions a white translator, who has the discursive power of white Central Europe behind her, can approach the text of a black author, whose work deals with murder and oppression wielded by white people.⁴⁹ How can a translator contribute to and translate that work of 'mourning'? In German the word 'übersetzen' both means 'to translate' and 'to cross over' or 'ferry over'. Wolf considers the nautical metaphor of translation as crossing over; which is a form of life-saving, while non-crossing or non-translating leads to death, or to an unacknowledged extinction. Her choice of what she considers a gentle form of non-translation can thus serve the purposes of survival, of visibility. In an interview with Wolf, NourbeSe Philip describes the poem, and particularly the last section (in which language breaks down, so much so that it's hard to tell to which language individual words belong) like this: 'I really had this sense that I was getting my revenge on the English language' but also that 'for the first time I had my own language and this is where the healing comes in'.⁵⁰

Can translation then also perform such acts of healing? For Carolyn Pedwell, 'translation offers one important critical and pedagogical approach to negotiating the multiple and overlapping "double binds" that face us in the midst of late liberalism'.⁵¹ Pedwell proposes translation '[a]s a mode of interpretation attuned to affective nuance and complexity, and one that proceeds in awareness of

its own impossibility'.⁵² It invites us 'to reflect on the complexity of "our" moods and those of our texts, to feel the often conflicted relations between affective attunement, knowledge and power'.⁵³ She arrives at this understanding of translation via Eve Sedgwick's call for reparative reading and Gayatri Spivak's call for 'patient epistemological care'. Spivak makes it clear that there are some approaches to translation that wrongly assume that one can simply transfer meaning from one language into another, and thus 'a specific neocolonialist construction of a non-Western scene is afoot'.⁵⁴ So, especially within a context of transnational activism and decolonisation, translation needs 'a love that permits fraying'.⁵⁵ Language frays, Spivak suggests (referring to Freud's term 'Bahnung', which is often translated as 'facilitation' or 'facilitated pathway'), if the translator permits this *frayage*; even creates it, welcomes it. Wolf, too, maintains that language and therefore translation is 'many pathways, channeling'.⁵⁶ This channelling requires listening, or even a handing over, as Spivak puts it so emphatically:

[T]he translator must surrender to the text. She must solicit the text to show the limits of its language, because that rhetorical aspect will point at the silence of the absolute fraying of language that the text wards off, in its special manner. No amount of tough talk can get around the fact that translation is the most intimate act of reading. Unless the translator has earned the right to become an intimate reader, she cannot surrender to the text, cannot respond to the special call of the text.⁵⁷

In a similar vein, Briggs highlights that '[r]esponding actively to [the translation's] address is a way of opening her own writing up to its difference, its independence: to the instruction of its different energy, its unfamiliar thinking, its other rhythms'.⁵⁸ That's why translation has a political potential for me, too. It asks me to be attentive to *difference*. Édouard Glissant compares translation to the composition of a fugue – a melody introduced by one instrument or voice that is then taken up by another, repeated in a different pitch, and accompanied by a counterpoint. Translation might indeed attune us to different states; it might tune us, like an instrument, to do political work. It invites us to listen to something in an unfamiliar key.

I want to return again to Wolf's response to Cha and both writers' demand that the reader *not* be 'master' in the 'house' of language.

In *Wandering Errands*, Wolf quotes Deleuze and Guattari, who ask ‘How to become a nomad and an immigrant and a gypsy in relation to one’s own language?’⁵⁹ Wolf suggests that in America the English ‘mother tongue’ is always-already a nomad. She continues: ‘It seemed to me from the very beginning that language was not to be found at home. Language was never in when I called.’ Consequently, Wolf practises and praises such a self-foreignising:

In a 1982 interview, the Austrian writer and Holocaust survivor Ilse Aichinger was asked about the use of foreign words in her work. They’re an opportunity, Aichinger replied, ‘to make language foreign to itself and to leave it alone in such a way that it must speak for itself again’. [. . .] In the title story [in Aichinger’s book *Bad Words*], ‘Bad Words’, the narrator announces her deep mistrust of supposedly ‘good’ language: ‘I now no longer use the better words.’ Instead, she writes, ‘I’m beginning to have a weak spot for the second and third best’ by which she means the overlooked words; language in the margins.⁶⁰

Wolf concludes, again linking how she reads Aichinger, Cha and Philip and how we must also read her own work: ‘Whoever wants to trace the outlines of Aichinger’s bad words had better not come as a winner or a language dompteuse. These foreign words cannot be tamed when you meet them, and they cannot be colonized as a trophy.’⁶¹

We might here be reminded of Jacques Derrida’s *Monolingualism of the Other*, in which he disentangles his complicated relationship with the French language as an Algerian Jew, a sentence Wolf cites herself, which we could read almost as her mantra for translational poetry: ‘I have only one language, yet it is not mine.’⁶² So, whose language is this? The question of the multiple *whos* with which I began this essay is crucial to Wolf’s work, and to translingual experimental poetry more broadly: namely, in recognising that there isn’t a single, coherent identity or voice presiding over a poem, we must also recognise that there isn’t one in its translation. Wolf’s work is not just translational in its method and thinking, it is also enmeshed with other source texts, usually acknowledged in notes at the end of her books or individual poems, where we find Nelly Sachs, Sigmund Freud, Hélène Cixous, Gertrude Stein, Anna O. and Susan Sontag. Sometimes we even find these literary or historical interlocutors within texts themselves, such as in ‘Babeltrack’, which I discussed earlier, where the poem has a theoretical argument with Roman Jakobson about aphasia and language-learning.

Texts are not isolated incidents; they can engender intertextual and real friendships – hospitable relations which Wolf explores linguistically. It speaks for Wolf's generous poetics that she invites and acknowledges such continuities and dialogues – a conversation that my translations, I hope, can further hospitably extend.

Translations offer spaces for collaboration and friendship with what Christian Hawkey in the introduction to his constraint-based translation of Georg Trakl so aptly terms 'between-voices': 'to read the deceased is to reanimate their words; the between-voice is a ghost, a host'.⁶³ In translating Uljana's words (and I might as well – and even feel like I must – switch to first names here), I also extend our non-textual friendship into text and vice versa. I am writing 'with' her, in her words and in mine, and while I can understand her (an adhesive for friendships), these translations quite stickily and happily sound both like and unlike her; both like and unlike me. Translation becomes a work of transformed and transformative failure, a confrontation with impossibility, a giving up of mastery. These are familiar arguments from postcolonial critiques; and multilingual translation itself becomes a driving force in such a rejection of monolingualism. Uljana's poems are rich in such a critique; they are never just 'play' despite or precisely because of their insistent interrogations of form and sound as side-kicks. Or rather, wordplay and sound become equal partners, collaborators, absolutely crucial for her political engagement to be effective and affective. The poems resist the notion that one can ever be fully a 'native speaker', fully own a language, be of it, within it or on top of it. To take another metaphor from Uljana's essay on translating from Belarusian, 'Messages from a Beehive', the buzzing train of my relationship with the German of Uljana Wolf is therefore, in her/my words, 'double-tracked and never direct', it 'lies in the sleeping car facing backwards, drives across a bridge, is a bridge, hums'.⁶⁴

Notes

1. Wolf, *Wandernde Errands*, p. 6. Wolf is here playing on Jacques Derrida's essay 'Hospitality', trans. Barry Stocker and Forbes Morlock, *Angelaki* 5.3 (2000), pp. 3–18 (p. 6): 'when I begin to speak in my language, which seems to suppose that I am here <at home> master in my own home, that I am receiving, inviting, accepting or welcoming you, allowing you to come across the threshold'.

2. Wolf has translated into German several well-known authors, such as John Ashbery and Yoko Ono, but she often chooses to translate authors whose practice mirrors her own translingual play, such as Erin Mouré and LaTasha N. Nevada Diggs. Diggs's poem 'Benihana', for example, turns into translingual German in Wolf's translation. An audio recording accompanying the text is available at <<https://www.lyrikline.org/en/poems/benihana-11994>> (last accessed 19 February 2018).
3. Antena, 'About Us', <<http://antenaantena.org/about-us-2/>> (last accessed 30 January 2018) and Antena, 'A Manifesto for Ultratranslation'.
4. John Keene, 'Translating Poetry, Translating Blackness', *Harriet*, 28 April 2016.
5. Jen Hofer and Sawako Nakayasu, 'Can Can', *ON 1* (2008), pp. 87–98 (pp. 92, 90).
6. Derek Attridge, *The Work of Literature*, p. 305.
7. Ibid.
8. Sophie Collins, 'Three Kinds of Translation', *Currently & Emotion: Translations* (London: Test Centre, 2016), unpaginated [pp. 25–7 (p. 26)].
9. Briggs, *This Little Art*, p. 49.
10. Ibid. p. 54.
11. Apter, *Against World Literature*, p. 4.
12. Wolf, 'Schreiben und Übersetzen heißt, sich Meta-artiges Desaster einzuladen' (my translation).
13. By 'transnational turn' one usually means those projects that have, for a while, advocated a geographical and linguistic expansion of scholarly subjects and attention to how identities and cultural and literary work exist beyond traditional borders – it appeals to decentre the nation state – but within global networks, and migration, and hybridity.
14. Wolf, 'dancing double speech', in *Subsisters: Selected Poems*, p. 18.
15. Wolf, 'Babeltrack', pp. 137–61 (p. 148).
16. Wolf, 'Tatting', in *Subsisters*, pp. 84–109.
17. Wolf, 'Babeltrack', in *Subsisters* pp. 137–61 (p. 138).
18. Wolf, 'Babeltrack', pp. 137–61 (p. 160).
19. Wolf, 'Babeltrack', pp. 137–61 (p. 161).
20. Wolf, 'Babeltrack', pp. 137–61 (p. 148).
21. Spahr and Osman, 'Editors' Notes', pp. iii, iv.
22. Ibid. p. iv.
23. Seita and Wolf, 'How to Subsister: An Afterword'. The quote from Caroline Bergvall is from 'Writing at the Crossroads of Languages', pp. 207–8.
24. Cha, *Dictee*, pp. 56–5.

25. Wolf, *Wandernde Errands*, p. 6. My translation. Please note that this is a translation in progress.
26. Ibid. p. 7. My translation. Wolf uses the English words 'displaced' and 'displacement'.
27. Cha, *Dictée*, p. 8.
28. Wolf writes in 'Stationary', *Subsisters* (p. 12): 'in the flubbed dialect of these forests/a crossing is the word tree.' And: 'no one/ever saw the homelands go home'.
29. Waldrop, 'Mallarmé as Philologist, Dying', p. 61.
30. Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*, p. 138.
31. Waldrop, 'Between Tongues: An Interview'.
32. Waldrop, 'The Joy of the Demiurge'.
33. 'Faux-Amis Footprints', *Subsisters*, pp. 168–9 (p. 168).
34. Ibid.
35. Wolf, 'Translating the Untraceable: On Ilse Aichinger', *Subsisters*, trans. Sophie Seita, pp. 170–4 (p. 173).
36. Delabastita, 'Focus on the Pun'.
37. Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, p. 4.
38. Ibid. p. 5.
39. Mouré, 'But do we need a second language to translate?', p. 29.
40. The first part of this paragraph is slightly adapted from a translator's note that appeared in *Asymptote*, April 2016 <<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/special-feature/uljana-wolf-subsisters/german/>> (last accessed 17 June 2019).
41. Seita and Wolf, 'How to Subsister: An Afterword', p. 179.
42. Briggs, *This Little Art*, p. 29.
43. Wolf, 'Translating the Untraceable', p. 172.
44. Carson, *Nay Rather*, p. 32.
45. Choi and Hawkey, untitled conversation.
46. Ibid.
47. Wolf, 'Messages from a Beehive', p. 166.
48. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*, pp. 193–4.
49. NourbeSe Philip, 'Über ein Gedicht von NourbeSe Philip'.
50. Wolf and NourbeSe Philip, 'Poesiegespräch'.
51. Pedwell, 'Cultural Theory as Mood Work', p. 58.
52. Ibid. p. 63.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid.
55. Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, p. 181.
56. Wolf, 'Messages from a Beehive', p. 166.
57. Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, p. 183.
58. Briggs, *This Little Art*, pp. 134–5.
59. Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, p. 19.
60. Wolf, 'Translating the Untraceable', p. 170.

61. Ibid. p. 171.
62. Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, p. 21.
63. Hawkey, *Ventrakl* (New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2010), pp. 5–6.
64. The first part of this paragraph is adapted from my afterword to *i mean i dislike that fate that i was made to where* (New York: Wonder, 2015). The second part of the paragraph is adapted from my afterword to *Subsisters*.