

# Adjacent to (Many) Languages

**Klara du Plessis & Sophie Seita**

Klara du Plessis is a poet, critic, and literary curator. Sophie Seita works with text, sound, and translation on the page, in performance, and often in collaboration. Sophie and Klara crossed paths on the internet and through their respective publications before meeting in person in early 2020. Klara then invited Sophie into this conversation for *The Capilano Review* as a venue to trace shared interests in language, literature, performance, and curatorial endeavours. A prelude rather than a finale – may this discussion keep evolving.

**Klara du Plessis** As I enter this document in English, I exit another shared document in Afrikaans and Dutch, a similar conversation on language and poetry across national, linguistic, and visceral, physical borders. Two tabs open side-by-side as my mind shifts from composition in one language to expression in another. Considering both English and Afrikaans to be first languages, I wrote my debut, multilingual (or translingual) collection, *Ekke*, with an awareness of these languages' simultaneity in who I am as a presence in language. I enjoyed writing with the languages as equal entities, interweaving, interacting, and blocking each other out. Now, some years later, my curiosity has shifted, perhaps only temporarily, but I notice these languages residing adjacent to one another in my writing—my second collection of poetry is in English and I'm working on a manuscript of Afrikaans poetry. I'm currently interested in how these two languages influence each other surreptitiously, invisibly. I'm curious to explore the difference of my Afrikaans due to my Montréal-based life in English (and French), or to pick up on cultural residue or patina traced by Afrikaans onto the way I use English.

**Sophie Seita** I'm immediately drawn to some of the descriptive words in your linguistic origin story: your prepositional implication of being "adjacent" to a language, which for me also translates into standing next to or moving alongside a particular practice, linguistic or not. I'm also interested in thinking about the metaphor of interweaving as a material engagement with language, which reminds me of Bauhaus textile artist Anni Albers's call for a "tactile sensibility." "Residue" and "patina" similarly suggest matter, substance, and a process of weathering or time passing. I feel comfortable in that processual layering, those material tracings, and would situate myself there. More concretely and less poetically, my thinking and feeling space is English, which became my first language a long time ago, even though I wasn't born with it, and which I had to learn, and learnt a bit like music, looking for the right pitch and rhythm. It replaced German, my "mother tongue," a language I now translate into English. I also have Italian roots (that's where my surname comes from) and I speak Spanish. In fact, I came back to German through translation. Not that I ever "left" it really, but emotionally, creatively, and intellectually I certainly have. So when I translate now it's both like tapping into something intimate and weirdly foreign, which feeds my innate curiosity about words and sounds as resolutely grounded in unfamiliarity.

**KdP** The linguistic adjacency we both associate with, as well as the simultaneous intimacy and distance you describe in relation to German, pushes our discussion into the terrain of translingualism. Sarah Dowling's study, *Translingual Poetics*, counters monolingualism as a settler ideology that attempts to linearize relationships between

language, ethnicity, and nationhood. She writes, “I use the term *translingual* ... because it describes the capacity of languages to interact, influence, and transform one another ... the term *translingual* allows scholars to move away from the monolingual/multilingual binary and to recognize a range of competencies across, as well as within, languages.” It’s important to acknowledge that both our language sets — English, Afrikaans<sup>1</sup>, Dutch, German, French, Spanish, and Italian — are Eurocentric languages that are explicitly laden with colonial baggage. That said, the way I use my set of languages is a deliberate attempt to perforate the foundations of multiple monolingualisms, to lay bare the fragility of monolithic and self-contained linguistic structures, and to recontextualize them as relational entities. M. NourbeSe Philip talks about the “rupturing of language” in her own dismantling and reconstruction of English in *Zong!*. It’s a useful way for her to think about how languages can be interrogated and opened up for air. Prepositions take on a degree of importance — what is *between* languages, *in* languages, *through* languages, *towards* languages, *across* languages.

**SS** Uljana Wolf, the German poet I’ve translated most frequently, thinks a lot about the translingual. In her playful manifesto-like essay, “What we talk about when we talk about translingual poetry,” she says, “a poem is never written as one language” and “the multilingual poem speaks as language.” She’s trying to distinguish between surface-level multilingualism and translingual writing because, for her, “a multilingual poem can be monolingual in its thinking” just as a “monolingual poem can be multilingual in its thinking.” That distinction acknowledges that there are sometimes invisible ways in which other languages (cultures, histories, practices) can be present in a text without easily identifiable external markers. It also reminds me of the critique Sandeep Parmar makes in “Not a British Subject: Race and Poetry in the UK,” in which she argues that the expectation (primarily from a white audience) of a proliferation of “exotic tropes” comes at the expense of “nuanced, fluid, transcultural paradigms of racial and national identity.” So it’s also a question about form and not (just) content.

Whether it’s the translingual in the ostensibly monolingual poem or, as you suggest, the possibility of dismantling and remaking from within, the translingual can be a way of loosening structures and strictures of belonging. We’re constantly being asked to define ourselves and prove our belonging — be this to a language, a nation, or a discipline — which is related to authority (a disciplining), which is often negotiated materially, on and through materials (i.e. paper is a material on and through which

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<sup>1</sup> Afrikaans is an interesting case, being both a settler language developing out of Dutch and one that originated on African soil in proximity to and engagement with other languages used in Southern Africa.

belonging, careers, and citizenship are negotiated). For me, in particular, this movement across that's embedded in the translingual is deeply connected to my desire for the transdisciplinary, the transmedial.

**KdP** You raise an important question about the relationship between belonging, definition, and language. The possible ways that one language can invisibly refract into many, while retaining its formal status as English or German or whatever, is something I've been thinking about a lot as I wait for my collection *Hell Light Flesh* to be released. While this book is resolutely written in English—and I refused to pepper it with linguistic markers that might have signaled geography—it is, for me, very much based in South Africa and emanates from a knowledge of Afrikaner culture. It is strange, even alienating, to think that this book will be read in the context of CanLit, by an English-speaking readership that might not make the leap of language and place. My thinking hesitates between two poles: does publishing an English book for an English-speaking readership render it monolingual? Or does my affiliation with South Africa, as well as the book's latent curiosity with Afrikaner culture, surface as multilingual monolingualism, as translingual? These are questions I prefer to leave unanswered, questions that probably only have answers that constantly shift and morph. These questions are relevant to a broader spectrum of texts other than my own, of course—how are writing and language linearized through monolingual assumptions and dominant cultures, or how are writing and language able to assert their belonging across borders, cultures, and contexts. This discussion, and Uljana's quotes you referenced in relation to poetry and language, reminds me of words by Rosi Braidotti, which have stayed with me from the first time I read them: "writers can be polyglots within the same language; you can speak English and write many different Englishes ... Becoming a polyglot in your own mother tongue: that's writing."

**SS** What a brilliant quote—I love the phrase "polyglot in your own mother tongue"—I'm going to remember that! I'm curious to hear more about your feeling of strangeness at the thought that your book might be encountered in a way that doesn't recognize the culture from which it emanates. Do you think there's an ideal reader for your or anyone's work? Or can the non-ideal, imperfect reader become exactly the right kind of reader, whose not-quite-getting-it is in fact the most readerly reading experience? Etymologically, *to read* means *to guess*. How do I allow myself and my audiences to not-know? I'm reminded of Jack Halberstam's seductive promise in the *Queer Art of Failure* that "intuition and blind fumbling might yield better results" than the normalization and routines that academic disciplines create for our thinking and

learning. But this equally applies to an original-versus-copy-fixated translation or the transparency-sheet vision of writing. I'm intrigued by the wayward forms and directions of my reading and who my teachers of reading are — writers, artists, musicians, thinkers, even objects, etc. I've started work on a book of essays, tentatively called *Lessons of Decal*, where I explore these questions. A decal is a copy, a transfer, of forms and knowledge. A decal also describes an exchange between mediums. So, I'm thinking quite seriously, but also frivolously, about these readerly lessons, about our chosen inheritance and kinships, and about how we can make specifically feminist and queer decals in and through our reading, writing, and making.

**KdP** I'm so looking forward to reading your new book of essays! But regarding an ideal reader — no not at all, I don't have one in mind; in fact, a culturally specific readership might be exactly the wrong audience. What I am more curious about is the stretching *across* (back to that preposition!), the gesture of leaning over geography, connecting parts in language and art, then seeing what happens next — generative uncertainty. Leaning, which is a lengthening, but also a folding, an overlaying, a copying. You mentioned the *transmedial* in passing, Sophie, and a linguistic metaphor of leaning and interconnecting also rings true in terms of work that crosses disciplines and media. I'm thinking of your performance-lectures. I'm also thinking of the literary curatorial work I've been doing (in particular, the project that I've been calling Deep Curation) that places the undertheorized form of the poetry reading into conversation with performance art, participatory art, archival art; it attempts to activate the repertoire by incorporating ways of thinking about literary performance as something beyond its immediate and accepted context. This is becoming a whole other discussion, but it's amazing how one's understanding of a distinct art form or genre or work can shift just by considering it in relation to a different critical nexus. Both of us enjoyed reading Kate Briggs's *This Little Art*, which is a book on the process of translation, but also a book about living, about how living influences and reacts to the translating, writing, and languaging one becomes imbricated in when working with any kind of text. In a sense, the relationships between author-text-reader and original-copy, or the connections between transmedial performances and experiments, are infused with the organicism and flexibility of the far stretch and the tight fold; to phrase it more concretely, they are infused with the relational connections and divergences between subjects, genres, and events.

**SS** I love the simultaneity of contraction/condensation and expanse that you describe in the action of leaning! My question about readers was sort of rhetorical; but also, not quite. I actually think I do have a reader in mind, a known audience I address. My first

readers are always people close to me. There's a long history of small-press writers and art communities making work for each other and I identify with that gesture, not as a gesture of exclusivity but of dedication and community. At the same time, I'm most thrown into recognition when someone unknown to me reads my work and sees lines of connection, of meaning. I actually remember my friend Erin Robinsong telling me she ran into you at the Montréal airport and you were reading a book of mine—and that was before we knew each other. I love serendipity. I also love when people unfamiliar with my work, or unfamiliar with performance or experimental writing, hear a performance or a text of mine and get something out of it. When someone is moved and transformed through that process of discovery—that's a moment of magic. But it's not an outcome I can plan or predict. I'm also currently part of an artist development program called *Constellations* that supports artists who work with and want to explore socially engaged practices, community-oriented art, and other forms of non-white-cube public art. So, these big questions of audience, engagement, participation, authorship, attribution, collaboration, and accessibility are very much on my mind. To come back to this bibliophilic memoir that I'm working on and to add another metaphor for translation into the mix: translation is a decal. You can even escalate that process by making decals of decals. A Möbius strip of readings. For me, translation is ultimately a reading-turned-writing. It teaches you to pay attention. A process of slowly trickling through. Which requires a porosity. ■