

Translation, Collaboration, and Reading the Multiple

Who is translating whom? Who is writing whom?
Where and how is the threshold? When do we cross it? Are we thresholding?
Is there a border between us and the audience? When writing and translating, aren't we both writers and audience at once?
Content is plastic. Language even more so. Plurality wonders me into writing. Tongues migrate me across.
What first spurred *these* chimærical expeditions? An unfinished poem by Paul Celan in Romanian. I wanted to finish it, though I was not sure how; it was my impulse to translate or write into what was not yet there.
That intrigued me, so I had to interrupt, or help, or make sounds, or who made those sounds?
Elisa Sampedrín? When I saw the English poem Elisa had translated from Nichita Stănescu, though she knew no Romanian, I was urged to read it, and then translate it into another Romanian.
Or another English. But who were you translating, Sampedrín or Stănescu? And who was I writing? Who is who?

OA: *Civic* comes from Latin *civicus*, from *civis* (citizen), yet the original use was the *corona civica*, a garland of green leaves and acorns given in ancient Rome to a person who saved a fellow citizen's life. So to enact the civic means to be accountable to another, to another body.

I thought much about this when writing *feria: a poem park*. *feria* works against the palimpsest of a real park and uses a landscape's transient architectures to explore the ephemeral space where we enact the civic, where our private selves face other private selves in a public space, a space of

leisure and nature, though also a troubled space where much is constructed, torn down, constructed over. There is also an exploration of remnants left behind physically and imaginatively in this space once the civic is engaged. And remnants demand a kind of translation. Here landscape is a clamorous crossing of voices/bodies who are not only accountable to each other but to the environment they inhabit and possibly impair. So when I embarked on the *Expeditions*, I entered their tumult not as *author* but as *citizen*, joyously accountable to the other voices met and created within their frontiers.

EM: In *O Ciudadán*, the citizen is one who enables passages across borders, where bodies act or enact, and do not enclose but open, in order to *be*. The paradox of borders is that their primary job is not to keep out, but to let in. My practice more and more involves translation. It is a movement across borders in poetry and language that came to me as surprise and accident when I started translating Fernando Pessoa, because I realized I could read Portuguese (as well as French, English, and Galician). Translation, I began to comprehend, involves permeability, not equivalence. It involves the formation and reformation of identities. Translation is always already unstable. And thus *fruitful*. And political, because even to make these claims for translation solicits a discomfort, a backlash, from those who would rather see translation as static, foreign, an administrative action alien to poetry and poetics.¹

The border, and translation, also link with the notion of “seams,” which are folded borders, and can be related to Gilles Deleuze’s fold or *pli*, as well as to Jean-François Lyotard’s idea of the libidinal band, both of which have echoes in Judith Butler’s work on the “inside” and “outside”—intense work on the formation of identity in and through language.

OA: My poetic work has developed *in companionship* with work in and through translation. Because my primary writing language is not my first language, I am in a sense always in the constant act of self-translation, and thus aware of the space *in-between* the lexicons, music, structures, histories of different languages. Often, I think I compose out of this in-between space, allowing, for example, my written English to be affected by the rhythm of oral Romanian, or by the structure of French, and in so doing not only altering the very materiality of my English but also that of the Romanian or French.

Over time, my writing practice and translation practice, because I also translate the work of others, have become more and more intersticed, or rather, they always were, but I have become more aware of the interstices, and can thus use these more consciously, as tools. My upcoming book *We*,

Beasts emerged not only out of interstices in time and between languages, but also between genres, the folk/fairy/wonder tale and poetry, in particular, and the possible crossings between the oral tale and the inscribed page.

As I began translating the work of Nichita Stănescu a decade ago, I knew from the start that I needed to *write* his poetry to be able to *translate* it. For me, writing and translation begin with the materiality of language, how the architectures of page and text interact, and how language, which is sound and music, is handled bodily in the throat and the chest and the belly. Furthermore, both language and the tongue that forms it are not neutral places but loaded sites of histories and permutations. To leap from a *cuvânt* in Romanian to a *palabra* in Galician to a *word* in English, new pathways and contexts must be forged. “Context,” by the way, comes from the Latin word *contextus*, from *con-* “together” and *texere* “to weave,” thus to weave together, thus the text and what is outside it, its context, its support, are inextricably woven. And so to traverse any text from one language into another language, the text and its context undergo a dismantling and then a remounting into the other language; they are unwritten and then re-written in the new language.

EM: There is a sense in which any reading of English—or another language—by any one reader is already translation. There is no one way to read that is determined solely by the text; the body of the reader is necessary. And the body of the reader exists in culture, is always already, in a sense, *inscribed* on a support outside its strict biological casing. We’re back to the idea of *citizen* here, as a response to an other, to the other and the embodiment of the other.

Given this dynamic relationship of reader to culture—the exterior circumstance that conditions the reader’s reception of any text read (and in fact conditions their very subjectivity and its formation)—it’s clear that we don’t really have access to a pure original. That’s a myth, though we do like to embody or “ensoul” the text we read with the “intentions” of an “author”—a single human who “authorizes” or “authenticates” the text. When we do this, we create the original. The process is so natural (i.e., we don’t think about it or question it) that we see it as subversion when poets or translators or writers work textually in other ways. We still “authenticate” that poet as author of “an original,” even in work that attempts to depart from such notions, such as Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Day*; here the copy of the newspaper in the form of a book, which may or may not have been copied word by word by one human named Kenneth Goldsmith, functions as a new original, and its author is recognized; authorship is acknowledged. The “authenticity” process is not interrupted.

OA: The effect of this kind of thinking on translation is that in North America, by and large, a “good” translation still means smoothness, domestication and easy readability, as the translator is supposed to disappear so that the author and their original can be more visible. On the other hand, Jacques Derrida in an essay titled “Des Tours de Babel” speaks about “the necessary and impossible task of translation, its necessity *as impossibility*” (223). To my mind, translation is impossible because there are no equivalences between languages, the bodies that utter them and their contexts, only counterparts and digressions, and necessary because there are no equivalences, only counterparts and digressions.

In our shared work in the poems of *Expeditions of a Chimæra*, we foreground the interruptions and digressions that are always ever part of translation, and not just this smoothness that is identified with a “good” translation. We multiply the author and translator positions and make them equally visible and equally unauthentic. The text can no longer be “ensouled” with any one person’s intentions, but is instead constantly interrupted and bent to rearticulate the concerns of language in another way, and, in part, we do this simply through the act of reading.

EM: As readers we always only have access to *markings*. To a materiality we process through *our* subjectivity, through the entire cluster of social, cultural bandings that make us cohere as individuals. Without the body of the reader, which involves the *civis*, the markings rest on the page, ink, and cellulose. If there *were* an original—a set of intentions fixed on the page and in no need of translation—then study or conversation would be superfluous. Nothing would be moot.

OA: One of the things I realized early on, as I was first encountering a second language, is that my only limits are the limits of language, and that language is an encounter which can and must occur again and again. Language belongs to no one in particular; it is material, sometimes *marked* on a page or a screen, material whose intentions can never be fully assumed and which is palimpsestic in nature.

EM: As a reader of five languages, I tend to read in “language,” just in language, not in English. All languages just seem like reading language to me. I translate this language I read on the page into my language, the language I am thinking in at that moment. Sometimes this means I translate English into English.

There are other instances of translating a language into its same idiom. There is Ronald Johnson’s *Radi Os*, a kind of fetish text for both of us, written in the very lexicon and *mise-en-page* of *Paradise Lost*, translating *Paradise*

Lost into English. In *O Cadoiro*, there are the bands of text in French across the English poems. These are texts compressed, played, selected from snatches of Derrida's *Mal d'Archive* in a reassembling and breaking. When I finished, I found it was still Derrida or, really, because I had bodily intervened in it, it was a *translation* of Derrida from French into French. All these actions disturb English in beautiful ways, and disturb the authenticity process.

OA: Another example of translating from one language into that same language is Jen Bervin's *Nets*, where she bared Shakespeare's sonnets into "nets" where the holes catch words to form her poems, paradoxically both paring down and amplifying Shakespeare's language. In *feria: a poempark*, I wrote a long poem in which I took historical extracts from newspaper articles, park board meetings, letters, etc. and placed my body before them and unfocused my gaze, the way one does before an abstract formalist painting, until certain forms and words emerged. It is not simply a matter of erasure. It is occupying a text, deconstructing it into parts, having the body traverse those parts, to then reconstruct and transfer them onto another page, into another context, another time. In this movement, authorship is multi-dimensionally fractured across contexts, pages, time. Furthermore, when dealing with historical documents, their historicity is disturbed, because they can no longer simply "document"; their assumed authority is both mined and undermined, and ultimately translated.

EM: Which brings us back to reading as translation, and to our tasks in *Expeditions of a Chimæra*. I don't understand Celan or Stănescu in Romanian, nor you Elisa Sampedrín in Galician, but we heartily engage with these voices and these languages in these Chimæras. We do something objectively impossible and claim a place for it as translation: translating from languages we don't know.

How do I read a language I don't understand? Romanian, for example? I use other aspects of poetic art, in a sense. I am obliged to read Romanian as absolute material, as material markings and shapes on the page. I see where the language repeats, what syllables it takes up again, how one syllable leads to another because of a look or sound; I intuit rhythms and structures that subtend it. I make connections using the languages that I do know, and I literally witness my own mind at work concatenating "sense." Not knowing the language means the semantic level takes a different seat, yet it doesn't vanish: rather, I see things I know, still, but they are differently exposed. A lot of what we call "understanding" is based on assumptions about meaning, and not about objective correlations. When the text breaks from these assumptions, when it refuses to give us what we assume, we have to

invent new tactics. Paradoxically, we rely not less but more heavily on the text itself, its materiality. We also engage more of our own cultural/social cluster that constitutes our subjectivity, in “unauthorized” ways. There’s an ethos of space and body, sound, reaction to sound, to the way a word looks in any of five languages: a *polyphonicity*. I am reading through my own subjectivity, and mine, like any given subjectivity, is a coalescence or banding that is social and cultural—I know other languages and they inflect my English. And my subjectivity is dented and moved by what is proximate to it, in this case, the unknown language Romanian and, in *Expeditions of a Chimæra*, the fact of you working along beside me actively in the text.

In the end, in working on the unknown language, there’s a beautiful paradox that blows apart conventional considerations: *Meaning happens without understanding*. And the reverse holds as well, and this really intrigues me: *understanding takes place without “meaning.”*

OA: We seem to always get so stuck on the *is-ness* of language, how this language is and how that language is, as though a language is static, instead of exploring its movement, its passage, its ways of crossing from here to there. Language exists because of the necessity of dialogue between two beings. Language *is* only because it *moves* from me to you to her to me, etc. It is its motions and arcs that one attempts to translate/read into/write into, rather than its *is-ness*.

Language is always also in *flux*, it is not syntactically or grammatically intact or whole, and this becomes most evident and obvious when writing out of and across languages. Caroline Bergvall, herself a multilingual writer/performer, spoke of this in a recent essay: “. . . a multilingual or second language writer cannot rest nor trust the ideal of a complete, motivated, monological and pre-Babel language, at one with a Nature that writing might uncover” (8). So we fell in with these *Expeditions*, in this flux between languages and bodies, because our individual practices and cultural relocations had already shown us that an unconfused, complete, pre-Babel language does not exist and that this is enriching, prismatic, and infinitely explorable. We don’t have one *natural* language to *protect* and so we are free to listen to the other standing before us, making language.

In this doubled, tripled, ever multiple embodiment that is collaboration, listening becomes acute. One must listen with the whole body, not just the ears. Listening is an active act—involves response, for you have to *SHOW* you are listening—and an agreement to constantly risk the unknown, to feel destabilized and out of this instability be willing to create new connections, to build into a rhizome, to be rhizomatic.

Listening in the Chimæric work demanded of me that I forge other ways of perceiving/receiving/creating. We have such a learned tendency to organize information into systems, but within a collaboration, in this space of receive and respond, the rational and the systematic quickly become inoperative. In their place a dialogic/responsive/instinctual/bodily listening occurs.

When responding to another person, another embodiment, I cannot construct what I am listening to based on my expectations, and if I do, I am proven wrong, because I can never anticipate what the other might do. Some might think that, after a while, based on experience, or prior tacit agreement, I might come to have some sort of accurate expectation of what the other might do. In practice this proves to be false. Early on, I once told Elisa that “I am so tentative when giving you clues.” This tentativeness arose out of the idea previously held in my body that these clues would be cues, and thus would not only influence, but somewhat control what she was about to do next. But then I realized that since, every time, each person is responding anew based on what has come before, and since what has come before is constantly changing, the context is slightly or greatly altered, and thus the response unpredictable, and the listening acute.

There is clamour, reverberation, a cumulative chorus of voices, that arise out of and through two voices, which are really three voices, or four or five. EM: Some decisions about what to do next come out of a bodily response to those conditions. We have to watch posture, detect from where the voice is emerging. There is a relationship between gesture and word. The materiality becomes four-dimensional: two bodies (three-dimensional) over time (because there are two).

I think this responsiveness evolved, as well, because we wrote these pieces over time. The writing of subsequent pieces was not only informed by the writing of prior texts but by the public performance of those texts, and by the decisions we would make in performing, in translating between voices, in being attentive to the different registers of these voices (due to different embodiment) and to how the voices themselves could be combined or overlapped aurally. This knowledge would then be folded into the composition of subsequent pieces. Here body and embodiment are inescapable factors in the aural text and impact writing. Affect is an inescapable factor. Agamben’s definition of friendship as a “purely existential con-division . . . without an object” is a close parallel as well (7).

The process of growing each work as written text, and interfering in the text of the other, is different than working with constraints or writing

through constraint. Most constraints are enacted “passively,” from above, i.e., they are set out in advance and followed. They are “striations,” to use a Deleuzian term. But in *Expeditions*, the process is active, not passive. It emerges from below. The constraint, if you will, in *Expeditions of a Chimæra*, was not just working with Stănescu or Celan, it was confrontation with the subjectivity and incorporation of the other: admitting that language takes place outside me as an individual and that this is writing too, and is, curiously, “my” writing.

Our process accepts from the outset that the other person will interfere in whatever text I set down, and the other person’s text is there for me to interfere in. This derails what we conventionally think of as individual expression. Rather than try to pretend we’ve made subjectivity vanish, it is doubled, then doubled again—and across the folds, various subjectivities, or “subjectivity-figures” operate. In *Expeditions of a Chimæra*, I contribute to a textual flow or folding, signing myself to a text that is already on the page, or on the page before the page I write on. And because I’ve heard you read the text and syncopate words—for we performed earlier texts as we were writing later ones—I can challenge or try to interrupt that as well, interrupt what I might see as your possible readings of whatever text I put down, in advance of your seeing it. I fold space before you get to it, as you do for me.

OA: Perhaps the notion of the hinge could help amplify some of what we are saying. On the hinge hinges an opening, a potential. The hinge is also a crack in time or time suspended; time for a moment perceived as possibly nonlinear. The hinge is time all unto itself: a beautiful collision. The question becomes how to create such hinges so that the work can shift into unpredictable spaces and simultaneously *be* this movement and these spaces. So that time can begin to loosen its yoke of linearity.

One hinge is you, Erín, writing O.A. and me, Oana, writing E.M. and Elisa writing both, and the readers writing us as they read, for they will urgently need to, for we play. We lie, thus we are true. I write E.M. and sign it as O.A. or you write E.S. and sign it as P.C., and in fact it is really Elisa writing us all.

The only one creating the original is the reader in the act of reading. The author is a prank in that the author is a fabrication. Collaboration taught me this most fully. I discovered that I could not only play/write my own author but also the author of others. And how liberating to see it for the game that it is and actively engage with it, mess with its rules or invent new ones, rather than “naturally” and “passively” assuming that a subjective “I” and an “author” are exactly one and the same being. While the subjective “I” may be a living, breathing being, at least in the moment of speaking—the I is a

speaking position, not necessarily “the person” who occupies it—the author is a role, a mask. And thus can be occupied by more than one person, or no one.

EM: We could mention Jorge Luis Borges here, who refused to give primacy to any text as “original,” and who insisted that every text is a translation, including the original. Or Samuel Beckett, who translated himself and whose attitude toward translation was that the purported original was a draft and subject to being improved upon, and that any translation was just a subsequent version.

Of course there’s Michel Foucault as well, saying—in short—that the author is an eighteenth-century phenomenon that arises to shut down plurality of meaning, also as a place to assign blame. It is an exclusionary structure. It is there to add veracity to a text, but it is important to remember that the “author” is a textual move, i.e. a move in a textual game, in the game that is text.

What’s fun is that when we’re actually working on a text, the author is the last thing on our mind; we just started to play in language, in listening, in hearing. We invent the characters we need in order to maintain the momentum of the work as we are doing it, for the momentum is a “rush,” is an energy that seems to surpass any one of us as individuals, and it is a *textual* energy.

On the other hand, I don’t think this lets us avoid subjectivity. Some writers have said that part of the thrust of their compositional practice is avoiding subjectivity (that messy “I”). Yet avoiding [it] is a fallacy. A subject still decides. Even the rewriting, word for word, of one day’s edition of the newspaper starts with a decision to start, and continues because the subjectivity articulated from above the text does not say “stop.” All work passes through a body, and thus through a subject. The subject in such a text is visible as striation or banding rather than field/flesh, but it is still operative. That authenticity process is still at work. I think, rather, that the striations must be admitted, examined and allowed to emerge.

At the other extreme, “subjectivity in flux” is not adequate as a description of what we do, either; subjectivity itself is always subject to alteration and failure and denting. Just as a dented car is still a car, a dented subjectivity is still a subjectivity! What’s interesting are the intersections and not the “flux” in isolation (this flux *is* subjectivity, which is always in formation). The pressures from above/below in the process of writing turn out to be flexible; inside and outside can change places as they do in the fold. Because a subjectivity is not possible without this flexible and ongoing movement, “subjectivity in flux” belabours the point.

OA: In that light, our insistence and admission that we made no prior decision to “collaborate” makes sense. Collaboration is the name that came afterward,

when we looked at the text and acknowledged we were all guilty parties in its confabulation. When we could look at it as readers. At the moment of writing, we are not collaborating, we are just *writing*, or *answering*, or at play in the material; we are subjects encountering subjects, regardless of what language they speak.

EM: Yes, an absolutely material response and provocation: the prompts come from the language itself. The subjectivity of the “author” is not split or fragmented between us, as there is not yet an “us,” just language and listeners, responders who are in *play*, both playing with language and—need I say it—giggling!

That’s why I want to refer to *Expeditions of a Chimæra* as our shared work, rather than as a collaboration. We shared work in a material field, both inscriptive and aural. Earlier, I mentioned Deleuze’s fold, his *pli*. Clearly one of our Expeditions is a poem that physically folds—and must be unfolded by the reader. It walks right out of the book. As well, in “C’s Garden,” each part of the text is a fold, and within each of these folds, there are more folds: the line can be folded. We found this out in performing it. Even “Prank” has folds, vertical ones—in terms of the repeatedly “translated” texts—and horizontal folds, with the footnotes—which are composed as part of the text, and aren’t really footnotes at all.

In *The Fold*, Deleuze invokes Gottfried W. Leibniz. “The multiple is not only that which has many parts but also that which is folded in many ways,” says Deleuze (6). Or as Leibniz wrote: “The division of the continuous must not be taken as of sand dividing into grains, but as that of a sheet of paper or of a tunic in folds, in such a way that an infinite number of folds can be produced, some smaller than others, but without the body ever dissolving into points of minima” (112-14).

The process of writing *Expeditions of a Chimæra* (which are also the *Chimærae of an Expedition*) was not simply improvisational or homophonic, but involved working with distribution and resemblance, smoothness and striation, propagation and momentary occupation. There was the crossing of the written and the spoken in the composition process, facing the necessary linearity of the spoken (because we have to say one word before another) and working consciously in performance and in writing to disrupt that linearity, to fold and put stress at the points of folding, to move through constraint by stressing or folding it. All of which is subject to embodiment and certain features of embodiment, such as the differential construction of vocal cords in a human being, which affects the timbre of the voice and its potential for interaction with another voice. All these movements, to us, are political

gestures as well, as they are provisional and enactive: they move and open subjectivity and subject formation in ways that acknowledge our con-divison and intervention as affective subjects. Ah, the *civis*!

Have we crossed the threshold?
Did you lose your watch?
If your passport expires, while you are on the border, can you call across?
I want to extend the reading experience.
You have already made people walk on text!
How else to material a word's meat?
Enter foreign and indigenus, across a text?
Exit indigenus and foreign.
All poetic text lets the texts of future poets enter.
Who is who?

NOTE

- 1 An example: http://www.ualberta.ca/~transday/index_files/2009abstracts.htm of the type of backlash that refuses, even, to consider Moure to be a translator; here she is accused of “impersonating a translator”!

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