

THE SPATIAL POLITICS OF ULTRA- TRANS- LATION: A CON- VERSATION WITH JEN HOFER

Nasrin Himada on behalf of Scapegoat I am interested in how language constructs space and in how it constitutes spatial politics. I want to get at the heart of that through your practice as a translator, interpreter, and writer. Could you introduce yourself, and tell me more about your practice?

Jen Hofer My practice encompasses poetry and other forms of writing, some visual practice, usually visual textual practice, DIY bookmaking, translating, social justice interpreting, language justice advocacy, teaching, knitting, urban bicycling. But my main practice as an artist is writing, mostly poems and essays, and cross-language work, as well as a number of collaborations, most actively with John Pluecker, the co-founder of Antena.

SG I want to begin by asking you to define language in your work.

JH I have a few thoughts about that. Language is both a tool and a system. Many things happen in the body, or in relation, or in the world, that exceed language, or bypass language, or aren't in language. But language is central to what we can imagine and think and do, and that's where I feel the political power of experimental or adventurous uses of language—poetic or otherwise—resides. Language makes the world that we are able to think and articulate and be in. If we're able to reconfigure our relationship to the structures of dominance and power in language, we can literally help ourselves to re-imagine the world—a re-imagining we need urgently.

Existing in more than one language can help us to realize that language and object, or language and world, or language and experience, are actually very different from one another. This is a glass [Jen holds up a little drinking glass] and it's also un vaso. Words are just sounds that we put onto this object, interpolating the object or layering over it. Being bilingual or multilingual helps us to remember that there's no essentialism, there's no essential *thingness* to the thing.

SG I want to ask you about what language justice is to you and how you feel it's connected to a spatial politics, or power in space, or how it conditions those relations.

JH Language justice is the right that every person has to speak in the language in which they feel most comfortable and hence to participate fully in the spaces they inhabit, whether those spaces are in public or private, at a community meeting, in a courtroom or a classroom—whatever the space might be. At its heart, language justice is about using language as a tool for enfranchisement, and for bringing a person's full self and full experience into a space. When you ask what language is: it's tied to our experience of the world, our capacity to express what our experience has been and articulate our ideas. This is intimately linked to our capacity to experience ourselves as experiencing. Of course you can occupy

a space without language in a purely bodily or purely visual way. But because occupying space is relational, language becomes a very important tool. One of the concepts behind language justice is creating a space where there is horizontality among the languages that are present in that space as much as possible, rather than one language dominating over others, which tends to happen. And I say as much as possible because doing language justice work isn't about reaching perfection—often we're limited by the resources we have, often there will be more than two languages in a room but we might only have the capacity to create horizontality between two of those languages, and then we just acknowledge that and keep working. In the language justice pamphlet that Antena wrote,¹ we mention that just making the effort to welcome more than one language and to create that space where all languages are equally honoured—even if we're not able to do justice to every possible language—this changes the structure of the space on a molecular level, alchemically. Language justice in that way has to do with how the architecture of a space is set up, both conceptually and physically.

So it's the difference between, say, when you walk into a meeting or a workshop, and someone says: "If you don't speak English you're going to want to take the interpreting equipment and sit over there," versus "Welcome, this is going to be a bilingual space. In this space, we are going to be speaking in both Spanish and English, so if you're not comfortable in both languages you're going to need to use the interpreting equipment."

Language justice is about making sure you have the correct tools so that you don't have to ask people to sit in one particular place. It's making sure that the people who are presenting are not only speaking in the dominant language(s). A lot of times people get told a particular space is going to be bilingual, but in practice all the important speech occurs in the dominant language, and people who are not proficient in that language are accommodated by the presence of an

interpreter. And that is a completely different way of setting up the space than to create a truly bilingual or multilingual space where two or more languages can coexist. I think it's important to ask ourselves the question: how would we need to orchestrate the physical space of an event, the conceptual space of an event, the people invited to present or facilitate, to make sure that every person in the room can participate fully regardless of the language they speak?

SG Tell me more about Antena, what you do as a collective.

JH The work that we do as interpreters, translators, writers, and teachers is about listening, transmission, and reception. Hence our name: Antena.

SG How many of you are there?

JH Antena started as a social justice interpreting collaborative five years ago with two people: myself and John Pluecker, who goes by JP. We met at a writing workshop in Tijuana where I was teaching and he was a participant. We liked each other and maintained a connection. We also kept seeing each other in social justice interpreting contexts like The National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights and the U.S. Social Forum. We started having conversations about being social justice interpreters and talking about some of the challenges we experience. One of which was about how language wasn't being thought about as an integral piece of social justice, that it was often more of an afterthought. JP and I also have many strong connections in our creative work, and share perspectives on those challenges as well—for instance, in our reactions to the idea that "everything is lost in translation." In our *Manifesto for Ultratranslation*,² we wrote: "Nothing is lost in translation. Everything was always already lost, long before we arrived," and we welcome that waywardness. What we're losing in translation or in cross-language work, if we do it in a thoughtful way, are colonial structures, white supremacy, patriarchal structures. In conventional translation, there's this focus on creating a seamless translation

of a brilliant and masterful original text; the typical lament with this type of translation is that the essential nature of the original (presuming such a thing exists) cannot fully be transmitted in the other language. That is a way of thinking that keeps problematic and imbalanced structures of power in place, privileging the heroic, singular, individual act of creating genius texts, rather than seeing each person's literary production as one strand in a much larger and more complex whole in which all voices are necessary. I am all for embracing what is lost in translation and starting over from nothing—that is, from the nothing we already have if we think about all the poisoned putrid social and economic and political and linguistic structures we need to remake from scratch, and then moving somewhere, toward something, within that.

SG You mean through language and expression?

JH Yes, but also through a constant thinking about what's being said or written or expressed elsewhere that we can't otherwise hear here. What do we need to do to tune our ears in order to hear difference?

As Antena we've done a range of things—interpreting for conferences and community groups, helping organizations to create effective bilingual spaces, writing collaborative texts together, collaborating on translations, publishing bilingual texts in homemade DIY books through our small imprint, Libros Antena Books, making installations that include the work of many other writers, bookmakers, and artists, and experimenting with new modes of performance based on the techniques we use as interpreters. We often think about that form of trading language back and forth and the corrosion that happens if you're not doing that carefully, or if you're giving the other person too much input, which is something that as an interpreter you're often trying to control. So we create improvised poem-performances that ask: what happens if you force excess into that equation, or if you improvise in a way that makes it very difficult for the person to interpret "accurately"? What is accuracy in poetic language? What kinds of poetics

become possible within an exchange that's guided by the way interpretation requires following what another person says, and the way poetic improvisation requires leaps of imagination?

SG I want to hear more about what "Ultratranslation" is and how you came about inventing it?

JH Antena did an installation at Blaffer Art Museum in Houston from January to May of 2014. We displayed thousands of publications from small autonomous presses from all over the U.S. and from six countries in Latin America; we curated the books we included from each press, to include innovative work by writers of colour, as well as feminist, queer, and genderqueer writers, alongside work in translation into English from all over the world, and experimental writing in Spanish from Latin America. We also had work by eleven artists from the U.S. and Latin America in the space, all of whom in some way work across visual and textual languages. The installation involved extensive programming, all of it bilingual with interpretation provided, and we also taught a class collaboratively in the space. JP and I knew we wanted to create some offering as part of the show, to explain the ideas behind Antena, so we wrote five bilingual pamphlets: three manifestos, and two how-to guides; the *Manifesto for Ultratranslation* is one of those pamphlets. We were originally calling it a manifesto for "Untranslation," but that didn't seem right. "Ultratranslation" opens up a space of potentiality, but it isn't something I can explain—this is what you do to make an ultratranslation, or this is how you do it...

SG So, what conditions its possibility?

JH Ultratranslation is both excess and absence in some way. A lot of the thinking we've done around translation and ultratranslation often comes back to Lawrence Venuti's theorizing around problematizing the translator's invisibility and the dominance of "fluency" in our conception of what translation should be or do. Venuti writes about the translator's invisibility in two senses: first, in terms of lack of credit, acknowledgement, and compensation

for the people doing the labour of translation; and second, in terms of the ways translations are considered “bad” if they sound “like translations,” as if they were not originally written in English—which they were not! The age-old lament of all that is lost in translation—that’s just a normalizing and essentializing way of thinking about what writing is and therefore what translation can be, because translation is a form of writing. So our thinking around ultratranslation was sparked by a desire to just turn our backs on that kind of constriction and do something different. And also frustration with the idea that a translation is supposed to be seamless, and how often translations are talked about as if there were no agent of their coming into the other language. Translation, as Gayatri Spivak writes, is the most intimate act of reading—it’s the deepest of deep reading—and it’s taking everything about a text apart, changing all the constituent parts, and putting the text back together again, but it never goes back together again in quite the same way. So I think our *Manifesto for Ultratranslation* is trying to think about all the different ways that it doesn’t go back together, as well as the body and the being of the person who does and does not put the text back together again.

SG How do you think about meaning in that regard? I’m trying to go back to what you were saying about the glass, this is called a glass, and the word is not the glass, it’s not its thingness, as you put it.

JH I know the glass exists. I do realize that. SG Right. So, I’m trying to think of an example, like when I read a poem. You might have gotten something else than what I got in reading the same poem. But, in the translation of that poem, the feeling or the expression of it, what the poem wants to communicate in tone, rhythm, and affect emerges from an autonomous intention. In the sense of how the poem is already playing with language. I’m interested in thinking about how that becomes translatable. So it’s not about the words in and of themselves, but what the words are doing together.

JH Yes, but I think that the poem is doing a different thing in a different language, and

that’s totally fine. The only way to create the exact same effect is to reproduce the exact same poem in the exact same language so that your translation of, let’s say, a poem in Arabic, would be the exact poem in Arabic. The words are positioned in the exact same place. That would have to be the “translation” in order for the text to be the exact same text after it was “translated.” And, even then, it wouldn’t be exactly the same, perhaps, because time makes a difference: if you read a poem right now, and then you read it again right *now*, even these few seconds later, it’s going to be different. That’s what meaning is. It’s in difference, in the space between all the things—not in the thing.

SG With that said, I get the sense, an intuitive feeling, about your practice—as translator, poet, interpreter, activist—as also emerging from an erotics of joy and pleasure in working with language, creating language and destroying it at the same time. How do you feel about what your work does? How does it constitute a politics or an erotics? Do you have a name or an expression for that?

JH First, when I think about erotics and language I think indelibly and joyously about Audre Lorde and bell hooks—so part of me just wants to insert quotes from each of them here. But I’ll respond to your question with my own words instead. I take great pleasure in how language functions and un-functions—as a reader, as a writer, as a poet. When I’m interpreting, enacting the multi-directional flipping-back-and-forth of language transfer, taking something in and then spitting it out in another language is incredibly pleasurable. It’s also very exhausting and it can be very painful depending on who the speaker is and how they’re speaking, how much they mumble, how much you may have to strain to hear them, or the content of what they’re saying. But regardless, that transfer or transit between two languages has a certain kind of material, textural, palpable erotics that’s very pleasurable, as does the taking apart of language.

As a person who is perceived by most of the world as white, and hence as someone who

benefits from white privilege whether I want it or not—that is, as someone who is a mixed-race person but is often misread as white—I’ve thought a lot about what it means to have the white privilege I have and do not want. I’d prefer if those twin systems of privilege and oppression didn’t exist, and given that I’d like to work in any way I can, in everything I do, to dismantle those systems I also have to recognize that as much as I don’t want to have these benefits, I benefit from an unjust system based in white supremacy. In terms of thinking about the ways that I take up space and don’t take up space when I enter a particular experience, it’s become very important to me to do work that uses the privilege that I have—the education that I’ve received, the ways that I have been encouraged to be articulate and to be a fearless speaker and willing to talk back to authority—to use those privileges to open up spaces for conversations that might not otherwise have been possible. My leadership, such as it is, is about removing myself from the space, or using myself as a tool for other connections to be possible, or other leadership, if you want to use that word, to be possible. I don’t know if that’s about erotics, but I do think it is about dismantling white privilege as a kind of space making.

I would say that what constitutes the political in my work is my outrage over the ways inequity, lack of dignity, and assaults on autonomy and violence against marginalized bodies of all kinds are systematized and normalized so that those who are privileged don’t even notice themselves perpetuating inequality. And at the same time what constitutes the political in my work is a radical sense of mutual accountability with the communities I participate in, and an abiding belief that we can use the tools we have, and the tools we invent, to re-imagine ways of being and acting and interrelating in the world. So in that sense—insofar as being and acting and interrelating are embodied and vibrantly love-charged spaces—I suppose you could call that a kind of erotics, if that’s a framework you prefer. My own frameworks tend toward

language, and I see language justice as an integral part of social justice, and of course language is the primary material of my artistic practice as well. I first became aware of the term “language justice” as it was being used at the Highlander Research and Education Center in Tennessee.³ Language justice, for me, is a politics based in listening rather than speaking, or in speaking out of listening.

SG What is “speaking out of listening”? Or, how is listening a practice?

JH JP and I wrote a piece some months ago titled “Speechlessness into (and out of) Speech” that was published as part of a folio on translation edited by Rosa Alcalá for *Evening Will Come*.⁴ Much of what we discussed there has to do with how easy it is to feel silenced—paralyzed, really—by the brutal workings of the world, and how to find ways to use radical listening practices and the speech that might come out of those practices, those silences, those communications, as activating agents. Part of the work of language justice is making space for conversations to take place across languages, and for listening to happen across difference. We’re not making space for our own speech; rather, we’re making an intervention into a particular space so that others can intervene in the space.

SG How do you open up the space?

JH The tools to create effective bilingual or multilingual space—the tools of language justice—are both conceptual and practical. Some of the practical tools include experience as an interpreter and translator, simultaneous interpreting equipment, experience around specific strategies organizers can use to plan in advance to create a space where two or more languages can coexist equally. In terms of opening up the space, it really depends on the folks organizing a particular event, who need to be committed to thinking about how language politics will manifest in the space from the very beginning, and to invest in implementing strategies to resist the dominance of whatever language is dominant (in the U.S., almost universally English).

It happens all the time that you walk into a

community meeting—this is just one example—and you say “this is a bilingual space, if you’re not bilingual in Spanish or English, or Korean and English, please take the interpreting equipment” and monolingual English speakers will say, “oh no I don’t need it, I’m cool.” Not because they speak Spanish or Korean, but because their assumption is the space will actually be nominally bilingual, meaning there are some non-English speakers in the room but everything important will be conducted in English. Too often that is corroborated; this is part of what Antena is trying to change. Frequently, the only non-English spoken in the room is if a monolingual speaker of another language happens to drum up the courage to ask a question or make a comment through the use of the interpreter. But otherwise we’re interpreting entirely into the other language from English. So we need to work more closely with the organizers of a space or an event to set up the space as a bilingual space, and often we encourage people to have the very first presenter present in a language other than the dominant language. So the immediate message is: something is happening here that you need to hear, and if you can’t hear it in this language you need to use the interpreting equipment. This approach is trying to invite or even perhaps oblige people to practice a kind of listening they’re not familiar with. And then often what happens in meetings or other events, when the space is set up to be an effective bilingual space, is suddenly people find themselves having passionate conversations about something they know a lot about and care a lot about, even though they don’t share a language—they’re still having a full, dynamic conversation in real time. It can feel magical, yet there are very concrete things to do to set up those structures where that other kind of listening can be accessed, and then hopefully carry across beyond just that one interaction.

SG It also completely changes the space when the first person to present is not speaking in English. My other question though, and maybe you already answered it, but I want another way around it: personally speaking, what moves you about

language, why are you so drawn to it as a site of work and practice and politics?

JH I think I’ve always had proclivities toward language in ways that are inexplicable. But I also grew up between two languages and not having ready access to one of them really marked me. That’s why it’s so important to me to be bilingual and to remain actively bilingual. Also, I am a structural thinker and very committed to changing the structures of the way the world works. I feel like working with language allows us to address the foundations of the way our societies are structured—foundations that allow settler occupation to happen, or allow white supremacy to happen and to manifest in a plague of authorities with weapons attacking humans they do not see as human—those structures partly exist in language.

Of course, I also recognize certain specific issues that urgently need to be addressed. But working with language as my primary material and conceptual framework allows me to work across every kind of issue. I mean, I have interpreted for everything from reproductive justice groups, to immigrant rights groups, to day-labourer groups, to domestic workers, to experimental writers, to families who have had their child, brother, partner killed by the cops—you name it.

I want to think about how to metabolically change everything that is imbalanced and unjust in the way our societies are structured, and how language affects and touches all those things. And, to return to where we started this conversation, language limits and also makes possible what we are capable of imagining.

1
The pamphlet is accessible online at antenaantena.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/langjust.pdf.

2
The *Manifesto for Ultratranslation* is also included in this issue on page 83 and is accessible online at antenaantena.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/ultratranslation.pdf.

3
For more information on the Highlander Center, visit www.highlandercenter.org.

4
See www.thevolta.org/ewc51-antena-p1.html.