THE SPATIAL POLITICS OF ULTRA-TRANSLATION: A CONVERSATION 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 is that 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 two people are trying to make a space where only 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, ‘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 go 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 that a 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 doing it. But because occupying space is relational, language becomes a very important tool.

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

SG So 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 too much input, which is something that as an interpreter you’re often trying to control. So we create improvised poem-performance that ask: what happens in translation across languages? Is it possible to invent something 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 poetic

...become possible within an exchange that’s guided by the way we use language and the listening following what another person says, and the way poetic improvisation requires leaps of imagination.
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for the people doing the labour of translation; and second, in terms of the ways translations are considered “bad” if they sound “like...” as someone who...

It happens all the time that you walk into a

EROS

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benefits to 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 same 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 the text 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 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.

With that said, I get the sense, an intuitive feeling, about your practice—as translator, poet, interrogator of language functions and un-functions—as a reader, as a writer, as a poet. When I’m interpreting an erotics of joy and pleasure in working with language, creating language and destroying it at the same time. How do you feel about your work does? How does it constitute a politics or an erotics? Do you have a name or an expression for that?

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 depend- ing on who the speaker is and how they’re speaking; it can be very malleable, 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 its own erotic power, its own eroticism of joy and pleasure that’s very enjoyable, as does the tak- ing apart of language.

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

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 Amharic 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 the things that it is about dismantling white privilege as a kind of space making.

Second, when I think about language, creating language and destroying it at the same time. How do you feel about your work does? How does it constitute a politics or an erotics? Do you have a name or an expression for that?

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First, when I think about erotics and lan-
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.

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?

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.