

TALKS FROM THE CONVENTION

Translation, Equity, and Solidarity

REMY ATTIG 

REMY ATTIG is assistant professor of Spanish at Bowling Green State University, where he researches how TV and film representations of US Latinx and queer communities are translated for global Spanish-speaking markets. His current book project, *Linguistic Labour and Literary Doulas: Spanglish, Portuñol and Judeo-Spanish Languages and Literatures*, focuses on the post-1980s boom in these literatures and the stylistic and ethical challenges they present for translators.

Over the past few years there have been an increasing number of conversations about the ways in which privilege and translation intersect. Some of these conversations have suggested that the identities of translators and the authors they translate must overlap. But this ideal may be impossible if we consider the complex transnational identities that many translators have and the importance that language and culture play in the creation of these identities, on the one hand, and the often monolingual lives of the authors they translate, on the other. Other conversations have revolved around a need for equity of access to the translation profession, which is certainly pressing. But is there space for solidarity in translation in the interim, while we continue to strive to dismantle systemic barriers? After all, translation is a way of amplifying the voices of others and, as such, seems like the perfect forum for international solidarity, but a singular approach to solidarity through translation—complicated and humbling work—will never fit all situations.

I offer here a reflection on the realities that inform translation as a practice and an optimistic exploration of the role that translators can play in advancing solidarity work. I do not study the translation praxis of minoritized communities' stories objectively; such a focus would require an empirical methodology rather than the exploratory and iterative thought process that I am attempting to encourage. Instead, I raise questions with which I grapple as a translator-scholar and which have no singular answers. To this end, I assume that translators reading this contribution aspire to work in solidarity with the authors they are translating, as allies, so that we can collectively work toward building a more just society.

I consider how the translation of some texts necessitates a wider conversation about translator choice, target audience, equity, representation, and the role that solidarity between translators and the

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communities on either end of the translation exchange might occupy. I begin by presenting some seminal scholarship in the field of translation studies, then move on to discuss the impetus of this reflection—the prospective Dutch translation of Amanda Gorman’s poem “The Hill We Climb”—before finally raising three questions that translators and editors may consider as they contemplate how they can stand in solidarity with activist authors from minoritized communities. My hope is that this contribution will generate additional questions, prompt nuanced reflections, and spark important dialogues between translators, translation studies scholars, publishers, and authors.

Translation and Power

The power imbalance inherent in any translation exchange has been discussed at least since Walter Benjamin’s 1923 seminal essay “The Task of the Translator.” Many more contemporary debates consider the language exchange through a postcolonial or center-periphery lens (e.g., Appiah; Bandia; Spivak; Susam-Sarajeva). Additional studies have focused on the translation of multilingualism or the ways in which heteroglossia, idiolects, queer language, or nonstandardized forms are translated for audiences who may not understand the cultural context from which such texts emerge (e.g., Démont; Grutman; Meylaerts). Still further conversations have highlighted the overwhelming emphasis on the translation of source texts produced in prestige varieties of national or so-called named languages into prestige varieties of other languages, which comes with its own nationalist bias (e.g., Cussel). This orientation, Mattea Cussel notes, stresses translation that takes place between languages like French, Spanish, and English but minimizes the importance of translation from, into, or between minoritized varieties that do not enjoy the same level of institutional or national recognition, such as Québécois Joual, US Spanglish, Acadian Chiac. Most theorists take a stance that all texts can be translated in some way, but the discourse needs to evolve to consider the role that the social location of translators can play in the translation

exchange in the context of the social and political realities of the 2020s.

Marc Démont found that source texts from queer communities are not always fully understood by translators. Building on Démont, I suggest that perhaps such a misunderstanding of minoritized communities’ may be more widespread, especially when translators are not engaged with the communities they translate (Attig). Consequently, in their misunderstanding of the source texts—and perhaps source culture—and a possible lack of engagement with similar themes in the target culture, the resulting translations often fail to convey the message that was central to the source, prompting a domino effect of misunderstanding or minimization for readers of the translation. It is essential, then, that any conversation about the translation of minoritized voices fully engage the matter of who is translating their literature and for what audience.

Amanda Gorman

In 2021, the Black Dutch activist and journalist Janice Deul published a critique of the announcement of the forthcoming Dutch translation of “The Hill We Climb,” the poem Amanda Gorman read at the inauguration of President Joe Biden (Deul; Deul and Kotze). This critique spurred much debate within translation and literary circles, particularly about who is qualified to translate which stories.

Gorman, a young Black woman, is the American National Youth Poet Laureate; her poetry focuses on the lived experience of oppression and marginalization, particularly around issues of race and gender. The translator that Gorman chose was Marieke Lucas Rijneveld, a nonbinary, white, award-winning Dutch author with little translation experience (Flood). Rijneveld, despite their experience of identity-based violence as a trans person, is nevertheless a white European from a former colonial center. Why, Deul, wondered, was there not room at the table for a Black translator whose experience might more closely overlap with Gorman’s?

Deul’s critique highlights the facts that no text exists in isolation from the people producing it and that some texts, including “The Hill We Climb,” are

relevant and impactful because of the visibility that it gives to the author. Of course, the translator of a work as prestigious as Gorman's would also benefit from a great deal of prestige. Deul says it is "incomprehensible" to allow the work of a young Black woman who speaks about oppression to be translated by a white Dutch person, no matter their qualifications (Deul and Kotze), and notes that there are many qualified Black translators who might have been given the chance to translate—and to be fairly compensated for translating—the poem into Dutch. After the publication of Deul's critique, Rijnveld withdrew from the project, saying the following:

I am shocked by the uproar surrounding my involvement in the spread of Amanda Gorman's message and I understand the people who feel hurt by Meulenhoff's [the publisher's] choice to ask me. . . . I had happily devoted myself to translating Amanda's work, seeing it as the greatest task to keep her strength, tone and style. However, I realise that I am in a position to think and feel that way, where many are not. I still wish that her ideas reach as many readers as possible and open hearts.

(qtd. in Flood)

In response, the American Literary Translators Association (ALTA) released a statement affirming that it is a slippery slope to suggest that translators ought only to translate works of authors with whom they have overlapping identities ("ALTA Statement"). As the Catalan translator of Gorman's work, Victor Obiols—who was later fired for "having the wrong 'profile'"—stated, "But if I cannot translate a poet because she is a woman, young, black, and an American of the 21st century, neither can I translate Homer because I am not a Greek of the eighth century BC" ("Not Suitable"). Indeed, I wonder to what extent the identities of authors and translators can overlap, given the effects of multilingualism and transnational experience on some translators' identities.

Language shapes our worldview; authors write what they write from their vantage points as subjects in the culture(s) through which they navigate the world. This is a scalable experience—that is, moving beyond monolingualism to master more than one

language shapes the world of translators and how they think. Migration and the acquisition of multiple cultural reference points further shape those who have lived a transnational life and create translators whose experiences differ greatly from those who have lived their lives monolingually and navigate one national dominant culture fluently without external influence. In other words, I would argue that, as in the relationship between a source text and a translation, there can be no perfect equivalence between author and translator.

Instead of selecting translators based on identity, ALTA recommends addressing the limited diversity among translators specifically and within publishing in general. The gaps of representation within publishing are too many and the discussion of them too multifaceted to address fully here. (But we might start by insisting that publishers offer proper recognition of and equitable compensation for translators, to help make literary translation a sustainable career choice for those who are not independently wealthy or otherwise supported by external funding.) Below, I take up three questions that can help translators, translation studies scholars, writers, and editors make ethical choices now, both to inform their translation practices and to support important critiques of the status quo, to recognize the dialectic of power imbalances and solidarity that can exist in a translation exchange and to strive to support equity and justice.

Questions for Translators and Editors

For whom is the source text written and for whom might it be translated?

From a profit-driven publishing model, it is easy to imagine that texts should be written and translated to reach the broadest audience possible. But the reality is that sometimes the intended audience is far narrower and creators (authors, filmmakers, and so on) have chosen not to present their work in a way that is equally accessible to all. For example, Brandon Taylor's 2020 debut novel, *Real Life*, tells the story of Wallace, a gay Black graduate student at a midwestern university. Wallace describes feeling

out of place, being gaslit by white colleagues, and being exoticized by the predominantly white gay community. Taylor, in an interview, has clearly stated that the target reader of this novel is not a cis-white-het-male. Instead, he wanted other queer Black young adults to see their experiences reflected in his work (qtd. in Wheeler). Writing for a specific audience is not new. In the 1980s, Gloria Anzaldúa said, “Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate” (59). And, indeed, Anzaldúa published a wide range of poetry in which she used Spanglish to articulate her message to those with whom she thought it would most resonate. For source texts like these, it is essential to consider for whom we might be translating the texts.

One might believe that the translations of such texts would be created for a broad readership, but authors might not always share that goal—even if publishers do. Instead, there are opportunities for south-to-south translation (that is, translation that avoids passing through central or dominant language varieties), which can build international solidarity by fostering direct communication without the risk of economic or ideological influence from postcolonial centers, or for translations aimed at building solidarity between queer, feminist, or other minoritized communities who struggle in similar ways against cis-white-het patriarchal power structures.¹ When translating a text through the lens of equity and solidarity, it is imperative that those involved consider the target audience of the translation and the impact it will have on the intended readers. After all, the ideal of a translation in solidarity should be to advance the goals of the source text rather than to skirt or undermine them, even if unintentionally.

What is the translator’s relationship to the source community?

The search for translators must consider whether they understand the nuances of the source text and

are in fact able to render them appropriately for potential readers. This seems obvious, but too often literary and audiovisual media are not considered specialized texts—a term that has often been used to refer to medical, legal, or other jargon-heavy texts,² for which we expect a translator to understand nuance in genre, form, and vocabulary in their specialized areas and for which we require proof of such understanding before we hire them. The same rigor is not uniformly applied to vetting translators of literary works, including those by equity-seeking groups. It should be. Social justice translation requires as intimate an understanding of source-community language use and culture as does the translation of medical or legal texts.

The reboot of the sitcom *One Day at a Time* offers an example of what happens when translators fail to consider specialized language and culture in a social justice context. The show follows a Cuban American family from Los Angeles. At one point, the daughter introduces her friends in a go-around that is typical of queer spaces. Each person introduces themselves and states the pronouns that are to be used in reference to them. One character introduces herself as Syd and says that they use “they/ them” pronouns. For anyone familiar with queer norms, this is clearly a person who identifies outside the gender binary and is using the singular *they* rather than a gendered *he* or *she* pronoun. Some of the translations into Spanish and French rendered the interaction into complete gobbledygook. In one version Syd said that their pronouns were “las dos y ellas” (“both of the girls and them” [feminine]) and in French they were “on et tout le monde” (“we and everybody”) (Attig 11–12).

Given that the object of this interaction, as we see moments later, was to provide a learning moment for the mother and grandmother, the butt of the joke should have been their ignorance of nonbinary pronouns. In English, this scene serves to normalize the presence of nonbinary pronouns. In Spanish and French, however, Syd becomes the butt of the joke. Here translators were presumably unaware of the queer-specific source and target cultures. Instead of supporting the intended message, they undermined it. The resulting translations are

exemplary of Démont's observation that queer elements in texts are often misunderstood or erased in translation (157). Furthermore, there is no reason to believe that a misrecognition of cultural nuance is unique to queer contexts.

Translators can minimize the risk of misunderstandings by focusing on translating works from communities with which they are closely connected. This approach does not mean that all translators must have significantly overlapping identities with the authors they translate. After all, there is no guarantee that a gay translator, for example, will be feminist. Nor is there a guarantee that a lesbian translator of *One Day at a Time* would share the same queer politics and understand the same Gen-Z queer reality as the nonbinary queer characters being portrayed in the show. To suggest that an identity overlap in one area is a quality control mechanism for rendering the individual and intersectional realities of an author's voice into another language is naive and minimizes the complexities of identity. In this regard, I agree with ALTA's statement: we should not use personal identification as the primary criterion for determining a translator's ability to work on a text. But translators must have some experience of honest and deep engagement with the communities they are seeking to represent in their work. Engagement with a community to which one does not belong is a humbling task and requires ongoing work—there is no end goal at which to arrive. Instead, the goal is a continual integration of this humility and engagement into the practice of translation.

It can be easy for language professionals to believe that we know the right way to do or say things or to assume that because we have not encountered something—or because the language-governing bodies do not approve of something—that it does not exist. I suspect it was from this place of professional comfort and multilingual competence combined with ignorance of the communities concerned that the aforementioned foibles emerged in the translation of *One Day at a Time*.

While there is no guarantee that translators from the same communities as those in the source text will produce work that is objectively more

accurate or representative of the intentions of the source text, translators from outside the communities they seek to re-create through translation must consider their work through the lens of solidarity.

Is there space for solidarity in this translation?

The third question, and the one that is the most important to me here, is this: What is solidarity and what might it look like in translation?³

David Featherstone defines solidarity as “a relation forged through political struggle which seeks to challenge forms of oppression” (5). He adds that the tendency to understand solidarity as a bringing together of likeness is short-sighted and undermines the transformative experiences that can emerge when diverse groups come together to challenge existing structures of oppression. Solidarity is inventive and transnational; it is built from communities engaging with each other, not from top-down hierarchies (5). Translation, like solidarity, is rhizomatic. It can connect anyone, anywhere, without the need for institutional structures to necessarily support those connections. To Featherstone's definition I add that solidarity is outcome-oriented, meaning that it is measured by the degree to which one's efforts concretely support others in achieving their goals. “Meaning well” is not solidarity; rather, it is a required condition upon which solidarity can be built, but it is far too often used as a cop-out by those who have caused harm and wish to avoid accountability for their missteps. Solidarity is, instead, measured by doing good with and for those with whom you stand.

This definition of solidarity can muddy the waters. It may mean that there is not space for solidarity in every translation project, and, if a translator or editor is approaching the text through a solidarity lens, that condition must be respected. An attempt at solidarity through translation may be declined for several reasons. Two such reasons jump out when we consider the translation of Gorman's poetry, for example. First, the translator chosen distracted from the goal of magnifying the voices of Black artists. Instead, the translator became the story—which in its own way did shed light on the inequities at hand, but by centering the wrong

person. Second, the initial choice of translator diverted resources away from talented Black Dutch translators who might have benefitted economically and gained prestige for their translations of such a high-profile work.

But it is not always clear who can grant or decline an act of solidarity and speak on behalf of a community. No community is a monolith, and if solidarity is a community-led endeavor with no clear hierarchies, there may be conflicting opinions as to whether—or to what degree—there is space for solidarity in a given fight. And, without a clear authority to issue a binding decision, these differing perspectives may produce in-group conflict. Again, the example of Gorman's work is illustrative. Gorman's own choice of a translator was at odds with what it seemed some vocal members of the Black Dutch community wanted. In the case of translation, prevailing international copyright laws, which are certainly not without their flaws, generally do establish a hierarchy. The decision lies with the holder of the copyright: typically, but not always, the author (Venuti 47)—although translators can certainly choose not to pursue or to remove themselves from a project. If translators ask important questions at the outset of a project, authors and publishers may be encouraged to consider some of these challenges earlier in the process as well.

If there is space for solidarity in the work, supporting parties must remember that an acceptance of support is conditional and may be revoked if what seemed like solidarity at the outset turns out, in practice, to undermine the goals of the work. Rijneveld is one such example: they saw that their desire to support was ultimately distracting from the meta goals of the poetry. Successful solidarity work involves prioritizing the objectives and, to do this, the translator must listen and make decisions that advance a project's mission. Honest conversations, humility, and education will go a long way toward this goal. Ultimately, no one wants to remove a translator who has worked hard to support a community; my hope is that more intentional conversations at a project's inception will minimize the risk of such missteps in the future.

If we accept that social justice and solidarity translation are specialized translation and should be treated as such, we can develop practices that will prioritize accurate and nuanced translations of these messages over rushed and mangled translations that may “mean well” but instead undermine the purpose of the source text. Not all texts are written to prioritize equal access by all audiences, and not all potential translators should translate all texts, even when there is no doubt about their linguistic competence. But I would be remiss to close without first considering how my perhaps idealistic suggestions might fit when we consider the current working conditions of translators. While literary translators often complete works on their own, many audiovisual translators work on tight schedules, often in teams, and may only work on a fragment of a larger whole (Bisset). Some shows are subtitled by uncompensated fans—a trend known as fansubbing—which, while democratizing the flow of information, further contributes to the devaluation and low prestige of professional translation. Translations are then often revised by yet others, sometimes without consulting the source texts, so that they conform to the briefs that were provided by the client, editor, or production company.⁴ This piecemeal model works well for some texts but, for others, can increase the potential for a source message to be undermined, at either the textual or meta level.

The solidarity work proposed in this essay is no replacement for addressing the lack of diversity in the translation and publishing industries. After all, there are qualified translators from all corners of our society, and many of them simply need to be given an opportunity. Instead, what I propose is a parallel form of solidarity that can help us be more accountable to those with whom we stand in our work. Sometimes humble solidarity means recognizing that the best way to be an ally is to use our own privilege to magnify the voices of those who were not invited to the table. That may mean speaking up; it also may mean stepping back.

NOTES

1. On south-to-south translation, see Larkosh. On queer solidarity in translation, see Attig. For more information about feminist translation, see Flotow.
2. For a definition of specialized translation, see Franco Aixelá 32; see also Rogers 21.
3. This question arises from the panel I organized for the 2021 MLA Annual Convention, “Activist Translation and the Other.”
4. For more on the working conditions of translators, particularly audiovisual translators, see Kuo; Marignan.

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