“Straddling Languages”: Aspects of the Translational and the Transnational in the Work of Afrikaans Authors Breyten Breytenbach, Marlene van Niekerk and Antjie Krog

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Summary

This article proceeds from the vantage point that the “transnational” and the “translational” are important concepts when discussing the processes of cultural literary signification taking place under the various conditions of displacement and migration the world has witnessed throughout the course of history. The article explores the notion of “translational literature” (as defined by Waïl Hassan) as a means to mediate between different languages and to connect cultures. Translational texts foreground, perform and problematise the act of translation by “straddling” two languages in their construction and presentation. The article proceeds from the vantage point of texts written in the minor language Afrikaans, but constructed and presented in such a way that they include or reach out to other languages. The focus falls on the way in which texts by Breyten Breytenbach (*Oorblyfsel/Voice Over* 2009), Marlene van Niekerk (*De sneeuwslaper* 2009, *Die sneeuslaper* 2010) and Antjie Krog (*Mede-wete* 2014, *Synapse* 2014) try to straddle the divide between Afrikaans and languages such as Arabic, English, Dutch and Xhosa. It looks at the way in which these texts stage the act of translation as a way of declaring solidarity with other cultural groups, exploit the connection with other languages to revitalise Afrikaans and also demonstrate the failure of translation.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel gaan uit van die standpunt dat die vertalende (“translational”) en die transnasionale belangrike konsepte is wanneer daar gepraat word oor die prosesse van kulturele betekening wat plaasvind te midde van die verskillende vorme van verplasing en migrasie wat die wêreld ondergaan het in die loop van die geskiedenis. Die artikel ondersoek die begrip vertalende literatuur (“translational literature”), soos gedefinieer deur Waïl Hassan, as ’n manier waarop daar gemedieer kan word tussen tale en waardeur kulture met mekaar verbind kan word. Die artikel gaan uit van die vertrekpunt van tekste wat geskryf is in die minderheidstaal Afrikaans, maar op so ’n manier gekonstrueer en aangebied word dat hulle uitreik na ander tale of hulle insluit. Die fokus val op die manier waarop tekste deur Breyten Breytenbach (*Oorblyfsel/Voice Over* 2009), Marlene van Niekerk (*De sneeuwslaper* 2009, *Die sneeuslaper* 2010) en

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Antjie Krog (*Mede-wete* 2014, *Synapse* 2014) die gaping tussen Afrikaans en tale soos Arabies, Engels, Nederlands en Xhosa probeer oorbrug. Die artikel bespreek die manier waarop hierdie tekste die vertaalhandeling ten tonele voer ten einde solidariteit met ander kulturele groepe te verklaar, die verbande met ander tale uitbuit om sodoende Afrikaans te revitaliseer en ook die mislukking van vertaling demonstreer.

1 Introduction: Translational Literature and Minority Languages

In search of definitions of the "transnational" and the "translational" one encounters a variety of views and explanations. In her research on translingual narratives Rita Wilson (2011: 236) refers to the fact that Homi Bhabha locates cultures in the globalised world at the "intersection of the *transnational* and the *translational*". She goes on to explain that in this context the *transnational* refers to the various displacements the global world has witnessed throughout the course of history, whereas the *translational* "describes the complex processes of cultural signification produced under the impact of such displacements, migrations, relocations and diasporas" (Wilson 2011: 236). Waïl Hassan is more specific when he defines the term "translational literature" as referring to "texts that straddle two languages, at once foregrounding, performing and problematizing the act of translation" (Hassan 2006: 754). He suggests that these texts have the ability to both mediate and problematise the relationships between languages and cultures when he writes that such texts are "performances of interlinguistic, cross-cultural communication, operating on several levels of mediation and contestation", often playing out in reaction to the "agonistic and antagonistic relation between the languages of colonizer and colonized" (Hassan 2006: 754, 755).

Translation and transnational movements are also connected to each other in Rebecca Walkowitz's notion of the literary text that is "born translated". Writing about texts that seem to be written in order to be translated, she states: "Translation is not secondary or incidental to these works. It is a condition of their production" (Walkowitz 2015: 4). Rather than seeing these works as potentially problematising translation or staging imbalances of power as Hassan does, Walkowitz emphasises their ability to transcend national or "native" borders: "[T]oday's born-translated works block readers from being 'native readers', those who assume that the book they are holding was written for them or that the language they are encountering is, in some proprietary or intrinsic way, theirs. Refusing to match language to geography, many contemporary works will seem to occupy more than one place, to be produced in more than one language, or to address multiple audiences at the same time" (Walkowitz 2015: 6). She values the fact that these works question the links between language, territory and nation (Walkowitz 2015: 88-89), thus emphasising their ability to mediate and connect rather than to contest and question.

More recently Ivanovic and Seidl (2016) have argued that translation as a concept has become increasingly important against the background of "unprecedented global mobility" and set out to develop a set of categories defining translational literature to ensure a better understanding of the genre. For the purpose of this article my interest lies in their preliminary description of the genre of translational literature rather than in the methodology of "citizen science" or "crowd-sourcing" they want to use to build a data base on which to base further descriptions. They state that the basic characteristic of translational literature is the fact that it "refers to translation, and uses it to generate productive aesthetic procedures" (Ivanovic & Seidl 2016: 959). Seeking to go beyond Hassan and Walkowitz's descriptions of translational literature, they propose a typology consisting of three distinct categories (Ivanovic & Seidl 2016: 958-959). The first category consists of "narratives of translation" in which "translators appear as protagonists, or scenes of translation are described", often uncovering negative experiences of translation such as "violence, overpowering, and a loss of a voice". They also identify a second category, namely "hybrid texts", that "mix translation and original writing" and in which authors reference several linguistic and cultural systems simultaneously, include multilinguality and emphasise the limits of translatability. The third category consists of texts in which "translation is a form of experimental literature" and in which the translations claim the status of original works. Their thesis is that "translational literature calls into question the implicitness of translation, by expressing the possibilities and limits, the intentions and consequences of translation in a diverse spectrum of literary forms". Although Ivanovic and Seidl see this as the starting point for a much larger project (building a corpus of translational texts through crowd-sourcing that will enable them to extend and refine their description of the genre), their preliminary descriptions give insight into my chosen examples which mostly fall in the second and third categories.

Because this article explores the notion of translational literature from the perspective of literary texts written in a minority language from South Africa, it seems important to emphasise the idea that translational texts both mediate and contest, that they not only celebrate transnational, interlingual and cross-cultural movements but also complicate and problematise them, thus linking the translational with the transnational. Writing about the "transnational turn" in post-apartheid South African literature, De Kock (2009: 31) argues that the concept of the national remains relevant in the larger transnational context of "world literature", because "the 'trans' in 'transnational' creates a cusp between the national and what lies beyond it, not a severance". In an article on "Translation and Minority Languages in a Global Age" Michael Cronin (1998: 146-147) points out the dearth of studies that theorise translation from the perspective of minority languages. Because "minority language cultures are translation cultures par excellence", Cronin (1998: 147) argues that theorising translation from the perspective of minority languages can make a

valuable contribution to translation theory in general. My argument will be that examples of literary texts written in minority languages which function in multi-lingual and multicultural contexts can contribute to theorising the concept of "translational literature" (as Ivanovic and Seidl envisages). Venuti (2016: 19) makes the argument that "the strangeness of minority" (mostly due to the lack of knowledge about minority languages, their literatures and literary traditions) can have a significant cultural impact when texts from minor languages are translated: "It can change the images of peripheral languages and literatures in metropolitan centers, it can challenge dominant cultural values enshrined in the publishing practices of the major languages in those centers, and it can start new debates in cultures major as well as minor." It will be my argument that examples of translational literature, whether they take translation as a subject, are hybrid texts or create new texts in the translational process (Ivanovic & Seidl 2016), have the ability to bring different (literary) cultures into productive but also challenging conversations, whether these conversations are between a major and minor literature, or between two minor literatures.[1]

The texts I want to discuss are written in Afrikaans, a South African language with a complicated and compromised history. Although Afrikaans developed from the interaction of Dutch with a melting pot of other languages such as Malay, Creole-Portuguese, French, German and English as well as Arabic and African languages[2] and was spoken as an emerging language by a spectrum of people who ranged from wealthy Dutch families to servants, workers and labourers of mixed descent,[3] it was appropriated by Afrikaner nationalists during the course of the twentieth century despite the fact that more than half of its mother-tongue speakers were not white Afrikaners. As such it gained the reputation of "language of oppression", even though these Afrikaans-speakers asserted themselves by using Afrikaans to articulate their struggle for liberation, using it as an instrument against apartheid. After 1994 Afrikaans lost the privilege it enjoyed as one of only two official languages to become one of eleven official languages, with English increasingly in the role of *de facto* official language because of its dominance in government, commerce and education. As such it is a minority language in the global context. This in itself is not exceptional – Cronin (1998: 151) writes that the "hegemony of English in the fastest-growing area of technological development means that all other languages become, in this context, minority languages". Venuti (2016: 12) also writes that the "global hegemony of English reduces every language to minority status in relation to it". Even so the "interlingual interrogation" between languages and the accompanying

1. See Lionnet and Shih (2005) on the subject of minor transnationalisms.

2. See Den Besten (2012), Ponelis (1993) and Roberge (1995, 2003).

3. See Hofmeyr (1987: 96-97).

"cultural implications" which take place in every act of translation (as Venuti points out 2016: 16) and are specifically foregrounded in translational texts can be enormously productive and creative.

The texts discussed in this article stage the translational for a variety of reasons and with a spectrum of different effects. They do so, for example, to mediate between languages, explore the possibilities and limits of translatability, to comment on the transnational movement of texts and to engage with the power imbalances between languages. Each of the authors in question, namely Breyten Breytenbach, Marlene van Niekerk and Antjie Krog, creates a unique translational space in which they can explore a variety of related issues such as ideological positioning in a global world, artistic procedure in a transnational context and the relationship between language and social inequity.

2 Breytenbach's *Oorblyfsel/Voice Over* (2009): Ideological Positioning in the Translational Space

Breyten Breytenbach is one of the generation of Afrikaans writers who revolutionised Afrikaans literature in the 1960's by rebelling against its nationalist foundations. Although he has written short stories, autobiographical fiction, travelogues and essays, he is especially known as a poet. From 1972 onwards selections from his poetry have been translated and published in English, Dutch, Swedish, Basque, Bulgarian, Danish, French, German, Italian, Polish, Portuguese and Spanish.[4] Although his work has been translated by others, he has also translated some of his own work (especially poetry) himself and has also written in English (mostly prose). He thus writes in his mother tongue, self-translates and also writes in English. Thus it is not surprising that he stages and exploits the process of translation in his volume of poetry, *Oorblyfsel/Voice Over,* written in honour of his friend, the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, who died on the 9th of August 2008. As the title of the South African edition signals, it is a bilingual text with the poems written in Afrikaans printed face to face with their English translations. This edition was the first to be published in August 2009, with a bilingual French-English translation (*Outre-voix/Voice Over: Conversation nomade avec Mahmoud Darwich*)[5] released later in 2009 and the monolingual US

4. I am indebted for this information to Francis Galloway who compiled a select bibliography of Breytenbach's work.

5. The translation into French was done by Georges Lory. In 2010 it was awarded the *Prix Max Jacob Étranger,* an award given annually to two poets; Breytenbach shared the prize with Bernard Mazo for *La cendre des Jours***.** The prize was founded in memory of the French author and painter Max Jacob, who died in a Nazi deportation camp on 5 March 1944.

edition in English (*Voice Over: A Nomadic Conversation with Mahmoud Darwish*) in 2010.

The Afrikaans title *Oorblyfsel* ("remnant" or "remainder") evokes that which remains after the death of his friend, whereas the English title *Voice Over* suggests that Darwish will be the unseen presence on behalf of whom Breytenbach voices the words in this volume. Breytenbach writes in the note accompanying the text that he started writing these poems immediately after Darwish's passing as "fragments of a continuing dialogue with him" (Breytenbach 2009: 61). He also states: "The present 'collage' touches upon transformed 'variations' of his work, at times plucked from different poems and then again by way of approaching a specific verse, with my own voice woven into the process. The images, and to an extent, even the rhythms and the shaping are his. I don't know Arabic and have to make do with English and French approximations. I did have the luck of hearing him read in his tongue and the sounds and movement always struck me" (Breytenbach 2009: 63).

Oorblyfsel/Voice Over was thus born in translation but it also multiplied the act of translation. The process started with Breytenbach hearing Darwish reading his poems in Arabic and then reading their French and English translations. After the death of his friend he wrote the Afrikaans poems that were creative re-workings or transformations of Darwish's poems. Then he translated these poems into English, with the English translation influencing the original Afrikaans poems in a kind of reverse operation or backward loop. Breytenbach describes the latter part of the process as follows: "The English versions here grew retroactively from my Afrikaans efforts, with the intention of facilitating a conversation between the two languages. They can thus not properly be described as 'translations'. At times an echo or an association presented by the English possibilities opened a new way back into Afrikaans" (Breytenbach 2009: 63).

Focusing on the translation of the Afrikaans poems (already "translations" of the poems in Arabic) into English, Odendaal (2011: 286) uses the Afrikaans term "oortekening" (which refers to both a re-signing and a re-drawing) and the English term "retracing" to describe the translation process in this volume, making use of Derrida's theory of translation as "an act that is both transformative and corrupting". Odendaal (2011: 287) argues that these "retracings" have the effect of creating "a kind of feedback loop that reverts the reader's attention back to the source text", thus casting the source text elements (the Afrikaans words) in a new light and alienating the source text from itself. Kirsten and Feinauer (2014: 661) take a stereoscopic approach to *Oorblyfsel/ Voice Over,* in the sense that they read "the source and the target texts at the same time", the kind of reading in which they admit only a bilingual reader can take part. They place their reading against the background of three theoretical concepts that make it possible to further explore the interpretative play and translational interaction between the Afrikaans and the

English versions of the poems, namely Mary Louise Pratt's description of the "contact zones" between cultures, Homi Bhabha's notion of the "in-between" and Jacques Lecercle's idea of the "remainder". Their point is that all three these concepts allow for viewing the conflict between differences in meaning as productive rather than problematic (Kirsten & Feinauer 2014: 662). Wilson's comment about a similar bilingual text holds true in Breytenbach's case: it "constructs a privileged space where double linguistic and cultural palimpsests create an intricate relational mode between two worlds [which] destabilizes meaning and deterritorializes both source and target languages, while simultaneously reterritorializing them through the 'mirroring' effect of a bilingual edition" (Wilson 2011: 238).

There are several senses in which Breytenbach's *Oorblyfsel/Voice Over* can be read as an example of translational literature, involving three languages. It is abundantly clear that this volume was the result of a flow of translations from one language to another and back again. The movement via different translations establishes a dynamic space in which different languages come into contact on the basis of their difference and their similarities (on the level of rhythm, sound, graphic image and meaning). It also creates a space in which the different languages come into contact ideologically, in the sense that Breytenbach's text is not "just an interpretation", but also "an assimilation of thoughts, experiences and trajectories" in Darwish's work (see Oppelt 2010). Comparing Breytenbach's poems with those written by Darwish, it becomes clear that they are based on a shared understanding of notions such as identity, exile and war.

The reason for this identification can be related to the fact that Breytenbach was part of a delegation representing the World Parliament of Writers that visited the West Bank and Gaza in 2002 to take part in a public reading with Darwish and other Palestinian authors "as a gesture of solidarity" (Breytenbach 2008). Breytenbach further professed this solidarity in an open letter addressed to Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon shortly after the visit and spoke of this once again in an essay written in honour of Darwish after his death (Breytenbach 2008). Like Darwish, Breytenbach is known for his strong convictions about the role of the poet as public and political figure. Although he was born a white Afrikaner, he is known for his outspoken criticism of the apartheid regime after he left South Africa in 1960 and the fact that he served seven years as political prisoner in a South African jail because of subversive actions against the apartheid government. His identification with Darwish is thus both personal and political.

Oorblyfsel/Voice Over is a slim volume, comprising only 12 poems that follow a narrative line of sorts. The first poem relates how Breytenbach found himself on the slave island Gorée off the coast of Senegal when he received the news of his friend's death whilst undergoing heart surgery in the USA. The second poem refers to Darwish's wish that he should be buried "quickly" with "no wailing and no grandiloquent display" (Breytenbach 2009: 11),

evoking the irony that Darwish was given the equivalent of a state funeral and that the Palestinian president declared three days of mourning to honour him. In the third poem the poet fantasises that Darwish sits next to him during a flight from Senegal to Catalonia, discussing the circumstances surrounding death. The idea that the poem can create an "inbetween space" is evoked by the Afrikaans word "inktussen" which is literally translated as "inkbetween". The "ink" in which the poems are written creates a space in which Breytenbach and Darwish can relate their similarity, but also retain their difference (Breytenbach alive, Darwish dead; Breytenbach an Afrikaner, Darwish a Palestinian).

Following this imagined dialogue Breytenbach's poems engage in a "nomadic conversation" with some of Darwish's most famous poems, such as "Counterpoint: Homage to Edward Said"[6] and "Under siege". From the latter he adapts Darwish's invitation to an enemy soldier ("You who stand in the doorway, come in, / Drink Arabic coffee with us / And you will sense that you are men like us")[7] to read as follows: "come, come drink Arabic coffee with us / and you will see us weep / and fit into coffins just like you do" (Breytenbach 2009: 24). The reference to "coffins" in Breytenbach's adaptation reminds the reader that death is foremost in the author's mind and that this volume is an elegy for a deceased friend. He also rewrites Darwish's poem "If we want to" (beginning with the long line: "We will become a people, if we want to, when we learn that we are not angels, and that evil is not the prerogative of others", Darwish 2009: 42-43) in which he closely follows Darwish's outline but adapts it to a South African setting, for instance when he adds a reference to South Africa's history of political, religious and linguistic segregation to his version of the poem by mentioning the presence of Muslim culture in Cape Town: "we shall be a people when the singer like a canary / may chant a *sourat* of Rahman / at a mixed marriage in the Bo-Kaap" (Breytenbach 2009: 29).

His ideological identification with Darwish is demonstrated the most clearly when he adapts lines from the latter's famous poem "Identity Card", which is built around the defiant refrain: "Write it down. / I am an Arab" (also translated as "Put it on record. / I am an Arab.").[8] Breytenbach modifies this to the following lines with which he concludes the penultimate poem in the

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6. See Breytenbach's (2009: 37) reworking of this poem.

7. I make use of Marjolijn de Jager's translation of the poem, available on the website of the Festival de Poesia de Medellin (<http://www.festival-depoesiademedellin.org/en/Diario/04.html>; 17 June 2016).

8. I have taken the two different translations of the poem's first lines from Arabic into English from two different websites (<http://tomclarkblog.blog-spot.co.za/2014/04/mahmoud-darwish-identity-card.html> and <http://www.Barghouti.com/poets/darwish/bitaqa.asp>) respectively.

volume: "write: Arab / write: Palestinian / write: Afrikaner / write: human too". The identification of Afrikaners with Palestinians is especially subversive when read against the background of South African history in which Afrikaner nationalists identified themselves as a people oppressed by British imperialism with the Jews as a persecuted people. The volume is concluded with a re-writing of Darwish's poem "Another day will come, a womanly day" (Darwish 2007: 183) with its promise of peace. The final lines of Darwish's poem (translated by Fady Joudah) reads: "And a dove will sleep in the afternoon in an abandoned / combat tank if it doesn't find a small nest / in the lovers' bed". Breytenbach makes the following translation with which he closes his volume: "a dove will nestle head under wing / in the painted war wagon … / if it cannot hollow a nest in the lovers' bed" (Breytenbach 2009: 59).

In conclusion, one can say that Breytenbach's bilingual volume stages Afrikaans alongside English in a mutually productive relationship. The fact that the Afrikaans poems were written in an attempt at re-creating poems originally written in Arabic and to honour the poet who wrote them serves as an important reminder of the hybrid origins of the Afrikaans language. The first attempt to use Afrikaans as a written rather than just a spoken language was by Sheikh Abu Bakr Effendi,[9] who produced a religious manual, the *Bayãn al-Dĩn (Uiteensetting van die godsdiens/Exposition of the religion),* written in Afrikaans but printed in Arabic script for Afrikaans-speaking Muslims at the Cape in the 1860s.[10] This fact was long overlooked by certain historians of the Afrikaans language who saw the language as mainly deriving from Dutch. Breytenbach's volume, which can be placed in the category of "hybrid texts" (Seidl & Invanovic 2016), thus establishes a translational space in which the minority language Afrikaans feeds off Arabic and converses with English, opening up a complex history of identification, mediation and contestation. It is especially topical because this history resonates strongly in current debates around the use of Afrikaans in the public spheres of South African society, especially universities.

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9. After requests by Cape Muslims for religious books and a qualified scholar to assist them in practicing their religion, directed to Queen Victoria via the governor of the Cape of Good Hope, Sheikh Abu Bakr Effendi was sent to the Cape in 1862 by the Ottoman Sultan Abdülmecid I in order to teach and assist the Muslim community of Cape Malays. See Argun (2000) and Van Bruinessen (2000).

10. See the work by Van Selms (1953), Muller (1962) and Steyn (1980: 136-137). Davids (2011) also did seminal work on the Afrikaans spoken by Muslims at the Cape form 1815 to 1915.

3 Marlene van Niekerk's *Die sneeuslaper [The Snow Sleeper]* (2010): Foreignisation of the Mother Tongue in the Translational Space

My second example is Marlene van Niekerk's volume of short stories *Die sneeuslaper* [The Snow Sleeper], another text that was born in translation. The text was commissioned by the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands who wanted the author to write a series of essays on the role of literature in society. She responded by writing four short stories, using the narrative form to reflect on several questions around literature and art (a solution which in the end did not satisfy the commissioning committee; see Chris 2010). The stories were written in Afrikaans and sent to her Dutch translator Riet de Jong-Goossens as they developed. Van Niekerk then used the translations into Dutch to re-work the Afrikaans text, thus establishing a unique cooperation or duo ("tweemanschap") between writer and translator (see De Vries 2011). The Dutch translation of the text was eventually published in 2009, one year before the Afrikaans original.

The close interaction between the Afrikaans author and her Dutch translator during the creative process had a visible impact on the text. It led to the comment that the Afrikaans version was "perforated" by Dutch (De Vries 2010: 8), a feature that was both praised (Human 2010; Crous 2010) and criticised (Visagie 2010) in reviews. Writing about the "Englishing of Marlene van Niekerk", Attridge (2014) argues that her novels *Triomf* and *Agaat* are "bold attempts to redeem Afrikaans, to acknowledge not only its impurities and porous boundaries but also the fact that the impurity and porousness are among its greatest strengths". It is precisely this "impurity and porousness" that creates the translational space in which the interlingual and cross-cultural traffic between Afrikaans and Dutch, two languages that are closely related, takes place in *Die sneeuslaper.*

The four narratives in *Die sneeuslaper* each follow a different rhetorical strategy. The first story, "Die swaneluisteraar" [The Swan Whisperer],[11] is presented as an inaugural lecture in which a professor of Creative Writing tells the story of her writing student who profoundly unsettles her views about creative writing.[12] The second story, "Die slagwerker" [The Percussionist], is presented in the form of a funerary oration in which an Amsterdam watchmaker tells the story of his novelist friend's obsession with a young

11. A translation of "Die swanefluisteraar" by Marius Swart and the author was published as *The Swan Whisperer: An Inaugural Lecture,* with images by William Kentridge in the *Cahiers Series* by Sylph Editions, London.

12. Van Niekerk read this text on the occasion of her own inaugural lecture as professor in Creative Writing at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, in August 2008.

percussionist. The third story, “Die sneeuslaper” [The Snow Sleeper], is a report on fieldwork done as part of a research project on the homeless. The final story, “Die vriend” [The Friend], takes the form of a lecture in which a writer tells the story of her friendship with a photographer.[13] Two of the four narratives in *Die sneeuslaper* engage in transnational movements between the settings of Stellenbosch in South Africa and Amsterdam in the Netherlands. At the same time the language of the original Afrikaans text “moves” between Afrikaans and Dutch.

The translational space thus established is especially prominent in the third story, “Die sneeuslaper” [The Snow Sleeper]. The two main characters in this story are the Dutch woman Helena Oldemarkt, who conducted research on the homeless as part of her doctoral study and the vagrant whom she interviewed in an Amsterdam park. The story is the report she submits to her supervisor: it consists of a detailed transcription of her interview with the vagrant (whom she calls the snow sleeper) as well as personal reflections on her interaction with him. She is profoundly discomfited by the snow sleeper, partly because he reminds her of her late father who took to wandering the city streets during the early stages of his dementia.

At first she occupies a position of power with regard to the snow sleeper because she is the researcher while he is the destitute object of her research. Gradually he inverts the balance of power by challenging and provoking her, flirting with her, lying to her and showering her with abuse. She is deeply troubled by the story he tells her about a South African student whom he duped into believing that he could talk to swans, relating how he made use of the student’s hospitality and care before suddenly disappearing from his life and leaving him emotionally traumatised. Even more disturbing she finds his story about a South African photographer who followed him in order to photograph him, who bought him food and even slept in his cardboard shelter in the snow, while unbeknownst to the photographer the real snow sleeper spent the night in his apartment before trashing it and smashing his cameras. In the same way that the snow sleeper rebels against being the object of both the writing student and the photographer’s artistic experiments (Van Niekerk 2010: 134), he is angered by the fact that Helena views him as a scientific problem to be researched (Van Niekerk 2010: 122) and leaves after a final tirade against her (Van Niekerk 2010: 151). The story ends with a postscript in which Helena realises that her interaction with the snow sleeper has radically impacted her life of caution and reserve, forcing her to engage with the precarity of human existence.

The story can be read as an example of translational literature because of the way in which the Dutch language infiltrates the Afrikaans text. On the one hand the use of a Dutch-sounding Afrikaans could simply be read as an

13. This story is the text that Van Niekerk delivered as Albert Verwey Lecture at the University of Leiden in October 2009.

attempt at authenticating the speech of the two main characters who are both Dutch and live in Amsterdam. On the other hand readers are often required to suspend their disbelief in order to accept that characters are actually speaking in a language different than the one they are uttering in the text. About this Walkowitz (2015: 4) writes: “These works are *written for translation,* in the hope of being translated, but they are also often *written as translations,* pretending to take place in a language other than the one in which they have, in fact, been composed.” This is also the case with *Die sneeuslaper:* the text was written in Afrikaans for translation into Dutch, pretending to take place in Dutch while actually using Afrikaans (an effect unfortunately but inevitably erased in the Dutch translation).

Van Niekerk’s Afrikaans text, especially the story “Die sneeuslaper” [The Snow Sleeper], makes abundant use of Dutch words. Even though the two languages share a significant number of words that have the same meaning, they also use different words for the same concept; there are also the so-called “false friends” or words that look and sound the same, but have completely different meanings. I give a few examples of Van Niekerk’s use of Dutch words in the place of the more readily acceptable Afrikaans word: instead of the Afrikaans word “sopkombuis” (soup kitchen) the text uses the Dutch word “gaarkeuken”; in stead of the Afrikaans “bottel” (bottle) the text uses the Dutch “fles”; in stead of the Afrikaans “onderdak” (shelter) the text uses the Dutch “onderkomen”, etc. The fact that the use of Dutch words in the Afrikaans text was deemed “pretentious” (Visagie 2010) hints at the difference in status between Afrikaans as a minority language from Africa and Dutch as a European language with considerable cultural capital. This is a throwback to the history of Afrikaans: in the early phases of its development Afrikaans was regarded as a simple vernacular or “kitchen language”, inferior to Dutch.

There is also a reverse movement in the text in which the narrative world of the Dutch characters, Helena and the snow sleeper, is infiltrated by an Afrikaans cultural sphere and a South African spatial sensibility. The speech of both Helena and the snow sleeper are shot through with references to Afrikaans poetry, Afrikaans songs and Afrikaans literary texts, amongst which Van Niekerk’s own novel *Agaat* published in Afrikaans in 2004. A large part of Helena’s reflection on her interview with the snow sleeper dwells on the relationship with her father (of whom the snow sleeper reminds her). She remembers the youth spent with her father with great fondness. She pictures him in rural landscapes: as a child on his father’s wheat farm, walking with her in the wheat fields when she was a child, bringing them flowers from the fields, helping cows give birth to their calves, looking for lambs abandoned by ewes and tending fruit trees. These scenes seem to be set in South Africa rather than the Netherlands. They also relate to the author’s own experiences as a child on a farm in the southwestern districts of South Africa as shown in an autobiographical piece in which she describes her father

helping a cow giving birth: "Hij was een koeien fluisteraar. Wat als kind indruk op mij maakte was de fantastische muzikale woord-vaardigheid van mijn vader en zijn onuitputtelijke meelevende verbeelding. Het was een soort erotisch gebed als je het zo zou kunnen noemen, een groot religieus lied dat het geweld en het mirakel van het leven bezong, bezwerende rijmen waarmee hij zichzelf moed insprak en de koe in een trance praatte. In mijn kinderlijke verbeelding was mijn vader een soort demiurg van de stal" [He was a cow whisperer. What impressed me as a child was the fantastic musical eloquence of my father and his inexhaustible compassionate imagination. It was something of an erotic prayer if you can call it that, a great religious song that celebrated both the violence and the miracle of life, the incantatory rhythms with which he encouraged himself and spoke the cow into a trance. In my childlike imagination he was a kind of demiurge of the stable] (Van Niekerk 2008). These sentiments couched in a South African spatial sensibility are carried over on to the Dutch fictional character Helena Oldemarkt who grieves for her demented father and recalls his efforts to free her from her self-imposed exile from life. This constitutes a context-specific example of the way in which – as Hassan (2006: 755) argues – "translational texts point to the limits of translatablity.[14] They transfer the rhetoricity of one language into another, reproducing not only sense but also such cultural-linguistic phenomena as etymological deriviation; conventional, idiomatic and proverbial usage; and culturally embedded connotations of cognates and word associations."

The translational space (in which languages mingle and seep into each other through porous borders) also becomes a means to put forward the notion of a radically free and disruptive kind of artist. In an article titled "The literary text in turbulent times: an instrument of social cohesion or an eruption of 'critical bliss'" Van Niekerk (2013) articulates her ideas about the role that literature has to play in politically unstable times. Building her argument on the work of Nancy, Barthes and Deleuze and Guattari, she is critical of attempts to instrumentalise art and use it in the service of political, social or theoretical agendas. For her the ethical importance of the work of art lies in "the autonomy and singularity that makes it 'stand on its own' through nothing but its own internal conceptual clarity and formal cohesion" (Van Niekerk 2013: 2). She expresses her preference for the kind of artist or writer that will work against "essentialisms, complacencies and ideological closures" and quotes Nancy who writes that it is "the task of literature as event/fragment to express not the foundations, but the groundlessness of human existence" (quoted by Van Niekerk 2013: 6).

The translational space of the story sets the scene for the snow sleeper who functions as a model of the artist who is fearless, uncooptable, radically open and does not hesitate to expose his reader to the unimaginable. He is a

14. See also Infante (2016) for further views on the notion of (un)translatability.

homeless vagrant who cannot be confined to any one space; he discomfits, perturbs and brutalises Helena as well as the writing student and photographer whom he meets during the course of his wanderings. His use of language is sonorous, filled with vivid images, a variety of references and larded with words from German, French, Italian, Greek, Hebrew, Maltese and the marginalised languages spoken by gypsies, thieves, religious visionaries and secret societies (all in contrast with Helena's stilted academic discourse).

In this text Van Niekerk's Afrikaans is "semantically infused by its other, linguistically and ideologically contaminated" (to quote Katibi, in Hassan 2006: 755). Like Breytenbach, Van Niekerk negotiates the complex and compromised history of the language Afrikaans in her text. Rather than viewing the infiltration of Afrikaans with Dutch as a nostalgia for colonial roots and a European homeland, Van Niekerk sees it as a means of revitalising Afrikaans that exists in the shadow of another colonial language English. In the face of the increasing infiltration of Afrikaans by English, she feels that Afrikaans should be "recontaminated" by Dutch, reintroducing Dutch words into Afrikaans in order to reawaken and reclaim words that have become dormant in Afrikaans. She writes: "Om slapende honde wakker te maak, en te hou, ook in die taal, is my *business*" [To awaken sleepings dogs, and to keep them awake, also in language, is my *business*] (La Vita 2007). The ideological intent – achieved by foreignising Afrikaans through the inclusion of words taken from Dutch – is to radicalise, disinhibit and free language in the same way that the snow sleeper disconnects himself from all manner of decency, complacency and dependency on bourgeois comforts, just like the truly radical artist envisaged by Van Niekerk in her article would. The translational space in this text emphasises the historical connection between Dutch and Afrikaans in order to free the latter from the confines of its colonial and apartheid history rather than preserve it in an act of nostalgia.[15] It acknowledges the colonial "contamination" but tries to construct a model of artistic alterity and radicality that will go on questioning any form of ideological appropriation and misuse.

4 Antjie Krog's *Mede-wete [Synapse]* (2014): The Failure of Translation

My third example from Afrikaans literature represents a translational space that demonstrates the failure, rather than success, of mediation between languages and people. The text I refer to is a cycle of poems titled "servants talk" in the writer Antjie Krog's volume of poetry, published simultaneously

15. See Stander's (2012) reading of *Die sneeuslaper* as an example of a language that stutters, stammers and stumbles in a way that is reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's reading of minor literatures.

in Afrikaans as *Mede-wete* (which means "shared knowledge") and in English as *Synapse* in 2014. Krog was internationally acclaimed for *Country of My Skull* published in 1998, an account of her experience as a journalist reporting on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This book was followed by two more examples of autobiographical fiction from Krog's pen, *A Change of Tongue* (2003) and *Begging to be Black* (2009). Together they have been dubbed the "transformation trilogy" (Van Niekerk 2015), because of its focus on transformation in postapartheid South Africa and the desire to be connected with fellow South Africans. The poetry in *Mede-wete* and its English version *Synapse* continues to explore the topic of interconnectedness, not only with others in the larger South African community but also with non-humans, the planet in all its many facets and the universe of which it forms part.

The simultaneous publication of the Afrikaans volume and its English translation should also be read against the background of Krog's work as translator of her own and other's work. She has translated her poetry as well as autobiographical fiction from Afrikaans into English in order to gain access to a larger audience than is possible in Afrikaans. The decision to translate her own work from the minority language, Afrikaans, into the erstwhile colonial language, English, fills her with feelings of guilt and shame: "I feel at times embarrassed that I want to be read in English, like I have sold out, betrayed something, or revealed a shameful desire ... and I am not clear how much of it has to do with a resistance to colonization, giving in to power, being owned, accepted by the colonizer's hand – because English has become the door to the Father" (Krog 2000: 13). Krog is thus fully aware of the complex mediations and contestations involved in translating texts from minority languages into languages that are major players on the international scene. Similar power imbalances were involved when Krog translated a selection of poems from all the indigenous languages in South Africa into Afrikaans in a volume titled *Met Woorde soos met Kerse* [With Words as with Candles] (2002). Although English is by far the most powerful language in South Africa, Afrikaans used to have a relatively powerful position by virtue of the political power wielded by some of its speakers, with the indigenous African languages in the weakest position. These power imbalances form part of the translational scene depicted in the cycle of poems "servants talk" in *Synapse.*

Although Krog has self-translated some of her work, the translation of the volume *Mede-wete* was the result of a cooperative effort by the poet and Karen Press (2014: 118) who writes in the "Translator's note": "The poems in this collection are the products of an intricate conversation between poet and translator, conducted through drafts, queries, suggestions, revisions, requests, new suggestions, further revisions." Apart from the translational play between Afrikaans and English, the cycle of poems titled "servants talk" (Krog 2014: 60-74) introduces a third language into the equation. The cycle consists of twelve poems structured into three different sections in two

languages. The top section on each page depicts two white employers (they seem to be a couple) in conversation about their employee, the black houseworker Victoria; this part is written in Afrikaans in *Mede-wete* and in English in *Synapse*. The middle section on each page presents the woman Victoria in conversation with members of her family, mainly her daughter; the language used is Xhosa. The bottom section on the page translates the middle section in Xhosa into Afrikaans in *Mede-wete* and English in *Synapse*. This brings about a complicity between Afrikaans and English as the languages of the masters in South Africa as opposed to Xhosa as the language of the servants, evoking the history of Afrikaans as language of oppression during the apartheid era, English as the language of colonisation and Xhosa as one of the indigenous languages marginalised by both Afrikaans and English. The poems in "servants talk" therefore suggest that the erstwhile power imbalances between the oppressor/coloniser and the oppressed/colonised have not been fully eradicated. The fact that the Xhosa sections of the poems had to be translated for Afrikaans- and English-speaking readers of the volume also serves to demonstrate their complicity in this imbalance.

Apart from suggesting the imbalance of power between the languages used by the different speakers in the text, the poems also perturb the reader with questions about the veracity and credibility of the servant's discourse. Was it recorded or invented by the poet? Was it originally written in Afrikaans and then translated into Xhosa? The acknowledgements page at the back of the volume says that the "Xhosa translation in 'servants talk' [was] done by Balisa Finca" (Krog 2014: 122). This suggests that the servant's discourse was indeed written by the poet and then translated into Xhosa, which raises the further issue of whether the subaltern can truly speak[16] or who can speak on behalf of her. A further question is whether the translations are true to the original (whose status is also not clear). Krog herself said in an interview: "selfs die vertaling is hoogs twyfelagtig" [even the translation is highly questionable] (Esterhuizen & Krog 2014). This uncertainty is borne out by the fact that each of these translations is preceded by a question mark. Rather than suggest a free and empowering flow between linguistic and socially diverse groups, the translational presentation in "servants talk" emphasises the lack of understanding between them. Although Krog's whole writerly project is driven by the desire for interconnectedness between the different racial and social groups in South Africa, these poems demonstrate the difficulty of achieving such interconnectedness. The two employers and the houseworker seem to be using different discourses and it is clear that they have vast misconceptions about each other's lives.

The employers know that huge demands are being made on the servant by her extended family and that, even though she is HIV-positive, she cannot give up her job because it is her only means of survival. In the end they realise

16. With due reference to Spivak (1988). See also footnote 18.

that they have "no idea" what her life is about (Krog 2014b: 73). The servant's discourse shows her negotiating the precarities of her life, her fears and misconceptions about the foreigners in her community, even her attempts to defend her employers against her family, especially her daughter who refers to them as "soul-eaters" (Krog 2014b: 63, 69, 73). It is also made clear that mastery of a powerful language such as English plays an important role in the ability to escape poverty. Victoria is articulate in Xhosa, but needs an interpreter when she wants to discuss an important money matter with her employers who can speak English but no Xhosa (Krog 2014b: 67). At one point one of the employers comments that Victoria's daughter will have difficulty to make a more comfortable life for herself because she "understands even less English"[17] than her mother (Krog 2014b: 67).

The pattern of the bilingual poems I described above is interrupted at two points: once by a poem titled "*the snail as chimera on the sleeping subaltern cheek*" (Krog 2014b: 66) and again by the poem "*Victoria and the Poet*" (Krog 2014b: 74). Both are given in italics to differentiate them from the other poems and both differ in mode and voice from the others in the cycle. In "*the snail as chimera on the sleeping subaltern cheek*"[18] an impersonal voice describes a snail moving across the cheek of the exhausted servant who rested her head on a stone table in the garden to sleep. The painstaking movement of the snail becomes a metaphor for the attempt by the poetical imagination to represent the "sleeping subaltern" in language (see the lines "*the snail is in turmoil her feelers rejoice / hydraulically she pumps language*", Krog 2014b: 66). The poem describes the intimate and tactile engagement of the poetic imagination-as-snail with the sleeping subaltern in its attempt to understand, empathise and represent. Despite the painstaking effort it all ends in failure – the final lines of the poem read:

> *the snail's lung ferments she is one big empathy-thudding*
> *tear through which the cheek echoes before burning with human*
> *sweat everything fails and she shrinks back into her white coils.*

The final poem in the cycle again focuses on the scene of Victoria, now awakening from sleeping with her head on the table. Again it is an impersonal voice that describes the scene before focusing on "the poet" watching Victoria from the window in the final lines (Krog 2014b: 74):

17. Both the Afrikaans and English texts refer to English as the language that empowers people.

18. A quote from Spivak's essay "A moral dilemma" that refers to "the "founding gap in all act or talk" that must be supplemented (Krog 2014b: 60) is used as motto for the cycle of poems.

> *distressed the poet stands at the study window he believes*
> *in the snail the persistent effort of the snail but actually*
> *now he should die from self-loathing impotence and sorrow*

Thus the cycle ends with the idea that even though the poet believes that an effort at empathetic and fully engaged poetic representation of the subaltern should be made, he is in utter distress at the futility of his attempt. The impersonal voice that speaks in this poem represents a stern judgment of the failure of the poetical imagination to represent the other with sufficient empathy and moral effort when it says: "*actually / now he should die from self-loathing impotence and sorrow*". This view correlates with Krog's comments on *Mede-wete/Synapse* in an interview: "Ek bevraagteken in die bundel ons erns omtrent mede-wete en mededoë, ons verbintenis aan mekaar, ons onvermoë om groot ruimtes van ons land te verstaan nevermaaind verwoord […] 'Bediendepraatjies' is nie juis daarop uit om aan die stemlose stem te gee nie, maar om te sê: ons is midde-in daardie gesprekke, ons WEET ons weet nie waaroor gepraat word nie" [In this volume I question our seriousness about shared knowing and compassion, our commitment to each other, our inability to understand, nevermind articulate, large parts of our country […] "servants talk" does not really want to give voice to the voiceless, but rather wants to say: we are in the middle of these conversations, we KNOW that we do not know what is being said"] (Esterhuizen & Krog 2014).

Although Krog is one of the South African writers who consistently tries to bridge the gap between the different communities in South Africa and to engage with the history of inequality and prejudice in which she was complicit by virtue of being a white Afrikaner, this cycle of poems indicate that there are moments in which she despairs about the possibility of ever achieving her goal. The translational space in "servants talk" stages misunderstanding and despair rather than mediation, reminding the reader of the complexities involved in inter-cultural communication in an unequal society.

Conclusion

Wilson (2011: 246) puts a positive spin on the translational text that emerges from an intercultural situation when she writes: "A 'translational' view of an intercultural situation makes visible those all too easily forgotten elements inherent in any intercultural communication: understanding, mediating, misunderstanding, resistance, etc. – it makes complexity more transparent and thus easier to handle because we can deconstruct its component parts."

In this article I tried to demonstrate that the texts discussed require careful analysis of the ways in which they are embedded in the linguistic, social, political and historical contexts from which they originated. Being written in Afrikaans, a minority language with a complex and compromised history, they reveal the complexities of the "contract" entered into with another

language when a translational text is constructed. As such they make transparent the complexities and tensions inherent in the act of translation and the construction of translational texts, taking into account not only the understanding and mediation resulting from the process, but also revealing its failures. Whether they make those complexities "easier to handle" – as Wilson suggests – is a different question altogether. It is clear that each of the authors discussed here see their texts as participating in a transnational circuit in which the act of translation itself and the construction of translational texts have become almost inevitable. Even though they demonstrate the difficulties inherent in translation these translational texts are also indispensable in the attempt to retain cultural diversity while at the same time building understanding between different groups.

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