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# Unsettling lingua franca through translation: Solidarity in migrant cities

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**Abstract:** Migrational cities are inherently cosmopolitan and translational. In such cities, language is no doubt one of the most difficult barriers for migrants, who are often identified because they speak *Englishes* rather than English—not only when they do not know the language of their new “homeland” but also, perhaps even worse, at that stage when they are supposed to have learned it. Many of them never manage to speak the dominant language “well”; they are deemed to speak “weirdly” in terms of both grammar and accent. In this context, translation has much to say. Translation operates within a politics of language. Being translational does not necessarily mean finding common linguistic grounds—or lingua franca, conventionally defined as stable and neutral languages that bridge incommensurable cultures. This paper examines whether lingua franca can instead be conceived of as being built on uncommon and unsettled grounds, more specifically as temporary, ever-shifting registers borne out of the conference of diverse tongues in particular time-spaces. Translation is understood as a way to creolize the lingua franca to forge a language that is native to no one and thus potentially available to everyone. This redefinition of lingua franca can lead to a new understanding of solidarity in multilingual cities by advocating for a translation that highlights rather than smooths over difference.

**Keywords:** Translation, migrancy, lingua franca, translational cities

And you were kneeling on the sidewalk tying my powder-blue shoes, saying,  
“Remember. Remember. You’re already Vietnamese.”

—Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous*

## 1. Lingua franca as *uncommon* language

The term ‘lingua franca’ conventionally designates a language that bridges disparate, mutually unintelligible tongues. It is, in other words, *the* language that converges and translates other languages into itself to facilitate communication. Its presence is most acutely felt in nation states comprising several peoples, where a common medium is imperative for the management of superdiversity. Hence, the very existence of a lingua franca in any given space points to a state of multilingualism beneath the veil of a monolingual order: there is no lingua franca without the existence of two or more languages (Gramling, 2016; Yildiz, 2012).

In this connection, the etymology of the term ‘lingua franca’ is of interest. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers the antiquated meaning of the term as a

“pidgin language drawing its lexicon mainly from the southern Romance languages and formerly used as a trading language, first in the eastern Mediterranean and later throughout much of northern Africa and the Middle East” (Oxford English Dictionary, sense 1). The following sample sentence is by F. Burnaby, written in 1877: ““What do you want?”—he asked in *lingua franca*, that undefined mixture of Italian, French, Greek, and Spanish, which is spoken throughout the Mediterranean” (Ibid.). This historical sense, registered as the first meaning of the term, has since been superseded by its contemporary usage with which we are more familiar, where *lingua franca* means “[a]ny language that is used by speakers of different languages as a common medium of communication; a common language” (Oxford English Dictionary, sense 2.a). To this second definition is added a footnote in small print: “In early use sometimes specifically denoting a mixed language that fulfils this role [of being a common medium of communication]”. The entry points us to the following example from 1777: “At that time [that of Charlemagne] it appears that a *kind of mixture*, or *lingua franca*, of Latin, Gaulic, and Franc, was *in general use*” (Ibid.; emphasis added).

The substrate meaning of *lingua franca* is, therefore, at odds with its contemporary usage. We seem to encounter a paradoxical formulation, namely that a mixed language can double up as a common language. But the formulation is paradoxical only when read from the perspective of contemporary usage, with the attendant assumption that a common language must also be a homogeneous one. In migration contexts, such homogeneity constitutes a source of power that marginalizes those who do not speak the *lingua franca*, or who speak it in a distinctive, negatively valued accent that indexes them as “non-native” speakers. Whereas many migrants strive toward acculturation over time through the acquisition of English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL), others may be trapped in a linguistic limbo due to their incapacity in learning the host language. This inability to speak (the *lingua franca*) compels the migrant to seek out various other resources to compensate for a perceived loss of voice.

## 2. Beyond the host-migrant duality

This linguistic pathos of the migrant is poignantly exemplified in the semi-autobiographical novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* by the Vietnamese born, U.S.-based writer Ocean Vuong. In one episode, Vuong's narrator and alter ego witnesses a spectacle of miscommunication as his mother and grandmother, both non-conversant in English, try to buy oxtail at a butcher's store in a city in Connecticut. The mother first attempts the purchase in Vietnamese, only to find the butcher bemused. She then resorts to a whimsical charade demonstrating how, where language falters, the body speaks:

Floundering, you [referring to the narrator's mother] placed your index finger at the small of your back, turned slightly, so the man could see your backside, then wiggled your finger while making mooing sounds. With your other hand, you made a pair of horns above your head. You moved, carefully twisting and gyrating so he could recognize each piece of this performance: horns, tail, ox (Vuong, 2019, p. 30).

When it is apparent that this theatrical gesticulation, too, fails (the butcher finds the body language uninformative albeit entertaining), the narrator's mother makes a surprising switch to French, a language remembered only in fragments from her childhood and invoking the spectre of Vietnam's colonial

history. “Derrière de vache!”, she says, literally, “back of a cow”. This French intervention elicits a response from a co-worker from the stall, though in Spanish—this did not work either. In a last-ditch attempt, the narrator’s grandmother joins in to enact yet another charade, with “mother and daughter twirling and mooing in circles” (Vuong, 2019, p. 31). The intended purchase of oxtail nonetheless concludes in failure.

Ruminating on the incident later in the day, the narrator makes a resolution that speaks to the power of the lingua franca in incriminating the migrant’s tongue into “blanks”, “silences”, and “stutters”:

I promised myself I’d never be wordless when you needed me to speak for you. So began my career as our family’s official interpreter. From then on, I would fill in our blanks, our silences, stutters, whenever I could. I code switched. I took off our language and wore my English, like a mask, so that others would see my face, and therefore yours (Vuong, 2019, p. 32).

This passage, evocative of Frantz Fanon’s “black skin-white mask” trope (Fanon, 1952), powerfully reveals the stigmatization of languages other than the lingua franca in migration contexts. For migrants like Vuong’s narrator and his family: “our words [are] suddenly wrong everywhere, even in our mouths” (Vuong, 2019, p. 31); and when they endeavour to act like locals, they would inevitably be “outed” by their tongues the instant they speak (Vuong, 2019, p. 32). This virtual silencing of the migrant by virtue of their mother tongue creates a gap to be filled by translation—which for Vuong’s narrator becomes a means of redemption, as if not speaking the lingua franca were a disabling sin. In this redemptive role, translation operates in unilateral fashion, continually masking differences by dubbing the alien tongue in the lingua franca—but not vice versa—hence reinforcing vertical hierarchies between the host and the migrant. What Vuong’s narrator calls code-switching is essentially a denial of the mother tongue in its encounter with the lingua franca in public spaces, a strategic erasure of one’s otherness for the sake of surviving in a foreign land.

At one point, Vuong’s narrator seems to suggest that the body can salvage the silenced mouth. Citing Roland Barthes, he draws a language philosophy out of his predicament: “Two languages cancel each other out [...] beckoning a third. Sometimes our words are few and far between, or simply ghosted. In which case the hand, although limited by the borders of skin and cartilage, can be that third language that animates where the tongue falters” (Vuong, 2019, p. 33). The embodied performance of the narrator’s mother and grandmother related above exemplifies this ghosting of words and the animation of a third language. But as the episode at the butcher’s store demonstrates, even such embodied communication falls through. Ultimately, the switching among Vietnamese, French, and a fitful of body language does not enable the Vietnamese family to engage with English-language speakers in the way they want, implying the futility of truncated tongues and colourful gestures in the face of the hegemonic lingua franca.

How might we imagine the above scenario otherwise? Is it possible to conceive of the failed engagement with the lingua franca as a positive rather than embarrassing event? More radically: What if the multimodal performance described in the above scene is the lingua franca? To conceive of this possibility requires a rethinking of translation not as a linear carrying-over of meaning from one endpoint (Source) to another (Target), but as a transformative convergence of both into a relational, intersemiotic, open-ended time-space. This entails altering the indexicality of translation, such that it does not point asymmetrically from the migrant’s language to the lingua franca, but bilaterally from both languages to an intermediate as well as multimodal space that

transfigures resources from the two codes into a repertoire, transcending the boundary between named languages, as well as between linguistic and non-linguistic modalities. To wit: this is a conception of translation “not as a form of erasure and replacement, a cancelling of what was there (what we were) to substitute it with something forever striving and failing to be a perfect replacement, but as a trace that functions as the guarantor of narrative continuity, of productive change, of the resilient co-presence of multiple narratives and selves” (Simon and Polezzi, 2022, p. 158). Hence, one language does not obliterate the other by way of substitution; the two languages together translate into hybrid repertoires, born across linguistic borders and even beyond language as such.

Translation, then, is not a redemption of flawed selves, but a reinvention of new identities out of old ones, as well as a proliferation of singular languages into multiple tongues and modes of communication. This idea of translation as a throwtogetherness (Massey, 2005) of resources from two or more languages and nonverbal modalities has implications for how we envision the lingua franca in a new light. It has the potential to pivot a lingua franca from a “common” to an “uncommon” medium—one that foregrounds rather than smooths over difference, producing outcomes that creatively and critically engage both Source and Target. To propose this notion of lingua franca as a heterogeneous repertoire is, in effect, to resuscitate the historical meaning of the term as a concoction of different languages. It is to reimagine translation as a different kind of heuristic, one that does not lineate from one terminal point to another, but that takes both endpoints toward the mediating ground and negotiates meaning in transformative ways. This is the main contribution we would like to make throughout these pages. In thinking translation through the notion of solidarity in migratory contexts, we make the case for conceiving translation as a throwtogetherness; as an experience drawing toward community practice, towards the intermingling of cultures; as the process to deconstruct those linguistic borders which build the political foundations of monolingualism; and as a fluid “constellation of trajectories” (Massey, 2005, p. 149) that makes up migratory spaces.

Returning to the fictional episode related earlier, where the butcher watches with amusement the Vietnamese women play out their intentions in different languages as well as with sounds and gestures, what if the butcher actively participated in this interaction by drawing on resources from his own repertoire, engaging his Vietnamese interlocutors dialogically by translating his response into a different set of verbal and nonverbal signs? The interaction between the two parties, then, would need to be re-scripted, proceeding not vertically along a hierarchy of languages ranked according to their symbolic capital, but rhizomatically in a series of to-and-fro exchanges. On this understanding, translation lapses into translanguaging (Lee, 2022; Lee and Li, 2020), a whole-body performance synergizing semiotic resources from both ends of the communication into an immensely enriched multilingual and multimodal space. This is the space where selves can be transformed beyond the host-migrant duality, where solidarity can be fostered across the boundary of source and target cultures, and where the conventional imaginary of the lingua franca can be nuanced.

### **3. Subaltern voices**

As mentioned above, translation in this context is not a substitution of one language for another; it is a much more complex double process “of

appropriating and replacing what is foreign while keeping its foreignness in view [...] It is also the letting loose and putting forth of the foreign [...] hence saving it for those who come later” (Rafael, 2005, p. xvii). Fostering solidarity through translation means creating a nonbinary space built by those living in translation, by those who understand translation as a never-monolingual third territory. Translation as a territory embracing “an ever-shifting constellation of trajectories” (Massey, 2005, p. 151) which makes possible our throwtogetherness. It means not setting aside the migrant language “in acknowledgement of the ever-present demand to speak the lingua franca” (Rafael, 2016a, p. 109). It means giving voice to the subaltern, in the sense of allowing them to speak directly in their own way, rather than merely representing them and their tongues. As Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, we need stories that give voice to the voiceless (Nguyen, 2018, pp. 12, 14).

The unsettled and unsettling territory of cosmopolitan cities needs to be a translational zone in which “the encounter and exchange of languages” (Simon, 2021, p. 15) unravel. Emily Apter’s “translation zone”, which follows Pratt’s (1992) “contact zone”, is a territory that can become a space of violence but also a *topos* that facilitates the exploration of difference by forcing us to leave behind the known familiar space as well as our mother tongue, one which may sometimes feel us “in war”. Going back to Vuong’s novel, what we have is a literal war (the Vietnam war) that leads to displacement and, consequently, the “stunting” of the mother tongue:

*No object is in a constant relationship with pleasure, wrote Barthes. For the writer, however, it is the mother tongue. But what if the mother tongue is stunted? What if that tongue is not only the symbol of a void, but is itself a void, what if the tongue is cut out? Can one take pleasure in loss without losing oneself entirely? The Vietnamese I own is the one you gave me, the one whose diction and syntax reach only the second-grade level.*

*As a girl, you watched, from a banana grove, your schoolhouse collapse after an American napalm raid. At five, you never stepped into a classroom again. Our mother tongue, then, is no mother at all—but an orphan. Our Vietnamese a time capsule, a mark of where your education ended, asked. Ma, to speak in our mother tongue is to speak only partially in Vietnamese, but entirely in war (Vuong, 2019, p. 32).*

#### **4. Migrant cities as translation zones**

In a striking formulation, Apter connects the “l” and the “n” of transLation and transNation to understand the nuances of translation in relation to the lingua franca. Her translation zone would be one in which the lingua franca and the nation could be unsettled, since it designates “sites that are ‘in-translation,’ that is to say, belonging to no single, discrete language or single medium of communication” (Apter, 2006, p. 6). Furthermore, all languages “belong to their speakers in a way they do not belong to everyone else” (Pratt, 2016, p. 246). An unsettled language is composed of layers. It is a palimpsest created with words that have lived not one but many lives, and which thus tell many stories. Translation is thus conceived of as a relocating act:

*Instead of seeing translation merely as a movement of meaning across languages, cultures, and borders, we read translation as a relocating act: of meanings and texts but also of people and cultures. As a keyword of today’s global culture, in fact, relocation commonly refers to the redistribution of migrants, but it also describes the cultural and linguistic adjustments that people who move from one*

form of belonging to another know firsthand (Bertacco and Vallorani, 2021, p. 1).

A multilingual city living in translation implies that languages do not only coexist but intertwine, cross-pollinate, overlap and contaminate each other. Multilingual, cosmopolitan, migrant cities incorporate what Said (1984) called “a plurality of vision”, simultaneous voices that are heard on equal terms, “contrapuntally” (Said, 1984, p. 148; Said, 1993). Migrant cities are an example of how languages reflect ways of life, the gap between “languages *lived* and languages *learned*” (Bhabha, 1994/2004, p. x). They also demonstrate that today languages lead “plurilingual lives: they change, live, and die in constant contact, or war, with other idioms” (Bertacco and Vallorani, 2021, p. 22). In migrant cities, inhabited by relocated (Bertacco and Vallorani, 2021, p. 26) and translated people (Rushdie, 1991), translation is much more than a mechanical process of transference but an overwhelming activity which shows diverse experiences across borders. Translation may play a major role in contemporary cities by facilitating encounters and exchanges that go beyond linguistic substitution:

Translators serve the important additional function of protecting the social, linguistic, political, economic, and legal rights of individuals and communities, particularly where a clear bias, injustice, or imbalance of power reveals itself. [...] Re-voicing a refugee or asylum seeker’s motivation to flee famine, war, or persecution, for example, often requires more than linguistic or cultural skills, as deliberations regarding whether universal hospitality should be denied or granted are habitually fused with social, political, and discursive instruments of power (Inghilleri, 2017, p. 31).

Translation is here posited “not as an action to be performed or a skill to be learned but as a condition of living—temporary or permanent—and a way to see the world” (Bertacco and Vallorani, 2021, p. 22). This approach shows the urgency to deconstruct the imperial lingua franca, since, as Apter (2006, p. xi) states, “[m]ixed tongues contest the imperium of global English”.

## 5. Speaking “englishes”

No doubt, language plays “a significant role in determining one’s place in the social map” (Rafael, 2016b, p. 97). The space occupied by each language reveals in many cases asymmetries and inequalities. Migrants speak *englishes* rather than English—not only when they do not know the language of their new “homeland” but also, perhaps even worse, at that stage when they are supposed to have learned it. Many of them never manage to speak the dominant language “well”; they are deemed to speak “weirdly” in terms of both grammar and accent. Non-native speakers of a language “feel the full weight of its grammatical constraints and its idiomatic trickiness” (Rafael, 2023, p. 21). In these circumstances, the demands of translation are also asymmetrical. In language ideological regimes that sustain the myth of monolingualism, translation, and more specifically translating out of one’s tongue, seems optional if not superfluous. The U.S. stands out as exemplary in this regard, whereby American English prevails as the dominant language into which other languages are mandated to translate. As Rafael argues:

The labor of translation is something that is relegated to non-English speakers. For those who speak American English, language feels purely instrumental—

unless of course you're a poet or a scholar—and so translation is something one can set aside and remain indifferent to. One speaks and expects to be heard and understood without further mediation (Rafael, 2023, p. 20).

Thus, whereas speakers of hegemonic languages are entitled to “forget” translation as a pervasive practice and dwell in the fantasy of a monolingual order, migrants do not have this option and live perennially *within* translation:

The forgetting of translation, however, is not a privilege enjoyed by those who are non-native speakers. Immigrants, especially, enter the dominant language as a second, borrowed tongue. Barely habitable, it comes across as a kind of incommunicable thing, a blocked passage calling for new forms of translation that result in novel locutions (Rafael, 2023, p. 20).

Therefore, it is quite clear that language is one of the strategies through which the subaltern is silenced and stereotyped. Ignoring the “weird” language of those different from Us is a form of erasure, a form of symbolic violence, of rendering Them absent and, therefore, a way of leaving them in a risk zone (Taronna, 2016), marginalized and far from those spaces where order, monolingualism and homogeneity are synonymous with security. Some languages sound “bad” (Gilmour, 2020), “weird” (Chi'ien, 2004) or “broken” (Fusco, 1995). These are the “barbarians” of the poem written by Constantine P. Cavafy in 1898 and used in 1980 by John M. Coetzee as inspiration for his novel, also titled *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Twenty-five years later, Philip Glass composed an opera of the same name, based on Coetzee's novel. Things do not seem to be much better now, when the displacement of large groups of people and the existence of borders are “the distinguishing feature of our times” (Rushdie, 2003, p. 425).

Barbarians must be passive subjects. “To be otherwise is to be suspect, and at the frontier to come under suspicion is the worst of all possible crimes” (Rushdie, 2003, p. 315). Speaking the lingua franca “correctly” is one of the best ways to show obedience. In a neoliberal order that purports to support cultural plurality and multilingualism, the logics of global capitalism nevertheless dictate that English is *more equal* than other languages. Not speaking the lingua franca may have consequences, as shown by many different migrant writers: from Minae Mizumura's *The Fall of Language in the Age of English* to Cathy Park Hong's “Bad English” in *Dance Dance Revolution* (2007). The Spanglish of Junot Díaz, Giannina Braschi, and Susana Chávez-Silverman; or Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2009) living “My Life In-Between Languages”; Amos Tutuola's nonstandard English and Saro-Wiwa's “rotten English” in *Sozaboy*, among many others. A case in point is Vahni Capildeo's use of the English of her childhood in Trinidad as a mirror of the country's history and of its many stories. This is a clear example of unsettled lingua franca, since the English she uses contains words and phrases from West African languages and parts of India, and is also influenced by Spanish, French, Chinese, and Portuguese. Capildeo's English, or rather *englishes*, reflect fragments of multilingual, exiled, migration identities, always fluid in movement:

Expatriate. *Non dépaycée, sin saber por qué ni por qué sé yo, unhoused free condition*. I arrive at the theme, which surely is a citation. I am incited to pluck out the heart of the mystery. I am transported on the instant to another century. *Patria* sings an Italian tenor. No expiry, please (Capildeo, 2016, p. 104).

In “Five Measures of Expatriation”, Capildeo (2016) describes an expatriate who finds refuge in an unsettled, weird, hybrid, accented language:

Language is my home. It is alive other than in speech. It is beyond a thing to be carried with me. It is ineluctable, variegated and muscular. A flicker and drag emanates from the idea of it. Language seems capable of girding the oceanic earth, like the world-serpent of Norse legend. It is as if language places a shaping pressure upon our territories of habitation and voyage; thrashing, independent, threatening to rive our known world apart [...] Language is my home, I say; not one particular language (Capildeo, 2016, pp. 100-101).

Accented, unsettled languages create dialogic spaces for new languages located “outside the oppositional model set up by the traditional binaries of postcolonial theorizing: centre/margin, self/other, coloniser/colonized” (Wilson, 2011, p. 237).

Unsettling the lingua franca in “polyphonic cityscapes” (Wilson, 2018, p. 59) also means undermining institutional monolingualism, the centres of power, the space of the homogeneous lingua franca which does not want to recognize what has been obvious for decades, namely that “cross-cultural movement has become the norm rather than the exception” (Hoffman, 1999, p. 42). Each language documents the different (hi)stories of a place. The location of each language reveals how close and yet how far away the “them” is from the “us”, the *them* as *not-us*, and the *us* as *not them* (Bauman, 2017). Identities are constructed and maintained many times through language, by transforming the homogeneous lingua franca by adapting it to a new way of looking at existence, a way that implies living *in* and *through* translation. In these contexts, language is seen “as both ‘home’ and simultaneously a ‘translated space’” (Wilson, 2011, p. 238). Place may change us. As suggested above, translation may be the possibility of “the *practicing* of place, the negotiation of intersecting trajectories; place as an arena where negotiation is forced upon us [...] ‘Place’ here could stand for the general condition of our being together” (Massey, 2005, p. 154).

## 6. Solidarity and the politics of translation

In this context, translation has much to say. Translation operates within a politics of language (Fernández and Evans, 2018). The experience of translation “contains a politics of language” (Rafael, 2023, p. 22) which has nothing to do with “benevolence” (Spivak, 1995, p. xxv), nor with the “authentic” migrant experience. As Spivak argues, experience “is one that comes to us constructed by hegemonic voices; and so, what one has to tease out is what is *not* there” (Spivak, 1990, p. 61). It is concerned with “the impossibility for the translator to translate from a position of monolinguist superiority” (Spivak, 1993, p. 410). Solidarity is closer to throwntogetherness, to the middle, to liminality:

...my interest is much more in the middle, which is where something like a practice emerges by way of a mistake. ‘Mistake’ within quotes because the possibility of this mistake cannot be derived from something that is over against it, ‘correct’ [...] Within that space, against what would you declare your own inability since there is no model where anyone is fully able to do anything (Spivak, 1990, p. 158).



Being translational does not necessarily mean finding common linguistic grounds—or lingua franca, conventionally defined as stable and neutral languages that bridge incommensurable cultures. Being translational means asking if the lingua franca can instead be conceived of as being built on uncommon and unsettled grounds; more specifically, as temporary, ever-shifting registers borne out of the conference of diverse tongues in particular time-spaces. This redefinition of lingua franca can lead to a new understanding of solidarity in multilingual migrant cities by advocating for a translation that highlights rather than smooths over difference. Translation can turn out to be a weapon against homogeneous lingua franca regimes and thus seek justice and solidarity (Baker, 2016, 2020, 2022). This prompts us to reconsider the ambit of translation beyond a linear movement from one discrete language to another. Translation is, on this understanding, a political activity,

as it affects the interactions among groups and communities [...] [translation] performs ‘bordering’ [...] creates borders [...] it can increase access [but may also] have the effect of separating [...] Translating texts can alter narratives about specific communities in other communities as well as the narrative communities tell about themselves, thus affecting the ways in which people understand situations and act. This is the case for non-political texts as much as political texts, as they all contribute to a narrative understanding of a community or group (Evans and Fernández, 2018, pp. 2-4).

The notion of translation as a throwtogetherness, hence co-presence, of languages constitutes a foundation for thinking the notion of solidarity as grounded not on commonality, but on difference:

[T]he throwtogetherness of place demands negotiation. In sharp contrast to the view of place as settled and pre-given, with a coherence only to be disturbed by “external” forces, places [...] necessitate invention; they pose a challenge. They implicate us, perforce, in the lives of human others, and in our relations with nonhumans they ask how we shall respond to our temporary meeting-up with these particular rocks and stones and trees. They require that, in one way or another, we confront the challenge of the negotiation of multiplicity (Massey, 2005, p. 141).

Solidarity in and through this way of looking at translation means interrogating established processes of knowledge transfer. It means living in a translation zone, an intellectual topography that is neither the property of a single nation nor an amorphous condition associated with post-nationalism. Indeed, the complexities of translation have rendered the nation-state an obsolete analytical category. The trope of translation enables us to understand the synergy of multiple languages in spaces transcending the borders of the nation. And within such synergy lies the potential of solidarity.

Solidarity through translation can only be constructed through *heterotopias* (Foucault, 1986, p. 23)—spaces constructed through deterritorialization, displacement and community. In these heterotopias translanguaging unsettles boundaries and shows that in contemporary hybrid spaces difference “is threaded through the entire social fabric and incorporated into the repertoire” (Baynham and Lee, 2019, p. 9). Unsettling the lingua franca does not mean bilingualism as the simple juxtaposition of several languages as co-existing but discrete entities. It involves translanguaging and *bilanguaging* something “that is beyond sound, syntax, and lexicon, and beyond the need for having two languages [...] bilanguaging then would be precisely that way of life between languages: a dialogical, ethic, aesthetic, and political process of social

transformation” (Mignolo, 2000, pp. 264-265). In this context, translation is a way to understand how communication is based on difference. Communication occurs in cosmopolitan spaces (Bielsa, 2017) *through* translation in many ways: allowing an infinite variety of linguistic landscapes (Blommaert, 2013) and experiencing the urban experience through all the senses: listening to “weird” accents different to “ours”, feeling enriched by different rhythms of speech and being open to “strange” objects which translate experiences lived in other spaces.

Translation leading to solidarity in heterotopic cities means “taking into account the specific history and geography of the city, the circulation of language within urban space, zones of resistance and misconnection” (Simon, 2021, p. 15). This implies that the translator needs to be aware of how different spaces serve different narrative roles: spaces of power are written asymmetrically and therefore they will translate from the “pure” lingua franca into the “weird” languages of those who need advice and have no right to speak in public places. The homogeneous lingua franca used in some spaces demonstrates that space is where Power watches over everything, a place for control and repression. Contemporary urban spaces are hybrid *topoi* where language is very close to the “other” (Canagarajah, 2017). Asymmetry between cultures is experienced through asymmetry between languages and through the suppression of voices. Contemporary space is not a smooth, homogeneous, neutral territory, but rather an extremely complex one due to all the differences it embraces, in terms of races, beliefs, ways of life and languages. Thus, translation does not occur among equals and therefore it can be a way to achieve solidarity or, on the contrary, it can be “carried out in the service of inequality, disturbing ideologies, and violence” (Simon, 2016, p. 7).

Translators know very well that the unity of language is fundamentally political (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 101), driven by the myth of monolingualism that constructs foreign languages and accents as alien Others, thereby reinforcing the hegemony of global lingua francas (Baynham and Lee, 2019, p. 3). Writing in the context of language understood as a site where displacement and relocation, othering or inclusion become visible, Vicente Rafael (2019, p. 145) argues that the dominance of American English is premised on its disavowal of linguistic heterogeneity by enregistering nonlocal languages and accents as threats to the polity.

Unsettling the lingua franca means assuming English as “a language always in translation” (Pennycook, 2008). It means that English as a lingua franca no longer functions by itself in a vacuum because it now coexists with other languages and itself exists in translation: “English always needs to be seen in the context of other languages, or, as I shall argue here, as a language always in translation [...] [translation] is not so much a method of language teaching or an aspect of comparative literature but rather is a fundamental player on the global stage [...] all communication involves translation” (Pennycook, 2008, p., 40). Unsettling the lingua franca would imply achieving the right to speak oddly. This entails reversing the normative power relation between hegemonic and non-hegemonic language. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the centrality of major languages can be mitigated by seeking out traces of minor languages in them: “Use the minor language to *send the major language racing* [...] minor languages are not simply sublanguages [...] but potential agents of the major language’s entering into a becoming-minoritarian of all of its dimensions and elements” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1975/1986, p. 106). Unsettling the lingua franca will enable living in a state of continuous translation, perennially living between languages without belonging to either of them. In *Bilingual Love*,

Abdelkebir Khatibi, in line with Jacques Derrida's monolingualism of the other, alerts us on how language is never homogeneous but multiple and thus drives one to heterological openings and to what he calls *bi-langue* (see Chow, 2014, p. 30), an occurrence that problematizes the connection between language and belonging, eliding a simplistic correspondence between the two:

Language belongs to no one, it belongs to no one and I know nothing about anyone. In my mother tongue, didn't I grow up as an adopted child? From one adoption to another, I thought I was a language's own child [...] This idea imposes itself as I write it: every language should be bilingual! [...] Speaking to you in your own language, I am yourself without really being you, fading away in the tracks you leave (Khatibi, 1983/1990, pp. 4-5).

A smooth lingua franca is linked to the idea of a homogeneous and well-defined national identity, but today the domain of national language is occupied by nonnative speakers "whose native, mother, home, or community language is not the one they write in" (Seyhan, 2001, p. 8). Contemporary languages contain traces of other languages, traces of past times and spaces which reflect diasporic, transnational consciousness and traumatic experiences. In Edwidge Danticat's *Krik? Krat!* (1996), *The Farming of Bones* (1998) and *Claire of Sea Light* (2013), for instance, the mother tongue is a blurred concept. As a Haitian-American writer, her language contains traces of Creole, French, and English, which she uses to recreate the diasporic, transnational, and deterritorialized consciousness and traumatic experiences of Haitians. Having no mother tongue has to do with living in "imaginary homelands", as she states in her introduction to *The Penguin Book of Migration Literature*:

Is home the place where we are born, where [...] our umbilical cords are buried? Or is home the place we die, where we are buried? Or is home the place where we toil in between? The place to which we've sacrificed our youth, our strength, the place to which we have given the best years of our lives? Some of us are born speaking one language and will die speaking another. We are seeds in one soil and weeds in another. We don't always get to decide where we call home. Many times it is others who decide, gatekeepers, immigration officers, border guards [...] Do we define home as where we welcome others in, or as where we keep others out? These days it certainly seems as though the latter is prevailing, but the voices you are reading here will not be pushed out. They will not go unheard. "Tell us," the novelist Toni Morrison said in her 1993 Nobel lecture, "what it is to have no home in this place. To be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of towns that cannot bear your company (Danticat in Ahmad, 2019, p. 12).

Perhaps agreeing with Deleuze and Guattari when they state in *A Thousand Plateaus* that there is no mother tongue, only a power takeover by a dominant language within a political multiplicity, Danticat argues that English is her "stepmother tongue":

I thought of a stepmother tongue in the sense that you have a mother tongue and then an adopted language that you take on because your family circumstances have changed, sometimes not by your own choice. But I don't think of it as something ugly. I've always thought my relationship to language is precarious because in the first part of my life, I was balancing languages. As I was growing up, we spoke Creole at home, but when you go out, you speak French in the office, at the bank. If you didn't speak French at my school, the teacher would act like she didn't hear what you were saying. French is the socially valid and accepted language, but then the people who speak Creole are not validated and

in some way are being told their voice isn't heard. So I've always felt this dichotomy in language anyway (Shea and Danticat, 1996, pp. 387-388).

Danticat's reflections on imaginary homelands "as a distinctive feature of our times" (Rushdie, 2003, p. 425), on physical and metaphorical borders that are reflected in language is present in many writers whose lives and languages are marked by transience. For instance, Edward Said (2001, p. 557), raised between the Arab language and English, says: "I *have never known* which was *my first language*, and have felt fully at home in neither, although I dream in both. Every time I speak an English sentence, I find myself echoing it in Arabic, and vice versa". And something similar could be said of the Nobel prize for literature in 2021: Abdulrazak Gurnah's migrant storytelling in *By the Sea* (2001) shows how translation may function as a solidarity zone, where the two East Africans, Saleh and Latif, encounter in an English seaside town. Latif helps Saleh, who pretends not to know English, through translation at the immigration service, where the immigration officials have a poor understanding of translation. The asymmetrical power relations between the two languages in question, Swahili and English, are highlighted by Gurnah. As Tina Steiner explains:

Latif is therefore assigned the role of a cultural broker, equally competent in Swahili and English. This benign gesture by the official immigration people, who have a naïve understanding of translation, is contrasted in the text with the asymmetrical power relations which exist between languages. Both in Zanzibar, itself a polyglot environment, and in England, translations between languages hint at the complex negotiations of identity within and across boundaries, oscillating between what can and what cannot be translated across difference. Figuratively, translation can also be understood as describing the processes of movement between the cultures of the place of departure and those encountered in the host society – processes which are inextricably part of the migration experience (Steiner, 2006, p. 313).

Far from homogeneous spaces of power, polyglot neighbourhoods are heterotopic zones, translation sites (Simon, 2019) where objects, languages, myths, and stories rooted in the past and brought into the present are brought together. Solidarity means understanding translation as a way "to creolize or pidginize—the difference between the two is often elided—in order to forge a language that is native to no one and thus available potentially to everyone" (Rafael, 2023, p. 27). In this context, unsettling the lingua franca would also imply translating *all* that which constitutes the other's world: objects, clothes, material things which define their otherness, their being human, their memories. In his *Imaginary Homelands*, Rushdie explains that fragmented, polycentric identities that transcend a single nation and language are translated beings who do not find their home in one place but in several:

The coexistence of languages and different accents, and the mixture of semiotic and cultural systems, is a rich context from which one can only derive benefits. The effect of mass migrations has been the creation of radically new types of human being: people who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as in material things; people who have been obliged to defend themselves—because they are so defined by others—by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves. The migrant suspects reality: having experienced several ways of being, he understands their illusory nature. To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier (Rushdie, 1991, pp. 124-125).

Spaces of solidarity are translational spaces where words travel from the past into the present, from earlier memories which sound in the language of childhood into a new vocabulary which does not only translate words but also emotions and feelings, especially those words connected with “home”, with childhoods lived in another language. Words that wander endlessly and therefore discover new connections, new meanings in different contexts. Words which are always in movement, in translation:

[T]ranslational thinking is a perspective which sees ideas in movement, issuing from a former state and advancing towards a new one, each stage a layer in a figure of complexity [...] [Translation] evokes restlessness, drift, continuous searching [...] the fact that the inevitable shifts and slippages of meaning which result from translation introduce differences that are themselves new beginnings (Simon, 2023, pp. xii-xiii).

In this context, translation is not derivative or secondary but a fundamental and foundational activity, because translation shows “the trace of contact with the incomprehensible, the unknowable, or the unfamiliar, that is with the foreign, and there is no awareness of language or meaning until we come across the foreign” (Sakai, 2009, p. 170). Borders between languages, therefore, are an artifice of the development of the nation-state since the eighteenth-century, creating the modern regime of translation (Sakai, 2017).

## 7. Conclusion

Translational regimes based on a monolingual mindset need to be re-written, and multilingualism needs to be reinvented to bring solidarity to an increasingly globalized yet deeply divided world. Cosmopolitan cities bring solidarity into light via translation, given that we understand the kind of translation that transpire in them as an *experience* in Foucault’s sense, as that which makes possible a metamorphosis not only for oneself but for others: “experience must be linkable, to a certain extent, to a collective practice and to a way of thinking” (Foucault, 1981/1991, p. 39). If translation-as-experience points to a collective practice, it has the potential to bring about new ways of thinking about the throwtogetherness of languages and cultures, “the unavoidable challenge of negotiating a here-and-now (itself drawing on a history and a geography of thens and theres)” (Massey, 2005, p. 140). Throwtogetherness destabilizes the apparent homogeneity implicated in the contemporary idea of lingua franca by exposing its constitutive faultlines. It unsettles the lingual franca, highlighting the constructedness of linguistic boundaries that sustain the myth of monolingualism and unveils rhizomatic connections that cut through entrenched hierarchies between cultures. In doing so we follow Sherry Simon in proposing a translation that interrogates “processes of knowledge transfer and creation, interpretation, reading, communication, and relationship building”, a translation that constitutes “the source of new solidarities” (Simon, 2023, p. xv). Here, translation goes beyond the construction of a point-to-point equivalence between languages and texts; it entails reframing texts as they traverse and transform new contexts of reception (Simon and Polezzi, 2022, p. 155). In this regard, the translational city brings forth a new concept of “home”. Home is no longer just one place but that place “which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the constructions of the new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become” (hooks, 1990, p. 148). This new home

echoes new affects of belonging between home and abroad, between a here, a there, and an elsewhere (Minh-ha, 2011, p. 27). In the born-translated city “home” is not only the place which is marked out as your own, but also the specific place in which the Us will be recognized by the Others (Papastergiadis, 1998, p. 3). Translation, as vividly described by Rafael (2023, p. 20), then becomes “the practice of breathing, of taking in what is outside, opening oneself to the affection of as well as the potential infection by the other, yet seeking to distance oneself in order to live: such are the existential and practical dilemmas that translation constantly opens up”. And if translation is *infection* by the Other, might we not consider it in the reverse as a *healing* from the Self, a moving-through across time-spaces that rehabilitates memories, activates translanguaging encounters, and transforms identities? This is where we come full circle to the epigraph of this article taken from Ocean Vuong’s novel. The narrator’s mother’s admonishment “You’re already Vietnamese” underscores the imperative of the migrant to translate him or herself into the lingua franca. At the intersection of tongues, however, issues of translatability lurk in the form of semantic slippages:

In Vietnamese, the word for missing someone and remembering them is the same: nhớ. Sometimes, when you ask me over the phone, Con nhớ mẹ không? I flinch, thinking you meant, Do you remember me? (Vuong, 2019, p. 186)

The tension between missing and remembering is an affective split that manifests only by considering Vietnamese translationally with English; it is symptomatic of the migrant’s multivoiced psyche. Yet it also represents an ineluctable friction that both precedes and conditions solidarity, pointing to the lingua franca’s unstable but creative potential to signify differentially at its interface with an alien tongue. Such instability produces a translanguaging space, a social space for multilingual users—of which migrants are exemplary—where “different dimensions of their personal history, experience and environment, their attitude, belief and ideology, their cognitive and physical capacity [are brought together] into one coordinated and meaningful performance, and [made] into a lived experience” (Lee and Li, 2020, p. 397). It is precisely through uneasy juxtapositions within translanguaging spaces that any solidarity coming through transcultural encounters can be critically appreciated.

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