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## **FROM CULTURAL TRANSLATION TO CLINICAL CONSULTATION: WORKING BETWEEN LANGUAGES, WORKING BETWEEN DISCIPLINES**

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**Abstract:**

This article discusses the findings of a translation “workshop” run at intervals between 2011-2015, which brought together a) students of a liberal arts graduate program in Cultural Translation and b) recently arrived asylum seekers in Paris. The evolution of these workshops prompted the decision to explore the field of transcultural psychiatry and clinical practice as it has developed from its inception at the Hôpital Avicenne in Paris, where it continues to be developed and taught under the direction of Professor Marie Rose Moro. The aim of the collaboration was to support and theorize the inclusion of a marginalized, potentially traumatized and multilingual public within the frame of the liberal arts classroom. Reviewing, first, the reasons for reaching beyond the discipline of translation studies to that of psychiatry and psychotherapy, this article will explore this “case” of interdisciplinary practice through a comparative analysis of the group dynamics operating in the translation workshop, on the one hand, and in the teaching and clinical environment on the other. It examines the different modes of production for discursive acts in the two contexts—situating, first, the processes of positioning within each of these multilingual groups, in order, second, to foreground the relative importance accorded to textual productions versus oral enunciation. This difference offers a useful magnifier for understanding the conceptions of subjectivation at work in the respective approaches to multilingual transcultural communication.

**Keywords:**

Cultural Translation ♦ ethnopsychiatry ♦ Migration ♦ Transculturality ♦ Translation pedagogy

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## Introduction

Cultural Translation is one among many arenas of growth in translation studies within American academic institutions. Stemming for the most part out of modern languages study, and with a strong anchoring in theory, particularly deconstruction and Marxism, it advocates close reading and attention to the complex cultural and historical contexts in which texts are produced.<sup>1</sup> Ethno-psychiatry, or Transcultural Psychiatry, is a more multi-polar field, but in this article we will be focusing particularly on the branch that emerged in France in the mid 1970s, concurrent with the “French Theory” that found such fertile ground in the United States.<sup>2</sup> It is also the result of a transatlantic dynamic, but developed largely in parallel to post-structuralism, with little evident cross-fertilisation.<sup>3</sup> Today, however, some degree of convergence is arguably underway, and it is within that horizon that the present article will explore what is at stake, and what is in the way, when working between these disciplines.<sup>4</sup>

Both modern languages study and mental health are well-delineated disciplines ballasted by long-established schools dedicated to their study, a fact that is in itself a reflection of the specialized skills that both are understood to involve. Interdisciplinarity between psychiatry

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<sup>1</sup> Reflecting this new prominence, the Presidential Forum Theme for the 2009 convention of the Modern Language Association was “The Tasks of Translation in the Global Context.” Harish Trivedi’s “Translating Culture vs. Cultural Translation” (2007) offers one useful account of the genesis of cultural translation in the Anglophone academy, while the edited volume *Specters of the West and the Politics of Translation* (Naoki Sakai and Yukiko Hanawa 2001) offers a series of significantly different perspectives on the evolution of translation studies.

<sup>2</sup> The Division of Social and Transcultural Psychiatry, within the Department of Psychiatry at McGill University, constitutes a major pole in the field and has a significantly different history. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the differences. However, I would like to express my appreciation for the opportunity to hear Professor Cécile Rousseau of McGill speak at two events convened by Professor Marie Rose Moro for the comparative perspectives these offered.

<sup>3</sup> The importance of Jacques Lacan is common to both, but the modes and spaces for the reception of Lacanian psychoanalysis were significantly different in France and in the United States throughout the formative years of these disciplines.

<sup>4</sup> One instance of convergence is the inclusion of Homi K. Bhabha’s influential text *The Location of Culture* (1994) in its 2007 French translation on the core syllabus for the taught programme in transcultural psychiatry that will be discussed here. Bhabha’s is the only text in translation, as well as the only text from a humanities discipline on the syllabus. *The Location of Culture* is also the text Trivedi (2007) uses to situate the emergence of cultural translation as a “discipline.”

and translation raises broad, intuitive questions: how does diagnostic orientation intersect with the productive process, for example? These questions tend to disappear from sight, however, when translation is relegated to a vehicular process in medical situations, where it is recognised as an increasing necessity as more and more people live “in” translation, and where it is consequently bemoaned perhaps as an economic burden, but not acknowledged in itself as a process worthy of sustained consideration. The aim here will be to resist these various tendencies in order to explore the possibilities for interplay and development between a) the paradigms that inform cultural translation, with its specific focus on textual complexity and b) those that have shaped the development of transcultural psychiatry. In so doing, we will see whether working between them tells us more about what underpins their respective disciplinary structures, and—by extension—what this suggests about the potential released by interdisciplinary endeavour.

Our approach will proceed by considering a series of concrete situations, preferring the lived experience of teaching and acquiring a “discipline” over any prior delineation of its perimeter. The purpose of this exploration is not to advocate or critique the approach offered by either discipline in itself, but to reflect on why the possibility of productive contact between them emerged and what that contact in turn produced. The process will take us from a series of questions experienced as obstacles within the context of a graduate program in cultural translation to a project that gradually reframed some of its premises by engaging with the field of transcultural psychiatry through participant involvement in the acquisition of transcultural competence within a medical school and transcultural clinical practice itself. The end of this process will bring us back to one of the key articulations of what is at play, and perhaps in crisis, in the discipline of modern languages study in the Anglophone academy. So it is a movement “out” from a disciplinary grounding in modern languages and then “back.” Its contexts are Paris, a small American liberal arts institution called The American University of Paris, and a professional training programme within one of France’s largest medical schools, Paris Descartes.

Our starting point will be the decision to collaborate with a not-for-profit organisation offering access to language instruction and opportunities for creative language use, both to asylum seekers and indeed also to displaced people who choose not to declare a request for asylum in France. This decision was taken in 2010–11, in a bid to recast some of what the faculty and students of the MA program in Cultural Translation were collectively attempting

to do.<sup>5</sup> The young men who joined the student group had yet to achieve enough administrative or personal stability in France to access formal education or employment. They came from a range of national backgrounds—predominantly Afghanistan and Bangladesh, but also North and Sub-Saharan Africa, Ukraine and Thailand—and often had quite different motivations for their involvement in our workshops, where they collaborated directly with the university students in small groups of relatively balanced distribution. The groups worked towards projects that involved exploration of texts and of the city of Paris, and resulted for the most part in classroom work of text-image montages and video. This “experiment” ran from 2011-2015.

In 2014–15 we chose to re-frame the workshop again, collaborating with a primary school in the same area of Paris, also marked by high linguistic diversity and recent immigration. In this iteration of what was still conceived as part of the same “experiment,” the students joined a class of 8 to 9-year-olds to work together to translate various children’s books. This change in space and mode of encounter reflected a significant realignment of our expectations and questions, and was a result of the challenges we had encountered. These challenges had also in the meantime prompted increasing interest on my part, as workshop leader and researcher in translation studies, in the protocols operating in clinical contexts involving refugees and migrants, where linguistic diversity is often a major factor in establishing a conducive therapeutic environment. Both of these developments – the exploration of the clinical context and the evolution of the activities undertaken by the workshop participants—will therefore be discussed in what follows in relation to one another and in detail. But before that, let me first situate the impetus towards transcultural psychiatry within questions internal to the discipline of modern languages study.

### **PART ONE: “un à-prendre vivant”**

Patrick Chamoiseau’s 1992 prize-winning novel *Texaco* opens on an exchange between the character, a Haitian writer called Ti-Cirique and the narrator, in which the latter is charged with lacking ‘grandeur’ and ‘humanism’ because he stays put in the ‘nègreries’ or ‘slave depots’ of his Creole (19). He replies: “Cher maître, littérature au lieu vivant est un à-prendre vivant...” or ‘Dear Master, literature of the living place is a catch-it alive...’ (19). The vivacity of language is the issue here, a vivacity explicitly opposed to the ossified nobility of French that is more French than that of the French, and this vivacity is linked to the question

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<sup>5</sup> The MA program, in existence since 2008, is associated with the Centre for Writers and Translators, created by the American University of Paris in 2007, and draws its faculty from a range of translators and theorists.

of its place, although the relation between place and literature is already obscured by the strange preposition chosen—‘littérature au lieu vivant’—which equivocates between a location and a characteristic, and is quite importantly divergent from the more normal ‘d’un lieu vivant’ or ‘from a living place.’ So there is no sense that we know where this writing is stemming *from*. And there are a number of ways in which translation can proceed. In the translation workshop, which received its first group of students in 2008, we generated a vast range of possibilities. The word ‘nègreries’ was strenuously debated. It has historical significance, meaning where slaves were held on arrival in the Caribbean prior to auction, but the form of the word points too towards the noun forms generated from verbs of expression: “plaisanter” gives “plaisanteries,” “moquer” “moqueries” and so on. So “nègreries” also suggests “the way Negroes speak.” To unpack this polysemy, we needed reference resources. It sent us “off to the archive,” as the comparatist Henry Staten writes in an essay that was a key element in our reflection.

In this essay, “Tracking the ‘Native Informant,’” published as a book chapter in 2005, Staten offers a usefully spare formulation of why translation studies today has moved from a predominantly linguistic set of preoccupations to sit at the interface among cultural and political history (including a sociological and even economic dimension), anthropology and the close reading tradition of literary criticism. Grappling with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s theorisation of a “transcendental or quasi-transcendental notion of radical alterity” (2006: 116), he directs us towards thinking the ethics of an encounter with radical otherness as an imperative that is also an impossibility, and which must therefore prompt an attempt to delineate a political point of application. This point of application is, in one respect, what is at stake in the notion of the “native informant” and more radically of the “aboriginal,” posited as furthest point on the scale of “nativeness.” The aboriginal qua aboriginal would, by definition, be out of reach for the “metropolitan subject,” and therefore not a possible informant in any literal sense. But she is not a transcendental other, Staten argues, for there is always a historical signification to this almost entirely inaccessible otherness. Thus, the experience of the impossibility of translation—the moment at which the “rhetoric” or idiom of the other does not “go over” (Spivak, 2012: 265)—sends Spivak, and many who have followed her lead, he writes, “off to the historical archive, and produces an efflorescence of ‘logic’ of historical analysis that is fully articulated even if the human reality toward which it turns our gaze is not” (Staten 2006: 117-18).

Let us note that Staten’s indication is pointing clearly towards a mode of interdisciplinarity. The linguistic expertise of the translator is no longer adequate, he suggests. Or rather, the

translator's linguistic expertise has to extend to the complex entanglement of language, alive to the multiplicity of historical assignations of particular words. The students enrolled in the MA program were versatile and persistent in this process. The "logic" underpinning their translation choices was abundant. But the difficulties we encountered in the "un à-prendre vivant" seemed of a different order. Like "nègreries," it is also a nominalisation, and we were very interested in the way in which this grammatical form cemented certain categories. But this making-substantial paradoxically transforms "literature" into something much more difficult to catch. What would be "un à-prendre"? In the Caribbean context, the image of a powerful fish comes to mind, but then dives away. The expression catches us by opening up a space of conjecture that lies out there, before us, its irregularity signifying to us in a way that forces us towards analogies while remaining untranslatable into another set of representational conventions.

Faced with this example, the archive pointed to by Staten did not seem to hold much for us. We needed to look elsewhere, though still within the Spivak corpus. In her seminal essay *Death of a Discipline*, in which she takes to task the absorption of non-European literatures into Western classrooms through Anglo-American anthologies and translations and calls instead for reinvigorated "discipline"—or the "hard work" of "old-fashioned Comp. Lit," Spivak describes translation as the "incessant shuttle" from "body to ethical semiosis" (2003: 13). Rejecting processes of "transcoding" at work in this "re-packaging" of subaltern texts, she posits the end of translation as "draw[ing] a response" in "a supplement of justice" to the text (2003: 13). It was here that the impetus to take our translation workshop outside the frame of the university and into public spaces of precarious encounter found its spring. This was not interdisciplinarity in any straightforward sense, though we did borrow from the vocabulary of anthropology to describe what we were doing, as Spivak herself does, referring to this as "fieldwork" without abandoning the critical interrogation of the notion of "native informant." We weren't in search of any particular knowledge, and our "informants" were no more reliable in their understanding of the Caribbean or Martinique Creole than we. Our wager was simply that we might draw a more interesting and vivacious response to the text with their help, and in the process perhaps gain a firmer grasp of what doing it better justice might involve, and of how to articulate the double incitement to discipline and embodiment. What sort of working between the multiple languages of Chamoiseau's novel and our group was this going to call upon? In the first year of the workshop, the group had varying levels of command of Farsi, Urdu, Bengali, Arabic, Italian, Spanish, German, French and English. In

the subsequent years, we added Thai, Russian and Nigerian Pidgin to this range. What follows is a brief account of some of the significant moments.

### **The Workshops**

We decided to use a distinct poetic passage from *Texaco* as our initial material. A strange, incantatory evocation of seeking a new home, up in the mountains away from the violence of the plantations, our extract of text—several pages long—offered both thematic parallels to the situation of some of our participants and the sort of textual challenge posed by “un à-prendre vivant.” Quickly though it was supplemented both by other texts, in particular some Farsi poetry, and by the desire to do some shared exploring “up the mountain” of Paris. The group divided itself into four smaller contingents, and decisions were taken about where to meet next, and what to do there. Some stayed committed to translating the text in a site relevant to them—for example the Villette park, a large open space near the community centre where the asylum seekers met, unfamiliar to most of the university students, more used to central-city socializing. Others wanted to use the chance to venture closer to the sites associated with academic work: the Sorbonne courtyard, the national library. At the risk of being a bit schematic, the university students “authorised” access to these places, but the young migrant men took up the space, organising a make-shift but ambitious Afghani meal on the esplanade of the library and setting up a series of photographs using paper models of migrating birds to evoke an aspect of the poetry in the Sorbonne, under the watchful eyes of the guards.

After these spontaneously generated activities, where the textual specificity of the extract was largely subordinated to the complicated experience of negotiating Paris together, the challenge was to “re-textualize” the experiences—that is, to produce something that could be shared with the group as a whole, that could detach itself from the moment of the encounter and potentially be transposed into another context. This brought into play the relative positions of “power” of the languages the groups could mobilize and, in doing the deliberative work of translation—or the semiosis, to use Spivak’s term—the groups had to reckon with the force of dominant idioms, with the difficulty of working beyond the most easily shared possibilities, and also with their projective desires towards new attachments. In shorthand, this meant negotiating with the relative “ease” of English. The results, which ranged from text-only to text-image montages to film, bore all the marks and interest of the difficulty of these negotiations. Our polyphony was fairly cacophonous, and that cacophony was also the audible expression of some significant discomfort, which motivated two parallel reactions: one, an adjustment of the role of the “text” in what we were doing, and two, a realisation of the need

to reckon more fully with the specific hurdles to transcultural work, when the cultural displacements experienced by the individuals involved are ramified by personal danger and the trauma of clandestine migration. I will return to the evolution of the pedagogical activity internal to the workshop further ahead, but the more far-reaching evolution was towards transcultural psychiatry and the insights it could offer in the face of the disquiet that our group dynamic had generated.

In a position paper I co-wrote with the research assistant for the program after the first sequence, we stressed that “it is important to underscore from the outset, then, that the aim was not to put the literate, institutionally empowered students at the service, as such, of these young asylum seekers.”<sup>6</sup> But the question of the group “contract” that structured this engagement was omnipresent in our reflections in these first stages, and we found ourselves having to think carefully about the end to which we were working. Unexpected requests emerged, such as providing a certificate of good conduct to support the narrative requesting asylum, as well as more practical assistance, such as finding paid work, resolving access to legal support, building communication lifelines. Cultural translation is premised on an explicitly critical agenda; it looks towards non-hegemonic cultural sources to enliven the meanings circulating amongst us. It was difficult to plot how this critical orientation informed what we could offer to those caught in the desperately destabilising effects of “illegal” or unassisted migration. What sort of articulation is there between “littérature au lieu vivant” and the writing of pro-forma letters in English, on paper with an institutional letterhead?

In the choice of working with these participants from beyond the horizons of the university, it had been our intention to stretch towards that “radical alterity” of which Spivak and Staten write, though we were also responding to the “contingency” of the moment. When we began our workshops in 2011, the presence in the streets and parks of Paris of young men fleeing various forms of physical and mental exaction in countries of Africa and the Middle East was an overwhelming and disturbing reality for all those who strayed from the very central areas of the city, but there was, at that time, almost no media acknowledgement of this situation and no political or institutional response. Their alterity seemed very concretely to be “all” we could see and at the same time invisible, or insignificant, to the dominant forces in society. Our approach, stemming from within the geopolitical orientation of cultural translation, had been to seek a “political point of application” (Staten 2006: 118) in this visible-invisible

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<sup>6</sup> The workshop project was supported by the invaluable work of Lisa Damon, whom I thank most warmly, as I thank the American University of Paris and particularly Professor Geoff Gilbert for having made these workshops possible, supporting their equivocations with care and commitment.

presence that would disrupt our habitual processes and associations. In practice, however, we could not ignore the institutional, legal and psychological obstacles they were up against, and equally our limited though real capacity, at some level, to help them. So we needed to think more clearly about the interplay between the experimentation that this highly contingent aggregate of language practitioners could generate and the need for containment or a buffering of the potentially radical consequences of cultural dislocation.<sup>7</sup>

This realization prompted my decision to see what I could learn by situating our work in relation to the field of transcultural ethno-psychiatry, a branch of psychosocial therapy and research that has evolved in France, where the tradition of cultural and linguistic universalism remains strong. It is, in France, in this context—that is, in the relatively marginalized context of mental health—that the most sustained engagement with the complex implications of multilingualism in terms of identity formation and its political ramifications has been carried out. Turning thus towards what I would find described as “the here and now” of the therapeutic situation entailed a potentially major re-orientation of the paradigms informing our work. By opening up this horizon, I found myself having to engage with the core principles of the clinical situation, as it was being practiced under the appellation of Transcultural Consultations. And I was going to have to find out what would happen when I crossed the “frontier” between comparative literature and clinical consultation without possessing the very restrictive “entry tariff” of medical training. The process was progressive, initially limited to the exploration of the associated critical literature, then through involvement in research events and a teaching program and, latterly, by joining a Transcultural Consultation in a child psychiatry unit as a participant observer. Following a brief description of the emergence of this field of therapeutic practice and its institutional situation in metropolitan France today, the next part of this article will elaborate a comparative reflection on modes of working multilingually, and within a multifaceted group on either side of the disciplinary divide between cultural translation and transcultural psychosocial therapy.

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<sup>7</sup> The second iteration of the laboratory project situated itself more explicitly in relation to Paris. Our “text” for translation was the “tradition” of posting words or declarations on the walls of the city, particularly during times of civic unrest: the 1871 Commune, the Occupation, May 1968. Our aim was to “translate” these into posters that we would then paste up in locations that had significance for the group, if possible, or for individuals. We were responding to the importance that the city had taken on in the first laboratory. We hadn’t anticipated the anxiety that pasting up an “illegal” poster would generate for some of the migrant participants, whereas the university students felt fully secure in imagining the city as the canvas they could write their message on. This might be identified as an example of one of our oversights.

## PART TWO: A New Horizon

French ethno-psychotherapy developed out of the work of Georges Devereux (1980 [1967]), whose texts remain core reading for the training and research programs supporting the dissemination of transcultural clinical practice in the French-speaking world and beyond. For Devereux, culture is conceived as both a universal dimension of human beings and a specific set of practices and beliefs anchored in the life-world of individuals. This distinction was fed into therapeutic practice largely by Tobie Nathan (1986), who created the first ethnopsychiatric consultation in France in 1979 at the Hôpital Avicenne in Bobigny, a working-class suburb of Paris with a high density of social housing. The context of this hospital was also significant, in that it was originally built and administered as a specialized clinic for patients from the French colonies of North Africa. Inaugurated in 1935, it was called the “Hôpital franco-musulman de Paris” and was designed in overtly orientalist style. The aim in its creation was double: to respond to an idea of specific cultural needs and to parry fears of possible contagion from infectious diseases arriving unbeknown in the metropolitan space. Though this cultural heritage was officially expunged from the institution, with its full integration into the national healthcare service in the 1960s, the legacy of this exceptionalist conception of Muslim healthcare provided a particular ground for the growing concerns about the mental health of immigrant populations, which spurred the development of Nathan’s work.

In the last twenty years, the field has seen a new generation of psychiatrists come to the fore, initially in the now well-established space of Avicenne, and since 2004 in the Maison de Solenn, a “maison des adolescents” created under the patronage of Bernadette Chirac, wife of the former President Jacques Chirac, and situated in a new glass-walled building in central Paris where out-patient and in-patient care is provided to adolescents suffering from psychosocial disorders. The Maison de Solenn is headed up by Professor Marie Rose Moro, also lead therapist for the Transcultural Consultation that still takes places on a weekly basis at Avicenne. Indeed, Moro has become the key vector for development in ethno-psychoanalytic and psychiatric theory and practice through a substantial range of publications and public engagement, as well as her professional training and academic teaching roles. Moro and those working around her have tended to take a more dynamic approach to culture, though there are still strong continuities with Nathan’s work, particularly in its emphasis on the exploration of cultural representations and dreams. But she has championed the notion of *métissage*, arguing powerfully for the positive value of bi- and multilingualism as well as hybrid cultural identities (2010, 2012). The promotion of bilingualism has opened up

perspectives on cultural diversity that are unprecedented in France, and Moro's aliveness to different cultural scripts and what they can bring to psychotherapeutic care has placed her in an interesting and influential position in French life, which her role as scientific director of the journal *L'Autre*, subtitled *Cliniques, cultures et sociétés*, has allowed her to extend well beyond the sphere of academic publication and public policy. The teaching programs offered through the Maison de Solenn attract students from a broad range of primarily professional backgrounds, ranging from elementary-level teaching to social work and criminology, with the corresponding range of prior educational attainment. Increasing numbers of medical students and especially those specializing in psychiatry follow these courses while completing their medical training, but the group often also includes anthropologists and general practitioners, usually with many years of professional experience. The participants travel from other European and African countries and provincial towns in France to attend the class sessions, which are scheduled on a fortnightly basis, and the costs incurred are often covered by professional training grants, either through the public mechanism of entitlement or through schemes specific to particular employers. All the classes are taught in French by a faculty drawn from researchers and clinical practitioners. It was by joining a supervision group in the program entitled "Psychiatrie et compétences transculturelles" a few years into the development of the translation workshop project, and having presented the work carried out in that context to the yearly symposium organized under the auspices of *L'Autre* by Moro, that I had the opportunity to compare how "my" groups were functioning in relation to this very different pedagogical context. This was the intermediary step before accessing the clinical situation as such. It was here that I first observed Moro's longstanding co-therapist Isam Idris at work.<sup>8</sup>

### **"Le transculturel est fatalement collectif" (Isam Idris)**

It was the first supervisory session of the year, and the students had yet to tie down the subject of their research project. There would be four such sessions before the end of the year, so the stakes were high, especially as a number of the students were returning to the academic environment and to academic writing for the first time in many years. The group was composed of about fifteen students, and we had three hours to find out something about one another and about Isam Idris as supervisor, as well as decide on a general direction for research. The next meeting was not until after the Christmas break, and low-level

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<sup>8</sup> Isam Idris is a clinical psychologist and psycho-anthropologist of Sudanese origin, co-therapist in the Avicenne Transcultural Consultation since 1996 and member of the editorial board of the *Journal des psychologues* and *L'Autre*.

apprehension was palpable around the table. But Idris stopped the first volunteer almost before she had started: “Je suis d’origine libanaise et je vis...” No, he insisted, you are not of Lebanese origin... Thus began a long and combative exchange around the table, which finally loosened the hold of the phrase “of origin.” The presentations moved on: “Je m’appelle Julie...” No, interrupted Idris once more, “on vous a appelée Julie...”: no one calls themselves, or gives themselves their own first name. The tension was rising, but the group began to compose itself, as glances and gestures prompted us to take up Idris’s caution by slowing our everyday habits and giving attention to passive forms and verb choices. I was uncomfortable, too. My own practice with students is much less intentionally confrontational. I felt inclined to try to attenuate these disruptions. And I was also impressed. People were re-scripting from the start; what they thought they were going to do in their research was already changing focus. Most of the time the initial idea evoked by a student was underpinned by a desire to alleviate a situation encountered in their professional activity, or at least understand it better. A large amount of the session ended up being spent on a situation of quite extreme sexual violence experienced by 14–15-year-old girls of African parentage living in northern Paris, as it was described by one of the students, a social worker with a number of years of experience. The presentation spun out of control, and possible projects to engage these girls or constitute them as objects of study were volleyed across the table. “Où est ma position pour que je puisse commencer à voir clair?” [“Where is my position so that I can begin to see clearly?”] asked Idris, and strangely, it seemed as if, in response to his words, everyone literally sat back down around the table.

The phrase “fatalement collectif” means literally “fatally collective,” although it is common idiom to use the adverb “fatalement” to mean simply “inevitably.” During that first session, the full sense of Idris’s words seemed, however, to prevail. Being staged through this supervision session was an abandoning of individual autonomy that was subtle but effective. Students were being encouraged to loosen their habitual narratives and the preoccupations they had brought with them to the situation. The process was suspensive, in the sense of disruptive of established identifications. It also induced a particular type of relief. As I would discover more fully later, Idris was deploying the principles of his clinical practice in the teaching situation. In comparison with my habitual workshop practice with Anglophone students in elite institutions, I found it provocative, and it took me back to the discomfort I had felt in the early iterations of the workshops, where the legitimacy or appropriateness of the group bringing together first-world students and clandestine refugees had figured

prominently in the students' reflections about the project. They weren't sure what they had signed up for; perhaps it was more or less than they had bargained for.

### **“Good senses of humor” (student feedback)**

In contrast to the group being led by Isam Idris, “my” groups had been constituted by a very strong over-determination, on the one hand, since the MA program acknowledged that it was recruiting from a small, elite market, and on the other, a highly contingent association inasmuch as the “non-student” participants had simply happened to see a notice pinned up on a board in a drop-in social center known as an *Antenne jeune*, located on one of the very busy arteries of Northern Paris. This contingency tended, however, to disappear behind the range of translatable “logic” that the students reached for to describe the shape or possibilities of this encounter. There were recurrent expressions of dissatisfaction with the terms available to us, and doubt as to whether Spivak’s speculative notion of “native informant” was relevant. One student wrote of “an uncomfortable emphasis on the word ‘migrant.’” Another described the injustice these “labels” did among the group: “to us they were ‘the boys’ or ‘the guys’ (which is bashfully inadequate), to them we were ‘les filles’ or occasionally ‘les Américains’ (neither of which is accurate).” The student disquiet was part and parcel of the feeling that the situation was overly contrived, which it was, inevitably, or “*fatalement*.” One student did suggest what we were doing made “everything un-routine, un-anecdotal,” edging towards the sort of suspensive possibility we were after. But overall, this acknowledgement of re-scripting possibilities was outweighed by those who objected to being forced into a role, into the “good syntax” of appropriate classifications, such as Yves Citton has explored (2007).<sup>9</sup> So the question of place—of what one’s place is, or should be—was common to both groups, and difficult in both instances. But whereas Idris framed the singularity of one’s place explicitly, while insisting on the collectiveness of the configuration in which that place was held, my workshops were organized in relation to a particularly polyphonic text, foregrounding *its* singularity as opposed to that of the individual participants, who in turn felt themselves “lumped” into categories they didn’t necessarily like. Was this difference significant?

The disquiet generated by the (“over-wrought”) structuring of the relation in the translation workshops was offset in most of the student writing by expressions of gratitude. This was reassuring, but problematic too. For this gratitude tended to go along with a collapsing of the

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<sup>9</sup> Yves Citton develops Jacques Rancière’s notion of the distribution of the sensible by proposing the idea of ‘antaxe’ or negative syntax in opposition to “(positive) syntax, which tends to prompt us to think that everyone finds their (right) place by conforming to the categorisations and usages in practice” (146).

very difference that the project had been about. Something was “saved,” it was felt, from the contrivedness of the experiment, because ultimately they all had “good senses of humor.” In its most thoughtful expression, this collapsing of difference at least acknowledged that as a result there had been no positing of “the ethical relation to the other that Spivak demands.” There had just been young people hanging out together for the time of a workshop while taking photos of one another, posting them on Facebook, becoming one another’s “friends.” The “boys” were described as “enchanting” and “endearing” in some accounts. “Their willingness,” was deemed “impressive,” in what was perhaps the strongest wording used to register something of what was at stake in working with these undocumented people, surviving between the various agencies set upon suppressing their presence if at all possible. But if this writing expressed something of a joyful release from the reifying syntax of the encounter, it was nonetheless caught in what Spivak might call bad rhetoric.

In his discussion of the concept of cultural translation in social anthropology, Talal Asad refers to the “willingness” of languages to subject themselves to the translator’s power, noting that the “languages of the Third World are institutionally weaker and will submit more easily as a result to transformation by powerful languages” (2010: 22). This observation corresponded quite directly to what I saw happening in the translation workshops. At the time I had noted: “we need better strategies to see this willingness as a challenge,” which, I added, “would pull us away from worrying about the complex striations that distinguish each and every one of us from reified subject positions such as ‘migrant’ or ‘first-world intellectual’.” In other words, I had felt something akin to what Idris had advised: we needed to take up our places around the table, a young American sitting next to a young Afghani, and observe what the table—or the text—held for us. And what shape could we give it? The smooth sweep of global social-media speak, as had tended to happen in the groups, or the delineations of in-laid roles? Would we be able to find an alternative between these unpromising possibilities?

In her teaching Moro describes the group as generating a structure that is not strictly speaking triadic but of “at least three.” The group offers then the third position onto which can be deflected the binary dynamic that constitutes the subject. But this position is open, plural, and inherently protective. These are strong claims, and Moro recognises readily that in practice they do not necessarily find purchase. She observes a number of protocols in her transcultural clinic practice in order to mitigate the possible negative effects of the group dynamic. Transcultural consultation is only ever a “second-level” therapy, or “une thérapie de deuxième intention.” The patient is referred through a primary therapeutic situation and an initial assessment is made of the appropriateness of the group situation for this case. The latter

depends significantly on what she refers to as the pre-existing representation of extended family or community groups. The number of referrals of Chinese migrant families is very low. Sub-Saharan families are much more prominent. Moreover, the group functions around a stable core of practitioners, sometimes constant over a number of years, and its linguistic and cultural diversity, which is exceptional in the landscape of national public health institutions, is absorbed within a gradual “co-construction.” The lead therapist plays an essential role in constituting the group, but he or she occupies a primarily functional position, that of articulating, perhaps even orchestrating, the clinical process. The production of new “content” in the clinical moment is the work of the co-therapists, whose words are systematically mediated through the lead therapist.<sup>10</sup> Often their contributions will be tangential, and spoken from within the particularity of an embodied position: “chez moi, on va dire...”, “where I come from this is what you might say...” Moro describes these interventions as being “indirect,” sometimes even “remote.” In practice the aim is to generate a multiplicity of propositions, not necessarily formulated as explicit suggestions of meaning, but offered as discrete expressions—proverbs, citations, fragments drawn from particular philosophical traditions—which circulate in the space of the group. This dynamic of indirection, and particularly what I initially perceived as a tendency to shore up in a particular cultural identity—“Je suis de Congo Brazzaville, alors...”—was perplexing to me. The effectiveness of the codified or orchestrated nature of the exchange was more intuitively persuasive. If the aim is to reach beyond the interpretative possibilities we currently have—that is, to improvise, then the existence of formal rules to structure the interaction, and particularly the anchor that the lead therapist provides, made sense and would have a definite impact on the way I subsequently organised the groups. But what remained unclear was the extent to which this containing process, which entailed a very literal attention to the organisation of positions in the room used for the consultation, depended on staging particular ethno-cultural identities. To what extent were my observations in the context of French transcultural psychotherapeutic practice going to point to the need for my “global” grad students to take on the assignation of cultural particularity?

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<sup>10</sup> The lead therapist calls on interventions from the group, which can be composed of ten or more co-therapists, as well as a mediator when mastery of French is not sufficient to make the consultation function. The co-therapist speaks to the lead therapist, who relays (or not) the suggestion or contribution to the family by asking what they think, or if they have a reaction. This buffering, to avoid what Moro refers to as a “bombardement sémantique,” establishes a very particular rhythm to the consultations. All words are multiply refracted, especially when there might be partial understanding of French, but a mediator is nonetheless present and called upon to translate each intervention in both directions. See also Kalanga Wa Tshisekedi 2008: 112–115.

### “Dérrouler son contenu” (Marie Rose Moro)

This rather unlikely phrase, meaning literally “to unroll your content” or to “unfold your story,” was used on several occasions by Moro as she elaborated on her methods, although when asked to comment on its significance to her, she herself seemed surprised by it. The suggestion of linearity contained in it, and the idea that this would be an externalisation of the authentic truth of the self, was quickly rejected. It is more fragmentary than that, she added; more partial and interruptive. It continued to interest me, however, for it caught what I perceived as a tension between a pre-supposed script and the production of new scenarios. For while the clinical group offered a richly hybrid envelope for the consultation, I was nonetheless inclined to see the importance accorded to culturally specified fragments, such as proverbs and references to ritualised practices, as potentially letting an essentialized conception of culture in through the back door. In the clinical consultations I joined, it was almost systematic to hear phrases of the sort “la femme africaine” or “le rôle du père en Afrique du Nord...” The question of ethnicity was often foremost, and the reliance on well-entrenched conceptions of gender was a constant undercurrent. I bristled inwardly in one session where the mother, of Sub-Saharan origin, had explained the deficiencies of her husband at length—he was not present that day, but his empty chair had been left in the ring: “il peut porter votre sac” [“he can carry your bag”] as one of the therapists quipped—and the lead therapist, a man in this instance, turned to the women in the group, most of whom were French or European, and asked them collectively what they would do if their husband were behaving so poorly. Your husband, added the co-therapist from central Africa, has “the white-man’s disease,” meaning depression. None of this seemed to me to be holding out the possibility of improvising new scenarios, and I revisited with more visceral discomfort the difficulty my students had felt in being positioned through our group interaction.

Yet this indexing of “Africanness” or “whiteness” also pointed towards the sort of navigation that Claire Kramsch has underlined as emblematic of postmodern multilingualism (2012). A “redemptive” conception of therapy whereby the patient finds his or her “own voice,” argues Kramsch, is of little assistance in the face of complex semiotic repertoires. Moro points in a similar direction when she insists that her role is to “validate” a cultural form that is offered, by the patient or member of the clinical group, as a fundamentally empty and malleable form to be put to new use in the construction of what she refers to as “ephemeral but consistent identities” (2010: 205). Gisèle Sturm echoes this productive making-use of identity markers. In an article from 2010, she describes her own experiences as observer in clinical sessions in which therapists used roles such as “the one who knows West Africa,” and cultural and

gender representations were negotiated from the outset through moments such as “therapist evokes his own origins” or “therapist jokes about my German accent” (2010). But if what she describes corresponded directly to my own observations, it also pointed up to me the significant difference between Kramersch’s emphasis on equipping students to cope with a polycentric world saturated by multimedia, and a clinical situation where the equivalent stereotypes and clichés were not the free-floating tags of advertising billboards, but contributions freighted with the presence of the speaker proffering them.

The primacy of the “here and now” of the clinical moment and the reliance on oral interaction thus came to be an increasing preoccupation for me, and the significance of the phrase “*dérouler son contenu*” shifted from the implied linearity to the aspectual dimension of the expression: to unroll something suggests that it will roll back up again, and I began to think more about the respective time frames of this work. This was also prompted by my role as the “note-taker” for the clinical sessions. Transcribing every contribution as closely as possible struck me as an unexpectedly interesting process. As I typed up the notes for the group, possibilities of sense emerged and the mediation of the written word seemed in itself interesting. This act was one of a re-composition of someone’s else’s “content,” rather than the unfolding of my own, and closer in this sense to the process of translation. The clinical group approached these notes, however, as direct evidence. They were photocopied before leaving the medical centre to be typed up, and considered to function only as a means of verification and the establishing of a minimal form of continuity between the consultations, which are often up to two months apart for any given family or patient. My interest in discussing them found little purchase with the lead therapists, who responded only by stating the axiomatic importance of the emergence of speech in the shared space of the group. What is more, the silence that the note-taking allowed to settle over the moment of actual translation—for the purely practical reasons that this “shameful scribbler” or “*marqueur de paroles honteux*” to use Chamoiseau’s term, is unable to transcribe Soninke, Arabic, or Haitian Creole—pointed to a persistent sense that translation as such was conceived as a fully reliable and purely vehicular process, a “conduit” (Davidson, in Baker 2010: 155).

The significance of the role of the mediator in this clinical practice is acknowledged in the training programs offered through the Maison de Solenn, but as has been observed by Moro in collaboration with others (Leanza et al. 2016), and also by research carried out in the US (Berthold and Fischman 2014), the complexities that stem from reliance on non-clinicians as the key articulation in the clinical situation is an amplification of the constitutive difficulties of this structure. The “fundamental ambiguity” of the mediator’s role as “mere” mediator, but

also as crucial embodiment of cultural knowledge highlights the fragility of the situation, where appropriate management of the “cultural text” and its “willingness” to give itself up or over is premised on therapeutic experience and a capacity to establish trust while valorising all contributions to the clinical process.<sup>11</sup> In practice, I observed a *de facto* convergence between the role of clinician and mediator when highly experienced therapists took up the role as “interpreter,” as well as occasions when the “mediation” was perceived and regretted as problematic for its refractive dimension—ranging from disapproval of the patient to flirtation—but passed over in the post-consultation discussion.<sup>12</sup> In all instances, though, the reflection focused on the training and selection of mediators underscores the issue of accuracy and tends to ignore the interface of the written mediation. The increasing move towards the use of video and audio technology is liable to reinforce the assumption that the transcription or recording of these sessions is a mere trace for the processes of verification.

Approached from within the paradigms of cultural translation, however, this assumption appears more problematic. A written text is always more than the immediate end to which it is produced, and its reception, even in the immediate wake of its production and by its very author or transcriber, is unpredictable and animated by competing claims. A transcription re-scripts by definition. So how does this process of re-scripting relate to the sort of re-scripting that is the aim of the therapeutic process? In the latter, I was observing “propositions” emerging in the clinical space as relatively anchored funds of cultural preconceptions (Sturm 2010) offered as performative possibilities, while the note-taking process was provoking awareness of the forms of words, the gaps in syntax, the moments when my transcribing (in)capacities produced ellipses in my text. In one, I was observing a wavering zone between taking up one’s place at the table as “cultural authority” and as a mere instantiation of a potentially useful representation, while in the second, I was grasping what might be at stake in finding a form that exists beyond the here and now of oral enunciation, while remaining alive to the obduracy of expression. A form, that is, with sufficient syntactic stability to hold beyond its provisional performance but still rhetorically unpredictable: a “table” built out of the contributions from around its emergence.

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<sup>11</sup> In one description of the mediator’s role in work with isolated minors, it was described as being “donner du sens [...] pourqu’il [le patient] puisse le nommer” [“to provide meaning so that the patient can name his/her condition”]. Session with Fatima Touhami and Sevan Misassian, 6 February 2016. In this instance the premise of “lack”—of age, accompaniment, experience—results in the moment of mediation becoming a full instigation, and not a relay.

<sup>12</sup> Leanza et al. (2016) point to the need for more observational studies, through methods such as video vignettes, to help clinicians and interpreters immerse themselves in the complexity of this articulation. My own experiences confirmed the need to bring this process more clearly into focus.

My experience of group work in both the pedagogical and the clinical context had clarified the type of availability, or “disponibilité,” that transcultural interaction requires. The particular suspensive positioning—the “fatalement collectif”—that Idris had exemplified in the sessions I attended had brought the contingency of the encounter into clearer focus, a contingency that our initial group dynamic, underpinned by theorisation of radical alterity, had obscured. But the disinterest in specifically written production emerging from these situations was further indication to me of the reliance on the presence, and skill, of the lead therapist in managing the collective suspension.<sup>13</sup> His or her embodied orchestration of suggestion and affirmation has to be always vigilant not to overwhelm those predisposed to be, in Asad’s term, “willing.” And in this respect, the place of power in the clinical group struck me as remaining firmly designated, leaving the shape of the “table” unchanging.<sup>14</sup> The patient occupied the patient position, while the taking and giving of “la parole” remained the preserve of the primary therapist, and the mediation of this “parole” through the process of linguistic translation or note-taking was conceptualised as an interface that at best would tend toward full adequacy to the original.

In the final phase of this project we had, then, two primary objectives, both of which were partially grasped responses to these prior experiences: 1) to establish a firmer conditions for the emergence of a collective basis for the work to be done, and 2) to delimit the parameters for the re-textualising moment of the work more clearly, so that we could see what was happening when we shuttled back, in Spivak’s terms, from body to ethical semiosis. This would be the last stretch in the interdisciplinary circuit related here.

### **PART THREE: Return to the “land of translation”**

We let go of the “radical” unlikeliness of the encounter and our theorization of it as “quasi-transcendental alterity,” which had prompted its translation into unhappy categories. Instead, we allowed an institutional frame to shape it. The latter was a primary school and a class of 8- to 9 year-olds; the project remained to engage in multidirectional translation. We had some texts, short and accessible story books, which we placed on the tables between us. We divided the class into groups, each with a student leader. The role of the latter was akin to the

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<sup>13</sup> The need for “great methodological rigor” is underscored by Moro at every turn against culturalist simplifications, but reflective of the French context, she identifies a greater danger in the tendency to “deculturalize” an individual. See, for example, Moro 2002: 33.

<sup>14</sup> In practice, too, the positioning of the participants and patients in the clinical situation is self-consciously managed.

orchestration I had observed in the clinical situations: the student would field the suggestions and the languages coming from the group, ensuring as much as possible that the dynamics of willingness and unwillingness, of affirmation and anxiety, generated possibilities rather than shutting them down. This re-introduction of a clear hierarchy into the dynamic drew intentionally on the group theory as I observed it at work through my engagement with transcultural pedagogy and therapy. It was a lesson learnt in “compétences transculturelles” and in this sense a result of venturing in to a new disciplinary space. But it was also evidently and in itself an instantiation of the methodological inventiveness—embodied in the practitioners’ combination of eclecticism and experience—governing the work being carried out by Marie Rose Moro. In this respect, more than a move *between* two delineated alternatives, it had collapsed the very distance I might have imagined crossing.

However, the place of text versus oral production remained quite clearly demarcated, and the last iteration of the workshop project was an opportunity to re-affirm a specifically textual dimension to our translational process. Our texts were about as rudimentary as they come, while still involving linguistic inventiveness. None included Chamoiseau’s innovation, “un à-prendre vivant,” that been such a strong prompt and reservoir of reflection for us in the early stages of this exploration, nor did we expect that or try to achieve it. But we were interested in rhetorical instability, in idioms that would challenge our willingness to produce good syntax or to transcode. So our story books ranged from repetitive schemas, in which words twisted and turned, to the almost pre-verbal in one book that only included the transcription of a series of noises made by things falling into water: “flouch,” “clapoti, clapoti,” “bloub, bloub, bloub,” “plouufff.” Our question was still what it means to draw a response from these texts, as Spivak has put it, in an injunction formulated in opposition to a model of representation whereby subaltern literatures are absorbed within the global corpus, just as foreign languages are accommodated within the medical context by the means of a vehicular translation. What more do we get if we approach translation as a transformative and not merely transcoding or transcribing process?

All sorts of work was produced, and finishing the project continued to matter significantly to some of the students, who contributed their ease with digital technology to generous ends for the children. Some groups reproduced the original book, in one instance in five different languages: Spanish, Portuguese, the Romani language Manouche, Arabic and English. One group got no further than the title, but rendered it most fully in Mandarin, while experimenting with English, Portuguese and Arabic alternatives. The group with the water noises remained resistant to the end, despite the vigorous efforts to relativize the linguistic

transcription of noise on the part of the student leader: no, insisted the most vocal Arabic speaker in the group, “flouch” sounds just like “flouch” in Arabic, and so that is what they worked at transcribing. Meanwhile, one group, including a Creole-speaker, managed the negotiation with orality perhaps less successfully. The child offered his translation of the key sentence in the story in Creole, but didn’t know how to write it. When he returned the next week with a written version in one long continuous word, contributed by his father, the group disqualified the contribution. That’s not a sentence, it was declared, and their collective will to do well, that is to produce a “good” text, kept the Creole contribution out of their project.

The failures and successes of this process merit more reflection, but within the space of this article I will conclude with the dynamic of exchange that was fostered by the shared object of the book. Belonging to no-one, but quickly the identificatory cement of each group, the text offered the possibility for improvisation well outside the limits of specific linguistic or cultural competency. The focus was not anyone’s particular “content” and, though the student leader played an organizing role, the primary lead was given by the text, which both positioned the participants and remained malleable to their interventions. The absence of any specified target language, as well as the very uneven range of second-language ability across the groups, was not experienced as an impediment but an opportunity. In particular, the dichotomy of “the language of school” (and State) versus “community or heritage language” was undermined by the multiple horizons of the groups. The languages with which they worked were necessarily tethered to their social and cultural inscriptions, but only loosely. And if the general assumption initially had been—on the part of the teachers as well as my students—that the “cachet” of English would prevail and that none of the children would be able to write the Arabic they speak at home, the results proved us much mistaken, revealing a panoply of linguistic possibility that ran to and fro between Spanish and Manouche, or Brazilian Portuguese and Mandarin, all negotiated and channeled in the unflustered syncretism of life.

Perceived in the light of interface with the ethno-psychotherapeutic conceptualization of transcultural practice, the deliberative processes called upon by text itself came more fully into focus. The passage from written medium into written medium fully decentered anyone’s particular content and, while the positions around the “table” were more stabilized by our cultural particularities than in our initial workshops and more straightforwardly acknowledged, they all turned primarily towards to what was between us, to the text, which constituted the collectivity and called for its care, precision and inventiveness. This is what Spivak is pointing to, I think, when she writes of “ethical semiosis” (2003: 13) And it is this

“hard work” that she is calling for against the “death of a discipline”—that is, an engagement with the demands of text, with its excess of signification, which is more amply and unexpectedly served by allowing diversely embodied voices to sound across the table, as opposed to a model of cultural inclusiveness opened up by an expansive, potentially generous but undiminished hierarchy.

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