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## Special Focus Introduction: Centering Black Cultural Production in Translation

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## Special Focus Introduction: Centering Black Cultural Production in Translation

### Abstract

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### Keywords

translation, race, Blackness, diaspora

Special Focus Introduction:  
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The Black Lives Matter protests that swept the globe in the summer of 2020 sparked widespread attempts by individuals and institutions to reckon with entrenched anti-Blackness. Self-help-style books about anti-racism, some already several years old, topped the bestseller charts. Corporations, organizations, and institutions of higher learning released mission statements committing themselves to greater diversity, equity, and inclusion. Within the translation studies and literary translation communities, similar efforts were made to address the exclusion of Black translators and translation studies scholars in the so-called Global North along with a historic inattention to questions of race and particularly Blackness in the discipline. While translation studies has undergone various “turns” over the past decades, including postcolonial, feminist, and queer turns, there has yet to occur a critical race turn. Black translation studies scholars in Global North institutions are few and far between, part of a larger scarcity of Black faculty members, where, for example, 6% of faculty in the US are Black and only 1% of faculty in the UK, while Black people comprise 12% and 3% of the general populations, respectively. Recent surveys also suggest that Black translators located and/or publishing in the US make up about 1.5-3% of the profession there.<sup>1</sup> Yet while the translation studies and literary translation studies communities have marginalized Black scholars and translators and discussions of Blackness, Kaiama L. Glover notes that “translation informs the discourses that determine which black lives matter and, relatedly, the success or failure of policies and practices that have an explicit impact on those lives” (30).

Half a year after the wave of Black Lives Matter protests, the literary translation and translation studies communities demonstrated how ill-equipped they were to discuss the circulation of Black-authored texts or the position of Black

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<sup>1</sup> The data about faculty comes from the US National Center for Education Statistics (fall 2020) and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (2020-21). The data about translators comes from the 2015 Authors Guild survey and the 2021 American Literary Translators Association survey. General population demographics come from the 2020 US census, the 2021 census of England and Wales, the 2021 census of Northern Ireland, and the 2011 census of Scotland.

translators within the world literary system after the controversy around the translation of Black poet Amanda Gorman's poem for Joe Biden's presidential inauguration. The poem's original Dutch translator, Marieke Lucas Rijneveld, stepped down after an opinion piece by Black cultural critic Janice Deul and other negative responses to his selection on social media that suggested that a Black Dutch spoken word poet could have been chosen instead.<sup>2</sup> Rarely do issues in literary translation reach so widespread an audience, but the translation community did not rise to the occasion in a sea of hyperbolic handwringing about "cancel culture" and straw-man arguments claiming that those calling for a Black translator were insisting that only Black translators should translate Black authors. Even some of the most thoughtful and insightful pieces tended to focus on the question of *who* translates—who "gets to" translate, who "may" or "can" translate—rather than the question of *how* one translates Black-authored texts and how a Black translator might not be just a different—more "diverse"—translator but *translate differently*. This is an argument the contemporary Black author Sharon Dodua Otoo raised in her reflections on the issue of race and translation in the German-language market. Otoo, who is originally from the UK and is of Ghanaian descent, has lived in Germany for decades and writes in both English and German. She has long been engaged in conversations around anti-Blackness, translation, and Germany, going back to her essay on the use of offensive language in a German translation of Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* ("Die Kunst über Rassismus zu schreiben"). In the more recent essay "Vor der Grenze" (Before the Border) Otoo writes:

Another problem is the lack of recognition for the fact that both anti-racist language skills and Black cultural production are separate areas of expertise. I am not explicitly trying to say that only Black people are familiar with Black issues. What is striking, however, is that in the more recent translated works by Black authors, in-depth knowledge of the discourses in Black German communities does not seem to be a criterion.<sup>3</sup>

While Otoo's essay serves as an outlier for addressing *how* one translates, most who weighed in on the Gorman debate took an anti-racist position pointing to structural barriers preventing Black translators from joining the profession, such as access to higher education in languages and literatures or publishing opportunities that rely on established networks and generational wealth. Thus, while some scholars, translators, and translator organizations usefully shifted the conversation to the structural and systemic nature of anti-Blackness, there was little acknowledgment that the practice of translation itself along with scholarship about

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of the controversy, Rijneveld used they/them pronouns in English but now uses he/him pronouns.

<sup>3</sup> Quote translated from German to English by Priscilla Layne.

its practice are shaped by norms and values rooted in systemic white supremacy. This special focus section of *STTCL* centers the *practice* of translating Black cultural production, elucidating various means by which translators challenge or perpetuate the aesthetic, linguistic, and ideological norms of white mainstream culture.

To focus on practice, particularly the practice of Black translators, does not imply an essentialized notion of racial identity where a Black translator by definition better serves a Black-authored text. Indeed, the essays in this special section include examples of white translators using resistant strategies and Black translators assimilating the original text into US notions of global Blackness. However, Black translators may draw from different linguistic and aesthetic repertoires, political and ethical commitments, and experiences that resist or refuse the norms of white mainstream culture. These norms determine what counts as “good” literature worth translating, who is “qualified” to translate, and how to translate “properly,” enshrined in translator training handbooks, workshops, and degree programs. Critical race studies, which arose in legal studies during the 1970s, has shown that the perpetuation of racism does not rely on individual biases but rather on the systemic nature of racism, where supposedly “colorblind” laws themselves actually propagate racist discrimination and inequity. The norms of translation practice similarly masquerade as race-neutral conventions when they are in fact derived from white supremacist logics embedded in white mainstream culture. Though it goes unspoken, the theorized and marketed-to “average” bourgeois Global North reader of literature in translation is a white reader. This leads to the marginalization of Black-authored works translated for Global-North markets, and when they are translated, their consumption as anthropological objects rather than literary, artistic, or philosophical texts.

Brent Hayes Edwards has highlighted the importance of theorizing translation in the Black diaspora in order to articulate both the similarities and differences across transnational Black cultures and movements, where Black internationalism “necessarily involves linking across gaps” (11). Similarly, in his foundational 2016 essay “Translating Poetry, Translating Blackness,” John Keene calls for more translations into English of Black-authored works from Africa and throughout the Black diaspora:

This aporia [of works by black authors in English translation] limits our understanding of the range and complexity of black lives all over the world, and also limits our understanding of forms of living and being, as well as of systems and structures of oppression, based on race (and ethnicity, indigeneity, class, gender, religious affiliation, etc.), [that] have direct parallels globally. To put it another way, we have a truer and fuller sense of

the black diaspora, and thus the globe, when we have translations of the vast body of work out there.

But in order to have a “truer and fuller sense” of global Blackness, it must not be translated in such a way that it tells us what we already “know” about it, presenting a stereotyped version of global Black thought and literary expression. In her essay for this special section, Amanda Walker Johnson illustrates just this phenomenon in the English translation of Senegalese writer Awa Thiam’s 1978 book *La Parole aux Nègresses*, which was published as *Black Sisters, Speak Out: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa*. Johnson finds that the translation treats Thiam not as a feminist theorist but as a native informant by eliminating and modifying many aspects of the text, reinforcing the idea that Africans can only be the objects rather than the subjects of knowledge production. The translation, for example, eliminates numerous footnotes and annotations, privileges commonplace language over philosophical terminology, and obscures references to Marxism, Negritude, and intersectionality as modes of thought. Thus, while the translation purportedly aims to give voice to African feminism, it fails to treat the text on par with European and North American feminisms, as if African feminism were less sophisticated and theoretically rigorous.

Moving away from white supremacist norms such as these, where Black African and diasporic cultural production is translated anthropologically for white readers, requires reimagining who translation is for. Black translators like Glover and Sharon Masingale Bell (1995) have described instances of directing their work primarily toward a Black diasporic audience when translating Francophone Caribbean texts. The imagined audience then shapes translation decisions, such as Bell’s practice of incorporating US Black English into her translation to recreate the effect of Creole in the original text as a language of intimacy among “home people” (55). In this special section, Nathan H. Dize and Charly Verstraet examine the strategies of various translators in dealing with similar instances of Creole and Creolized French in novels from the Caribbean, finding that the translators’ identities affect their relationship to language and, along with audience and translation aims, shape their practice in translating polyglossic texts. White US translator Linda Coverdale keeps some terms in French or Creole, invents similar neologisms, and borrows onomatopoeia from the heterogeneous original, while Trinidadian-born translator J. Michael Dash incorporates Jamaican and Trinidadian English into his translation, keeping the text within a Caribbean context, though an Anglophone one. Finally, Jamaican-born translator Betsy Wing employs the Creole orthography for Creole words that her author had gallicized in the original text but generally seems more concerned with the translation’s readability. Identity, thus, while factoring into translation practice is not determinative of strategies used.

Translating Black diasporic texts is a relational process, according to translators Barbara Ofosu-Somuah and Candice Whitney (2020), in which they draw upon their own experiences while paying attention to global specificities so as not to project their experience of Blackness onto the texts they are translating. In her essay for this special section, Adrienne Merritt looks at this type of relational translation in texts by Black German writers translated into English. Describing the double translation from experience to written text and from text in one language to text in another, Merritt refers to the multisensorial and ineffable aspects of living in the Black diaspora. She draws from Tina Campt's concept of hapticity, "the labor of feeling beyond forms of alienation produced by the negating gaze of white supremacy" (Campt 44), to articulate a practice of "haptic translation" of Black-authored texts. To illustrate this haptic translation practice, which involves a labor of love and care in representing both the precarity and joy of Black lived experience, Merritt looks to past examples of Black German poetry and interviews translated into English as well as her own process translating a text about Black motherhood, written by Otoo, that resonated with Merritt's own experience. While Merritt argues that translators and authors will never have the "same" experience, she points to the value of feeling oneself into the text through a mindfully embodied translation practice.

The embodied nature of translation is made abundantly clear in the case of dubbing, but as Robin Queen has shown, dubbing often does not seek to directly embody the Blackness of characters in televisual media. Queen's research (2004) explores the replacement of African American English in urban "street-culture" contexts in films with a dialect associated with North German working-class urban youth culture in dubbing for the German market. In this special section, Patrick Ploschnitzki explores the hiring practice side of German-language dubbing, looking at a database for voice actors with no Black voice actors listed but several white voice actors catalogued as having voiced Black characters. Ploschnitzki terms this practice "Vocal Blackface" and argues that it constitutes more than a problem of structural barriers to Black voice actors finding work. Rather, the "whitening" of Black characters may also suggest an assimilation into white mainstream culture that is considered by the audience to "elevate" Black cultural production. Moving beyond the structural questions of who voices characters, Ploschnitzki describes semantic and lexical choices in dubbing that perpetuate anti-Blackness, such as a Black German voice actor being asked to add an African accent to a Sudanese character speaking in the original with an English accent as well as a case of a racist slur being added to the German dubbed version of popular film *Home Alone 2*, where no reference to race is made at all in the original.

Taken together, these various essays demonstrate the importance of the *how* of translation in regard to the work of Black-authored and Black-translated texts. The anti-Black slur in the dub of *Home Alone 2* had been taken for granted by white

German audiences for decades before a Black German voice actor called it into question. The theory and practice of translation must give more attention to the *how* of translating Blackness, revealing within the norms of translation the racism and white supremacy that has been hiding in plain sight and seeking to replace it with a theory and practice of care, conscience, and justice.

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