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Translating the political.

Reading feminist writers of Color in Poland

Introduction. Translation as a process of passionately theorizing the neoliberal society.

„(...) a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel”. W. Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator*

„These Berliners do not regard themselves as *men* who *criticize*, but as *critics* who, *incidentally*, have the misfortune of being men. (...) Love, for example, is rejected, because the loved one is only an “*object* (...) *It is therefore regarded as the greatest crime if the critic displays feeling or passion, he must be an ironical ice-cold σοφος [Sage]*”

K. Marx, Letter to L. Feuerbach, 11 Aug 1844.

In contemporary, neoliberal societies primarily focused on effectiveness and productivity, love, as we remember it, especially from its romanticized descriptions, does not seem to be the first and most interesting social factor. Paradox as it might sound – the needs of women might even seem accomplished by the least compassionate, contemporary version of capitalist economy, since the liberation from duties imposed on women seems to meet here the requirements of contemporary precarious condition with its accent on precarity, fast change and unmaking of the heavy, paternalistic family bonds.

Before directly referring to translation, I would like to propose a short historic journey – to Socrates and his two monologues on love from *Phaedrus* and to Karl Marx and his remarks on love, shared with Feuerbach in 1844. Socrates' first speech might be read as one about how to “love profitably” and the second as a rejection of “effectiveness” in passion. The second speech sounds as a critical, not “product oriented” approach to love. Interestingly, this vision became a part of a wider project of knowledge production, where love-based sharing with the “other” is the first thing to do.

The second journey directs us to Karl Marx, and a small debate he had with one of the *critical critics*, Bruno Bauer, over the issue of love. The debate happened in a letter Marx sent to Ludwig Feuerbach on August the 11th 1844. Drawing from Fourier's analysis of passions and generally making a comparison between French and German radical thinkers, Marx deduced, that in both cases, one



witnesses a great alienation which should be rejected. The passionate is either overestimated or forgotten, both leading to dehumanising the human.

In this essay I would like to propose a reading of some of the feminist writers of Color in this 2nd world, East European context, translating **together with** and **in connection to** the authors and their experience. I will also try to situate my own position within a particular set of conditions and without reproducing the so popular “Archimedes point” of an external observer who just seems to encompass the whole field of human experience from some mystical “outside” position¹. Donna Haraway² wrote about the partiality of any form of subjectivity and she claimed that the „always constructed and stitched” subject is „*therefore* able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another”³. This practice of joining the other without trying to become her, reminds the practice of translation as described by Gayatri Spivak. On the very general level – the practice of translation is indeed initially embedded in a sense of partiality, and still – for Spivak it is a practice, in which identity is being produced⁴. In a more specific, political and ethical context – translation seems to be one of the best possible ways of building a supportive, empowering relation, although the risks of „changing democracy into the law of force” are always present.

Translating the political.

When I started to work on a translation of bell hooks *Feminist theory. From margin to center* into Polish in 2009, I noticed that the reactions of my students, colleagues, friends and strangers, had some sort of „surplus excitement”. I decided to unpack these ecstatic⁵ states and only later I came up with the idea of intercultural practice of translation as something that is connected to them. The set of ecstatic reactions was definitely not homologous. There were screams of joy from socialist feminists, who appreciated the radical critique of market economy. Some white, male, highly privileged middle class scholars somewhat sympathizing with the feminist movement expressed joy about an “extravagant” set of topics proposed by the feminist writers of Color. One should

¹ See the work of A. Jaggar and D. Haraway about situating knowledge and the theorist.

² See: D. Haraway, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, in: *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988), p. 579.

³ D. Haraway, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism...* op. Cit, p. 586.

⁴ G. Spivak, *The Politics of Translation*, op. cit, p. 179.

⁵ Martin Heidegger is definitely not an author to quote in a feminist, progressive text. Nevertheless, an exception should be made for his analysis of the „ecstasy” of being, where the „ex” means precisely „stepping out of one's normal condition”. Ecstasy is a state of going out of one's separateness, it could also be seen as gaining a conscience about one's belonging to a wider world. The opposition of the „it” (się) - non-interested, annihilating self detached from the world and the ec-static (as Heidegger would write it) „being” the world is a very important element of Heidegger's „Being and Time” but also of his efforts to „come back to the Greek” as language and as a way of understanding and practicing philosophy. This footnote is dedicated to prof. Jolanta Brach-Czaina, who was able to write a whole book of a follow up of Heideggerian ontology at the service for feminism, whereas I could only do it in one footnote. See: M. Heidegger, *Being and Time* and J. Brach-Czaina, *Szczeliny istnienia*.



remember, that the lack of any direct connection to the experience of the oppressed might effect in tokenizing their experiences. I also came across some extremely positive reactions from gay progressive scholars, who already read chapters of bell hooks with their students and found it particularly interesting for unpacking the diversity of social problems. I have also seen some supportive reactions from the working class people, like the hairdresser to whom I happened to mention what my work is about. An intuition of „historical justice” was very strong in her response, she claimed it is just the right time for Black people to speak about their needs, and she expressed content about the possibility of speaking from a position of a Black woman especially. Somehow it was not so obvious for her that white women in Poland had any problems, but she had no doubts, that Black women in the US needed attention and support. In this example we can see the ways in which “exotisation” can work: it can open our eyes to the social phenomenon invisible for us in the countries where we live, but it can also ease the process of externalizing the uneasy truths – we can see the problems of women of Color in the US, and we can always believe, that this „extravagant” situation only belongs to this far away “exotic” place we have not even been to. “Exotisation” was also described by Susan Buck-Morss in her famous essay *Hegel and Haiti*. She claimed that there are several ways of omitting the real presence of the oppression, like in case of John Locke, who would claim rejection of slavery in *Two Treatises on Government*, but who would not resign from his own shares in plantation business in Carolina⁶.

Many of the excited voices about bell hooks I heard were inspired by a deep respect toward a woman who came from a working class Black family in the South and became a scholar in a predominantly white American „academia”. hooks can easily become a heroine of another story about crossing cultural and economic boundaries, a true capitalist self-made woman, but at the same time the critical dimension of her writing will be forgotten. This form of ecstatic reaction is most popular in the liberal feminist circles in Poland, and I am very skeptical about them.

Translation vs. assimilation.

Excitement might actually blur the quality of translation that is a fear emerging with an easy recognition of similarities between „others”. In her reply to Mary Daly Audre Lorde wrote, that it is not true, that all women are oppressed in the same way just because they are women. „Within the community of women, racism is a reality force within my life as it is not within yours. The white women with hoods on in Ohio handing out KKK literature on the street may not like what you have to say, but they will shoot me on sight”⁷.

⁶ See: S. Buck-Morss, *Hegel and Haiti*, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Summer, 2000), pp. 821-865.

⁷ A. Lorde, *An open letter to Mary Daly*, in: G. Anzaldua, Ch. Morraga, *This Bridge Called my Back. Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, New York 1983, p. 97.



In *Politics of Translation* Spivak juxtaposed two possible approaches to translation, the ethical and the erotic one. She writes: "To surrender in translation is more erotic than ethical. In that situation the good-willing attitude "she is just like me" is not very helpful".⁸ Spivak signaled the impossibility of literally copying the original text while translating it to another language. She criticizes the teaching she received at school, where the best translation was understood to be the most exact one⁹.

We could say that what hides in the ecstatic reactions to the translation of a Black feminist writer is actually an effort to assimilate the other, an effort based on hidden symbolic violence presented as friendship, just like in the case of *The Merchant of Venice* discussed by Jacques Derrida in his article on „relevant translation”¹⁰. Derrida interprets the practice of mercifulness, as it is proposed by the Christians to Shylock, who is a Jewish merchant, as a practice of a violent assimilation, a forced conversion disguised in a form of a supposedly goodwill attitude. It seems that a similar „assimilation” could actually take place if the experience and theorizing of a white Eastern European women would be equated to the experiences of a Black woman from the US. Translation should indeed be perceived as a political act, as Gayatri Spivak suggested in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, and the power relations which are placing themselves in the field of any cultural production, should also be seen and considered here. Maria Lugones suggested a certain “politics of friendship” in her essay on feminism and cultural imperialism¹¹. I would like to explore the possibility of friendship she described.

Translation and herstory production

The excitement about feminists of Color I witnessed is definitely embedded in a bigger discursive history. There is something particular about the „ecstasy” as element of discursive condition of a human being. Judith Butler wrote, that: „Autonomy in speech, to the extent that it exists, is conditioned by a radical and original dependency on a language whose historicity exceeds in

⁸ G. Spivak, *The Politics of Translation*, in: *Outsid /in the Teaching Machine*, Routledge, New York, 1993 p. 183.

⁹ There is an interesting example of Spivak's translation practice in *Outside/in the Teaching Machine*, where she discusses the French word „pouvoir” using a reference to „can” and „can-do-ness”, a word with which she proposes to replace the word „power”. The French equivalent of „can” („peut”) easily translates as „might” and – what follows from there – builds a reference to „mightness”, and the „might” – royal power of the sovereign. Knowing Foucault's interest in sovereignty we might want to use the word „might” instead of power. Spivak's intuition is exactly opposite to what I just proposed – using her neologism she „desuveraigneses” the foucauldian concept leaving the reader with a sense of liberty supposedly embedded in Foucault's vision of power. To me this operation remains a practice described by Walter Benjamin as a „bad translation” - one which does not proceed according to the principle of exactitude, but still works well forcing the reader to thinking. See: G. Spivak, *Outside/in the Teaching Machine*, p. 34 and W. Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator*, in: *Illuminations*, NY 1968.

¹⁰ See: J. Derrida, *What Is a "Relevant" Translation?*, in: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Winter, 2001), pp. 174-200.

¹¹ See: M. Lugones, E. Spelman, *Have we got a theory for you!* *Women's Studies International Forum* 6(1983).



all directions the history of the speaking subject”¹². My own interest in the writings of feminists of Color might be explain by the historical coincidence of the victory of the „Solidarność” movement in Poland and the end of apartheid in RPA – both happened in the early '90s and both are claimed to be rare examples of almost peaceful political change. Another reason might be a story I first heard in my French literature classes and it was later confirmed by anthropologists¹³ about the Polish Legionnists sent to Haiti by Napoleon in early XIX cent. The legend says, that most of them was not willing to fight the local uprising, and some even stepped on the other side of the barricade to fight against the very Napoleonian troupes that brought them to San Domingo. Whatever the truth was, the article 13 of the first Haitian Constitution granted citizenship to any Pole who requested it. Until now there is a small village in Haiti (Cazale) where a small group of Haitians still want to be called “Poles”, and who claim to be descendants of the brave Polish soldiers who arrived on the island 200 years ago.

The lack of texts depicting marginality in the Polish Academia, the strong political support for neoliberalism as system introduced as the one giving „chances for everyone” might be another explanation of the ecstatic reactions to bell hooks and other writers of Color. Yet, there is another one – a set of similarities between female activists of “Solidarność” and anti-racist movements in USA.

Henryka Krzywonos is one of the key figures in the history of „Solidarność”, and therefore also of contemporary Polish history. In 1980 she was a tramway driver, and one of the first members and organizers of „Solidarność” independent workers unions. She spread the information about the strike which just started in the whole city in August 1980 while driving her tramway and finally stopped it in the center saying „this tramway ain't going any further”. During the Martial Laws (state of war) introduced in December 1981 (ended up in 1984), she lost her pregnancy due to a brutal police attack, she never could have children again.

The gesture she made in support of the political opposition in 1980 can be compared with another political act performed by a woman activist in support for political change in a public transport context. Rosa Parks, who refused to leave her place for a white traveler back in 1955 on a bus in Alabama. Interestingly, the more I researched on the history of both political activists, Parks and Krzywonos, the more I learned about the differences between the ways social movements work in Poland and in the USA. The act of Rosa Parks differs from the spontaneous activity of Krzywonos, whose symbolic gesture was one of support for the strike, not aimed at a particular law¹⁴. We can

¹² See: J. Butler, *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative*, Routledge 1997. p. 28.

¹³ See: L. Kolankiewicz, *Czarna Polonia*, http://wyborcza.pl/1,75480,7486464,Czarna_Polonia.html

¹⁴ A detailed analysis of the trade unions in Poland is proposed by Jerzy Wratny, who claims, that the legal regulations of workers unions in the whole Soviet Block was created in USSR and was a strange mixture of progressive, communist rhetorics and propositions of party control over every organization of workers. Wratny claims, that the oppressive practice of these regulations was granted by informal measures, such as



nevertheless still compare the sexist erasures of the memory about most of the female activists in different social movements¹⁵.

„Solidarity” between women.

Interestingly, bell hooks also discusses the notion of „solidarity”, but in a different context, than I just did – she points at the controversy between two strategies in the feminist movement: **supporting** (women as victims) vs **solidarity** (sharing between women, who might be oppressed, but at the same time are conscious about their strength). She discusses the impossibilities of emancipation in a movement of victims and points at the racist stereotypes often expressed by white women about the supposed „strength of black women” who therefore are presented as the ones who do not need support, since they are strong, and the „real victims” are powerless, weak white women¹⁶.

For Gayatri Spivak solidarity between women is not convincing if practiced among women who are „produced similarly”¹⁷. She stresses the necessity of learning other languages in order to talk about the other or „making a claim to be the other”. Spivak connects us to the classic essay of Walter Benjamin, who explicitly spoke about the practice of translation as being the process of recognizing „the Foreignness” of any language¹⁸. Spivak also mentions the fact, that not all women are literate and asks, what „accessibility” means when we acknowledge that not everyone actually can read.

The uses of anger. On the cultural capital

In her text *The uses of Anger* Audre Lorde discusses a memory from a conference on Black women held in one of the cities in the American South: „What has this week given to you?” I ask. The most vocal white woman says: „I think I've gotten a lot, I feel Black women really understand me a lot better now; they have a better idea of where I am coming from”. As if understanding her lay at the core of the racist problem¹⁹. This radical refusal of giving any attention to the situation of the other is the most striking example of such a practice I found during my research. It is nevertheless copied every time, where the fact of belonging to a dominant group is not given enough critical examination. I would suggest that although anger is understandable in the given circumstances, any

undemocratic choice of the chiefs of workers unions, informal exclusions of the „disturbing elements”, agreements held outside of official gatherings etc. See: J. Wratny, *Związki zawodowe w prawodawstwie polskim w latach 1980-1991*, KUL, Lublin 1994. I am grateful to Jarek Kuisz, who shared his legal theory resources with me and discussed the problem of legal regulations of the workers unions and pointed at the great importance lawyers had in the writing of the „August Agreements”.

¹⁵ See: S. Penn, *Solidarity's Secret. The women who defeated communism in Poland*, The University of Michigan Press, 2005. Interestingly, Henryka Krzywonos is mentioned there only once.

¹⁶ See: b. hooks, *Feminist Theory...* p. 64-67.

¹⁷ G. Spivak, *The Politics of Translation*, op. cit, p. 192.

¹⁸ See: W. Benjamin, *The Task of Translator*, op. cit.

¹⁹ A. Lorde, *The uses of Anger*, *Women's Studies Quarterly* 9:3(fall 1981), p. 7.



conference which assumes that we are already liberated from racism should be revisited and its methodology reworked.

Anger is an attitude which often becomes key element of stereotyped reactions to the writing and generally to the behavior of black women in the US. In one of her texts bell hooks gives an example of a NOW conference, where one of the organizers asked for a speaker, who should not be Black (she would be too angry) nor white (too articulate), but maybe Puerto Rican...²⁰ Still, hooks claims, that: „(...) it's important to maintain that kind of rage that allows you to *resist*”²¹.

Feminists of Color against alienation

Reading the Polish society together with the texts of the feminist writers of Color could show, that in both processes – political transformation after 1989 but also in the installation of neoliberalism – as process of a growing separation of social classes, trained into conditions of precarity, we maybe lost a sense of community, solidarity and equality, which actually were the most important postulates of the “Solidarnosc” movement. In *Feminist Theory...* bell hooks writes: „Feminism in the United States has never emerged from the women who are most victimized by sexist oppression, women who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically and spiritually – women who are powerless to change their condition in life”²². Later she discusses the „problem which has no name”, which for her is the politics of representation in predominantly white middle class feminism. Her polemic with the *Feminine Mystique* of Betty Friedan reminds me of a discussion in a feminist meeting in Warsaw. When a famous liberal feminist scholar and writer said „ In the end we all come from rich, upper middle class families”, which was supposed to be a joke, there was silence, and than only one voice was heard, of a lesbian working class woman, who said „no, we are not”. Interestingly, the discussion was not continued, and while translating the book of bell hooks I often come back to this situation. While reading *Feminist Theory* with students I can have this kind of discussion, whereas without this kind of writing it is almost inaccessible.

In her essay *The Politics of Translation* Gayatri Spivak wrote, that „The task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay”²³. Just as Walter Benjamin, who described translation as a “loving” procedure, also Spivak explicitly refers to the discourses of intimacy while describing the activity of translation. Perhaps the rereading of

²⁰ See: b. hooks, *Feminist Theory...*, p. 55.

²¹ b. hooks, interview *Moving into and behind feminism*, in: *Outlaw Culture. Resisting representations*, Routledge 2006, p. 251

²² b. hooks, *Feminist Theory. From Margin to Center*, Pluto Press, London, 2000, p. 1.

²³ G. Spivak, *Politics of translation*, in: *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Routledge 1990, p. 181.



translation as a practice of “aufhebung”, as proposed by Derrida, could also be read as a passionate one?

***En Pologne, nulle part.*²⁴ Why would we need a 2nd world theory? / Racism**

While reading the voices of women of Color, I realized, that one of the inevitable elements of this kind of translation is actually locating oneself. As a reader of most feminist writers of Color (with a notable exception of Gayatri Spivak) I clearly see, that I am not on their map, as an inhabitant of Poland, I find myself “En Pologne, nulle part” (In Poland – meaning nowhere) as Alfred Jarry puts it in “Ubu the King”²⁵. The fact of not belonging to the 1st nor to the 3rd world (and I am conscious about the controversies of this simplistic division) does not change the attitudes Polish people have toward people of Color. There are up to 10 attempts of murder and several tens of acts of physical violence based on racist prejudice in Poland every year²⁶. My translation is obviously also produced in effort to end this violence.

Homophobia. A fear of going home?

While writing about the experiences of Chicana women, Gloria Anzaldua quotes one of the college students, who thought that homophobia was a fear of going home. The fear of going home has another association for me: an association with exclusions done while archiving social movements, the queer ones in particular. As Paola Bacchetta rightly states in *Recalling Transnational Queerdom*, it is very easy to build a neocolonial image of the history of social movements while the only historical points of reference come from the dominant culture. While criticizing the „From – Stonewall-diffusion-fantasy”, Bacchetta shows the cultural and ethnic bias of theorizing lesbian experiences, where racist and colonial habits can still undermine the supposedly emancipatory practices²⁷.

La Mestiza from Ukraine? Crossing the gender neutrality of contemporary *homo sacer*

As Gloria Anzaldua wrote in *Borderlands*. „In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two

²⁴ A. Jarry, *Ubu Roi*, Paris, 1896.

²⁵ For an interesting analysis of the politics of location, see: P. Wielgosz, *Od zacofania i z powrotem. Wprowadzenie do ekonomii politycznej zacofanego miasta przemysłowego*. in E. Majewska et al (ed) *Futuryzm miast przemysłowych*, op. cit, p. 198-199.

²⁶ See the statistics provided by the antiracist ngo „Nigdy Więcej” (Never Again), on-line: http://www.nigdywiecej.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=category§ionid=15&id=34&Itemid=50

²⁷ See: P. Bacchetta, *Recalling Transnational “Queerdom”: Lesbian and “Lesbian” Identity – Positionalities in Delhi in the 1980’s* in *Antipode* 34 (Nov), 2002 and J. Butler, *Imitation and Gender Insubordination* in: D. Fuss (ed) *Inside/Ou. Lesbian Theories, Gay Theoriest*, Routledge 1991.



individuals shrinks with intimacy”²⁸. When we think about the borders, a very interesting set of images comes from Anzaldua’s explorations of the borderzones in *Borderlands/ La Frontera*. They are particularly interesting because she discusses a situation of border between the rich and poor world traversed by historical acts of colonization, cultural dominance and separation. The Polish/Ukrainian border has recently become the border of the European Union, which led to an extreme technologization and militarization of the border areas and the borders themselves. The Ukrainians, Belarussians and Russians always are „ caught in a bi- or trilinguality” , since most of them speaks Ukrainian, a little Polish and a bit more Russian, and Ukrainian is more similar to Russian (Anzaldua spoke English, Castillan Spanish, Mexican Spanish, Tex-Mec and more²⁹and she described the practice of speaking Tex-Mec as a Chicana specificity, which consists on changing and mixing various languages. This is socially perceived as not being able to speak any language at all, whereas for Anzaldua it is the fully legitimate language of the Borderlands)³⁰.

The racist attitudes Ukrainian women face in Poland are in fact due to a mixture of language, cultural and economic factors, since they are physically similar to Polish women. The Ukrainian immigrants are mostly seasonal physical workers in Poland. They have to cross the border every couple of months in order to renew their visas, and they never have any guarantee of being able to come back. When at the border, they are never called „Pan/ Pani” (Mr/MS, which is applicable to any stranger). They are expected to understand Polish, although they don’t always know it well, and there are sometimes called names if something in their documents/ luggage does not seem quite ok. While reading Anzaldua all my memories of crossing the eastern Polish border seem so clear. The concept of Borderland makes this situation much easier to imagine.

I would like to stop here, since the observations I made already form a hybrid set of references to the practice of transcultural comparison due to the particular project of translation I got involved. Closing this article I would like to express my gratitude to all the authors whose work made this essay possible and to all the women who were brave enough to make their experience enrich the possibilities of transcultural communication, understanding and translating. Thank you for your patience and please do question, discuss and comment on what I just said.

²⁸G. Anzaldua, *Borderlands/ La Frontera. The New Mestiza*, Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco 1999, Preface.

²⁹ See: G. Anzaldua, *Bodrerlands/ La Frontera...* op. cit.

³⁰ See: G. Anzaldua, *Bodrerlands/ La Frontera...* op. cit.

