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Response to Şebnem Susam-Saraeva

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Şebnem Susam-Saraeva's original forum piece addresses the question of *who may translate whom*. Starting with a focus on experiential knowledge, i.e. knowledge learned through lived experience, she quickly moves on to questions related to “racial, ethnic, sexuality and gender-based identities” (2021, 85). These identities, following and expanding on Susam-Saraeva, are grounded in bodily and lived experiences, which may themselves be viewed positively, for example positive sexual experiences, or as more negative experiences ranging from micro-aggressions to outright abuse. Susam-Saraeva is right to highlight the complexity of sharing and translating lived forms of knowledge. The debates of whether such complexity is “fully” appreciated in translation are commonly witnessed in various cultural contexts. A notable Korean case would be the debates of the first of the two Korean translations of the Korean-American author Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995). The novel explores Korean immigrants' ethnically and culturally determined identity, language, and their attempt to assimilate into the mainstream American national fabric through the narrative of a Korean-American protagonist Henry Park who tries to become a “native speaker” but keeps feeling cultural alienation in society. The first translation was criticized for failing to appropriately represent what permeates the source text, such as Henry's sense of distance towards his native

speaker wife (Lee 2011, 135).

However, identities themselves may not constitute a limit to the capacity to translate – and indeed, we (and Susam-Saraeva 2021, 91) feel this is a slippery slope to start down – but rather limits can be found in the willingness to listen and/or the intention to open oneself to the other. Moreover, as Haidee Kotze and Anna Strowe point out in this Forum, discussions about this issue have so far tended to be restricted to individual cases; we need to take a more holistic perspective.¹ As translators, our job is to understand the other and ethically represent experiences, cultures and expressions that are not our own, as other contributors to the Forum have argued. Debates and conflicts often occur when the translator’s attention is not on the ethical and appropriate delivery of content but on other goals, and translation is bound to have social, cultural, and political ramifications in local and/or global contexts, as we have witnessed in the colonial past as well as the post-colonial present. This is due to translation necessarily involving re-composition. In our response, we therefore further expand the question “who may translate whom” to “who gets to translate (and discuss) whom?” Susam-Saraeva touches on this in her contribution when she asks about “white, ‘central’ scholars” (2021, 91) working on other racial and ethnic groups. The question is about visibility and inclusivity, and, to an extent, Anglocentrism.

The recent controversy over the Dutch translations of Amanda Gorman’s poetry serves as a key reference here, highlighting the issues discussed by Susam-Saraeva (as she has pointed out on Twitter²). The debate came about due to the Dutch press Meulenhoff selecting Marieke Lukas Rijneveld to translate Gorman’s poem “The Hill We Climb”, which was read at Joe Biden’s inauguration as US President.³ A response was made, in Dutch, by Janice Deul,⁴ which

¹ We thank the authors for sharing their response prior to publication.

² <https://twitter.com/SebnemSaraeva/status/1366425037906051080>

³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-56334369>,

⁴ <https://www.volkskrant.nl/columns-opinie/opinie-een-witte-vertaler-voor-poezie-van-amanda-gorman-onbegrijpelijk~bf128ae4/>, see Haidee Kotze’s English translation here: <https://haidee-kotze.medium.com/english-translation-janice-deuls-opinion-piece-about-gorman-rijneveld-8165a8ef4767>

highlighted how as a white, non-binary person with no translation experience, Rijnveld was not the best choice for the job, and Deul recommended instead Black, female, spoken word Dutch poets. Rijnveld resigned the commission of their own choice, writing a poem in response which was translated and published in English in *The Guardian*.⁵

The discussion, and the discrepancy between the English- and Dutch-language debates (discussed below), has been analysed in depth in a Medium post by Haidee Kotze, which explored the difference between who “can” and who “may” translate.⁶ Kotze points out that Deul was focusing more on the choice of Rijnveld above other writers who were spoken-word poets, and was not arguing simply that a Black author should be translated by a Black translator. Kotze rightly argues that this debate, in its Dutch form, was about *visibility* and *inclusivity*, with Deul responding to systemic racism in Dutch publishing, where poets working in a similar poetic tradition to Gorman were overlooked in favour of a novel writer who recently won the Booker International prize. In that sense, this is not limited to this one-off Dutch case, but has resonance in many cultures and societies. For example, a similar question can be raised, such as, “May a Japanese translator translate literary work written by a Korean writer during the Japanese colonial era, which delivers the voice of the colonized?” Again, the issue here is not race or ethnicity; rather, it is about translation being a site for the colonized or marginalized to make their voices heard.

The Gorman controversy highlights the question of who gets asked to translate, and more generally, who is visible to publishers and other cultural agents. This is a problem within translation industries, where a translator who is well known, perhaps also a writer like Rijnveld, is more likely to be asked to translate a high-profile text. The Korean publishing industry operates in a similar way. In terms of translations from dominating into dominated

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/mar/06/everything-inhabitable-a-poem-by-marieke-lucas-rijneveld>

⁶ <https://haidee-kotze.medium.com/translation-is-the-canary-in-the-coalmine-c11c75a97660>. This piece also referenced and responded to Susam-Saraeva’s initial Forum provocation.

languages (Casanova 2010), e.g. English to Korean, this uneven power relation becomes more conspicuous: the author's visibility and the work's position ("bestseller") in the source culture dictate what is translated (Choi 2015, 182), while respectable institutions, such as the Literature Translation Institute of Korea,⁷ the Institute for the Translation of Korean Classics⁸ and The Academy of Korean Studies⁹ choose texts for Korean to English translation and their translators. Interviews undertaken by Literature Translation Institute of Korea (2020, 140–141) with stakeholders in the Korean translation industry of web novels also show that often native speakers of the target language are favored, to the extent that one of the translation companies said it hired only native speakers or people of Korean descent. As such, visibility is central to translation into and from Korean.

Interestingly, the Gorman debate becomes more visible and widely discussed once it moves into English, where it takes on a life of its own separate from Deul's original comments in Dutch. There is an Anglocentrism to the assumptions that the situation in the Netherlands is comparable to, or the same as, that in the USA or in the UK (themselves rather different in terms of race relations). The English-language debates seemed to focus more on the question of identity, linking it to ongoing discussion in the Anglophone world about cultural appropriation and identity politics.¹⁰ The assumption that markers of identity function the same the world over, whether that is the Netherlands, the USA, or even South Korea, is another aspect of the failure to understand and account for different experiences, bringing us back to the key ethical issues in Susam-Saraeva's piece.

Such issues of visibility, inclusivity and Anglocentrism are also present in academic publishing. For example, who is given space in this very Forum? The respondents in the first

⁷ <https://www.litkorea.or.kr/en/main.do>

⁸ <https://www.itkc.or.kr/>

⁹ <http://intl.aks.ac.kr/english/portal.php?sid=9432233c650d77073eb6906aa3a34a95>

¹⁰ For example, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/mar/07/amanda-gorman-in-segregating-identity-our-human-experience-gets-lost-in-translation>

round work primarily at prestigious institutions in the Global North, which leaves aside other, equally interesting perspectives and experiences. While the journal extended an invitation for further responses to other scholars, and although the in-/exclusivity issue here is inextricably linked to language hierarchies, the initial round of invitations reflects the same issue of visibility/inclusivity that we see in the choice of Rijnveld in the sense that it determines who gets the space to speak. Scholars in the field who work between dominated languages or national languages (e.g. Hindi – Albanian / Thai – Tamil) outside of the Global North are not commonly the first to be asked to contribute a piece to “international” academic journals. This means some indigenous knowledge may be trapped or unheard. More widely, speakers of languages other than English are often compelled to conform to the English writing norms and practices (sometimes needing to pay for translation and editing), or to use concepts rooted in English, with the result that local knowledge remains “subjugated knowledge” (Foucault 1980). Who gets asked to speak, then, is just as pressing a question as who can speak.

While acknowledging that no solution to this problem of visibility would be perfect, there are ways it can be addressed. One response is to work collaboratively, so that scholars from different locations and language combinations can pool their knowledge and experience in order to overcome their individual perspectives. Working collaboratively does require planning so that all contributors are on an equal footing and less experienced or less internationally well-known scholars are not exploited. Other responses include bringing diverse voices into academic discussions through invitations to scholars outside the Global North and creating more spaces for languages that tend to receive less scholarly attention at the international level. There are obvious risks to this practice, however, as scholars might be invited to provide a tokenistic representation of Global South voices in panels, forums, etc. To avoid this inclusion being superficial, it is important therefore that multiple (epistemological) viewpoints are considered from the beginning. The movement to decolonise university

curricula offers some possible ways of approaching such diversity. An encouraging movement is already being made in this regard to challenge Anglocentrism in academia, whereby some journals (e.g. *Language and Intercultural Communication*) present abstracts in two languages, one in English and the other in the language of the author's choice. Similarly, translations of scholarly works published in languages other than English, like the "Translation Studies in Translation" section in *Translation and Interpreting Studies*, expand the range of experiences that are visible. Such practices need more translation, and more careful listening to difference, but they can make all the difference to who gets heard.

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