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Queer Theory and Translation Studies: Language, Politics, Desire. By Brian James Baer. Pp. 1-227. New York: Routledge, 2021. [price?]

Going beyond the liberation of translation studies from earlier linguistic-based approaches that sought accurate renderings of source texts into target languages, and the reproduction of a text from one language to another based on relations of equivalence, a transition influenced to a large extent by sociolinguistics in the 1980s and the influence of interdisciplinary approaches to translation, including cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and certainly feminist studies in the 1990s, Brian James Baer, in his book *Queer Theory and Translation Studies*, takes the development of translation studies even further from its earlier mimetic aspirations through positioning it into a productive and mutually interrogating relationship with queer theory. The book also engages seriously with the notion that translation is not only about language alone, nor is it a mere textual practice, but is deeply embedded in relations of power, identity, and global networks as translation operates within the very spaces where various cultural systems, including, but not limited to, language, intersect, converge, and transform. While this may sound similar to Lawrence Venuti's work on the politics of translation, Baer's book is one of the first monographs to address how our understandings of translation beyond relations of pure cross-lingual correspondence may be broadened even further through the oppositional pressures of queer theory while asking the extent to which translation operates as a queer praxis through staging what Baer refers to as 'a clash of epistemologies' requiring ongoing sites of textual and cultural (re)negotiation. But the book also asks how translation studies can unmoor queer theory from its Anglophonic biases and its co-optation by the global hegemony of English. Indeed, as Baer notably points out, queerness and translation already share much in common; the former has been rendered

historically as unnatural, non-reproductive, and feminised in nationalist discourses that purport to strengthen the nation through the reproduction and sustainment of the population, particularly the case in postcolonial nations as they attained independence from European colonial domination and as they still recover from the trauma of the historical legacies of that ideological penetration, while translation historically has been marked as derivative, inauthentic, and deeply dependent on a source text regarded as original, inspired, spontaneous, and as an unmediated eruption of genius with highly masculinised conceptions of literary and authorial production inherited from Romantic and Modernist aesthetics. Indeed, Gayatri Gopinath had made similar comparisons that would also speak to and challenge the gendered original/copy dualism, and thereby the supposed inauthenticity of translation through its interimplication with queer, by linking diaspora and migration to queerness in so far as ‘within heteronormative logic the queer is seen as the debased and inadequate copy of the heterosexual, so too is diaspora within nationalist logic positioned as the queer Other of the nation, its inauthentic imitation’ (*Impossible Desires* 11), just as translation, by extension, has been feminised historically as the inadequate, inauthentic Other of a source text.

Baer’s book helps to counter such problematic dichotomies through what he refers to as ‘the dual integration of queer theory into the study of translations and translators, and of translation into the global study of sexuality’ in order to open up ‘counterhegemonic approaches to the study of sex and sexuality *across* languages and cultures’ (3; emphasis added). The book’s theoretical foundations are set out in its introduction ‘Textual and Sexual Orientations,’ and in its first two chapters, which look at queer theory and translation studies relationally (Chapter 1) and at the importance of translation’s pivotal role in queering global sexuality studies (Chapter 2). The central chapters present case studies, such as the history of gay anthologies as ideological tools which often served as textual and cultural vehicles to

circulate and consolidate Western sexual epistemologies, particularly problematising chronology as the principle of organisation, which also allowed for a progressive, developmental view of queer historiography anchored in the West. Other case studies involve the rise of the novel and its circulation of Western sexual epistemologies to the point of eliding the lyric and demonstrate how poetic translation can enact a reparative reading of the lyric as a site of queer performativity. There is also a brilliant chapter on translations of the memoir of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf (1928-2002), a self-identified transvestite whose life spanned the Weimar Republic, Nazi Germany, Socialist East Germany, and German reunification and after, where Baer traces and analyses translations of her memoir published in 1992 as *Ich bin meine eigene Frau: Ein Leben* [I Am My Own Woman/Wife: A Life] into various languages in order to show the paradoxes of Mahlsdorf's memoir and queer life and resist appropriation of her life story under the paradigms of North American queer identity without radically idealising or othering her.

Of particular interest to me, *Queer Theory and Translation Studies* has exposed the very idea of queer as an always already *translative condition* in a globalised world, especially in postcolonial contexts outside of the Euroamerican axis and in the contexts of diaspora, migration, and subaltern movement across geopolitical borders, given that, as Baer notes, translation can help us to understand the transnational circulation of queerness (11) and trouble the imperialist gestures of Western gay rights models that are often universalised to other parts of the world where local dissident sexualities have emerged under a very different set of historical, material, and ideological conditions. In speaking of the current debates in postcolonial queer studies, referencing Joseph A. Boone's *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*, as to whether 'modern "gay identity" or queer theory is transferrable to non-Western contexts, or whether both signal a further colonizing of the third world by American and European power' (Boone xxxi), Baer observes that what often results is a rigid binary

opposition between radical alterity, on the one hand, where same-sex sexualities in indigenous contexts are assumed to be so different they are beyond Western comprehension and always already subject to false understanding; or total transposability, on the other, where any attempt to describe or translate sexualities in non-Western contexts into Western languages or Western understandings automatically and straightforwardly reproduces the imperialist gesture. Baer rightfully argues that neither position captures the complexity of cross-cultural and cross-linguistic engagements, and that neither position allows much room for translation (55), points with which I would agree, offering that both positions offer little more than a kind of intellectual paralysis. While we as translators need to acknowledge possibilities for nuances, gaps in understanding, and spaces of untranslatability that cannot be elided, and, most importantly, as Baer remarks, that we ‘resist appropriating other cultures by forcing them into our conceptual frameworks’ (55), the critical question that needs to be taken further by translators is the extent to which translation offers a space to navigate more *in between* the binary poles Baer identifies as radical alterity and total transposability. For example, Joseph Massad, in his book *Desiring Arabs* (2007), which Baer curiously seems to cite quite often throughout his book, accuses scholars and activists in the West of transforming what he refers to as ‘practitioners of same-sex contact’ in Arab Muslim societies and cultures by producing subjects who identify as homosexuals, gays, or lesbians where they simply do not exist (Massad 162-63), a critique that is more or less repeated all over again in his more recent book *Islam in Liberalism* (2015). In Massad’s view, such labels simply reproduce forms of Western cultural imperialism if it is assumed that same-sex sexual practices in Arab Muslim societies have yet to catch up with the liberatory Western model of gayness (*Desiring Arabs* 173), the latter part of which may be true if Western sexual categories and identities are assumed to be universal without any historical or cultural contextualisation, but also if one assumes that same-sex sexualities in indigenous contexts

remain frozen in time and space, unaffected by the circulation of queer bodies, discourses, and materialities across the globe.

Yet, as Sean Chabot and Jan Willem Duyvendak argue in their article ‘Globalization and transnational diffusion between social movements,’ it may be more productive instead to examine how the negotiation of sexual identities outside of the Euroamerican axis may be influenced by, but not blindly copied from, the West, since they are *modified* and *adapted* to fit particular circumstances and traditions (*Theory and Society* 31 (2002): 721-22); that is, Chabot and Duyvendak acknowledge that sexual identities, materialities, and discourses that circulate globally are *translated* linguistically and culturally for local purposes and put to use in different contexts, even if the same terms, such as ‘gay,’ ‘homosexual,’ or ‘queer’ are used strategically in local or indigenous contexts, casting doubt as to whether these identities are taken on simply as a way to mimic the West. Even Judith Butler’s theory of gender speaks to translation and its very queerness, given that gender performativity is in itself a translative act; that is, the gender (and sexual) identities that are performed, embodied, and enacted are not simply located on the body alone, but are located culturally and transculturally, always missing the mark of the norm, imagined as originary, whilst simultaneously calling it into question. In other words, when Butler writes about the impossibility of separating out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained’ (*Gender Trouble* 6), what she is saying about gender can similarly be said about translation in so far as it exposes the myth of an ‘original’ textual body and speaks to the uneven correspondence between languages, and to translation as a performative act as well, which is always already influenced by its ‘political and cultural intersections’ and not simply reducible to the body of the source text alone. Therefore, it seems impossible for dissident gender and sexual identities in postcolonial or diasporic contexts, for example, simply to copy forms of queerness assumed to originate in the West as their very translation disturbs

the original/copy dichotomy, producing new and hybrid forms of queerness reducible neither to one's local or indigenous culture, nor to the West. In his fascinating analysis of translations of the autobiography of East German transvestite, Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, *Ich bin meine eigene Frau: Ein Leben* (1992), mentioned earlier, from German into Spanish, Dutch, English, Russian, and Hungarian, Baer cites Jack Halberstam, who, in *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability*, speaks of the embodiment of transgender individuals and to necessary forms of modification (i.e. translation) of meanings, desires, and identities, as do Chabot and Duyvendak above, in noting that the asterisk following *trans* in his book's title 'modifies the meaning of *transitivity* by refusing to situate *transition* in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity' (qtd in Baer 184; Halberstam 4; emphasis added). Halberstam's focus on transitivity speaks directly, in my view, to translation as a form of transitioning, which, like transgender, implies the deferral of certainty, the embrace of ambiguity and nuance, a degree of contingency and undecidability, ongoing renegotiation and reformulation, and the continual refiguring and remapping of borders and categories of meaning, but never a simple mimesis or stasis.

I mention this because Baer seems concerned in his book about replicating what Said has referred to as 'the process of empire' in his 1989 article in *Critical Inquiry* (qtd. in Baer 165; see Said 'Representing the Colonized' 214) when it comes to studying sexualities outside of the West. This is especially noted in his own clarification of his use of terminology in his Introduction, stating that he uses the term 'gay' only to refer to Western identitarian models of homosexuality since that term 'is most closely associated with the modern Western sexual epistemology' (Baer 18-19). But is it really? I would have liked to have seen Baer move even further away from Massad in this regard as we do need to look at how postcolonized subjects identify themselves, and not merely assume that they have been

co-opted by the West or by the so-called Gay International, à la Massad, especially if they identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, or queer. It is important to bear in mind, as Ruth Vanita reminds us, in writing about same-sex love and eroticism in premodern and early modern India, that the sometimes paranoid use of such general terms as ‘alternative’ or ‘marginal’ sexualities not only lacks the specificity of reference to same-sex desires and sexual practices (these terms have often been conflated with paedophilia and bestiality in some homophobic forms of cultural nationalism both in the global North and global South), and that while terms such as ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ were not used to describe same-sex sexualities or those who practiced them in India’s past, neither were terms such as ‘alternative’ or ‘marginal’ sexualities, and most certainly not with their present connotations. Vanita argues that the use of such terms today ‘is only a convenient fiction’ that leads us to find these terms more acceptable when addressing sexualities of the past (*Queering India* 4), and I would tend to agree and argue the same point for cross-cultural readings and translations of same-sex sexualities in the present. I found this to be true in my own work in examining queer francophone autofictional writing from the Maghreb, a genre which enables its authors to theorise and explore the shifting meanings of their gender and sexual identities, especially after having emigrated from the Maghreb to Europe, as autofiction creates a discursive and heuristic space for the translation of self textually into literary form through the act of writing. The autofictional work of Abdellah Taïa (Morocco), and Eyt-Chékib Djaziri (Tunisia), for example, references, in varying degrees, the global circulation of queer bodies and discourse, and their understandings of sexual subjectivity are navigated and translated into what it means *for them* both in their Maghrebian homeland and through the intercultural negotiations of racial, gender, and sexual epistemes that occur through their crossings of geopolitical borders and eventual settlement in France. As Wail Hassan notes, translation is an essential component of cross-cultural contact (*PMLA*, 131.5, 2016: 1436).

While the writers I mention, or their narrator-protagonists represented in their autofiction, generally assume the passive role in their sexual relations with men both in the Maghreb and in France, what they resist is not so much active/passive homosexuality as its trace is still present in their texts; but what is actually resisted and translated is the conflation of the passive sexual role with degradation and humiliation. For example, in his autofictional work *Un poisson sur la balançoire* (*A Fish on the Seesaw*), through the protagonist-narrator Sofiène, who represents the author himself, Djaziri writes:

Il est vrai que les mentalités ici sont ainsi faites que celui qui a le rôle actif ne perd rien de sa virilité et peut même raconter ses exploits, il n'en sera qu'applaudi, encouragé. L'homme qui aura eu le rôle passif se verra, lui, traité de pédé et sera méprisé. D'où ma surprise de constater qu'une interversion des rôles existait sous d'autres cieux, avec Frédéric par exemple. (70)

It is true that the thinking here [in Tunisia] is such that the one who is in the active role [in homosexual sex] does not lose any part of his virility and can even recount his exploits; he will only be applauded, encouraged. A man who has taken the passive role will see himself treated as queer and will be despised. Hence my surprise to find out that a reversal of roles existed in other places, with Frédéric, for example (my translation; brackets added).

Here there is a rupture, a disidentification, an intimation toward another kind of sexual relationship between men with an interchange of sexual roles not prescribed in advance through binary taxonomies of gender that may appear closer to Western forms of egalitarian homosexuality, though not completely congruent with them either, but rather is a case of translative performativity. There is not a complete rejection of active/passive homosexuality, often regarded as paradigmatic for sexual relations between men in Arab Muslim societies

and cultures, but a resignification, a translation, in Djaziri, and in contemporary queer francophone writing from the Maghreb, of the passive sexual role into a site of agency, intimacy, and sexual pleasure.

I mention this because it is critical to regard queer translation not only as a form of interlinguistic negotiation, but one of intralinguistic and cultural negotiation as well, especially incited by the processes of migration and displacement. While the writers I have mentioned are writing in French, the language of colonial inheritance in the Maghreb, they use French strategically to rework its received meanings in Europe. As Mildred Mortimer argues, Maghrebian writers breathe new life into standard French language usage, indigenising the language through inserting Arabic or Berber words, and, more importantly, as a way of broaching taboo subjects, such as sexuality, which is more easily accomplished in French (*Maghrebian Mosaic* 5) than in the more sacred language of Arabic with its close association to Islam. Francophone writing in the Maghreb is often a strategy for exploring new forms of alterity, renaming the world, recuperating memory, and redefining the self, all of which are forms of cultural translation that reconfigure the contours of sexual subjectivity and the rather static ways Massad and other cultural nativist scholars situate same-sex sexualities in indigenous contexts. And as Baer himself rightfully argues with regard to translation, ‘meanings in one language will almost never align with the range of meanings in another—and even words with similar semantic content will have lived different lives in their respective languages, lending them different valences, accents, and leading them along different semantic and intertextual pathways’ (75). But this would also be true of translative manoeuvres within the same language; that is, in using the language of the former colonizer in a postcolonial context as a political strategy, as a form of *métissage*, to write oneself out of many of the received and entrenched borders of continued imperial inscription and representation. But, at the same time, such terms as ‘gay’ do circulate globally and would

therefore also be inscribed with what Baer describes as different valences and accents, not reducible to their meanings in North American or Western contexts. For example, in an interview given in the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* with Alberto Fernández Carbajal, conducted and published in English, Abdellah Taïa consistently refers to himself as ‘gay’ throughout, discussing how he had told his family he was gay; explaining his fear of being raped as a young, feminine, gay boy in Morocco; and discussing generally his experience as a gay, Muslim, Arab boy growing up in Morocco in the early 1980s as explored in his autofictional work *Une mélancolie arabe* (Carbajal 53.4, 2017: 495-506).

Baer’s book makes a long overdue and welcome contribution to the study of sexualities across languages and cultures through his dialogical interrogation of queer theory and translation studies which expands and enriches the purview and parameters of both disciplines in the process. But locating certain terms, such as ‘gay’ in the West, and their use in other parts of the world as a form of Western hegemony is part of a broader replicatory problem in queer studies that potentially denies human agency and erotic autonomy to sexual subjects in locations outside of the West. As Boone points out, ‘Western conceptions of homosexuality and gay identity are being borrowed, retooled, and transformed to fit the priorities of the local culture’ (*Homoerotics of Orientalism* xxxi). But it is important to point out quite explicitly that these borrowings, retoolings, and transformations are, in fact, *translations*, and therefore can be reduced neither to simplistic forms of equivalence to Western forms of queerness, nor to mere instances of Western imperialism, as these very translations remain constituted by residues of difference, slippages, and deferrals that refuse domestication, equivalence, or complete integration either into Western or indigenous cultures, given that translation is a mediating, yet *interminable*, process, always subject to acts of continual rethinking, renegotiation, and retranslation. Perhaps further thinking along these lines can help us out of the binary trap identified by Baer between radical alterity and

total transposability, creating a space in between for further theorisation. In addition, Boone speaks about the need to get beyond what he refers to as ‘the hermeneutics of suspicion,’ which has achieved so much currency in academic work lately, and to honour the desire to understand alternative ways of being positioned in the world, ‘even at the risk of revealing the limits of our knowledge and the blind spots that our subject-positions inevitably create,’ focusing instead on *alternative* ways of knowing, sharing, negotiating, and producing knowledge (*Homoerotics of Orientalism* xxxii), and, similar to the Benjaminian tangent, where these might cross, intersect, converge, and differ, but never merely repeat, which comprises the very juncture of queer theory and translative practice.

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