Harm Reduction in Translation

On *Violent Phenomena: 21 Essays on Translation* (ed. Kavita Bhanot and Jeremy Tiang, Tilted Axis Press, London, 2022)

By *Susan Bernofsky*

An exciting new anthology of essays on literary translation has just been published in London: *Violent Phenomena: 21 Essays on Translation*[1], ed. Kavita Bhanot and Jeremy Tiang. With a title borrowed from Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, the volume collects essays from a wide range of perspectives that shed light on various colonial impulses inherent in the history of translation and offers some first steps for countering them. "Above all," the editors write in their introduction, "this book is a challenge to inherited assumptions about translators and translations being neutral, making the case that every aspect of translation is political." Almost all of the volume's contributors are literary translators, and their essays combine theoretical and historical approaches to translation with textual analyses and close readings—often of translations by the contributors themselves. Topics include the structural complexities that arise when works are transported between the languages of countries formerly connected by a colonizer/colonized relationship; untranslatability (intentional and otherwise); the difficulties and pleasures of collaboration; and occasionally even the refusal to be translated. The old saw about only translating into one's native language is conclusively laid to rest. Indeed, the very notion of a "mother tongue" is subjected to a serious reevaluation; after all, most people on this planet grow up speaking more than one language in their everyday lives; and the languages in which many writers produce their books are not necessarily the first they learned. This topic is explored by translators Anton Hur ("The Mythical English Reader") und Lúcia Collischonn ("Freed from the Monolingual Shackles: A Mongrel Crônica for the Mutt Translator"), and several of the anthology's authors share stories about being marginalized in the publishing world as non-white translators. At the same time, as Layla Benitez-James relates in "Proust's Oreo," translators of color may run the risk of making incorrect assumptions about the authors and texts they translate based on their own experiences of discrimination. In "'Blackness' in French: On Translation, Haiti, and the Matter of Race," Kaiama L. Glover considers the difficulties of translating elements of a novel by René Depestre that intersect with longstanding racial stereotypes in English-language contexts: "The process of translation," she writes, "can lead as readily to exoticizing and silencing as to unifying and subverting." Sofia Rehman describes the way "patriarchal impositions" in earlier translations of ancient Islamic texts systematically suppressed aspects of these texts that support feminist interpretations ("Seeking Hajar: Decolonising Translation of Classical Arabic Texts"); she proposes replacing this "manhandling" of the texts with "womanhandling." "Considering the Dystranslation of *Zong!*"– a conversation between Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip and Barbara Ofosu-Somuah – describes a translation project that went wrong when Philip's book-length poem, originally conceived as a work of mourning, was re-framed in translation in a way that centered a (white)-European perspective, causing the poet

to reject it. Other authors write of difficulties they have experienced as translators of color, disabled translators, or translators of Dalit authors, and of linguistic-literary life in places including Armenia, Mozambique, Singapore, and Wales. Brilliantly conceived and assembled, *Violent Phenomena* is full of translation lore and instructive tales from the translator's workshop. Even translators into languages other than English will find ample food for thought here. Check it out!

Susan Bernofsky, 9/19/22

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Susan Bernofsky is a writer and the prizewinning translator of seven works of fiction by the great Swiss-German modernist author Robert Walser, as well as novels and poetry by Yoko Tawada, Jenny Erpenbeck, Uljana Wolf, Franz Kafka, Hermann Hesse, and others. Her most recent book, *Clairvoyant of the Small: The Life of Robert Walser*, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for Biography. For her translations, she has received the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, The Schlegel-Tieck Translation Prize, the Ungar Award for Literary Translation, the Oxford-Weidenfeld Translation Prize, the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation, and others. A Guggenheim, Cullman, and Berlin Prize fellow, she teaches literary translation at the Columbia University School of the Arts and is currently working on a new translation of Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* for W.W. Norton. Her translation of Yoko Tawada's novel *Paul Celan and the Trans-Tibetan Angel* is forthcoming in 2023 from New Directions.

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