

# Culture Vulturing! A confession or even two

By Patricia Klobusiczky

Translated from the German by Steven Corcoran

*Indeed, she had this carefree way  
of adopting diverse customs and practices from foreign cultures  
as if she had colonized the entire globe*

Verena Rossbacher, *Mon Chéri und unsere demolierten Seelen*

How to deal with a fear of contact, or a certain reticence, that I have only recently begun to feel? And notably since the term "cultural appropriation" has been used so indiscriminately for all possible forms of approach and inspiration that it has degenerated into an insult and a killer phrase? Disrepute then also quickly befalls literary translation – as a hegemonic presumption, as an act of pure violence that supposedly reproduces colonial terror. These combative theses are adopted by the French literary scholar Thiphaine Samoyault in her book *Traduction et violence*. And because combative theses are prone to be taken out of context and run through the mill of social and other media, they twitter around quickly and become bromides at lightning speed. They become highly frequented commonplaces far removed from any historically grounded and artistically conscious approach. Whereupon they cannot be easily either recontextualized or argumentatively refuted.

And yet, as a quasi-professional “**culture vulture**”, do I now have to plead guilty to a crime I've been committing for decades? Even though I will surely remain an incorrigible repeat offender (repeat offender in every sense of the word, let's just think of the immortal Pierre Menard)?<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, in this summer of 2022, in which it feels that white musicians are banned from the stage every week because of their shamelessly adopted hairstyle, if Winnetou is not to be banned from German children's minds as the colonial distorted image *par excellence*, I feel compelled to at least reflect on my personal-professional compulsion.<sup>2</sup> And that can't do any harm, whether to myself or to others (I hope).

These reflections began with a tour of the early summer rosarium at Darmstadt's Mathildenhöhe, where Novalis, Fontane and Frédéric Mistral blossom together, the Florence on the Elbe (Dresden) meets Monaco, nostalgia meets charisma, and Saloon borders on Pink Paradise, while the Wedding Bells sound for the Corrida, accompanied by La Traviata and Broceliande, while Admiral and Schöne Maid roses join hands or, more precisely, twigs. How the roses came to have such names remains the secret of their breeders, but to me this garden seemed like a symbol of cultural tradition that eliminates temporal, spatial, generic, and even taste boundaries and offers us all a collective heritage from which we can each individually draw to make it fruitful - and keep it alive.

Is this an all too (literally) rosy picture, in view of current debates that occasionally go

beyond mere hairstyle dissing or the demonization of Karl May?<sup>3</sup> Already my colourful, luxuriantly proliferating, euphonious, beguilingly fragrant and, despite all the diversity, all the disparity, oh-so-harmonious world is beginning to falter. I find support – and simultaneously also salvation for dread-tempted whites – first of all in the British-Nigerian author Ralph Leonard, who already called out to us two years ago: "Stop apologizing for cultural appropriation."<sup>4</sup> This form of appropriation is not only progressive; it is also anti-racist. This is music to my ears. I also see it this way and have done for as long as I can remember. Leonard reminds us that the accusation of being a culture vulture can hit anyone at any time. Even Beyoncé got accused of exploiting a foreign culture when she once wrapped herself in a glittery sari. And he details how the concept of "cultural appropriation" leaked out of the academic ivory tower of postcolonial studies and into pop culture, becoming mainstream politics, a development Leonard himself is highly critical of. He warns against "identitarian gatekeeping" and laments the irony that most opponents of cultural appropriation see themselves as radical proponents of diversity, immigration, and a multicultural society – only they reject the practical consequences of such a symbiosis: diversity of opinion, artistic innovation, broadening of one's horizons, and unleashing the imagination. He thus quotes Edward Said (who famously paved the way for postcolonial studies with his critique of destructive European hubris): "The history of all cultures is a history of cultural borrowing."

Perhaps no one has summed up the history of cultural borrowing (or indeed appropriation) with such sonorous eclecticism as the Swiss musician Sophie Hunger, who sings in at least three languages and seems at home everywhere:

"And in my ears and eyes that's how culture is created - by taking things from others that don't really belong to you ... whether it is Max Bruch, who wrote the famous Kol Nidrei, played by a British cellist who converted [to Judaism], whether it is Jacques Brel, who stole from Franz Liszt, but whose 'Ne me quitte pas' found its perfection with Nina Simone, in French with an American accent ..."<sup>5</sup>

In Haruki Murakami's story "Drive My Car," Uncle Vanya is transported to the Meiji era on a Tokyo stage by a director and actor whose name is reminiscent of Kafka (Kafuku). In the Oscar-winning film adaptation of the same name by Ryūsuke Hamaguchi, Chekhov's classic is staged in Hiroshima in an old European, almost old-fashioned way (the set, the costumes), but with an avant-garde cast: the actresses come from Japan, Taiwan/USA or South Korea, among others, and each acts in their own native language, and the deaf-mute Korean in sign language. A delightfully Babylonian universal-Chekhov – that's what I remember most about this highly watchable film.

My joy is all the greater upon reading the following lines from the Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han, who was already thinking about these questions twenty years ago, lines that are still valid today:

"Appropriation means abstractly that I make something of the Other the content of my being. Thus, it is also a process of learning and education. I acquire, for example, the foreign language, the language of the stranger. In doing so, I do not deprive the other of his language. On the contrary, I speak his language with him. Appropriation of the foreign language makes a special closeness to the stranger possible. To appropriate the language of the other

means precisely to strive for the other, for his language. [...] Appropriation in this sense does not exert force on the other. [...] Appropriation of the foreign language does not mean that I project my language onto the language of the other or reduce it to that. This projection makes any learning, any education impossible. Original appropriation, on the other hand, is world-forming. Only an idiot or a god lives without appropriation."<sup>6</sup>

Even if we wanted to, we would not be able to adhere to a law on cultural purity (on a small scale, it would mean emptying our spice cupboard, pulling out the balcony plants – or rose bushes! dumping the fruit basket, bulldozing the vegetable patch). Anyway, history, the long history of oppression and annihilation, should have taught us where such efforts lead. But things are not quite that simple, because these accusations – which are often, but not always, unreflected – also make me aware of how fluid the boundaries can be between artistic inspiration and material exploitation. At the same time, clear boundaries can be drawn. Ralph Leonard quotes the political US poet Amiri Baraka: What is reprehensible is not that a band like the Beatles owes its know-how to an artist like Blind Willie Johnson, but that Blind Willie Johnson still works as an elevator operator in Jackson, Mississippi (while the Beatles rake in millions). The problem, he says, is inequality, not cultural appropriation, which is perfectly natural. Thus, it is no coincidence that the philosophically versed music journalist Jens Balzer advocates an ethics of appropriation that takes into account the prevailing power relations in each case, and thus constructively raises the level of the debate:

"Actually, one should formulate an imperative: Appropriate! Appropriate whatever you happen upon – but do it respectfully. Or do it in such a way that the different appropriated cultures remain visible in it and that your perspectives on it are clear, that you have understood where this comes from politically and historically"<sup>7</sup>

I am happy to accept this imperative (unlike many others), but perhaps that is because I have adhered to it for so long. For translating without respect for the original is unthinkable, and for years we translators have increasingly been reflecting on our own and others' perspectives, not just quietly at our desks, but publicly, in exchange with others who daily face similar problems, and this exchange is also interdisciplinary, artistic as well as scholarly, with growing resonance and influence. Increasingly, prefaces or epilogues are written to reveal our perspective, our engagement with the political-historical context of the source text, the current context of reception in the target culture, and our own point of view. Those who translate from former colonial languages can only welcome the fact that in this country, too, the colonial past is now being dealt with in a public way, as long as the debate does not lead to prohibitions of thought and language, but makes us generally more open, more accessible, more permeable to what we translate or receive. If, through the cautious as well as plucky appropriation of foreign-language literature, we expand the vocabulary, sonority, richness of rhythm, and syntactic repertoire of German, we dare to risk multilingualism, which is taken for granted in the source text. Colonize German in a peaceful, creative way, following the example of a word artist like Dagmara Kraus, who breaks the boundaries of every national identity and national literary language: "I polack. I polack you, German. Colonized, I polonize back. I pol-lust after you, my German."<sup>8</sup> This requires that we overcome our fears of contact, but – with unending reflection – I would not want to do without them. They stimulate reflection and inquiry, train sensitivity,

make us look and listen more closely, thus contribute to ethical trade(s) with language.

If these requirements are met, then, after appropriating the foreign language according to Byung-Chul Han, translation is not an act of violence, but one of tenderness and affection. Neither plundering nor vulturing, but a miraculous multiplication, a sharing. The original remains unscathed, while its foreign-language version reaches more and more people and, in the best case, arouses curiosity, and creates desire – for even more cultural rapprochement, appropriation, morally pure enrichment.



*Avec Amour*, Darmstädter Rosenhöhe.

Bamberg, 06.10.2022

## Endnoten

- 1 See Christian Hansen, "Lob der Wiederholung," in *Ins Unreine. Zur Poetik der Übersetzung II*, edited by Marie Luise Knott and Georg Witte (Matthes & Seitz: Berlin, 2021).
- 2 The examples are multiplying:  
[www.rollingstone.de/nach-konzertabbruch-wegen-dreadlocks-schweizer-band-lauwarm-duerfen-bei-festival-erneut-nicht-auftreten](http://www.rollingstone.de/nach-konzertabbruch-wegen-dreadlocks-schweizer-band-lauwarm-duerfen-bei-festival-erneut-nicht-auftreten) or  
[www.spiegel.de/kultur/musik/zuerich-weisser-musiker-mit-dreadlocks-darf-nicht-in-zuercher-bar-spielen-veranstalter-fuehlten-sich-unwohl](http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/musik/zuerich-weisser-musiker-mit-dreadlocks-darf-nicht-in-zuercher-bar-spielen-veranstalter-fuehlten-sich-unwohl)
- 3 It is not only musicians receive some much hostility from this, to the point it affects them both professionally and psychologically, as we see in the case of the Ukrainian-German hair-braiding artist Angelina Delgado, who sees Germany as a "land of mixed cultures" and withstands the many challenges because she enjoys the support and recognition of her Afro-European clientele:  
[www.noism-hairculture.com/angelina-delgado](http://www.noism-hairculture.com/angelina-delgado). Also, listen to:  
[www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/haarflecht-kuenstlerin-angelina-delgado-dlf-kultur](http://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/haarflecht-kuenstlerin-angelina-delgado-dlf-kultur)
- 4 [unherd.com/2020/07/cultural-appropriation-is-progressive-and-anti-racist](http://unherd.com/2020/07/cultural-appropriation-is-progressive-and-anti-racist); other articles from his pen worth reading include: [unherd.com/author/ralph-leonard](http://unherd.com/author/ralph-leonard)
- 5 <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/die-musikerin-sophie-hunger-100.html>
- 6 Byung-Chul Han, "On Appropriation," *Mercury* 11/2003, issue 655

- 7 [www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/kritik-an-kultureller-aneignung-eine-frage-der-machtverhaeltnisse](http://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/kritik-an-kultureller-aneignung-eine-frage-der-machtverhaeltnisse) and Jens Balzer, "Ethics of Appropriation" (Matthes & Seitz: Berlin, 2022).
- 8 The original word play is: "Ich pollackiere. Ich pollackiere Dich, Deutsch. Kolonisiert, polonisiere ich zurück. Ich pollagiere nach Dir, mein Deutsch." From the lecture "Mit Sprache handeln" by Dagmara Kraus, held at the conference of the same name as part of the Literarisches Colloquium Berlin on 24 June 2022 – the stream is available here

### #Kulturelle Aneignung, #Postkolonialismus



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The daughter of a Frenchwoman and a Hungarian, **Patricia Klobusiczky** (\*1968) grew up multilingual in France and Germany. She studied literary translation in Düsseldorf before becoming an editor for Rowohlt Verlag. She now works as a literary translator of works from French and English into German. Her authorial credits include such diverse voices as Emmanuelle Bayamack-Tam, William Boyd, Marie Darrieussecq, Petina Gappah, Catherine Mavrikakis (with Sonja Finck), Anne Serre, Louise de Vilморin, Valérie Zenatti and Ruth Zylberman. She is a regular mentor at the Berliner Übersetzerwerkstatt and the Bode Program of the German Übersetzerfonds. From 2017 to 2021, she was Chairperson of the Verband deutschsprachiger Übersetzer:innen literarischer und wissenschaftlicher Werke (VdÜ). She serves on various juries, including for the Brücke Berlin Literature and Translation Prize and for the Paul Celan Prize. She has received several scholarships for her translation work, and in the winter-semester of 22/23 was awarded a guest lectureship by the DÜF at the Europa-Universität Flensburg. She is also one of the first literary translators to receive a scholarship from the International Artists' House Villa Concordia in Bamberg.

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Veröffentlichungsdatum: 06.10.2022

Stand: 25.04.2024

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