



SIMON, Sherry, 2019, *Translation Sites. A Field Guide*. Routledge, London & New York, 281 p. ISBN: 978-1-315-31109-8 (ebk)

Karen Meschia

Université de Toulouse 2

[karen.meschia@gmail.com](mailto:karen.meschia@gmail.com)

The work of Sherry Simon, since her pioneering *Gender in Translation*, published in 1996, has been groundbreaking in systematically embracing interdisciplinarity, opening up new areas of inquiry and challenging traditional ways of seeing in the field of translation studies. Her latest publication, working at the intersection of translation studies, memory studies, urban geography, architecture and history, is playfully titled *Translation Sites. A Field Guide*. It does indeed adopt the form of an abundantly illustrated guidebook in order to pursue the author's reflexions, initiated in 2012 with *Cities in Translation*, on how languages and their translation have always shaped cultural, geographical and historical space. This extremely rich and erudite work is part of Routledge's *New Perspectives in Translation and Interpreting Studies* series, edited by Michael Cronin.

In her introductory text, Simon explains that she was inspired by Barbara Cassin's "Après Babel, Traduire" exhibition at the *Musée des civilisations et de la Méditerranée* (Mucem) in Marseilles, with its "strong message": translations have shaped history and have an impact on contemporary cities. However, she points out that the exhibition drew attention to a phenomenon generally neglected: "The evidence might be all around us, but, without clues, language histories are invisible." (1) Hence the book's ambition to reveal the overlapping stories that these translation sites, or polyglot places, tell: "To visit them is to experience competing versions of history and the uneven fit between present and past." (1) So, rather than a museum display, Simon offers the reader "hotels, markets, museums, checkpoints and border zones" where "cultural meanings are shaped by language traffic and by the clash of memories." (1)

Clearly, this guidebook is no celebration or consecration of the world's beauty spots but aims to evoke a powerful sense of place, challenging the reader with "an encounter and an unresolved exchange", (2) inviting us to engage with contradictory emotions and be unsettled. Indeed, almost by definition, translation sites are frequently borderline spaces where "the wounds of history are still legible." (2) Here, polyglot does not imply languages coexisting peacefully, but focuses rather on their interactions and rival claims. In this respect the linguistic landscape of Eastern Europe, with its successive political regimes, offered rich possibilities for reading buildings and cities, while, as Simon puts it, "For the cities of Central Europe, renaming in the

twentieth century was a form of violence. Lemberg-Lviv-Lvov-Lwów, Pressburg-Pozsony-Presporak-Bratislava,..." (2)

The book by no means limits itself to the linguistic ravages of twentieth century wartime Europe, though, but spans the continents in a generic approach that first establishes a typology of five themes to categorise different sites - "Architectures of memory", "Transit", "Crossroads", "Thresholds" and "Borders, control, surveillance" - thus giving Simon plenty of scope for interpreting what is at stake linguistically, socially, historically in a given space. Of these spaces, she cautions the reader: "Most of these can be found on a map. Others can be found only in books or on movie screens." (7). Whatever the case, the author uses each individual chapter under the five headings to examine place through one particular facet of translation, with analyses that systematically stretch our thinking about the activity.

An instructive way of shedding light is to bring together two locations, some fairly obscure or unexpected, others strongly symbolic, for comparison and contrast. Thus, in examining the theme of thresholds, a Japanese garden in Ireland meets a German garden city in Turkey, while the notion of transit invites us to consider the widely different linguistic functions of two bridges that navigate language between two zones: the "thick" bridge of Mostar where linguistic differences are magnified and the "thin" Øresund Bridge between Denmark and Sweden, where these are downplayed.

Indeed, a series of contrasts or paradoxical oppositions runs through the entire work: "Polyglot places bring together the past and present; they also scramble the near and the far, the rooted and the transient, the stable and the impermanent, the low and the elevated." (4). For Simon, these tensions are to a degree embodied in the person of the translator, as illustrated by her description of Antonello da Messina's Renaissance painting of Saint Jerome, where the latter sits in the seemingly protected space of his study, which actually looks out on to a vast palace and then to the wider world beyond, outside.

"Architectures of memory" deals with those places where memory is stratified by one language history being imposed on another, here three physical locations: a Jewish memorial in the now

Ukrainian Lviv, the *Neues Deutsches Theater*, opened in 1888 in Prague to rival the Czech National Theatre of 1881, and a synagogue-cum-church in Toledo, re-named Santa Maria la Blanca. Simon shows how, in times of strong linguistic rivalry, cultural projects mark out territories symbolically and she examines the part translation plays in these aggressive linguistic conversions, developing the notion of "counter-translation" as an instrument for correcting such attempts at obliteration.

The "Sites of transit" discussed in part two refer to liminal zones in a wide sense, places of movement from one sphere to another. They include the hotel, the bridge, the mountaintop and the tower. As the titles of the last two topics suggest: "The mountaintop. Translation changes you. The language of heptapods." and "The tower. From ziggurat to spiral, from Brueghel to Primo Levi", they deal not with precise geographical locations but are wonderful examples of the way Simon weaves ingenious and compelling connections around figures from artistic, literary or cinematic sources. Here Greek mythology leads to Christian iconography and the various retellings of both, to examine how images of verticality articulate with modes of communication – be they human, divine or alien.

The street, the market and the museum provide instances of the collision of multiple voices in the "Crossroads" section. Chungking Mansions shopping mall in Hong-Kong is a theatre for what Simon calls metrolingualism or translanguaging: "The interactions in the market are translational and best described by the notion of translanguaging – that is, as a weave of language exchanges enabled by the multiple competencies of individuals." (124) Inscriptions bear witness to a colonial past and the increasing power of mainland China. Likewise, "The street is a bountiful mix of language systems – a visual landscape of script and an oral environment of speech performances." (133). Here it offers a stage for activism, with references to the "printemps arabe" in Cairo, that was picked up and relayed during student protests in Montreal as "le printemps érable" (134). Finally, the exemplary case of an exhibition at Canada's National Gallery where not only were indigenous works integrated directly into the fine art collection, but fifty-three labels included the language of the community from which the objects originated: Anishinabemowin, Inuktitut (six different dialects), Haida Masset, Blackfoot, Michif, Kanyen'keha (Mohawk), Ojibwe, Gwich'in, Kwak'waka, Western Abenaki and Naskapi.

The topics in "Thresholds" work round simple oppositions, inside - outside, here – there, and feature the translator's study, the library, the garden and the psychoanalyst's couch. It is here that Simon returns to the iconic "Saint Jerome in his Study", which became a genre in its own right attributable to innumerable Renaissance artists, for further analysis of the depiction of the translator, which is set against a recent documentary, *Traduire* (2011), by French-Israeli director Nurith Aviv. On psychoanalysis, an ingenious reference to Freud's specific use of the term translation provides the opportunity to examine the life one of his most notorious cases: "It is ironic to discover that part of Anna O.'s recovery may have been due to her own activities of translation." (200) Indeed, Anna O., to whom the author does full justice here, was in reality Bertha Pappenheim (1859–1936), an accomplished German intellectual, feminist and translator, notably, of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*.

Finally, as its title suggests, "Borders, control, surveillance" takes us into what might be the most disquieting and the least comfortable zones for any potential linguistic visitor: No Man's Land, the Checkpoint and the Edge of the Empire. Starting from Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary spaces, Simon in fact examines how the unpromisingly named Dead Zone in Cyprus, scene of an encounter between poets in 2012, became a metaphor for the act of translation, as "poetry and translation create new paths across difference, shift the boundaries between self and other, create and transform meanings." (213). The checkpoint is Ellis Island, discussed in relation to an arresting artwork by Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth*, staged at the Tate Modern in 2007. The "metaphysical landscape" (233) of edge of empire is addressed through its literary depiction by writers such as Buzzatti, Coetzee and Joseph Roth, notably, with a wide-ranging discussion of all that is at stake culturally and linguistically in borderlands, often involving discontinuity and hardship, but always productive.

In conclusion, Simon suggests that her guided tour of these translation sites may have provided some clues to answering the question: "How formidable are the distances between one language and another? How difficult is it to negotiate the passage across?" (251) For she has indeed demonstrated that there is no neutral measure of language differences, more the result of historical interactions than properly linguistic features. Her challenging conclusion could serve as a route map for any would-be translator: "Translatability issues from a crucible of past

relations and present desires. The power to translate successfully is not to be found in dictionaries but rather in routes and connections.” (253). Setting up unexpected and enlightening routes and connections for the reader would appear to be something for which Sherry Simon is particularly gifted.