Translating the Anthropocene: Ulrike Almut Sandig's "In die Natur" and Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* as Planetary Eco-translation Practices

Delphine Grass

Abstract:

The Anthropocene, a term now widely adopted to describe a new geological epoch in which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment, is also a concept widely criticized for its Eurocentric framing of the climate crisis. This chapter explores how German writer Ulrike Almut Sandig and Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer have harnessed experiential translation to critique the ethnocentrism and anthropocentrism of Western environmental discourse and expand translation's framework to the non-human world. The chapter demonstrates how these works create a new imaginary framework for planetary relations which goes beyond the international framework of translation studies. Secondly, I argue that by performing the meaning-making agency of human and non-human agents often marginalized in Anthropocene discourses, these experimental eco-translations decolonize the Anthropocene by translating it from situated linguistic and cultural margins. The works of Sandig and Kimmerer, I argue, provincialize human language by acknowledging non-human forces as translation. By using translation strategies to 're-animate' nature in environmental discourses, these works stretch the remit of our political communities beyond the traditional gaze of the nation to imagine alternative, more-than-human planetary relations.

Context

Western philosophy, and alongside it, translation, have traditionally centred their understanding of the world around humans by arguing that humans were the only species capable of producing meaning. In this epistemological world order, humans alone are seen to matter both ethically and ontologically. However, recent translation and anthropological scholarly works have challenged this world view by expanding translation to the non-human world and exploring the possible links between ecosemiotics and translation studies (Cronin, 2016, 2017, 2020, 2023; Marais, 2019, 2020; Mussgnug, 2022; 2023; Scott, 2018; Sealey, 2019). Alison Sealey's recent work, for example,

suggests “parallels between the political issues recognised by translation scholars – of exclusion, misrepresentation and speaking for ‘the other’ – and those raised by biosemiotics, the study of signs in all living systems” (Sealey, 2019, p.305). There are vital ethical reasons to take semiotic borders between humans and non-humans as seriously as national and cultural boundaries in translation studies. Binding translation’s communication framework to human semiotic systems means translation studies risks perpetuating anthropocentric points of views of the world which legitimise environmental destruction. Such bias also prevents us from recognising the importance of non-human translational forces at work in the Anthropocene, as well as the entanglement between ecosemiotic, or the “semiotics of relationships between nature and culture”, and biological survival. (Kull, 1998, p.350).

Taking into account Eduardo Kohn’s observation that “signs are not exclusively human affairs. All living beings sign. We humans are therefore at home with the multitude of semiotic life”. (Kohn, 2013, p.42), this chapter explores how creative-critical translation practices, as norm-challenging approaches to translation across semiotic and sensing systems, can help articulate and translate the Anthropocene experientially from non-traditional western perspectives on animacy and language (Hornborg, 2006). I contend that by rethinking communication boundaries beyond traditionally assigned national and cultural linguistic ones, creative-critical translations invite a widening of our understanding of the Anthropocene to nationally indifferent terrestrial life forms and non-verbal experiences. Through practice-based critiques of traditionally “word-based” translation norms, more-than-lingual experiential translation practices recognise new planetary “borders”, limits and epistemic thresholds in the context of translation studies, and in the becoming of languages and cultures which are endangered by climate change (Cronin 2017, p. 92). Informed by recent developments in the field of translation studies (Scott, 2018; Cronin, 2016, 2017, 2020, 2023; Sealey, 2019; Marais, 2019, 2020, 2023), eco-cosmopolitanism (Heine 2008) and anthropology (Viveiros de Castro, 2014; Kohn, 2013; Todd 2015, 2016, 2017), this chapter will explore how experiential translations, as translations which translate not only across languages but across different embodied experiences, operate as a critique of a hermeneutic framework of translation traditionally centred around human experience of communication between fixed linguistic categories (des Rochers, 2023; Grass, 2023). Inherited from the Enlightenment, this framework of understanding privileges human language over other non-human forms of communication, human thought over material semiosis. Widening the ontological framework of translation theory through translation as creative sign-making practice, I contend, performs more inclusive and diverse practices of listening beyond fixed categories of national languages. Such experiential translation practices summon imaginaries of

'multinatural' planetary contexts beyond internationalism by performing experiential worlds in which not only humans sign, and not only humans, translate.

In the first section of the chapter, I will analyse how, by exploring translation across the senses as well as across human languages, experiential translations create a discursive space for forms of planetary cosmopolitanism which go beyond (inter)national relations. I borrow the planetary from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who contends that:

> The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan. It is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe. I cannot say 'the planet, on the other hand.' When I invoke the planet, I think of the effort required to figure the (im)possibility of this underived intuition …. If we imagine ourselves as planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away. (Spivak, 2005, p. 22)

In the context Spivak describes as planetary, translation is not secondary to global relations, but inherent to our planetary condition. Difference, rather than oneness, contains all beings, including humans. Expanding my previous work on "transtopian" translation practices, I will explore how experiential translations can "matter, weave and perform into poetic existence the space between national cultures"(Grass, 47, 2023; see also DesRochers 2023) to include a 'multinatural' as well as a multilingual world (Viveiros de Castro, 2014). My aim will be to show experiential translation's epistemic and hermeneutic potential to perform and create new planetary ethical contexts beyond human-centric cartographies reproduced in the structure of Western translational norms. In the second section, I will analyse the critique of nationalism and internationalism in Ulrike Almut Sandig's translation "In die Natur", a creative and multimodal translation of Emma McGordon's poem "Magnetic". In her creative and performative translation, the destructive force of the ocean is re-imagined as a non-human translator capable of redefining the linguistic and cultural categories assigned by ethnonationalism. I want to argue that experiential translations such as Sandig's which perform encounters between human and non-human worlds help us rethink the traditional division between subject and object, language and matter, practice and theory in Western philosophy through their embodied, more-than-linguistic representation of the material impact of climate change on language and communication. In the third and final part of the chapter, I will turn to the works of Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist, writer, teacher of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and citizen of the Potawatomi Nation whose memoir *Braiding Sweetgrass* explores what she explains as the "grammars of animacy" of Potawatomi (Kimmerer, pp. 48-59). I will argue that Kimmerer's exploration of Potawatomi ecosemiotics carries deep ethical implications for translation studies and its application in the field of natural sciences. This is because, byy re-imagining scientists

as translators of the non-human world, Kimmerer entices us to reframe scientific discourse in a multinatural and multi-species planetary ethical context. Translation, in this context, becomes kinship-making activity between non-human and human worlds which goes beyond the practice of information exchange.

Beyond Internationalism: Experiential Translation's Planetary Ecosemiotic Context

For Naoki Sakai, the field of translation is defined by what he calls "the homolingual address" (1997, p.3). Inspired by Romantic theories of nationness, "homolingual address", he explains, is "a regime of someone relating herself or himself to others in enunciation whereby the addresser adopts the position representative of a putatively homogeneous language society and relates to the general addressees, who are also representative of an equally homogeneous language community" (1997, pp.3-4). In his form of address, the speaker or writer assumes an immediate apprehension of the message, and therefore summons, through its form of address, a homogeneous linguistic community in the image of the nation. As Sakai explains in *The Modern Regime of Translation and the Emergence of the Nation*:

> It is through the assumption of shared language and everyday routines that a collectivity of people imagines itself, not as a multitude of disparate individuals, but as an organically unified commonality. The imagined homogeneity and organicity ascribed to the nation is supposed to derive from the facticity (Faktizität in Martin Heidegger's vocabulary) of a shared language. (2017, p.105)

The homolingual address described by Sakai defines and codifies affects, communities of care and political action both within and beyond one's immediate human nation. By essentialising the relation between self and nation, the national framework of the homolingual address shapes our relationship to more-than-human forms of life by establishing a global imaginary of kinship and relation that is mostly human-centred. For the German Romantic writer Herder, for example, the nation is the most "natural state" and form of community (Patten 2010) in that it is explicitly modelled on the patriarchal model of the family unit: "fatherlands … lie quietly side by side and assist each other as families do" (Herder, 2004, pp. 116-117). . As a Western nineteenth-century project of cultural and linguistic homogenisation, nationalism constructs forms of kinship around an essentialist model of cultural and linguistic belonging, condemning indigenous and multispecies ecosemiotic imaginaries and forms of planetary belongings to invisibility (Todd, 2014, 2016; Kohn, 2013).

Experiential translation practices unsettle this framework of relations by exploring translation across the senses as well as across national linguistic boundaries. In her chapter 'Translating 'our' world through sound: domestication, anthropomorphism, incantation' which appears in Volume 1 *The Experience of Translation*, for example, Madeleine Campbell notes that "experiential translation has a significant role to play in tuning our senses to perceive, as far as the limits of our technologically-enhanced antennae allow, the auditory, but also visual, olfactory or kinaesthetic signs necessary to read this [more-than-human] world, of which we are a part" (Campbell 2024, p. XX). In broadening the field of communication to sensorial and embodied experience, experiential translation practices prompt us to move on from translation's pre-discursive framework of cultural differences, inviting us to perform different models of communication across natures and embodied experiences as well as cultures. Through translation practice as an 'experimental' model of enquiry into the nature of our ecosemiotic relationship to the non-human world, experiential translation can critically engage with translational norms which traditionally reify anthropocentrism by being both language-based and information-oriented (Robinson, 2022, Grass 2023, Robert-Foley 2024). Instead, Campbell and Vidal (2024, p. XX) highlight the "holistic, co-creative" and "processual" nature of experiential translation which, I want to argue here, can sustain new social models of planetary relations in which nature and culture are portrayed in entangled networks of ecological survival. By integrating pre-symbolic meaning-making systems into the field of translation, experiential translation practices make visible the fact that signs are "not just the reality of culture, but most necessary for retaining sustainable relations between human culture and ecosystems, as well as for the dynamics and rejuvenation of the culture itself" (Maran, 2020, p.2). Such hermeneutic practices, as we shall see articulated in Robin Wall Kimmerer's works in the final section of this chapter, are not new to indigenous practices, but already built into their systems of knowledge and more-than-human communication as a way of making-kin beyond humans.

As models of planetary worldmaking inclusive of non-human subjects, indigenous ecosemiotics have attracted a significant amount of attention from anthropologists in recent years. Leaning on the field of linguistics to analyse human to non-human relations in indigenous practices, anthropologists and indigenous studies scholars have articulated trans-species translation frameworks and semiotic collaborations which seem oppositional to forms of anthropocentric international cosmopolitanisms (Kohn, 2013; Todd, 2013, 2016; Viveiros de Castro, 2014). They show that translation, in these contexts, cannot be contained within a human, let alone a national planetary linguistic framework. In his book *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human* (2013), for example, Eduardo Kohn recalls a conversation with Juanicu, a Quechua speaker, on ways of sleeping which

might discourage jaguars from attacking: "'sleep faceup! If a jaguar comes he'll see you can look back at him and he won't bother you. If you sleep facedown he'll think you're aicha [prey; lit., "meat" in Quechua] and he'll attack"' (Kohn, 2013, p.1). Kohn's anecdote and book host deep connections between human and non-human worlds where pre-symbolic and symbolic sign-making practices can be seen to cross embodied sensory realities. An anthropologist who spent years in the Amazonian forest, Eduardo Kohn's work challenges our understanding of signification and language as being a purely human property. For Kohn, "our exceptional status" as a semiotic species "is not the walled compound we thought we once inhabited" (Kohn, 2013, p.42). Kohn's anthropological research, which aims to 'provincialize language' in broader semiotic contexts, bases his analysis of Amerindian human to non-human translation and communication practices on Charles Sanders Pierce and Terrence Deacon's theories of signification (Deacon, 2015; Pierce, 1931). Unlike Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Pierce "'argued that the mental processes that interpret signs are also signs"' and located the process of making meaning in a triadic conception of the sign relation called 'semiosis', a triadic relation involving a sign vehicle (representamen), an object of reference, and an interpretant sign (Deacon, 2015, p.9; Pierce 1931). This triadic relation of semiosis can be illustrated as shown in Fig. 1.

Insert Figure 2 here, Caption: Figure 1: 'Pierce's Semiotic Triangle' (Based on Daniel Chandler [2002], 2007, p. 30).

Kohn's narrative encounter with the semiotics of the forest, encrypted here in the jaguar, can be both contextualised by and go further than Pierce's triadic sign relation. In more than human narrative contexts, as Kohn's narrative reveals, such sign relations do not happen at a distance: things enter into friction, are touching and are exploded by semiotic contact. In the context where the interpretant is a jaguar, and the 'representatem' is human, the object might be translated into 'dead meat', or into a fellow person depending on the position they sleep in. In other words, humans are no longer the privileged sovereigns of hermeneutic systems. Interpretants can be jaguars, chickens, plants or fungi and interpret (or eat) other signs: the act of interpreting the world is not a distanced verbal activity, but a materially embedded signified practice dependent on shared planetary ecologies. In this semiotic framework, humans are not sovereign in the position of interpretant. Understanding translation as the extraction of meaning is impossible: the semiotic relation between humans and species is co-emergent with the act of communication and translation itself. In this context, as Maran puts it: "The sign – or, more precisely semiosis, that is the sign's processual manifestation – allows some sort of connection to emerge that otherwise would be non-

existing" (2020 p. 6). Human language is decentred, or provincialized in a wider network and ecology of material-semiotic relations where signing is a relational, co-emergent activity between interpretant, representatem and objects. In other words, where any 'sign', or meaning production, is process rather than object.

Kohn's fascinating insights into what can be thought of as material-semiotic ecologies of communication echo Viveiros de Castro's theory of perspectivism, where translation is theorised to happen in a multinatural as well as a multicultural world. Glenn H. Shepard, Jr. and Lewis Daly explain Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism as follows: "in contrast to the Western scientific viewpoint, which postulates a single, all-encompassing universal 'natural world', multinaturalism implies multiple variable, perspectival natures that are determined by the unique lifeways of differente animal and plant species and human cultural groups" (2023, p. 89). Such a vision of the world, explains Viveiros de Castro, invites not only a form of cultural relativism, but a multinatural perspectivism:

> Cultural relativism, which is a multiculturalism, presumes a diversity of partial, subjective representations bearing on an external nature, unitary and whole, that itself is indifferent to representation. Amerindians propose the inverse: on the one hand, a purely pronominal representative unit – the human is what and whomever occupies the position of the cosmological subject; every existent can be thought of as thinking (it exists, therefore it thinks), as 'activated' or 'agencied' by a point of view – and on the other, a real or objective radical diversity. Perspectivism is a multinaturalism, since a perspective is not a representation. (p. 72)

In this context, Viveiros de Castro adds, the translator's role would no longer be to find a common referent to the same object, that is, to substitute one sign for another to designate the same object, but to understand objects socially and relationally. The task of the translator-shaman, in the Amerindian context, is not to exchange referents instead of exchanging signs, but to transform the methodology of translation practice beyond the principle of linguistic equivalence to instead, propose a wide semiotic framework of translation as anembodied social practice which can happen across embodied and sensorial experiences.

Far from furthering dualisms between mind and body, the interpreters and the interpreted, both Kohn and Viveiros de Castro's anthropological translations of Amerindian cosmogonies invite us to reconsider language and communication practice in more-than-human planetary ecological contexts where both matter and language are co-emergent and co-productive. Such epistemologies of translation which break down the division between practice and theory de-anthropomorphise sign relations while embedding and situating humans in wider ecosemiotic relations which decentre both humanity and the nation as normative social communication frameworks. Instead of pre-existing the

act of translation, meaning is co-constructed and co-emergent to the act of interpretation, and translation is tasked with the process of understanding our relation to more-than-human others in ecosemiotic planetary contexts as well as human ones.

Performing Climate Change as Translation in Ulrike Almut Sandig's "In die Natur" (2019)

In 2019, I organised an event and series of workshops for Lancaster Litfest entitled "Found in Translation: Literary Dispatches from the Periphery of Europe" (Grass, 2019). For the event, which was programmed on the day Great Britain should have exited the European Union, I invited several artists to translate each other's works to explore the themes of peripherality and belonging which had pervaded many debates about national identity surrounding Brexit. A contextual symptom of the resurgence of nationalist narrative in Europe and the Western world, discourse supporting Brexit relied on a particular narrative of peripherality and exceptionalism which the works presented at the festival explored through experimental translation practice. As the author-translators did not use bridge translations, each had to rely on the material qualities of languages, such as sound or alphabetical specificities, to translate the other's work. One particular translation by Ulrike Almut Sandig entitled "In die Natur" challenged the anthropocentric and romanticising discourse of nationalism on nature by exploring the relationship between translation practice, cosmopolitics, and climate change by focusing on the material dimension of language in her translation (Sandig, 2019/2022). As we shall see, by harnessing translation practice to explore and make visible the role of more-than-human actors in semiotic processes, Sandig decentred the role of human communication and language within wider planetary networks of communication.

In *Translation as Creative-Critical Practice*, I defined transtopias as "translation art and literary translations which use experimental forms of translations to challenge normative representations of place and identity funnelled by the nation" (Grass, 2023, p. 46). I argued that "transtopias … create and perform theoretical positions from which to explore the critical and creative potential of translation to build and imagine alternative geographies of being and belonging" (Grass, 2023, p.46). Expanding my existing study on transtopias, I want to argue here, through my analysis of Sandig's text, that while traditional translation norms

tend to reify the immanence of the source text and culture, experiential translations weave and perform the space between cultures to include non-human semiosis, thereby imagining new post-human and planetary geographies in translation.

For her commissioned piece, Sandig selected one line of Emma McGordon's poem '"Magnetic'" (2019). Originally from the Cumbrian coast town of Whitehaven, McGordon's poem reflects on the relationship between the changeability of the landscape, her Cumbrian dialect and the gender identity of the first-person narrator:

The body is a changing landscape,
above all a truth taker.

A body describes land,
water, work evidence and proof.

A map is a memory of an old story
once told. (McGordon, 2019, n.p.)

Rather than rooting herself within a fixed regional identity, McGordon's poem foregrounds the importance of the body as a relational compass and mapping instrument. Her poem is a changeable, experiential account of her relationship to her body's gender and regional identity through how land and water rewrite each other.

Sandig's translation of McGordon's poem relocates it within a wider planetary perspective. For her creative-critical translation of the poem into German, Sandig selected the last line of McGordon's text:

/The Tongue is a Needle. And I am true North. Telling lies./(n.p)

and transmaterialised this line into 12 different German anagrams making her poem. The anagram translation procedure reveals new locations, themes and correspondences materially hidden between the two texts and languages. In rebuilding a poem out of the last lines of McGordon's, the text deterritorialises both the UK and Germany as countries of reference in the translation process and translocates McGordon's text to the Gili Islands instead. A home to Sasak people, the Gili islands are an archipelago off the coast of

Indonesia. Here, Sandig's poem explores the disappearance of these islands due to rising sea levels and of the sea turtles who come to lay their eggs on its shores:

DE:

The tongue is a needle. And I am True North. Telling lies.
in der Heimat tollten Rettungshunde als Alge. o, ein Ei!
hatte es unterm Hut getragen. Lea in den Lilien o. Lidos
liegende, rinnende Gottesstatue, holla, reiht an! Im Ul-
tragruen d. Auen tosten Satelliten, Goldhelme, hiinei-
n in die Natur! Die Tiere heulten Moos, lallten: eggs! hat
uns hier eine angelogen? Lea, du trottest dahin mit ell-
enlangen, teuren Automaten, heilst Heide, grillst Dio-
den, und hinterher? ausgeatmete Gili-Inselatolle, Not.
du, mandelaeugige Lea, nennst es Nitrithoelle. tot, ihr
Norden, heiter tot! huell die Gaumensegel in Atlantis.
The tongue is a needle. And I am True North. Telling lies.

Die drei zu Indonesien gehörenden Gili-Inseln liegen nur wenige Meter über dem Meeresspiegel. An den Stränden legen fünf Arten von Schildkröten ihre Eier ab. (Sandig, 2019/2022)

"The tongue is a needle. / And I am True North. / Telling lies." ist Emma McGordons Gedicht MAGNETIC entnommen.

EN:

The tongue is a needle. And I am True North. Telling lies.
Late underdogs rattle in the home, ingest all. 'Nu ein Ei'!
Hide it in a hat. Lea runs legend-lost to unreel teeming
data. Hello, in line! No suing the ultra-green tides. Meet
a satellite retinue hounding neater gold helmets in
to nature! genuine stellar lights, one alien theme. Did
someone tell a lie? Lea, treading dust, uttering her inn-
er need to linger: slum it, atone, still aged heath, ennui.
Latent turn made true. The Gili-isles inhaled. Gone. One
nitrate hell intuited, almond Lea's egg rite unseen. Oh!
The North ill, undone. See Lea, mud-genii, greet Atlantis.
The tongue is a needle. And I am True North. Telling lies.

Note: On the shores of the Gili Islands several endangered species of sea turtles lay their eggs. Stop climate change now.

Translated by Karen Leeder (Sandig, 2019/2022)

Beyond its anagram shape, Sandig's creative translation of McGordon's text, here skilfully translated by Karen Leeder into English, distantly resembles a rondeau poem. Through repetition of the first line at the end characteristic of this form, the text seems to close in on itself in the image of an island. However, this self-enclosure is contrasted with the act of exposing the poem to the environmental force of the ocean and climate-induced erosion symbolised in the material translation of McGordon's line into an anagram. In her English translation of Sandig's text, Karen Leeder's translation uses the same constraint by reusing the same letters of the line:

/The Tongue is a Needle. And I am true North. Telling lies./

in her translation. Most of the semantic content of Sandig's translation is translated, but signs and referents are moved again, disappear and reappear across the page due to the anagrammic constraints she observes.

Indeed, as if disrupting the neat order of differences between national identities between English and German, Sandig performs a translation of Magnetic from the perspective of the rising oceans. She produces this effect by cutting the symbolic cliff-end of McGordon's text by impersonating the crumbling effect of coastal erosion in the form of her anagram translation: "The North ill, undone. See Lea, mud-genii, greet Atlantis." (lines 9 and 10 in Karen Leeder's translation). Each line therefore uncovers German words and meanings contained in the English text by way of the anagram as a process of linguistic transformation and metamorphosis. In so doing, Sandig creates a material translation procedure which is reliant on its multilingual referentiality to resist complete destruction. The anagram form carries across not the meaning, but parts of the body of the source text: what is moved closer to the reader is no longer the source text or the source language, but the very ecological and material conditions underpinning the survival of languages and cultures thematically explored in Sandig's poem.

The anagram as a material translation constraint allows other planetary connections to be made which seemingly undercut national and cultural individualisms. In Sasak language, 'Gili' means islet, or little island (Hakim and Hidayat, 2017, p.159). Through this found translation, a double meaning transpires: 'Gili island' can be read as an inverse translation of 'Great Britain', highlighting a contrast between the great in 'Great Britain' and its smallness in relation to the vastness of the ocean's forces. In this transtopian, ecological contact zone

between local identity and climate change, writing and translating seem co-emerging and relational: borders are made and unmade through experiential translation as a way of putting places, people and languages in material relation beyond the framework of human language. But in redefining the borders of translation as taking place across 'nature' and material realities as well as across pre-defined 'cultures', Sandig minoritises all human languages in the context of the bigger ontological forces of climate change. As such, "In die Natur'', it seems to me, represents climate change as a form of translation in its own right. While constituting an interlingual translation, the fictional material constraints of climate change performed in Sandig's experimental procedure undermines the idealism of international relations. Rather than moving meaning between places, it is places, languages and cultures themselves which are displaced by material forces in this performance of climate change as an agent of material translation: paying attention to the intersemiotic, material translations caused by climate catastrophes is foregrounded as vitally important in preserving the cultural and linguistic differences valued by nationalist discourses.

The act of translating McGordon's text from the elements' perspective is continued in Ulrike Almut Sandig and Grigory Semenchuk's film-poem and musical version of the text. Here, it is the lack of communication and translation between 'nature' and 'culture' in the context of climate change which is highlighted with urgency. Set to music by Sandig and Semenchuk, the musical film version of "In die Natur" sets language in motion cinematically by making creative use of the English subtitles by Karen Leeder. As each line is sang in German, an anagramic shapeshifting of the translated subtitles dissociate and reassemble through a floating-letters effect:

Insert Figure 2 here, Caption: Still image from Ulrike Almut Sandig and Grigory Semenchuk's "In die Natur" (2022), trans. by Karen Leeder https://www.faust-shop.org/in-die-natur-into-nature/

Throughout the film, Sandig, featured in the still of the video-poem, remains silent, while a voice-over of her anagram translation of McGordon's text is playing. The only movements perceptible are that of the water and the shapeshifting, translated lines captioned at the bottom of the poem. The relation between Sandig and the ocean is emphasized by the blue

make-up she wears across her eyes, highlighting the oceanic dimension of this experiential translation. In this visual and musical translation, traditional cultural elements such as human language are symbolically overwhelmed by the biosocial forces of climate change. The English of the source text, estranged and "foreignized" (Venuti [1995], 2018) by the ocean's force as an agent of what Amitav Ghosh named more generally "the great derangement" of climate change (Ghosh, 2016), is transformed by its unfamiliar encounter with a new material agency. The lack of translation between human language and nature is also illustrated in the disconnect between the cheerful singing voice over of the poem and the silent face progressively drowning as the musical score develops. While the anagram form reveals shared ecological contexts by translating Western concepts of locality and belonging on a planetary experiential scale, the multimodal translation of the text into film and music highlights a lack of attunement to nature in the context of the Anthropocene.

In McGordon's poem, both body and changing coastal landscapes are translated and re-embodied into each other to explore the plasticity of bodily identity and gender representation. The poem divests the simplified interconnectedness between land and identity traditionally represented in Romantic pastoral literary traditions by evoking instead the unstable link between land and sea:

> Nothing about the body is guaranteed
> its boundaries can shift and change
> land around these parts is known to be unstable
> holes in the earth have opened up and swallowed houses
> as though they were lies. (McGordon, 2019, np)

In her creative-ecocritical translation of McGordon's text, Sandig continues McGordon's work of deconstructing human accounts of nature as 'passive'. Rather than staging the source of cultural differences to be in well-defined geographical national boundaries, 'nature' is represented as agential and active: a source of common instability and transformation between bodies, voices and cultures. The reproductive function of translation is re-appropriated and mobilized as a creative practice to embody planetary forces and agencies traditionally erased and subdued in gendered discourses representing nature and the environment as passive and de-animated. While the text version of Sandig's translation of McGordon's poem highlights the translational impact of climate change

through the anagram form as a performance of linguistic and geographical erosion, the film and musical adaptation of the text highlight the catastrophic consequences of overlooking nature in traditional Western ecosemiotic relations. In Sandig's oceanic translation of McGordon's text, rising sea levels lead to a silencing and destruction of languages and cultures in return.

In a lecture she wrote for the university of Bonn where she discussed the poem's multimodal journey and eventual translation by Karen Leeder, she asks:

> "Preisfrage: Was ist jetzt der Körper des Gedichtes? Das Original? Die Vorlage des Originals? Die Adaptionen? Der Text? Das Audio? Die Performance? Also die verwirrende Klarheit auf halbem Weg zu euch? (Sandig, 2021)
>
> The million-dollar question: What is the body of the poem? The original? The original draft? The adaptations? The text? The audio? The performance? The confusing clarity reaching you halfway?" (translation mine and Simone Schroth's).

Through their concrete, material translation of McGordon's line in textual, sound and visual forms, Sandig and Semenchuk's works represent the forms of material translations at work in the environment as a source of both cultural instability and cultural transformation (Sandig, 2019; Sandig and Semenchuk, 2022). The performance of coastal erosion as translation performed in the poem reveals the material-semiotic entanglements of planetary relations. Sandig summons a planetary ecological consciousness which goes beyond national territoriality to explore the intersectional nature of more-than-human ontological relations in ecological contexts.

Sandig's translation perform a critique of translation studies' linguistic and nationalist paradigm by attuning us to the planetary environmental conditions which undercut the individual constructions of both individual and national languages. Hers and Semenchuk's multimodal translations of McGordon's text perform new ontological geographies and planetary belongings in the process which are not mapped in translation's current framework of international relations. While, in national-linguistic frameworks, the sign is

perceived to be a stable object of cultural representation rather than a process, experiential eco-translations such as Sandig's explore the possibility of sharing the same language differently, opening translation studies to different modalities of expression, ontologies and natures, and in so doing, to planetary semiotic processes which lie beyond the human gaze. Through her strategy of 'foreignizing' human language through material translation practice, Sandig performs her translation in a 'multinatural' context (Venuti, [1995] 2018; Viveiros de Castro 2014). The fictionalised failure of this interlingual translation relativises human languages and national identities by attuning us to other semiotic systems and non-verbal planetary relations.

Translating and Re-animating Anthropocene Science in Robin Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*

First-nation Potawatomi botanist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer's exploration of more-than-human ecological relations presents another process of unlearning Western territorial boundaries of translation and communication. Although not a translator in the traditional sense of the term, Robin Wall Kimmerer explores the relationship between humans and non-humans as translation in her works and scientific practice. Her memoir *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) can be read as an experiential translation of her encounter with what she calls Potawatomi's "grammar of animacy", where non-human entities such as plants and animals are endowed with personhood (Kimmerer 2013, p.48). Through literary work as a memoirist and essayist, Kimmerer foreignizes Western epistemic language in order to re-animate non-human entities through creative acts of epistemological translation, giving non-humans not only visibility, but agency as semiotic actors. Her memoir, I want to argue, builds a strong case for translation as a social practice of "making kin" (Haraway 2016, p.99) with more-than-human subjectivities across 'intra-acting' material-semiotic contexts (Barad 2011). Invoking Potawatomi's grammar of animacy, her analysis of language lays the basis for an experiential translation framework in which the forms of sociability between humans and non-humans enunciated by scientific language can be questioned. Her work highlights how scientific language, by animating and de-animating some lives over others, already hierarchises bodies, materials and ways of sensing. By showing the power of experiencing

non-humans as persons in scientific practice, Kimmerer enunciates alternative ecological social contracts between humans and more-than-humans in tangled ecological planetary contexts. Her work cuts across Western epistemological frameworks of inanimacy to explore how scientific discourse could be translated into a Potawatomi epistemological framework. These relational translation practices perform acknowledgement and recognition, through translation as a cross-epistemic practice, of forms of non-human place-making and dwelling practices which are often subjugated in Western epistemic contexts. They pave the way for a translation which goes beyond the question of linguistic equivalence to evoke the performative power of translation as a world-making activity.

This form of translation as ecological world-building practice is saliently articulated in the analysis of Western scientific discourse of *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Exploring the intersections between her works as a botanist and her identity as an indigenous member of the Potawatomi nation, she explains her journey into learning Potawatomi, a language which, in its very grammatical structure, challenges the anthropocentrism of Western languages:

> I grabbed a dictionary and flipped more pages and all kinds of things seemed to be verbs: 'to be a hill', 'to be red' … all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive. Water, land, and even a day, the language a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things, through pines and nuthatches and mushrooms. (2003, pp.54-55)

In this passage, Kimmerer reveals the variety of subject positions which are embedded in Potawatomi's grammatical structure. In Potawatomi, she explains, non-humans are granted agency in the same manner as humans: both material and semiotic worlds are seen as intra-acting across forms of sense-making in the embodied and experiential sense of the term. Stones, rivers, birds, fish, all are considered to have their own semiotic agency within a wider ecosemiotic network which cuts across the division between matter and meaning. In this ecosemiotic context, to be and to dwell is inherently a plural and relational experience: a matter of translating and being translated in wider biological and semiotic networks of survival. Knowledge cannot be extracted from the process of relation and co-habitation: it is co-emergent, relationally situated and therefore implicates a form of practice-led and embodied way of thinking with the other that is inherently co-translational.

Kimmerer's work as a scientist and educator, she explains in her memoir, is also that of translating this Potawatomi epistemological framework into scientific practice. Seeing the non-human world as agential and animated with its own form of being means that science becomes not so much a practice of 'discovering' through the study of inanimate objects as a practice of 'translating' what the plants are saying to the scientist. Kimmerer explains:

> To me, an experiment is a kind of conversation with plants: I have a question for them, but since we don't speak the same language, I can't ask them directly and they won't answer verbally. But plants can be eloquent in their physical responses and behaviors. Plants answer questions by the way they live, by their responses to change; you just need to learn how to ask. I smile when I hear my colleagues say 'I discovered X.' That's kind of like Columbus claiming to have discovered America. It was here all along, it's just that he didn't know it. Experiments are not about discovery but about listening and translating the knowledge of other beings. (2013, p.158)

In contrast with Western scientific discourse, as a botanist and educator, Kimmerer explicitly positions herself as a more-than-human translator rather than 'discoverer'. Her memoir is a detailed analysis of the double action of translating non-human animacies into English and of her efforts to translate indigenous epistemologies into English-speaking contexts. Her practice requires both a rethinking of science and of translation as neutral and acultural epistemes. She explains: "While science could be a source of and repository for knowledge, the scientific worldview is all too often an enemy of ecological compassion" (2013, p. 345). Translating scientific discourse into Potawatomi cultural and linguistic contexts, her works undermines the primacy of human thinking in this relation. Instead, Kimmerer once again repositions the role of the scientist as that of a translator: "Trying to understand the life of another being or another system so unlike our own is humbling, and for many scientists, is a deeply spiritual pursuit" (ibid, p. 346). As a translator of indigenous animacies into science, then, Kimmerer's writings re-animate a world de-animated not by scientific practice per se, but by the deeply entrenched bias of Western humans towards the more-than-human world as a passive area for human discovery and extraction. Her work, as a Potawatomi writer and author, is thus to bridge and translate on behalf of more-than-human subjectivities erased by Western constructs of subjectivity. Her experiential translation practice not only introduces grammars of animacy into the English language and culture, it also questions the instrumentalising premise of Western translation norms of transparency most likely modelled on scientific objectivity. In reframing her epistemological role as a scientist as that

of a non-human to human translator, she paves the way for a translation which would go beyond the question of equivalence as a go-to definition of translation in order to think of translation as a way of "making kin" (Haraway 2016, p.99) in "multinatural" contexts (Viveiros de Castro 2014, p. 72).

In Kimmerer's memoir, language and philosophy are closely intertwined. Kimmerer shows that translating Potawatomi grammars of animacy into Western epistemes challenges certain biological hierarchies which are structurally embedded into our language and communication practices. This task is accompanied by a more explicit rethinking of the political families which are nested in the exclusion of non-human animacies in Western grammars of animacies. Kimmerer demands that we not only construe these differences culturally, but politically – by exploring translation not only as a semiotic transaction of meaning between two pre-discursively established entities, but as an experiential, that is "holistic, in-the-moment, often shared and plural process" which can inaugurate new social, ethical and political relations (Campbell and Vidal, 2024, p. XXX). She prompts readers to translate beyond the Western paradigm of translation and communication to include other epistemologies of care for more-than-human kins.

The social and kinship making dimension of Kimmerer's inter-species translation practice is further explored in the paper entitled "Listening to the Forest", where Kimmerer and Jeff Grignon discuss "Pine, Maple and Menominee Nations" interspecies relations: one community made of trees, plants, animals and humans (Grignon and Kimmerer, 2017, p.68). As Kimmerer and Grignon show, such a territorial relationship undifferentiates hierarchically between human and more-than-human actors to create, instead, a more-than-human community. Kimmerer's translation practice, then, points towards such a planetary "democracy of species" (Kimmerer, 2013, p.58). Beyond the nomos of human nations, her works invokes the importance of other species by referring to them as nations in their own right: as rightful subjects in a broader planetary ethical context. Her translations of Potawatomi epistemes, in other words, articulate and perform new planetary communities into being beyond the anthropocentric European framework of international relations. In a section of *Braiding Sweetgrass* called "Maple Nation: A Citizenship Guide", she foreignises the English language and its anthropocentric translation paradigm by translating it into a

Potawatomi grammar of animacy: “the maples, our most generous of benefactors and most responsible of citizens, do not deserve our government. They deserve you and me speaking up on their behalf.… Political action, civic engagement – these are powerful acts of reciprocity with the land” (ibid, p. 174). Rather than separating indigenous practices from scientific endeavours, Kimmerer’s role as a translator is one of braiding and weaving different epistemologies together not only to advance knowledge (or move it from one language and location to another), but to advance and expand practices of care beyond humans in a manner that is ‘trans-relational’ rather than extractive. By trans-relational, I mean to refer to her practice of bridging biological as well as linguistic differences: a scientific approach which never assumes complete knowledge of the object studied but accounts for one’s own potential subjectivity and partiality in translating on behalf of non-human entities.

Kimmerer’s “epistemic translation” praxis is not a transfer of knowledge from place to place, but a co-creative practice of weaving differences into a place of mutual understanding which echoes other indigenous interpretations of translation (Bennett, 2024, p. 1). As Margaret Noodin explains of Ojibwe in “Anishinaabe Translation Studies”, a language closely related to Potawatomi: “Anishinaabemowin, also called Ojibwe, uses the word ‘aanikanootan’ to convey the idea of translation. ‘Aanikanootan’ is closely related to ‘aanikoobidoon’, which is the verb for stringing things together or extending something by tying pieces together” (Noodin, 2019, p.124). Noodin continues to explain the deep connections with kinship-making practices which translation, conceived this way, holds: “There is an echo of both in ‘aankikoobijigan’, which is ‘an ancestor, great-grandparent, or great-grandchild’ but nothing in the word signifies the nouns parent, person, or child” (ibid, p.124). Instead, she explains that the connection between translation and kinship is practice-based: kinship not as a pre-existing set of relations or categories, but as a doing in the form and practice of translating others beyond the self. In that sense, Kimmerer, like Sandig, uses practice-based translation strategies to re-animate ‘nature’ and stretch the remit of our political communities beyond the traditional human gaze of the nation. Their experimental and epistemological translations are a world-making exercise in rewriting our mental maps into more-than-human planetary geographies.

Conclusion

In their essay "On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene", Heather Davis and Zoe Todd articulate the need to contextualise and, indeed, translate the Anthropocene beyond Western epistemes and temporalities:

> the Anthropocene is not a new event, but is rather the continuation of practices of dispossession and genocide, coupled with a literal transformation of the environment, that have been at work for the last five hundred years. Further, the Anthropocene continues a logic of the universal which is structured to sever the relations between mind, body, and land. (2016, p.761)

In their translations, both Sandig and Kimmerer weave matter back into translational thinking by re-writing translation out of a capitalist model of global circulation and extraction. Re-animating the colonising and universal discourse of the Anthropocene through translation as praxis, Sandig's anagram translation reanimates representations of nature as passive and inconsequential and performs with urgency the consequences of not-translating non-human others. Her use of the anagram to foreignize human language locates translations which exist beyond the human gaze of national cultures, while hers and Semenchuk sound and film adaptation attune us to forms of planetary dwellings, borders and ecologies beyond the human gaze of international relations. Kimmerer, on the other hand, translates scientific knowledge into non-Western epistemologies by animating the English grammar and Western thinking through cultural and linguistic mediation of Potawatomi cosmogonies. Her re-thinking of scientific work as a form of translation situates science within a framework of ethical and social responsibility and recasts translation as an act of weaving relations with non-human others which exist beyond symbolic language.

By expanding translation practice beyond language to include experiential encounters which do not map onto pre-existing stable linguistic contexts, both translations expand the translation imagination beyond the task of moving ideas and meanings across places in an exclusively human world, rethinking language instead from the perspective of other more-than-human material and experiential agencies. In so doing, they acknowledge a planetary context where not only humans make sense, and not only humans translate, revealing the more-than-human semiotic contexts which sustain human languages and cultures in the first place.

References

Barad, K., 2011. “Nature’s Queer Performativity.” *Qui Parle*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 121–58.

Barcz, A., and Cronin, M., 2023. Eco-Translation and inter-species communication in the Anthropocene. S.E. Wilmer, Audronė Žukauskaitė (eds.) *Life in the Posthuman Condition. Critical Responses to the Anthropocene*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Barokka, K., 2022. ‘AMUK: A performance’, Video, last accessed 01/11/2023 < https://www.ed.ac.uk/events/lecture-series/edinburgh-futures-conversations/the-future-of-climate-justice/amuk-khairani-barokka>

Campbell, M., and Vidal R., 2019. *Translating across Sensory and Linguistic Borders*. 1st ed. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Campbell, M., and Vidal R., 2024. *Introduction: Materiality and Play as affective and embodied Means of (un)Knowing*.

Campbell, M., 2024. ‘Translating ‘our’ world through sound: domestication, anthropomorphism, incantation’. *The Translation of Experience: Cultural Artefacts in Experiential Translation.*

Chandler, D., [2002] 2007. *Semiotics: The Basics*. London: Routledge.

Cronin, M., 2023. Translation, ecology, and deep time. In *Time, Space, Matter in Translation*. Edited by Pamela Beattie, Simona Bertacco, Tatjana Soldat-Jaffe. London: Routledge.

Cronin, M., 2020. Translation and climate change, in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Globalization*. London: Routledge. pp.85–98.

Cronin, M., 2017. *Eco-translation. Translation and ecology in the age of the Anthropocene*. London & New York: Routledge.

Cronin, M., 2016. A New Ecology for Translation? Collaboration and Resilience. In Anthony Cordingley and Céline Frigau Manning (eds.) *Collaborative Translation: From the Renaissance to the Digital Age*, London: Bloomsbury. Pp. 233-246.

Deacon, T. W., 2015. "Steps to a Science of Biosemiotics." *Green Letters* 19, no. 3: 293-311.

DesRochers, A., 2023. *Language Smugglers: Postlingual Literatures and Translation Within the Canadian Context*, London: Bloomsbury.

Ferdinand, M., 2022. *Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*. Translated by Anthony Paul Smith. Critical South Ser. Newark: Polity Press.

Ghosh, A., 2016. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable. Berlin Family Lectures.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Grass, D., 2023. *Translation as Creative-Critical Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Grass, D., 2019. Translation as performance in “Found in Translation: Literary Dispatches from the Peripheries of Europe”. MEITS blog. https://www.meits.org/blog/post/translation-as-performance-in-found-in-translation-literary-dispatches-from-the-peripheries-of-europe

Grignon, J. and Kimmerer, R. W., 2017. "8. Listening to the Forest". In *Wildness: Relations of People and Place*, edited by Gavin Van Horn and John Hausdoerffer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 67-74.

Hakim, L., and Hidayat, T. S., 2017. *Kamus Sasak-Indonesia*. Mataram City: West Nusa Tenggara Language Office.

Herder, J. G., 2004. *Another Philosophy of History and other Political Writings*. Translated and edited by Ioannis D. Evrigenis and Daniel Pellerin. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

Hornborg, A., 2006. Animism, fetishism, and objectivism as strategies for knowing (or not knowing) the world, *Ethnos*, 71:1, 21-32, DOI: 10.1080/00141840600603129

Karin L., 2016. Translation and the materialities of communication, *Translation Studies*, 9:1, 82-96, DOI: 10.1080/14781700.2015.1063449

Kimmerer, R. W., 2013. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants.* Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions.

Kull, K., 1998. Semiotic ecology: different natures in the semiosphere. *Sign Systems Studies* 26 (1), pp. 344-371.

Marais, K., 2023. *Trajectories of translation: The thermodynamics of semiosis*. New York: Routledge.

Marais, K., 2021. Tom, Dick and Harry as well as Puss in Boots and Fido are translators: The implications of biosemiotics for translation studies. In Ovidi Carbonelli i Cortés and Esther Monzó Nebot (eds.), *Translating Asymmetry/Rewriting Power*. Amsterdam: Benjamins. 101-121

Marais, K., 2019. *A (Bio)semiotic Theory of Translation the Emergence of Social-Cultural Reality.* London and New York: Routledge.

Maran, T., 2020. *Ecosemiotics: The Study of Signs in Changing Ecologies* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

McGordon, E., 2019. Magnetic. Unpublished poem. Performed at Lancaster Litfest 2019. I thank Emma McGordon for sharing the written version of this poem with me.

Mignolo, W. D., 2009. Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom. Theory, *Culture & Society*, 26(7-8), 159-181.

Mussgnug, F., 2022. Translating Endangered Nonhuman Worlds. In: Tihanov, G. (eds) Universal Localities. *Schriften zur Weltliteratur/Studies on World Literature*, vol 13. J.B. Metzler, Berlin, Heidelberg.

Noodin, M., 2019. 'Ezhi-gikendamang Aanikanootamang Anishinaabemowin: Anishinaabe Translation Studies', in *At Translation's Edge*, Edited by Nataša Durovicova, Patrice Petro and Lorena Terando. New York: Rudgers University Press, pp. 123-135.

Patten, A., 2010. The Most Natural State': Herder And Nationalism. *History of Political Thought* 31 (4), pp.657-689.

Peirce, C. S., 1931. *Collected Papers of Charles Sander Pierce*. Edited by C. Hartshorn and P. Weiss. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Robert-Foley, L., 2024. *Experimental Translation: The Work of Translation in the Age of Algorithmic Production.* London: Goldsmith Press.

Robinson, D., 2022. *The Experimental Translator*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sandig, U. A. (text) and Semenchuk, G. (music) and (video). 2019/2022. In die Natur/Into Nature. Commissioned for Lancaster Litfest's MEITS funded event Translation as Creative Critical Practice in 2019. Translated into English by Karen Leeder in 2022. Last accessed 01.11. 2023. https://www.faust-shop.org/in-die-natur-into-nature/

Sandig, U. A. (text) and Semenchuk, Grigory (music). 2022. *In die Natur* (film), translated subtitled by Karen Leeder. https://www.faust-shop.org/in-die-natur-into-nature/

Sandig, U. A., 2021. ‚OPEN ARMS: Über Hörbarkeit und Sichtbarkeit von Dichtung in der Gegenwart', Thomas Kling Poetikdozentur 2021. I thank Ulrike Almut Sandig for sharing her notes with me in 2023.

Sakai, N. 1997. *Translation and Subjectivity: On 'Japan' and cultural nationalism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Sakai, N. 2017. The Modern Regime of Translation and the Emergence of the Nation. *The Eighteenth Century*, vol. 58, no. 1, pp. 105–08. JSTOR, https://www.jstor.org/stable/90001122. Accessed 31 Oct.

Scott, C., 2018. Understanding Translation as an Ecopoetic. In *The Work of Literary Translation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 61 – 84.

Sealey, A., 2019. Translation: A Biosemiotic/more-than-human perspective. *Target: International Journal of Translation Studies* 31(3): 305-327. https://doi.org/10.1075/target.18099.sea.

Shepard, G. H., and Lewis D., 2023. Sensory Ecology, Bioeconomy, and the Age of COVID: A Parallax View of Indigenous and Scientific Knowledge. *Topics in Cognitive Science* 15, no. 3 : 584-607.

Spivak, G. C., 2005. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Szerszynski, B., 2017. Gods of the anthropocene: geo-spiritual formations in the Earth's new epoch, *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 34 Nos 2-3, pp. 253-275

Venuti, L., [1995] 2018. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. London: Routledge.

Viveiros de Castro, E., [2009] 2014. *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology*, translated and edited by Peter Skajish. Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing.