

ANTENA / A Manifesto for Ultratranslation

Why do I translate? Because the congealed mass of anglo-'merican ugliness, greed & basic Christian fascism will continue to blow up the people & libraries & homes & museums of a hundred Baghdads unless we can make enough American citizens realize the beauty of the other, of the poetry of the other, of the speech of all the others.

—Pierre Joris

I have become intrigued with displaced things—things that are wrong.
And translation is in a perpetual state of being wrong....

—Don Mee Choi

I wanted to translate what was not yet there... The paradox of borders, national, corporeal and linguistic, is that their primary value is not to keep out, but to let in. Translation involves permeability, not equivalence.

—Oana Avasilichioaei and Erín Moure

“When we refer to translation,” ask(s) Andrés Ajens, “might it exist only in part? In part translation and in part something else? In part translating and in part not translating—another text, even another signature? Could that be?” I...translate Ajens...to an invitation to write, as I am writing. How to translate by not translating? How to translate the invitation to not translate? Its how? How to translate, in not translating? How to refuse translation’s disavowal, in translating?

—Andrés Ajens, trans. Erín Moure and Jen Hofer;
Erín Moure writing through Andrés Ajens

Nothing is lost in translation. Everything was always already lost, long before we arrived.

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Translation is its own undoing. A feedback loop. A Möbius strip or trip. An unwriting of the original, which is never the same as itself anyway. A writing of the unoriginal translation.

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Translation is an asymptote: no matter how close we try to get, there's always a space between the two bodies and that is the space where we live. The space where we transpose, or are transposed.

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Untranslatability is at the root of our practice. Moments of untranslatability lead directly to untranslation, undertranslation, overtranslation, an excess, extranlation, a lack, a limit, an excrescence, an impropriety, distranlation, retranslation, multitranslation, a mistake, a conflict, dystranlation. An understanding of the potential in not understanding. An ultratranslation.

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Ultratranslation—an awareness or hum or breath. Not all translation is ultratranslation. Ultratranslation is moments within translation, a part of translation, parting it to expose the irreducible gaps. Ultratranslation bubbles up from translation, moves translation somewhere else. Transposes it.

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Ultra: spatially beyond, on the other side, indicating elsewhere. Ultra: going beyond, surpassing, transcending the limits. Ultra: an excessive or extreme degree.

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Ultratranslation is messy. Ultratranslation is excessive. Ultratranslation is unruly. Ultratranslation is absurdly invested in the glories of translationese. Ultratranslation takes the untranslatable as starting point, not ending point.

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Ultratranslation labors to translate the untranslatable, and also to preserve it: not to reduce the irreducible. Not to know but to acknowledge. Ultratranslation does not

replace translation, nor does it seek to depose. They exist beside one another and concurrently, one feeding the other. Two bodies with the negative space of relation between them. Only in the geography of the margins, in the space between, only there. Ultratranslation is not translation unmoored from meaning, but translation that questions what and how meaning itself means.

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We are opposed to seamless translation, as it seeks to stitch innumerable disparate words and ideas and divides together as if they had always been fused. We oppose ourselves to poses: positions of control or superiority. We want ultratranslation: to untranslate the seams, to extratranslate the gaps, to multitranslate the leaps, to infratranslate the porosities. We want the transfer and the untransferrable, both.

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Ultratranslation leads us to inevitable failure. We believe failure is productive: a snag that makes the seams visible. Critiqueable. In failure there are moments of astonishment.

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We welcome errors and fissures because they are palpable, textured: those snags are as integral a part of the reading experience as the content, the form, the various kinds of information presented by the texts—always plural, as translation is an act of doubling, or multiplying, or reducing, or all of those at once.

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We will fail at the level of the word and we will fail at the level of the culture. “Success” is inappropriate given the complexity of human existence and interrelation. The only way to begin to understand is not to understand. To believe that reading a text (or even twenty texts) from a particular culture provides us an “understanding” of that culture is to reduce its complexity and inherent irreducibility to something we might digest. We believe in feedback rather than feed. Feed is digested and excreted; feedback continues, an ever-looping loop.

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We cannot take for granted that this word can be used for that body; we cannot take as a given that we share the same understanding of even (or perhaps especially) the most familiar words. The familiar demands translation. The ultrafamiliar demands ultratranslation.

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Work across languages needs contextualization. Ultratranslation attempts to contextualize from within the language, within the syntax, between and around the words, the breath, the utterance. Air and diaphragm contracting and relaxing.

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Ultratranslation lures translators out of invisibility and onto the streets, into the margins, into the footnotes, into annotation, into activism, into failure and into irrationality, the intuitive, a channeling. The work might speak for itself, but the translation never does. Nor can it be “spoken for” by the translator (or by anyone else). Rather, translators speak for ourselves, addressing questions of stance, position, and perspective, replacing invisibility with transparency by writing notes toward an understanding of the tools and processes that made the translation. Toward an understanding of the ultratranslator’s practice.

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Who we choose to translate is political. How we choose to translate is political.

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The politics of translation make us ultraskeptical and ultracommitted.

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Ultratranslation is built from radicalism, ultraism, anti-racism, anti-superiority, anti-assimilation. We recognize and respect words, details, and impulses that cannot be translated: a constant divide. Both translation and its riotous cousin ultratranslation provide tools for crossing or not crossing. Whether or not we cross, we need the tools.

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We recognize how translation has been used, is used and might still be used as a tool of conquest, assimilation, or domestication. We are committed to creating translations that are racinated in the cultures, dialogues, conflicts, battles, struggles, hierarchies, gossip of their communities of origin. We recognize this is a difficult—perhaps impossible—task and yet we have high hopes. Impossible hopes. Untranslatable hopes. Ultratranslators bent on unsettling the empire of English.

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Ultratranslation is a process of working against languages that seek to dominate. At the most basic level, the message of translation: there is something being said elsewhere that is of crucial importance for us here (in this language) to hear. It is worth great effort to listen to that “something elsewhere.” Ultratranslation would not bring something elsewhere into a dominant language (English, for instance) in a smooth, seductive, unproblematized way, as if to suggest that now “we” “understand” “you.” Ultratranslation nudges dominant languages away from dominance, toward the space between original and translation. Into the space of the ultra.

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Working across languages is a conundrum, especially for those of us who speak and write in the language of empire. Our language perpetrates the invisibility of the other. Our language imposes the privilege of the same. Yet we translate into our language. We translate into our language to rewrite our language. Ultratranslation as a way to clamber out of conundrum. Ultratranslation as a way of living restless and anarchic inside conundrum.

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If reading work in translation makes us think we haven’t read widely enough, that’s a good thing. If reading work in translation makes us wish we knew two or ten or thirty more languages, that’s a good thing. Rather than running away from the untranslatable, scorning it or eyeing it suspiciously, or lamenting the loss it represents, we experience the untranslatable as invitation to further immersion, further closeness. A hint of light knifing through a door slightly ajar. Always the light slivering through, the door impossible to close because the foundation has shifted imperceptibly, the threshold askew.

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Ultratranslation is a kind of activism or (dys)organizing: the translations we work on are not primed for comfortable consumption. We experience ultratranslation as a catalyst for changes in awareness, syntax, and our capacity to reimagine the world. Ultratranslation as catalytic.

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Ultratranslations allow us an entry beyond the level of surface, to a deeper level which itself is a surface made of many layers of surface. Ultratranslation shifts the categories of the knowable.

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We live and work in the clutter of untranslatability. The uncomfortable snag where we no longer know what to say, how to say, or even quite what saying is—but we continue in our saying. The language-snag is the sign that there is more thinking to be done. We can't get free from the grip of non-knowing, nor would we wish to detach ourselves even if we could. Rather, let's stay in this space. The instigatory space of difficulty and not understanding. Untranslate this space. Retranslate from this space.

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Untranslatability is an introduction. An introduction into translation. A lure. Ultratranslation is not no translation, nor post-translation, nor anti-translation. Simultaneity, not progression.

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Because we break the faith. Because the faith was already broken. Because there is only faith in breaking the faith (there is only possible in impossible, only translatability in untranslatability). Because there is no such thing as a word's literal meaning. No original, only points of departure. No neat and orderly connection between signifier and signified. No route from one signifier to another that does not take a detour through the undergrowth, the forest floor, the factory floor.

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Ultratranslation resists its own definition, nestled in dominant discourse, yet refusing to be contained by that discourse.

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Ultratranslation emerges at the tiniest, furthest extremes of an asymptote: no matter how close we try to get, there's always a space between the two—any two—and that is the space where we live. Where we are delighted and frustrated at once. Where we get to work. Where we want to agitate.

Sources

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Antena is a language justice and language experimentation collaborative founded in 2010 by Jen Hofer and John Pluecker. We view our aesthetic practice as part and parcel of our language justice work. Antena activates links between social justice work and artistic practice by exploring how critical views on language can help us to reimagine and rearticulate the worlds we inhabit.

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This manifesto is available as a free download on Antena’s website: <<http://antenaantena.org/homemade-books/>>. You can contact Antena at antena@antenaantena.org; we’d love to be in dialogue about the ideas in this manifesto.