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# Performing (Re)Writing: Moving Through Modes of Textual Engagement

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## Abstract

This paper frames the concepts of foreignization and domestication, so fervently discussed in the field of Translation Studies, within a selection of theories put forward by theatre studies scholars and literary theorists. After exploring the definitions of foreignization and domestication as proposed by Lawrence Venuti (1995), as well as the modes of textual engagement advanced by Rita Felski (2008), namely recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock, we address parallel discourses in other fields and make a case for conceiving of the act of translation as both a form of performance and a type of writing. In aligning Bertolt Brecht's aesthetics of estrangement, or "*V-effekt*", with foreignization and shock, and, conversely, Constantin Stanislavsky's System with domestication and enchantment, we are able to consider more broadly how textual choices made in the writing and translating process can contribute to soliciting various forms of audience response. In an effort to apply these discussions to fictional texts, the example of non-standard language, and especially the youth slang of the *banlieue parisienne* used in *Kiffe kiffe demain* (Faiza Guène, Hachette 2004), is adopted. This backdrop allows us to consider the choices made to transcribe and subsequently translate the linguistic features of this performance for readers generally unfamiliar with this language in its raw state, raising a number of questions related to the authenticity and accessibility of their (re)presentation.

**Keywords:** Stanislavsky, Brecht, Felski, Venuti, foreignization, domestication, banlieue, slang

## 1. Introduction

By envisaging the speech included in fictional texts as a reproduction of an initial production, real or imagined, transcribed by an author, we can start to unravel the ties between real-life and fictional performances of language. When the language of a text is non-standard, its appearance is conditioned by a marked tension between accessibility and authenticity which results especially from the perceived needs of the target audience. The features of slang, and urban youth speech in particular, deviate considerably from the norms of standard language: marginalized youth bend the rules of the language promoted by dominant social groups in an act of rebellion, be it conscious or unconscious, and their use of non-standard language constitutes an expression of identity. The first instance of performance of slang among young people generally adopts the streets and structures of urban spaces as its stage. When it is included in fictional texts, the receiving audience is broadened: the stage shifts as an author<sup>1</sup> reimagines, and performs, the speech of urban youth for a separate set of

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<sup>1</sup> The word author will be used throughout this article as a general term to encompass various people responsible for the production of texts, which are not necessarily always written. Though it is important to bear in mind the inherent differences between different modes of production, we can acknowledge that there is worth in this study in aligning the common goals and general approaches to each.

people, generally unfamiliar with this form of non-standard language. The inclusion of slang in fictional texts can be thus be seen as a form of intralingual translation, rendering the language spoken among peers of a restricted group accessible to an enlarged audience. If a fictional text featuring slang is subsequently translated into another language, the target audience is twice removed from the original context of utterance. The interlingual transition further complicates the task of conserving the specificities of the portrayed speakers' voice and raises additional questions of accessibility. In both writing and translating slang, therefore, authors and translators share the common challenge of crafting a picture of authenticity in the text so that the voice presented evokes the often opaque speech habits of the individuals portrayed.

The three-tier process of speaking, writing, and translating slang can be seen as a performative *mise-en-abyme*, involving the performance (translation) of a performance (fictional transcription) of a performance (initial utterance). With each separate performance of slang comes a new audience, and a new performer, meaning that there is necessarily a gradual increase of the dilution of the veracity of the voice of the first performer. Indeed, through writing and translating, the fictionalized version moves further from the initial performative speech act and the personal identity of subsequent performers necessarily seeps through each new production. In an effort to encourage an interdisciplinary study of slang in fictional texts, original and translated, this article offers a preliminary sketch combining concepts advanced in literary, translation, and theater studies. Harnessing these various theories to examine fictional texts featuring the voice of young people set in and around the *banlieue parisienne* helps to assess the different reactions that the extent of the (im)penetrability of the language used might solicit among audiences. We will see how the four modes of textual engagement put forward by Rita Felski in her 2008 book *Uses of Literature* (shock, enchantment, recognition, and knowing) can be coupled with two pairs of binary approaches to writing, rewriting, and performing texts prominent in theater studies (Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theater and Constantin Stanislavsky's System) and in translation studies (Lawrence Venuti's concepts of foreignization and domestication).

## **2. Defining and demarcating slang and the *banlieue***

Given the focus of this study, it seems judicious to discard the disagreements rife in different definitions of slang and turn to the explanation put forward in the 2014 book *Global English Slang: Methodologies and Perspectives* edited by Julie Coleman. In this collected volume, a number of scholars explore the traits and usage of different slangs from around the world and contend that "slang is informal, non-technical language that often seems novel to the user and/or listener, and that challenges a social or linguistic norm. It can also imply complicity in value judgements and thus play a performative role in defining personal or group identity" (Coleman, 2014: 30). Their attempt at consensus reveals that certain features of slang allow speakers to address directly or indirectly ideas of alterity, belonging, and identity, and we might linger on the idea of slang being a type of language that challenges a social or linguistic norm. By extension, this way of speaking is often used as a form of agency by marginal groups expressing their difference and dissidence in relation to dominant groups that set and enforce social and linguistic norms.

An ideal case of the use of slang in fiction for this study can be found in texts set in the *banlieue parisienne*. The situation of these areas stands in stark contrast to

stereotypical visions of France as a country of intellectualism, sophistication, and elegance, since the *banlieue* has a reputation of high crime and unemployment rates. Indeed, according to Hervé Vieillard-Baron (1996: 4), it is generally associated with exclusion, precariousness, illicit work, terrorism, and ghettos. As a general rule, these areas are largely ignored both in France and abroad, bar instances of heightened tension or riots (Hargreaves, 1996: 608-610). Such a negative reputation calls for a unique form of expression and slang allows its speakers, outsiders living literally on the fringes of Paris and figuratively on the fringes of French society, to assume and, to a certain extent, assert their difference. Slang plays a central role in urban street culture, where young people's performance of verbal prowess is presented to peers for judgement (Bertucci, 2011: 18). Indeed, young people gain credibility and popularity when they show evidence of verbal dexterity, exemplified especially in ritualized competitions such as rap battles and games involving the exchange of insults (Lepoutre, 2001: 410-411). An increased production of fictional works emanating from different French *banlieues* is said to have begun in the mid-1980s following the *Marche pour l'égalité et contre le racism*, launched by the writing of authors such as Azouz Bégag and Medhi Charef (Reeck, 2012: 122; Vitali, 2009: 173). More recently, since the mid-1990s, several works set in and around the *banlieue parisienne* have encountered considerable success in the Anglosphere. Particular interest, both at home and abroad, in the country's supposed problem areas was sparked by the 2005 riots, which resulted in a rise in the number of works appearing in the catalogues of reputed publishing houses in the late 2000s (Cello, 2017). Throughout this article, examples from the novel *Kiffe kiffe demain* by Faiza Guène, published in France in 2004 and in the anglosphere in 2006, will be examined more closely to provide a concrete demonstration of techniques used to produce urban youth speech in fiction.

### 3. Theater, translation, and literary theory

In 1961, renowned theater critic Kenneth Tynan argued that “two schools of thought dispute the field of Western acting”: on the one hand sat Constantin Stanislavsky whose “deep-burrowing naturalism” was practiced in American theaters, and, on the other, theater-makers in East Berlin wielded the rejection of illusion found in Bertolt Brecht's epic theater in an explicit espousal of detachment (Tynan, 1961: 87). He sums up the opposing approaches as follows: “‘You are in a drawing-room,’ says Stanislavsky to his audience, ‘watching life.’ ‘You are in a theater,’ says Brecht, ‘witnessing actors’” (*ibid.*). This image he offers points to the underlying difference between the two schools of theater, and of thought. In Stanislavsky's largely naturalistic theater, audiences are meant to be moved, to feel emotion, and to empathize with the characters on stage, convinced that the story they are being told is real. In Brecht's epic theater, on the other hand, audiences are encouraged to take distance from the play and be educated; if they are moved, they should be moved to reflect on the (in)coherence of the way society operates, not to feel empathy. Both Brecht (1898-1956) and Stanislavsky (1863-1938) had passed away at the time Tynan proposed his distinction, but since 1961, their philosophies and practices have continued to influence dramatic practice and theory and they are frequently cited among the most prominent theater-makers of the 20th century. Their opposing visions of how audiences should interact with the action unfolding on the stage before them, Brecht's distancing versus Stanislavsky's suspension of disbelief, tie in neatly with

numerous debates around the (in)visibility of the translator and of the act of translation in translated texts.

Arguably the most widely wielded theories in translation studies over the past twenty-five or so years, since the publication of Lawrence Venuti's book *The Translator's Invisibility* in 1995, foreignization and domestication have found fervent supporters among translation scholars and practitioners. In *The Translator's Invisibility*, Venuti speaks out ardently against the tendency to produce fluid translations and argues in favor of translation practices that accentuate the foreign nature of the text. He takes his cue from previous theorists, especially Antoine Berman, he himself influenced by Frederich Schleiermacher, who saw translation as a matter of ethical responsibility, "concerned with making the translated text a place where a cultural other is manifested" (Venuti, 1995: 20). Venuti is of the opinion that translation has a powerful role to play in combating "ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism and imperialism", and all this "in the interests of democratic geopolitical relations" (*ibid.*). His inventory of translation trends throughout the history of literary translation is intended to call attention to the various ways that translation might fulfill or fall short of such a goal.

The modes of textual engagement proposed by Rita Felski in her 2008 Blackwell Manifesto *Uses of Literature* provide an ideal springboard from which to explore the links between the three fields of study chosen here. In her book, Felski (2008: 5) seeks to provide a framework through which literary theory and affective responses to literature can be reconciled, lamenting the fact that "critics fumble to explain how works of art arise from and move back into the social world" because they separate it from everything around it. Instead, she calls for an approach to textual analysis that establishes dialogue between the academy and the lay reader by proposing four modes of engagement: recognition, enchantment, knowledge, and shock. The explanations Felski provides through her unpacking of enchantment and shock can be quite neatly aligned with the theater and translation theories outlined above: enchantment can be associated directly with domestication and the naturalism of Stanislavsky's system, and shock with foreignization and the distancing effect of Brecht's epic theater. Recognition and knowledge might further be seen as complementary and offshooting modes of engagement engendered by and within various modes of textual production and performance. These two additional modes of engagement allow us to move beyond binary oppositions as we acknowledge the impossibility of defining and anticipating clear-cut reactions to texts written and rewritten by and for complex individuals. In this way, we can accept Felski's assertion that "aesthetic objects may acquire very different meanings in altered contexts; the transactions between texts and readers are varied, contingent, and often unpredictable" (Felski, 2008: 9). Indeed, it is vital to bear in mind that even when authors produce texts according to a particular goal, the complexity and subjectivity of human behavior complicates the endeavor of predicting how a text might be received in various contexts, both at home and abroad.

#### **4. Slang and Skopos**

When considering an author's choice to include the slang of a specific group in a work of fiction, we might refer to the words of Mikhail Bakhtin who argues that "a particular language in a novel is always a particular way of viewing the world, one that strives for a social significance" (Bakhtin, 1981: 333). Bakhtin's line of reasoning can further be extended to suggest that many works of fiction seek to be bestowed

with a particular pertinence outside of the realm of fiction so that they act indirectly or directly as a form of representation of the real-life group portrayed. When used in a fictional text, the perceived or stated function of the use of slang, evoked above, may deviate from its use “in real life” and is intricately linked to the broader function of the text itself. In this way, the intensity and presumed credibility of the presence of slang in fictional texts necessarily vary depending not only on the author’s intentions (conscious or unconscious, stated or unstated) but also on the stylistic tools at their disposal. Sara Ramos Pinto (2009: 291-292) is of the opinion that, when dealing with slang in literature, “the degree of linguistic mimicry depends on the author’s aesthetic, narrative, thematic, stylistic or functional objectives”. Her views on the function attributed to slang in fiction may be developed to encompass not only the writers’ conscious or stated objectives, but the sphere of possible interpretations offered by the text.

When reflecting on the function of translated texts in particular, we may refer to theories advanced within the “functional” branch of translation studies. These theories envisage translation as “a purposeful activity” influenced by a number of factors and players, and the “Skopos” theory put forward by Hans J. Vermeer addresses the aim or purpose of a translation. Vermeer argues that “a source text is usually composed originally for a situation in the source culture” and that the translated text “is oriented towards the target culture, and it is this which ultimately defines its adequacy” (in Venuti, 2000: 221-223). It follows therefore that the perceived needs of audiences contribute to the approach and strategy adopted in writing and translating texts. As we have seen, the slang be used by individuals from dissident groups tends to set them apart from, and often excludes, members of dominant social groups. The intended audience of many texts featuring slang is composed of individuals who are not part of the group represented, which forces authors to grapple with the gap between the ways of speaking of each group. Unless authors seek expressly to spark negative associations with the characters, it seems logical to suggest that the overall Skopos is to encourage audiences to associate the fictional reality of the text with the actual reality faced by the people depicted. The secondary aims of authors, however, may propel them in two broad directions as they strive to solicit assorted reactions beyond the initial connection between the fictional characters and the people they represent.

To make the amateur audience’s job of dissecting and deciphering the meaning of the slang used quite simple, authors might choose to exploit readily-recognizable characteristics of slang embedded within an otherwise accessible style of speech, in a way that promotes fluidity and fluency. If, on the other hand, writers are less concerned with their audiences’ ability to understand the text, they might risk jarring readers by having recourse to a selection of more opaque features of the slang spoken in real life, regardless of how accurate these might be when presented in abundance. Anthony Pym (2000: 71) posits that an author generally uses one of two options when presenting linguistic variety: authenticity or parody, both of which tend towards the extreme. Pym’s explanations of parody show that authors harness the most easily identifiable, often stereotypical, features of the language variety in question, while authenticity (or, alternatively, “the aesthetics of detail”) can be seen as an attempt to convince audiences through the inclusion of an abundance of more or less opaque features of a particular variety that “the linguistic result must surely be the same thing” (*ibid.*). Within these two broad approaches to producing slang in fiction, we can identify parallels with the concepts of domestication, naturalism, and enchantment, on the one hand, and foreignization, distancing, and shock, on the other.

## **5. Domestication, naturalism, enchantment**

When contemplating the broad strokes of domestication, naturalistic theater, and enchantment, we observe that authors tend to strive for these modes of production and engagement in the hope that the audience's understanding of the text is as straightforward as possible. Though he rejected to a certain extent the idea and label of naturalism, Stanislavsky's system is anchored in a style of presentation that is "fundamentally illusionist" (Leach, 2004: 10). He sought to "create stage performances which gave the spectator the illusion that he was watching real life unfold before him" so that the ensemble of elements on stage, acting, setting, dialogue, and costume, was "true to life" (*ibid.*). Believing that the theater could "confront serious ideas and controversial political opinions" more efficiently when reality was presented as such, Stanislavsky discarded previous practices that presented plays through the techniques of melodrama and stock characters (*ibid.*). Further convinced that if the actor were at one with the character on stage, the audience would conflate the fictional and actual human being before them and buy into the illusion of reality, he championed an approach to acting that saw actors embody their character. He asked his actors to dip into their personal well of experience and emotion, as well as their exposure to others' experiences and emotions, reasoning that this would allow audience members to fully lose themselves in the performance, and his mentality is akin to the ideas Felski advances on enchantment.

According to Felski (2008: 54) enchantment "is characterized by a state of intense involvement, a sense of being so entirely caught up in an aesthetic object that nothing else seems to matter". In her contemplation of the manifold facets of this mode of textual engagement, she insists on the extent to which enchantment is experienced within the realm of audience expectations, since people are accustomed to specific forms of expression in fiction. She states that "the experience of being immersed in a work of art involves a mental balancing act that is all too easily overlooked by critics quick to impute a dogged literalism onto imagined audiences" (Felski, 2008: 74). In accordance with this reasoning, audiences are seen to succumb voluntarily to the illusion of reality while simultaneously being aware of the artificiality of the piece of art offered to them. When this argument is applied to the (re)presentation of slang in fiction, one might suggest, following Ramos Pinto (2009: 290) that "too much accuracy can compromise the reader's understanding of the character's speech" and that forms of linguistic variety in fiction are generally "literary re-creations that are only marginally concerned with accuracy". If the slang used is an especially veracious transcription, it might be said that the barrier established between the audience and the fictional characters acts as a roadblock, preventing audiences from becoming entirely engaged in the text.

A similar set of consequences may be observed for translated texts if the writing style employed is characterized by opacity, whether it be through the use of features of the original slang as part of a strategy exploiting various forms of borrowing, through the creation of a new and unfamiliar slang, or through the use of a comparably indiscernible replacement slang taken from the target language. Since the general aim of publishers in commercial contexts is tied up in concerns of saleability, it follows that writers tend to make use of an accessible form of slang in fiction, and that translators subsequently rely on strategies that infuse the text with a certain fluency. Venuti (1995: 60) frames fluency as a practice that stresses "immediate

intelligibility and an avoidance of polysemy, or indeed any play on the signifier that erodes the coherence of the signified”. Throughout his book, he argues that such concerns with fluidity, flow, and fluency within domesticating approaches to translation are a form of “ethnocentric violence”, concealed by the shield of transparency, or the “illusion that this is not a translation, but the foreign text” (Venuti, 1995: 61). Similar to plays produced following the guidelines of Stanislavsky’s system, domestication finds its backbone in a show of smoke and mirrors, hoping to persuade audiences that they have access to an authentic version of the reality presented.

When it comes to the production of slang in fiction, these concepts are borne out in the use of a sanitized and penetrable version of slang, or what Pym labels parody. In this way, the voice given to marginalized characters does not hinder understanding as the language appears credible while allowing audiences to indulge in the pleasure of reading or watching, compelled to forget the outside world. Various features of *Kiffe kiffe demain* by Faiza Guène bear signs of such an approach. With five books published in France by a leading publisher and four published in the Anglosphere, Guène is no doubt the most prominent banlieue writer. In France, her writing is the most widely available work from or set in the *banlieue*, and her voice is one of the very few that has crossed the border into the Anglosphere. Published by Hachette in 2004, *Kiffe kiffe demain* is Guène’s most successful novel. It is narrated in the first person by Doria, a teenage girl who lives alone with her mother in a social-housing apartment slightly north of Paris. The novel’s forty very short chapters, each between two and five pages in length, might be read as a series of brief diary entries. The writing style is relaxed and peppered with words and expressions typical of *banlieue* youth, affording the novel the appearance of being delivered directly to the reader by the young narrator. The voice remains accessible to readers unpractised in *banlieue* youth language: Guène takes care to harness the most widely recognizable traits of this language. In the rare cases where an uncommon word or expression is used, it is buffered through subtle in-text explanations that allow the reader to understand its meaning.

*Kiffe kiffe demain* was initially translated into English for the British market by Sarah Ardizzone, published as *Just Like Tomorrow* by Chatto & Windus in 2006. A heavily-edited version of this translation appeared several months later in the US, published by Harcourt under the title *Kiffe Kiffe Tomorrow*, and the two versions of the text differ drastically in linguistic detail. Each edition of the novel in English makes use of a broad form of national equivalence, opting for a style that evokes the voice of a teenager from the UK or the US. A similar strategy is therefore adopted in both the original text and the translation, since the features of the language used are not so abstruse as to impair understanding and allow readers to link easily the voice and the character. The fact that the initial translation was edited for an American audience does however suggest that the US editors found it necessary to tweak the marked British voice of the initial translation to avoid readers associating the language with the UK rather than to the French setting. Their decision reveals the limits of adopting a replacement slang in translation and acts as a reminder of the function of slang as an indicator of group identity, reflective of a specific place. Although its use might appear natural to an audience for whom the voice belongs to



the national linguistic repertoire, when the text crosses borders the decision to maintain such a style would run the risk of appearing jarring to foreign audiences<sup>2</sup>.

To illustrate how Guène moulded the voice of *banlieue* youth for a broad audience, how Ardizzone tackled the translation of slang, and how this translation was altered for an American audience, we can turn to the very first paragraph of the book. Below is the original French followed first by the initial translation for a UK readership and then by the US version:

FR *C'est lundi et comme tous les lundis, je suis allée chez Mme Burlaud. Mme Burlaud, elle est vieille, elle est moche et elle sent le Para-poux. Elle est inoffensive mais quelquefois, elle m'inquiète vraiment. Aujourd'hui, elle m'a sorti de son tiroir du bas une collection d'images bizarres, des grosses taches qui ressemblaient à du vomit séché. Elle m'a demandé à quoi ça me faisait penser. Je lui ai dit et elle m'a fixée de ses yeux globuleux en remuant la tête comme les petits chiens mécaniques à l'arrière des voitures.*

UK It's Monday and, like every Monday, I've been round at Mrs Burlaud's. Mrs Burlaud is old, ugly and she smells of Quit Nits shampoo. I'd say she's harmless, but sometimes I worry. Today she took a whole load of weird pictures out of her bottom drawer. We're talking huge stains that looked like dried sick. She asked me what they made me think of. When I told her, she stared at me with her sticky-out eyes, shaking her head like one of those toy dogs in the backs of cars.

US It's Monday and, like every Monday, I went over to Madame Burlaud's. Mme Burlaud's old, she's ugly, and she stinks like RID antilice shampoo. She's harmless, but sometimes she worries me. Today she took a whole bunch of weird pictures out of her bottom drawer. There were these huge blobs that looked like dried vomit. She asked me what they made me think about. When I told her she stared at me with her eyes all bugged out, shaking her head like those little toy dogs in the backs of cars.

This paragraph presents some of the most common features of the informal spoken French that is typical of teenagers, notably colloquial lexis and relaxed syntax with detached structures. These features are exploited throughout the novel, complemented by the systematic absence of *ne* in negative verb structures the use of *on* instead of *nous*, which are general traits of informal spoken French, as well as the occasional presence of *verlan* or borrowed Arabic terms. In terms of syntax and spelling, Guène provides a relatively polished and transparent style that avoids clouding the content and hindering understanding, all the while transmitting the impression of teenage speech. In this way, she seems to manage to make her novel appealing to a broad audience, infusing her text with enough traits of *banlieue* language to make it appear credible while being careful not to use language that is so obscure that it might alienate audiences.

As we turn to the translation, we note that the differences between the British and the American versions of the novel are apparent in all aspects of language, surpassing straightforward changes to lexis to imbue the syntax and the punctuation. Structures from the initial translation as seemingly simple as “I've been round at”, no doubt deemed “too British”, are transformed in the US version in what seems to be an effort

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<sup>2</sup> This was also the case for the subtitles of the 1995 cult film *La Haine*, which were also edited for a different target audience. The use of marked African-American vernacular to translate the voice of the French youth appeared so incongruous to many viewers that the director requested a new set of subtitles for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary DVD release.

to avoid jarring the American reader. The American version proposes alternatives that are judged to be more typical and representative of the voice of American teenagers; “I’ve been round at” is thus replaced by “I went over to”. In this first paragraph alone, we observe a striking number of changes made to the first translation: filler words at the beginning of sentences are erased or edited (the hedge “I’d say” and reformulation “We’re talking” disappear in the American version), lexical changes are made (“a whole load of” replaced by “a whole bunch of”, “sticky-out” replaced by “all bugged out”), various modulations shift the point of view (“I worry” shifts to the passive voice through a change in subject and becomes “she worries me”), and prepositions are altered (“smells of” replaced by “stinks like”, with “smell” also replaced by the more informal “stink”, “think of” becomes “think about”).

Through the techniques applied in both the original and the translated text, we note an apparent desire to produce a text that allows audiences to lose themselves in the text since the writing style remains accessible. The three versions of the novel offer a smooth, toned-down version of urban youth slang which does not challenge readers, including rather than including them, inviting them into the narrator’s world as a welcome guest. Venuti’s stance on domesticating strategies such as these is far from ambiguous as he positions himself closely beside Antoine Berman who defines the ethical aim of translation as receiving “the foreign as foreign” (Venuti, 1985: 69). We can identify parallels between Venuti’s and Berman’s opinions and the numerous objections to the state of enchantment that Felski presents. Within her discussions, she offers the argument that the “analytical part of your mind recedes into the background; your inner censor and critic are nowhere to be found” (Felski, 2008: 55). Though Stanislavsky might argue that the pleasure of observing a polished performance holding up the illusion of reality allows audiences to engage with the situation so that they are able to connect fiction and reality, Brecht’s mentality can be more closely linked with the words offered by Felski. His theater espouses the arousal of its spectators’ intellectual engagement with the play being performed, and he argues that “the epic theater will cultivate a critical perspective in its audience, allowing them to lean back thoughtfully and to assess what is happening on stage rather than surrendering to a hypnotic trance” (in Willet, 1978: 56). Such an objective spurns techniques used to draw a veil over the foreignness of the text, preferring to reveal rather than to erase the artifice of performance.

## 6. Foreignisation, distancing, shock

While the set of strategies discussed above seek to present a performance that conceals the fictional nature of the text at hand, opposing approaches may aim to reveal the manufactured nature of the words and scenarios offered to audiences. In this way, there is a more direct avowal of the context from which the non-fictional reality of the text is produced. Venuti’s advocacy of foreignization in translation, Brecht’s preference for distancing in theater, and Felski’s reflections on shock may all be seen together in this light as audiences are asked to engage with the text in a less emotional and empathizing manner as they recognize that what they are presented with is a deliberate reconstruction of a specific situation. When authors adopt an approach to make the mechanisms of production visible, what is foreign and unfamiliar is presented as such, with minimal effort to adapt the text to the audience’s sensibilities.

In the theater, Brecht advocated for the implementation of numerous techniques and devices to achieve the desired effect of detachment. He drew inspiration from a number of sources, acknowledging in a 1957 essay entitled “Theater for Pleasure or Theater for Instruction”:

Stylistically speaking, there is nothing all that new about the epic theater. Its expository character and its emphasis on virtuosity bring it close to the old Asiatic theater. Didactic tendencies are to be found in the medieval mystery plays and the classical Spanish theater, and also in the theater of the Jesuits. (in Willet, 1978: 75-76)

The hallmark of his approach to theater-making is the *Verfremdungseffekt*, or the *V-effekt*, translated variously into English as “estrangement”, “alienation”, “distancing”, and “defamiliarization”. This endeavor sought to encourage the audience to deconstruct and unpack the acceptability of the situations and conventions on stage and relating them to the world off stage. It seems important to specify that the goal lies not in not estranging or alienating the audience, as such, but rather in encouraging them to become detached, to take distance from the play, to reassess the reality of the world around them and push them in the direction of action. As such, the use of “alienation” may in fact be seen as a potentially misleading translation since the objective is not necessarily to push the audience away, or at least not so much so that they are prevented from engaging with the text, but to push them in the direction of a form of detachment that enables critical observation, unencumbered by emotion.

As part of the *V-effekt* and Brecht’s broader aesthetics, the repertoire of epic theater includes a number of devices enlisted to draw attention to the artificiality of the production. Among these techniques are the use of masks and make-up worn by actors to enhance their unemotional and mechanical acting, intended to demonstrate rather than embody the characters breaking of the fourth wall. Brecht also encouraged the use of signs and placards, songs and chants, often performed by a chorus, and a narrator who often makes explicit the moral of the story or suspends any suspense by revealing the fate of the characters at the beginning of certain scenes. Overall, he promoted a general separation of the elements of performance (words, music and setting must become independent of one another” and a disjointed, episodic style that requires audiences to assemble independent scenes (Willet, 1978: 38). When combined in practice, these techniques can contribute to encouraging a reaction that Felski labels shock, “to what is startling, painful, even horrifying” (Felski, 2008: 105).

Speaking specifically of the illusion of transparency in fiction, Venuti highlights the risks of taking what is foreign and presenting it on familiar terms when he states that “a fluent translation masquerades as true semantic equivalence when it in fact inscribes the foreign text with a partial interpretation, partial to [target]-language values, reducing if not simply excluding the very difference that translation is called on to convey” (Venuti, 1995: 21). He sees foreignizing strategies of translation as the ideal antidote to the tyranny of fluency since they that allow translators to “resist dominant target-language cultural values so as to signify the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text” (*ibid.*: 23), and his views on translation correspond with Brecht’s ideas of theater-making. Since, as it has become increasingly clear through the discussions presented in this article, we can envisage the process of producing a written performance of slang as an act of translating the voice of the Other, Venuti’s remarks on translation can also be applied to the writing of “original” fictional texts.

When it comes to fictional texts that seek to expose the unnatural craft of writing and translating slang, fluency is left in the wings as the language is presented without concerns for the audience’s ability to decipher its complexities. The audience-text relationship can thus be said to resemble the actual gap that exists between speakers

of slang and “outsiders” in the initial, real-life performance of slang. Authors do not make an effort to bring the text closer to the audience, relying on their willingness to decipher for themselves the rawness of the language presented to them. Though the type of shock engendered by the inclusion of raw forms non-standard language in fictional texts cannot be equated entirely with many of the reactions Felski outlines, “woven out of variegated strands of revulsion, horror, and disbelief” (Felski, 2008: 113), it may nevertheless be seen as a means of extracting audiences from the comfort of easy entertainment. When authors shy away from sugarcoating the style of speech used, the audience may find themselves shocked, or at least jarred, and distanced, by less familiar and more abstruse aspects of the language of the Other, potentially provoking (albeit in extreme cases) a reaction that “disables both mind and body” (Felski, 2008: 113).

As we saw in the previous section of this article, the approach adopted in writing and translating *Kiffe kiffe demain* seeks to present the narrator’s voice in understandable, relatable terms. Such an attitude to reader inclusion is unsurprising when one considers the ultimate commercial goal of most fictional texts, since the act of making audiences uncomfortable seems largely incompatible with the desire to sell books, cinema tickets, or DVDs. In fact, very few successful *banlieue* texts provide a raw version of the voice of its young residents, preferring to present what appears to be an authentic version of the slang spoken in the area through a carefully-measured dose of common linguistic features of the language. When potentially puzzling language is used, it tends to be subtly buffered, as in *Kiffe kiffe demain*, by contextual information to enable understanding while coaxing audiences to believe that they have succeeded in cracking a foreign linguistic code. Even in cases where the language might be more opaque than in Guène’s rather polished slangy style, authors act as illusionists capable of convincing crowds of their credibility.

Such sorcery is often observed in interlingual translation, too, as we saw for *Kiffe kiffe demain*, since translators also work to ensure audiences feel at ease when exposed to a foreign (con)text. The increased distance between the audience and the situation presented, as well as the precarious position in which translated works tend to find themselves, explain in part the apparent reticence to adopt foreignizing strategies. If a translator does, however, choose to emphasize the foreignness of the work, they might choose to borrow lexis from the source language and transplant it directly into the target text without facilitating the audience’s ability to unravel their foreignness. Alternatively, or additionally, they may opt for a more inventive style of writing to express the non-standard nature of the slang used in the original text, or harness a comparable replacement slang which poses similar problems challenges for the target audience as for the source audience in terms of understanding. To varying degrees, such techniques allow the translator to present the otherness of the slang in a way that highlights the characters’ marginalization and linguistic difference from dominant social groups, of which many audience members form part.

To close this section, it is worth considering Felski’s argument that although seeking to provoke shock might lead to the quick dissipation of its effects, “the after-shocks can reverberate in the psyche for some time; the suddenness of the initial impact is succeeded by an extended, delayed, or belated array of psychic or somatic reactions” (Felski, 2008: 113). Brecht also sought to incite sustained reactions to his work as he appealed to his spectators’ sense of reason, rather than to their emotions, exposing the hidden strings of performance. Both Felski’s and Brecht’s reflections coincide with Venuti’s desire to see the use of translation strategies that draw the

audience's attention to the foreign nature of the text before them and the performance of interpretation and translation that has preceded its production. In an effort to facilitate such modes of engagement, such forms of creation rely on the use of techniques that hinder hypnosis, requiring audiences to observe the text as fiction, and to recognize that the performance of language is created and curated by a number of players within the framework of fiction. When it comes to fictionalized versions of the slang spoken by members of minority groups, we may therefore wonder how the apparent accuracy of the voice presented might contribute to soliciting various audience reactions depending on their ability to decipher the meaning of the words in front of them.

## **7. Against the grain?**

When both Stanislavsky and Brecht incorporated devices used in various forms of theater, past and present, to complement their new, innovative means of production, they were in effect reacting to the trends of their time, proposing an alternative approach to making theater. According to Leach, "naturalism in the theater was above all a reaction against the conventions of melodrama, escapism, 'stock types', and the like" (Leach, 2004: 10). Stanislavsky sought to create a new mode of production where "the art of the theater should take precedence over the box office" (*ibid.*: 12) and wanted to start afresh, using new actors rather than established professionals who "had the old bad habit of the theater ingrained in their approach" (*ibid.*: 13). Brecht, too, wanted to forge a new path for the theater, but was opposed to the embracing of illusion that the theater of Stanislavsky, 35 years his senior, embodies. Though the specifics of Stanislavsky's system are not necessarily followed to the letter in contemporary theater-making practice, the overarching will to suspend audiences' disbelief is, by all accounts, a fundamental concern for most people producing texts. This concern can be extended and aligned with the common preoccupation with fluidity and fluency in source and translated texts, and the general desire to not shake audiences' sensibilities.

For Pascale Casanova, the road to international notoriety is paved with a delicate dose of conformity, since aspiring writers daring to dream of entering the canon are granted this privilege only if their work is validated by people higher up the literary ladder. She offers reflections on the knottiness inherent in writing and translating texts, stating that dominated, emerging writers are placed firmly within the clasp of the canon's custodians (2007: 218). Writers, it would seem, are faced with the unfortunate feat of deciphering from the literary trends *de rigueur* the extent to which they should deviate from formal and thematic norms in a way that will satisfy the criteria of those who hold the key to their success. In a context where readers seem hesitant to take the plunge into the foreign waters of translated literature, as indicated by the low percentage of translated works available in English, with the exact figure hovering around 3% of all literature available depending on the country, one might be inclined to apply this reasoning to the techniques used in translation. In any case, it serves as an important reminder that all decisions in writing, re-writing, and performing texts should be considered within the broader context of their application.

Practicing epic theater requires a certain openness on the part of theatergoers (and makers) who must be predisposed to innovation and to the use of theater beyond a form of entertainment. Brecht acknowledges this on numerous occasions in his writing and stated in 1957 that "these theatrical forms correspond to particular trends

in their time, and vanished with them. Similarly, the modern epic theater is linked with certain trends. It cannot by any means be practiced universally” (in Willet, 1978: 76). His thoughts tie in with the question of norms, which can be related to the rise and relative demise of his system. It should be stated that part of the pull of Brecht’s theater-making techniques relied initially on its unusual and unfamiliar aspects, and Leach explains that these eventually became predictable and formulaic through overuse, at least for a time, having lost their “shock” value and resisting further innovation: “[...] the ‘Brecht style’ [...] created a theatrical uniformity which became increasingly dull, while the ‘Brecht method’, including hackneyed V-effects and anticipated gesticulations, sank into a morass of orthodoxy” (Leach, 2004: 145). Leach’s reflections pay testament to the way in which that which is initially atypical can gradually become typical through distribution and repetition, and we can see parallels between this line of thought and ideas put forward in translation and literary studies on norms.

Felski offers comparable thoughts on the likelihood of unusual techniques becoming usual through exposure and comments in particular on the shock to lose its power when audiences have become accustomed to the devices used to perform it. Expanding on this view, she states that “we are now immune to the shocking insofar shock itself has become routine: we inhabit a world of frenetic change and frantic rhythms, immersed in a culture that is driven by an insatiable demand for novelty and sensation” (Felski, 2008: 107). Furthermore, Felski warns that the effects of shock must be “characterized as uncertain, unstable, and difficult to calibrate” since “shaking up consciousness is a strenuous and far from straightforward enterprise” (*ibid.*: 130). She also explains that it “teeters precariously between the threat of two forms of failure, caught between the potential humiliation of audience indifference and the permanent risk of outright and outraged refusal” (*ibid.*: 131). Her thoughts point to concerns of marketability in marginal forms of art when less common strategies are employed. The fact that so few translated texts are published in the Anglosphere means that translation can be seen as one such marginal form of art, potentially pushing authors and translators to conform to dominant trends.

As the discussions above have demonstrated, audiences are generally poorly placed to determine the authenticity and accuracy of the slang used in fictional texts. However, it must be recognized that this inability on the part of readers to ascertain the accuracy of the slang used in fictional texts is compounded in translation. This is because the distance between the characters and the reader is even greater than in the original, and foreign readers further lack much of the contextual cultural baggage afforded to readers of the original through geographical proximity. Felski argues that “while we do not usually mistake books for persons, we often think of them as conveying the attitudes of persons, as upholding or questioning larger ideas and collective ways of thinking” (Felski, 2008: 32). The way in which the voice of a broader group is presented to audiences in a fictional text necessarily influences their inclination to assume that the text reflects particular aspects of a certain (socio)linguistic reality. This tendency to associate reality and fiction can be linked to what Felski refers to as knowledge, or “what literature discloses about the world beyond the self, to what it reveals about people and things, mores and manners, symbolic meanings and social stratification” (*ibid.*: 83).

Though authors may endeavor to engineer a unique connection between fiction and reality through their use of specific techniques to produce fictionalized slang, it is vital to acknowledge that the personal preferences and attitudes of individual audience



members may compromise in part any aim to provoke specific reactions. If an author decides to refuse fluidity and accessibility and instead draw attention to the artificiality of the voice of the Other provided for audiences within a text, source or target, we may see the risk of conflating fiction and reality reduced. However, if the audience is pulled forcibly out of the illusion and encouraged to identify the fictional nature of the text before them, they may be less likely to engage with the text, feeling distanced to the extent that they disengage completely and feel no concern, objective or empathetic, for the people portrayed. While some might respond well to the ebb of foreignization, distancing, and shock, others may prefer the flow of domestication, naturalism, and enchantment. When it comes to slang in fiction, it would seem that both ends of the spectrum involve an element of illusion: authors are faced with the feat of turning spoken speech into written words, a task that involves compromise, since complete accuracy is fundamentally impossible. Slang transcribed on the page remains, in source and target texts, domesticated or foreignized, fiction. As such, audiences eager to hear “true” performances of marginalized groups must accept the flawed representation of individual realities offered to them and acknowledge the fact that accuracy or authenticity are accessible only on the stage of urban spaces, not of the authored page. It goes (almost) without saying that venturing into such spaces inevitably involves more risks than those imposed by fiction, regardless of whether the author seeks to please or to perturb.

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