Theories and Methodologies

Translation and Interpreting and the Public Humanities: A Forum

LAMIA BENYOUSSEF, AWA DIAGNE LO, STACY MOSHER, AND N. IMANI ROBINSON
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On 27 March 2024, South Carolina Centro Latino (El Centro), at the University of South Carolina Upstate, hosted the ninth annual Translation and Interpreting Conference in-person and virtually. The first university-based center for the study of Hispanic and Latinx cultures in South Carolina, El Centro focuses on Latinx interdisciplinary studies and civic leadership, multilingual public humanities, and translation and community interpreting. The theme of this year's conference was "Women Found in Translation," highlighting the pioneering contributions of women interpreters and translators representing Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Spanish, and Wolof. The discussion was moderated and organized by Maria Francisco-Montesó, assistant director of South Carolina Centro Latino, senior instructor of Spanish translation and interpreting at the University of South Carolina Upstate, and an accredited translator and interpreter. The participants were Lamia Benyoussef, who was then associate professor (Arabic, English, French) in the modern foreign languages department at Birmingham-Southern College and is now a lecturer in French at Santa Clara University; Stacy Mosher, an English and Chinese language translator; N. Imani Robinson, an English and Spanish language interpreter and translator; Awa Diagne Lo, a French, English, and Wolof language translator and interpreter; and Araceli Hernández-Laroche, director of South Carolina Centro Latino and professor of modern languages at University of South Carolina Upstate.

The panelists reflect and offer local and global perspectives on their intellectual labor anchored in language, bridging cultures and

Biographical notes about the contributors appear at the end of the forum.

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communities, and making public the need for more translation and interpreting—core values of public humanities. They demonstrate how translation and interpreting bring critical humanities skills to an array of professions in the legal, healthcare, business, and education fields while pushing the boundaries of scholarly inquiry to preserve less commonly taught languages and cultures, expand the borders of much needed community interpreting, amplify women's voices from non-Western cultures and resist harmful stereotypes, and render publicly accessible to English-speaking audiences the writings of journalists and authors. Their insights urge us to consider the role of translation and interpreting in emerging markets and public services, especially because US institutions of higher education lack robust academic programs in these critically relevant humanities fields to meet the growing local and global needs of various publics. The work of the public humanities cannot flourish without translation, since many public debates and discussions, both within the United States and on a planetary scale, are carried out not only in widely spoken languages like English, Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Arabic, Hindi, Bengali, Kiswahili, and French but also in languages that are less internationally dispersed and express the aspirations, fears, and ideas of millions of people.

What is the scope and impact of the public humanities when they exclusively engage their publics monolingually and not in their preferred language(s)? The roundtable panelists demonstrate the misconceptions and misperceptions of their highly in-demand fields. They show us not what we have lost in translation but rather what we lose when we underinvest in making public and accessible translations and in supporting sustainable academic and workforce conditions for translation scholars and practitioners.

Literary translators and interpreters invite us to articulate the theory and methods for the existence of the multilingual public humanities. To theorize the public humanities, we cannot afford to leave out voices we cannot hear or read from around the globe, many of which are coexisting on the other side of our university walls—unengaged and underrepresented in our scholarship. Literary translation as a publicly engaged humanities practice is a form of resistance against the erasure of the theoretical underpinnings and depth of humanist thought circulating today and in yesterday's national and global archives. Interpreting studies, which necessitate the rigorous teaching of advanced levels of language proficiencies, render possible the Sisyphean yet necessary pursuit of language access and justice.

To theorize and put into practice solutions facing humanity's increasingly complex and layered existential crises and opportunities, we need access to and connection with public scholars, humanists, students, and community partners representing diverse linguistic backgrounds and philosophies. To echo Jacques Derrida, "We never only speak one language" (8). We can bridge daunting communication, imagination, and theoretical gaps when we speak the same language and sustain dialogue through translation and interpretation. As this roundtable suggests, public humanities that do not attend to language justice are neither public nor manifestations of the humanities. The transcript has been edited for length and clarity by Araceli Hernández-Laroche.

Maria Francisco-Montesó: My goal is to raise awareness for nonprofessionals who like languages or cultures or who may be bilingual—to help them learn about the professional opportunities related to their interests and bilingualism. What is translation and interpreting? Translators work with written documents, and interpreters work with verbal, spoken messages. Both disciplines share the goal of overcoming linguistic barriers. The skills you learn as a translator or interpreter differ. The tools are completely different too. Not all translators are interpreters. Not all interpreters are translators. You become someone else's voice when you are a translator or an interpreter. It's an art. It's a skill. Some of our panelists are literary translators—they think about the audience, the culture, and so many different nuances. The lack of academic programs in translation and interpreting

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has created a need for accrediting bodies such as the American Translators Association to make these subjects more professional and to support language access and justice. Language access provides speakers of languages other than English with reasonable access to the same services that English speakers have. In a legal context, language justice is a commitment to ensuring that individuals are not denied access to services and justice based on their national origin, ethnic identification, and language. We cannot attain language access or language justice without professional translators and interpreters. Our panelists undertake this work in multiple ways.

Awa Diagne Lo serves as a staff French translator and interpreter at Lions Club International in Chicago, where her work supports breaking down language barriers to ensure that humanitarian action and solidarity services are never hindered. Imani Robinson is a certified medical interpreter and an educational interpreter in South Carolina. Lamia Benyoussef is the translator of Olfa Youssef's *The Perplexity of a Muslim Woman: Over Inheritance, Marriage, and Homosexuality*. Stacy Mosher has translated more than a dozen books and scores of articles by authors from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. I'd like to ask each of you to define what translation means to you.

Awa Diagne Lo: Translation and interpreting are fundamentally about communication and bridging the difference between cultures and between people and about understanding. My approach varies depending on the language that I am translating or interpreting. French and Wolof are my native languages. Wolof is particularly close to my heart because my parents speak Wolof and that's really my emotional language. It's spoken natively by just five million people. When I am translating or interpreting Wolof, it's about giving access and reach to my people, and not allowing my language to be forgotten in the world. French, the language we inherited from colonization, is widely used in Senegal and in many francophone communities in the world. It is also a traditional language for simultaneous interpreting, especially at high-level conferences like those at the United Nations. My connection to French is largely about cultural diplomacy. Usually when I interpret or translate for French, it is at conferences. English is about global reach because it is undeniably the most spoken language in the world in professional and academic circles. With English, I really get to connect with a tremendous number of cultures. Thanks to my profession, I communicate with people, develop empathy, and deepen my understanding of other cultures.

Imani Robinson: Translation is a bridge that connects cultures and people. Sometimes when in public I would notice Spanish speakers struggling to communicate and would step in to ask if they needed help and if I could help them. I think it's important to make experiences accessible to everyone.

Lamia Benyoussef: Translation, for me as a teacher of French and Arabic, is necessary. There are many French and Arabic texts that I would like to teach, but they are not available in English. It's so frustrating that I started to translate the poems that I need to teach a particular aspect of the Arabic-speaking world. The only translations are medieval texts or biographical narratives by Muslim women that fall into the category of "translation texts about saving brown women from brown men." I decided to create and translate for my own syllabus. I don't want to be limited by the types of texts that are available in English. While at Birmingham-Southern College, I did a little bit of interpretation to meet the community service requirement for faculty members. I volunteered at the Alabama Family Court when they needed someone who speaks Arabic, and I was able to get certified by the State Court of Alabama.

Stacy Mosher: I really liked the word that Awa used—"access"—in both directions. I remember before I went to Hong Kong in 1980, I wanted to read some Chinese literature or books about China. But at that time, China was just starting to open to the world, and I could not find many books related to China, so I went there cold. I didn't know anything. I find that many Chinese

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authors really want access to international readership. They want their books to be translated into English so that people can read them. There is a huge demand for this. It really works both ways—people need to understand each other on both sides. The conduits are just not plentiful enough.

Maria Francisco-Montesó: Please explain how you got into these fields.

Awa Diagne Lo: It all started in 2014 or 2015 when I was an undergraduate student in France and looking for opportunities to teach French. That led to requests for translations in French and eventually in Wolof once people realized I was from Senegal. Wolof translation soon became my niche. Then I worked on freelance platforms, subtitling projects, and other independent contracts. My real dip into interpreting started when I was a project manager in agriculture in Senegal, developing training for field workers in Senegal and Mali. At the time, I was one of the few employees who spoke French, Wolof, and English. I loved seeing understanding reflected in people's expressions; it is a very addictive feeling for an interpreter. I later pursued a master's degree in translation and interpretation at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey.

Imani Robinson: When I began interpreting, it almost felt like I had a superpower. My first experience interpreting as an adult and for someone other than my family was when I was in college. I worked at an afterschool program with many Hispanic parents and was put in the role of an unofficial interpreter. I liked how it felt. I went on to take Maria's wonderful translation and interpreting classes and was able to expand on my talent and hone my superpower. Yes, I majored in my native language, and I don't regret it. I use my major every day, and I love my job.

Lamia Benyoussef: I got into translation maybe seventeen years ago, when I started to work in American academia post-9/11. Even though I have a PhD in English, I was only offered teaching positions in Arabic. There was a lot of discrimination against Arab Americans. Arabic was taught only as a critical language—that is, as a dangerous language—and speakers of Arabic were put in a position of becoming native informants to help with the work overseas. I took a position teaching Arabic and decided to teach what I wanted about the Arab world, not what the department wanted me to teach. I then started translating, and it became a sort of resistance. Look at the texts typically taught in introductory Arabic courses. Why are students learning about Islam and the hijab in Arabic 101? These are American perceptions of the Arab world. There is no perception of communicative Arabic. Students of introductory Spanish aren't taught religion. I studied how Spanish was taught and used its pedagogy instead. I felt, too, that I was asked to teach just about women in Islam and the veil, women and Mohammed, but nothing about what Muslim women produced and created. I translated Olfa Youssef's *The Perplexity of a Muslim Woman: Over Inheritance, Marriage, and Homosexuality*, which was a best-seller in Arabic, but it has never made it into English. Why? It's a text written about Islam by a Muslim woman, an academic who writes in Arabic. In my country, Tunisia, women have reached higher positions in academia than Muslim women like me living in America. There is a respect for women academics, for women in general, that you don't find in the United States. My way of resisting the psychological violence against women minorities in American academia is translating into English the things you don't want to hear.

Stacy Mosher: I had a fascination with language from an early age. I remember being amazed by the Japanese characters in a Japanese-English dictionary. In college, as an English major, I took three years of German, and I really loved the idea of translating from German into English. I don't think there were any classes offered in translation from German to English and vice versa, and it was not something that I aimed to do professionally. Then I ended up going to Hong Kong and learning Chinese. After a few years, I came back to the United States and

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worked for Human Rights in China, where I translated press releases and articles about human rights issues for a quarterly magazine. I focused on translating works by Chinese authors into English, which a lot of people—including Chinese authors—really liked. After I left Human Rights in China, I started translating full time. I found there was a demand for it on both sides. I find it very fulfilling and rewarding, and I really love it.

Maria Francisco-Montesó: In your journey as a translator or an interpreter, what have been some of the most significant barriers and opportunities encountered? How did you navigate these challenges?

Awa Diagne Lo: The biggest barrier is stakeholder education. Clients and sometimes even the people who benefit from interpretation do not understand what interpreting is or the role of the interpreter. Sometimes we are underused, overused, or coerced into doing things outside the scope of the work. People sometimes perceive us as mere tools, like *Google Translate*, thinking we can simply "say it." In Africa, I have done a lot of remote simultaneous interpreting online, and one of the biggest problems is the digital divide—the variously limited access to the technology needed to connect clients and bridge language barriers. In addition, interpreting is a profession with a lot of niches, and it can be challenging to break it into such an insular industry.

Imani Robinson: As a graduate of USC Upstate, I know that professors are worth their weight in gold—Maria has helped me a lot. I also attended Hispanic Alliance meetings in Spartanburg and Greenville, where I could network and meet people who were passionate about helping the Hispanic community. Those meetings were inspiring and urged me to help my community too. As for challenges, I agree with Awa that people do not understand what we do. And my greatest frustration is when people who have used me as an interpreter say that they wish they had more access to professionals like me. Everyone deserves to have quality interpretation available to them.

Lamia Benyoussef: Censorship is a challenge. You might translate a work and find there's no market for it, that no one wants to hear what you have to say. When I had Olfa Youssef's manuscript, it took me three years to find a publisher. I wanted to go mainstream because that is what the author wanted. But to publish in a mainstream press, I had to give up my author's rights as a translator. Now the book belongs to the publisher. A second challenge is that you feel isolated in your field. Often there are very few people in your academic department who understand what you are doing or who can help you. There is not a lot of collaboration among faculty members. However, I have discovered the benefit of collaborating with feminist translators from around the world. Through workshops, they share their strategies, their knowledge, and what it means to make a feminist translation. I learn a lot from my colleagues in different disciplines. For me, that is a highlight of working in translation—the collaborative networking with other translators.

Stacy Mosher: One challenge is getting paid. People seem to think we live on air. The authors often don't have the money to pay us, and that is understandable. But the publishers also say they don't have the money to pay us and then leave us to figure it out. There is no foundational support either. Another frustration that I share with Lamia is when you translate a book and then no one wants to publish it. There is a real bottleneck for getting work on Chinese topics published in English. Somehow there is always this suspicion, sometimes from the author, that you have not done a good enough job and that's why it's not getting published.

Maria Francisco-Montesó: What qualifications and skills do translators need? Tell us about how rapid technological advancements such as AI impact the field.

Awa Diagne Lo: Strong research skills are needed, to be well-versed in a wide range of disciplines and be able to synthesize information quickly. Although, since we interpret such a

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plethora of subjects, it's impossible to know everything. Stress management is also key to interpreting. And it's important to acknowledge mistakes and to recognize where you lack skills. As for AI, it's true that most low-level interpreting and translating will be replaced by technology eventually, if it hasn't yet. However, I would not have such a catastrophic mind-set about it. There is always a need for a responsible person in case something goes wrong. Overall, the key is to find your niche; it's about positioning yourself.

Imani Robinson: You need to have an excellent memory and good note-taking skills. You must take good care of yourself, especially in medical interpreting, to protect yourself from vicarious trauma. You see a lot of things that may affect you greatly, but you must still remain impartial and professional. I do see that AI can do some of the more straightforward translation tasks. I think it's harder for interpreting. I've noticed that at least for my generation and those before me, we prefer to have the human connection. When you find someone who speaks your language, you tend to feel community, comfort. I've found that, when given the choice between an in-person interpreter and a virtual one, most patients prefer an in-person interpreter.

Lamia Benyoussef: There is also the importance of honesty in translation. Sometimes people change the meaning of a text to make it less violent. Other times, parts of a text are omitted in translation. I remember teaching the ninth-century text "The Boasts of Blacks over Whites," by al-Jahiz, in my class about Afro-Arabs. When I compared the original Arabic text with the English translation by Simon Starr, I noticed that entire sections had been deleted. The passages in which the Black Iraqi women slaves speak back, displaying female eloquence and showing that they have a voice as much as the men do, were suppressed in the translation. Honesty is important. When in doubt about how to translate something in a text, go back to the author. If the author is no longer with us, ask others for their opinions about a text, and you'll find that most people will want to help.

Stacy Mosher: One quality that impresses me is humility. Look at the source, text, culture with respect and humility and learn from it as much as possible. Experience always brings improvement. That's not true with all kinds of writing. We find in literature there are some authors who have one good novel and everything after that is just garbage. But I don't think that happens with translators and interpreters. I think we always find that each project we do is better than the last one. As for AI, I informed a funder that a work would take six months to translate, but he thought I could just churn out an AI translation and tweak it. Having said that, translation software has made my job easier. I am glad to have those tools. Since what I charge per word has not increased in fifteen years, efficiency has become the only way I can keep up with inflation.

Araceli Hernández-Laroche: Higher education tends to devalue the humanities, cutting language programs, requiring fewer requirements for English, languages, history, philosophy—for subjects that help us understand the human experience. Can you please share with us how you see your work in translation and interpreting in relation to valuing the humanities, specifically public humanities?

Lamia Benyoussef: Translation can be fun. I create new material for my classes and contribute to the humanities. I understand that most departments don't teach translation and interpretation. It's part of the general trend in academia to want to get rid of the humanities, especially given the structure of corporate academia. We need small language classes. Translation is resistance against the erasure of the humanities.

Stacy Mosher: What I found is that in Chinese studies there are a lot of overseas scholars who have written about China. But there is a need for high-quality work by Chinese authors and scholars to be translated into English because people in their own culture should be the ones who are reflecting what they are seeing. The outside eye has value, too, because there is objectivity there, but you need people who have grown up in that culture, who are steeped

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in its history, who have read the books, who know the language as their mother tongue. Those should be the people who are the main sources of information.

Awa Diagne Lo: In Senegal, it's similar: humanities are looked down on, and STEM fields are more celebrated. Maybe to truly value the humanities, we might need to embrace more interdisciplinarity, integrating languages and culture studies with other fields.

Imani Robinson: Interpretation, as a humanities discipline, should be public and accessible to everyone.

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