

TRANSLATION IN THE FIRST PERSON

Kate Briggs

Thank you so much for the invitation to speak with you today. I consider it a huge honour to be invited to address such a large room of practicing translators. I am the author of a book about the creative and critical practice of literary translation, titled *This Little Art*. And as I said to Marije when we met in Amsterdam a few weeks ago, although I'm deeply grateful for the ways that book has resonated with translators, it wasn't actually written for you. It was written more as an invitation to non-translators to think, perhaps for the first time, about what translation involves and why it is an interesting, generative, potentially transformative thing to do with one's work-time, life-time. Part of my argument in that book was this: I don't think it's possible to engage with this activity of translating without at some point coming up against some of the fundamental questions of aesthetics, relations, ethics and politics, that we're all constantly dealing with and, I would suggest, with each new project, revising or nuancing our positions on: questions such as representation, the right to speak for others, what it is for a translator to speak for herself, the nature and location, force and potential of the translator's voice, which is of course the theme of this gathering. In other words, I took it for granted when writing *This Little Art* that a readership of practicing translators would most likely *have already* encountered and spent some time considering the questions I was trying to phrase.

This talk, on the other hand, was written for you and for this occasion, but again on the assumption that my questions are our questions, and my experiences are probably your experiences, therefore our experiences – they form part of our commons, the part of our shared intellectual resource, specific to and generated and renewed by translation practice. Philosophically speaking, I am committed to the pragmatic position that all thinking arises from and is shaped by the practices in which we, as human beings, engage. A distinctive practice, such as translation, produces distinctive concepts, and distinctive meanings, and distinctive forms of thinking and knowing.

This makes thought social in two important senses.

First, although we might think and work in solitude, we make sense of our activities by means of concepts and values that are developed socially, in dialogue and conversation, in setting such as these. That would be the purpose and the great opportunity of occasions such as these.

Second, thought does not ever transcend its social contexts. Here I am quoting from a book titled *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* by Sara Ruddick, published in 1980s, a book which was hugely important to me when writing *The Long Form*, a novel I published in 2023.

Ruddick writes: “there is no truth to be apprehended from a transcendental perspective, that is, from no perspective at all ... Limit and perspective are intrinsic to language and to thought, not a deficiency of them.”

I think we could productively rephrase or translate that line as: Limit and perspective are intrinsic to translation practice, not a deficiency of it.

As you’ll see, I have printed a hand out to accompany this talk. Which lists all the books or works or practices referred to in this talk in the order of appearance – it is an effort to share who I am thinking with, with my own limits and perspective, but also to make a contribution to this collective resource, the co-elaborated body of distinctive practical knowledge we are all producing with our thinking and our work.

And now I’d like to begin – with an anecdote. A small true story from life.

Over ten years ago, before *This Little Art* was published, I received an email.

It was an invitation to take part in an event around a lecture course by Roland Barthes, titled *Comment Vivre Ensemble*, or *How to Live Together*, which I had translated into English in 2013.

At that time, I was still living in Paris, and my children were small. The event would be happening just down the road near the BNF, National Library, so as I skimmed the invitation I was already feeling flattered to be asked and excited to meet the other participants and thinking: great, yes, for once I think could actually attend.

The event would take place in English. The organizers had invited a range of different theorists and practitioners to select one of the different topics Barthes treats, sometimes only very briefly in his lecture course on living together and expand on it in their own way. Among the topics to choose from were: animals, names, proxemics, utopia, idyll and flowers.

This was so up my street.

I replied very quickly: what a wonderful project! I'd love to take part! Thank you for your invitation! Enthusiasm covered with enthusiasm.

A few hours later, I received a response.

Dear Kate,
this is embarrassing.

Embarrassing for us, and – they didn't say, but I felt it – embarrassing for you.

To clarify: we weren't actually inviting you to speak.

But rather to come along and translate.

An eminent Barthes scholar will be present at the event, and as he's not so confident in English, we were wondering that since you're a translator – which you are, aren't you, please correct us if we've got that wrong? -- we would like to invite you to translate his presentation ahead of time, and then live translate the discussion that follows. For a small fee. Of course.

Thank you for your understanding. Or apologies for any misunderstanding.

Looking forward to your response. All best wishes, kind regards, etc.

First, I will say that, yes, I was initially embarrassed: because I hadn't read the invitation properly, that I'd said yes too fast, too enthusiastically, with too much feeling, that can always be received as a bit embarrassing – but I have been trying to change that in ways I'll come back to later on. But mostly because I'd assumed something, or over-estimated something, possibly my own capacities, or a public's interest in my perspective, or simply myself?

Then the feeling shifted: and I was both angry and confused. If I had assumed that I was being asked to speak, it was because I clearly felt that I had something to say – something to contribute to discussion of this course that I had spent three years translating. Why had this not occurred to the organizers? What narrow conception of the translator and of the work of translation must they have been attached to, for them not think that I had any knowledge or insights of my own to share? There is a lot to say about Barthes's lecture course in terms of its specific translation challenges (which I won't go into now). I will only point out what we already know: that every translation works like a form of illumination, a particular sort of angle poise lamp lighting up distinctive aspects of the original text, aspects that only reveal themselves when you are tasked with translating it. What's more, the light is angled differently depending on which language you are translating into. The difference of English shows us things about the specific use of French, the difference of Dutch shows something else ... and so on.

So I was angered but my confusion was more troubling. Why, I asked myself, was I not satisfied with the role and the form of participation that was being offered to me? After all, I am a French to English translator. So why did I receive as it a reduction or a slight to be invited to come along and do what I do? Did I not – do I not believe that translating – the doing of it – is in itself a form of speaking, if we take that to mean, contributing, publicly producing knowledge? Is that not what I was suggesting just a moment ago? So why feel offended when I wasn't offered an expansion or addition to that role?

The end of the story is that I did go along and I did meet these people who were in fact very nice. I did translate the eminent scholar's presentation and did translate the live q and a. And I did write about this story in an early version of *This Little Art*. Because it is a scene from life which I think holds a number of interesting questions. However, then I cut it from the final version of the book for two related reasons:

First, I didn't want to shame the organizers, in print. They were genuinely embarrassed by the misunderstanding although not so embarrassed that they revised their invitation and said, Kate, please speak! Tell us what you have to say!

The second reason I cut it was that is at that time I didn't want to be seen to complain. To be difficult, an irritant, a downer. It's not easy, to inhabit the position of refusing to go along with what's being offered to you, of speaking up, and possibly making other people unhappy, when everyone else appears happy. The position of what you might call ingratitude.

On this, I want to refer you to the work of feminist writer and scholar and activist Sara Ahmed. Specifically to her notion of the feminist killjoy. And more specifically to the Killjoy Manifesto which concludes her book *Living a Feminist Life*, where she argues for the importance of saying the difficult uncomfortable thing. Of refusing to simply accept the conditions of work and expression that are made available to us, because for example, we happen to be doing the work that we love. The point of the manifesto is also recognize the costs of putting oneself in that position and to honour those who do so. Which brings me to a pressing question:

If and when a translator *is* given a platform to speak directly and publicly, to an audience, what should she speak of?

Is not the most urgent topic, this question of recognition and understanding, which is linked to pay and visibility, in other words, to the material conditions under which our human-made labour gets produced?

And on this I would refer to you a brilliant recent book by German to English translator, novelist and poet Jen Calleja, titled *Fair: The Life-Art of translation*. Which

playfully but also urgently demystifies the working conditions of a literary translator. It ends with Jen pondering seriously whether it is a profession she can continue with – because it simply doesn't support her. A Booker Prize nominated translator, she cannot make her living from it.

As translators, when we are invited speak, perhaps what we still to need do first is complain. Speaking for myself, I don't make a living from my translations. It is inconceivable to me, given the pace at which I work, and the kinds of books I translate, that I could do so. Instead, or as well as, or more accurately in order to translate and write the books that I write, I teach at an art school. For my two most recent translations: I was paid 10 pence a word, which is the recommended rate recognized by the Society of Authors in the UK. These were short books, novellas, so that equates, per book to about 2,800 pounds.

It is not enough to live on.

When speak we should demystify our working conditions for each other so that we can better understand who exactly is in a position to do this work, and how to get in that position, and how remain in it, over a career, a lifetime, given how poorly it is paid.

But what about this other question the story raised? The question of what it is to speak via a translation, that is to say more indirectly by way of a translation, via the decision to translate this and not this, to advocate to translate this and not this, or to accept a commission or invitation to translate this and not this, and then via all the micro-decisions that make a translation read this way and not any other way? Are these not also meaningful and consequential modes of speaking?

Yes, I do think so. But what manner of speaking is this?

I will say first that – clearly -- I have felt the impulse to annotate my translations. I consider both *This Little Art* and *The Long Form* as expanded annotations or indirect commentaries on my translations of Barthes's lecture notes, in the form of an essay, in the first case, and a novel, in the second. The novel I am working on now is an

indirect annotation of the novellas I have recently translated by H  l  ne Bessette. So, on some level, I must have felt that the translations themselves were in some ways not enough, and the paratextual spaces available to me as a translation – the translators’ introduction or note or interview – were likewise not quite roomy enough to hold everything that I wanted to say. But that doesn’t mean I don’t consider translating itself as a profoundly interesting, and provocative, even exemplary form of speaking.

An early working title for *This Little Art* was “translation in the first person”. – hence the title of my talk today. I still like that phrase. To my ear, it holds a deeply interesting contradiction or tension. Because when does a translator, when translating, ever actually fully speak in the first person. Is she not always inhabiting the I, the subject position, of someone else, an author, a narrator, a character? When does the I she is setting down on the page in the context of a translation, ever refer directly to herself? But also, when does it not? And how to tell?

There is passage in *This Little Art* where I am quoting and retranslating a line of thinking from Roland Barthes in his lecture course on the novel.

Here Barthes is talking about how in his life, he has changed position, let go of previous positions, how what he may have been interested in writing and thinking about 10 or 15 years ago no longer fascinates him... how the I of his earlier essays such as *The Death of the Author* does not refer to the same person as the I he is now. I will read this passage, as it appears in my book:

The point is, I'm not immobile.

Neither I nor the writing I have published is immobile.

And yet it's something people seem to find very hard to accept.

There's an aggressiveness to this attitude, in this assumption that I haven't – that surely I can't have – moved.

People will lose touch for five years and then expect to find me again, whenever they feel like calling me up, in the same chair, waiting by the phone.

Which is to say: we all think of the other as available, as always on hand.

I do it too, probably.

Of course.

But in reality, my impulse, my fantasy is to change position, to be reborn.

Which means: I am never where you want me to be.

New page.

I –

Which I now, Barthes or me?

In *This Little Art* I wrote:

Me: the translator, testing out and writing into a new translation of the recording of this lecture all these decades later, heartbeat racing in an effort to get this right...

I think of Renee Gladman, poet and novelist, asking her interviewer in an interview: 'When you're reading translations, don't you sometimes feel the racing heartbeat of the translator trying to get shit right?'

Recently, *This Little Art* was translated into French by Arianne des Rochers. Here solution to translating passage was to add a sentence. In French it reads:

Je –

Quel je, maintenant, Barthes ou moi ?

Et quel moi, maintenant, Kate ou Arianne...

Which I now, Barthes or me?

And which me now, Kate or Arianne?

Where I wrote, or insisted, “me”, Arianne writes “Kate” to mark the distinction, or rather to make clear that there is now a third person here in this relational dynamic, another translator, and her name is Arianne.

Consider the weird nature of pronouns, these ‘shifters’ which allow us – if only ever temporarily-- to inject a sentence with our subjectivity, knowing that it won’t hold it – for all it need take is for another voice to come along and read the passage out loud, for someone here to come and take over the reading of this paper, to inhabit the ‘I’ position, and for the link between my body and my experience and my subjectivity and this “I” to become displaced, or doubled, or dislodged, or at any rate complicated and confused.

When *This Little Art* first came out, something that friends and not only friends, but people who’d heard me teach or speak, would often say is: it sounds just like you.

The book sounds just like you.

A book, like this talk, which is partly composed of citations, sounds just like me.

I have never quite known what to do with that feedback.

On the one hand, it’s true. I was deeply invested in giving not only a voice, but also a body and a life, and a set of circumstances and resources to the translator.

I wanted to write an essay on translation in which the subjectivity of the translator, her limits and perspectives, is fully present and unignorable – in which a reader hear her, or read her, or in your imagination watch her, thinking, doubting, revising, loving, trying to get shit right. You can’t skip over her or through her.

Writing in the first person, I was deeply influenced by Roland Barthes whose lectures I’d been translating. There he makes a powerful case for the right to write in the first person, and not the more unlocatable one, or ‘one’. Part of his ambition in those courses, was, as he puts it, to actively *modify the rhetorical conditions of the intellectual*. In other words, challenge and to change, the forms of and manner of thinking in public. To put an end to the postures of objectivity, and to speak from lived, limited experience, to connect ideas with scenes from life, with feeling, with humour, with embarrassment, with desire, to expand the scope of what might be

considered relevant to a scene of thinking, to argument, to a rigorous engagement with the world.

In keeping with this, the ambition of *This Little Art* was to challenge and to change the rhetorical conditions of the translator. To give this this person, this practitioner, who at the time of writing, over ten years ago, was so rarely asked or invited to speak about her work, at a time when there was so little public interest or awareness of her work in anglophone contexts, I wanted to make a book space in which she could set down and share her thoughts, to test what she has in common with other translators, and to expand the field of relevance – to insist that children and childcare relevant, since they are part of her life, dancing and choreography is relevant, since they too count as a scenes of thinking. Changing the rhetorical conditions of the translator also meant, for me, changing the terms of the discussion: I consciously set myself the task of writing a book on translation in which the words, faithful, fidelity, loss, foreignization, domestication, source and target never ever appear. Those oft-repeated words seemed to me to both characterize and to immobilize conversations about translation: getting us stuck in moralistic judgements and false, wholly unproductive and impractical binaries. My effort was to seed new terms, new images, new metaphors into the discussion – so that the conversations might have a chance of shifting onto new ground.

So on the one hand I'm glad it sounds like me. I accept that it sounds like me.

Or at least like a human. Like a person. Like someone actually alive with a stake in these questions.

On the other, I have two doubts or caveats.

The first is assumption which can sometimes accompany writing in the first person, and in my experience, especially writing in the first person written by women, that a book narrating lived experience is somehow just an outpouring. If it sounds just like you, you've simply transcribed or downloaded your voice, no technique, no labour, no composition, no real writing required.

But if a voice means something like an energy signature, a distinctive language practice, distinctive enough to be recognizable as you or as me, as a person making use of language or being used by language, then writing it in such a way that their signature is felt, that it contains some measure of aliveness and personhood, is an immense labour. Arguably it's what both writing and translating are all about.

The second doubt is more far-reaching and I think far more interesting. It has to do with not knowing what I sound like. And not wanting to know. It's a productive not knowing. Wanting in my writing but also even more explicitly via my translations to try out different speaking positions, different forms of expression, alternative styles of language to use. To be, like Barthes, mobile. To be surprised by what my own mouth says, my hand writes.

*Whose voice is this who's talking in my larynx
Who's in my privacy under my stone tent
Where I live slippershod in my indoor colours
Whose talking in my lights-out where I pull to
Under the bent body of an echo are these your
Fingers under my roof are these your splashes*

That is a passage from a book-length poem titled *Dart* by Alice Oswald, an experiment in giving voice – a complex, mobile, polyphonic set of voices to a river – specifically the river Dart of the title. Which runs through the south-west of England, not far from where I grew up.

Whose voice is this who's talking in my larynx

When teaching writing in workshop settings, I often get asked about voice. Recently, a young woman working on her first novel asked me whether I dare to read when I'm working on a new project. Because, she said, I am so afraid of reading. What if, she asked, I read something I admire and my writing ends up sounding exactly like that, like them, like someone else? How did you find your voice Kate, she asked? And how did you know it was yours, that it hadn't been influenced -- contaminated -- by someone else?

She was of course just echoing this received wisdom that to be a writer you have to find your own distinctive voice. Maybe that's the first thing you need to find.

To be a translator, on the other hand, we tend to get told you have to be good at losing your voice, or throwing it, or suppressing it, or perhaps more accurately, allowing yourself to become a channel for another voice.

But aren't we all, in some fundamental acute way, antenna vibrating to the frequency of voices not our own?

This is line from a review by Alex Tan of a novel by Lisa Roberston. Interestingly also about a river, titled Riverwork, an underground, pulsing, contaminated, impure river.

A consequence of those assumptions about voice, is this further fiction that while authors are authors, and only they could write their books, translators are more or less interchangeable. My book could have been translated by Arianne or someone else, and wouldn't matter too much – or not all that much. Because, or so we are still so generally invited to think, the translator's decisions are of limited consequentiality, except of course when they are considered to be the wrong ones. Because, or so we are courageed to think, a translation is not in its way a form of complex vibrational distinctive and yet mobile expression.

So the young woman's anxiety around voice was in many ways wholly understandable. She'd like to have her own recognizable voice located in one body, her own body, which would amount to one locatable and steady subject position. It's how capitalism works, it's how it would like things to work, capitalism as it manifests in the book industry seems to me, with a few exceptions, to be deeply committed to promoting individualized achievement. Which requires the individualization of voice: the idea that we each have a voice, and if we don't we need to find it, your voice, or my voice. If I can set bounds to your one original voice, I can thereby set limits on your achievement, I can recognize and celebrate individualized responsibility and achievement, rather than think of writing in terms of ciration, collaboration, co-dependency, or collectivity.

An idea which of course, is so productively challenged by the model of translation. Translation as a form of language-work that cannot begin without accepting that this language comes from somewhere else, that it has been used in other contexts, that it comes bearing the material and usage of other voices, other writing practices – this is our acknowledged starting point. But it is also, I would argue, the wellspring of all so-called original writing, all novel forms of voicing.

Rather than the exception, or the peculiarity, to my mind translation offers the most generative, and enabling, and accurate model for literary production. Which is my advice to the this younger writer was this:

First, to read and read without anxiety

Second, to start transcribing what she was reading, the passages that spoke to her, and then three, to start translating them, changing the emphasis of certain lines, making them say slightly different things, and to see if that did not feel like a beginning, or an opening, a small channel through which some kind of vocal energy, possibly not hers, probably not ever straightforwardly hers, could start tentatively to speak.

To bring this very open-ended set of reflections to a conclusion, it feels appropriate to call upon other voices. That is, by quoting or speaking out loud three further instances of language-work in this space, three further thoughts on voice in my own voice, to see how they might resonate here, for you and with you as you talk and think together over the coming days...

The first is from poet and translator Mira Rosenthal, who translates from the Polish:

In 2019 she published a list of questions online, which might be an essay and might be a poem 'Translator's Note: Voicing a Voice':

Rosenthal asks 40 provocative and timely questions in total. I will just read aloud the first 8:

1. *What is the translator's voice?*
2. *What happens to voice when I am a woman translating a poem written by a man?*
3. *Does his voice become less authentic, or does mine?*
4. *And what about when the poem is written by a man in a language in which the conjugation of the verb informs you which gender is speaking without having to state it, and the poem is all in first person?*
5. *Does the gender in my voice place his subjectivity under stress?*
6. *When I get annoyed that this poet keeps using the same vague word over and over that could mean anything from footprints to marks to traces to tracks to vestige to remains, is my frustration a sign of the difference in our voices?*
7. *When I choose to translate that one vague word differently in each of the thirteen instances it appears in his collection, is this an example of claiming my voice?*
8. *How do I embody my voice when translating?*

The second work I want to cite – or, indeed to publish – to republish here with my voice --- is by poet and translator Sawako Nakayasu, who translates from the Japanese. The work is a pamphlet titled *Say Translation is Art*, published in print in 2020. It too is a work composed from citations, from many different voices and sources.

But what the pamphlet also does very particularly is activate the performative, speculative force of “say”.

Say at the start of a sentence is an interesting discourse marker, a technique we can use to grab attention and / or propose an idea.

In English it works as as an invitation to imagine, to imagine the world differently, to enter collaboratively into a space of *What If*.

Say this is a translation.

Say I am not here, and you've receiving my voice over the radio, over a great distance....

Say it, by saying it out loud, publishing this saying – it does something, does it not? The fiction it asks you to buy into, however briefly -- it changes things.

Here is a short page from *Say Translation is Art*

Say translation as open art practice as open as matter and anti-matter.

Say anti-translation as refusing, or not, to translate altogether, say not this.

Say anti-translation as not refusing to translate, just refusing to translate.

Refusing to translate, like this. Say it again.

Say translation of private space.

Say public translation.

Say I share this shape with you, say your shape is your shape, like this.

Say who, you.

Say who, I.

And finally, the last passage I'd like to publicly voice in this context, is a paragraph from an essay titled 'Voice' by the poet Alice Notley.

And here, as you listen to it, let's say together that when Alice Notley says "poetic voice", which is to say, when I say *for her* "poetic voice" she also means, which is to say, *I also mean*, the translator's voice.

Listen:

It seems to me that there are at least two important qualities that a poetic voice should have.

The first is fearlessness or courage, the voice must be clear about itself in some way, believe itself, and be consistently unafraid.

We are speaking now of a voice and not a person.

And I might add further things, that the voice shouldn't be afraid of being wrong or getting caught up in awkwardness or messy intricacy, or changing tone or emotion or diction, but mainly the voice should speak fearlessly, assuming its authority is equal to any other voice's – as far as speaking itself is concerned.

The second quality is that a good poetic voice must have is difficult to characterize, it's something like vividness, actual presence of the live poet in the dead words on the page – the poem is very little without that and very few, comparatively, poems have that. To make that transference is a mysterious thing to do and no one who can do it can teach the skill to another person.

Neither of these two qualities implies aggression, righteousness or usurpation of place: they simply imply being.

Thank you so much for your attention.

