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### **Translation in excess: engaging semiotics and the untranslatable**

*For to some degree all great texts contain their virtual translation between the lines...*  
Walter Benjamin

#### **Introduction: “what” and “how” to translate**

In this paper I want to explore the potential of translation as a methodological resource for social research. Broadly speaking, this potential derives from the fact that the notion of translation places the focus on relations between heterogeneous sites. This has become increasingly important in research designs functioning in line with what George Marcus (1995) has called ‘multi-sited ethnographies.’ Such research designs are concerned not so much with single-site locations structured by a larger social order, but rather with multiple sites positioned simultaneously as “local” and “global” and belonging to a range of institutional, political, and everyday fields of practice. ‘[T]he practice of translation,’ Marcus notes, ‘connects the several sites that the research explores along unexpected and even dissonant fractures of social location’ (1995, 100). While my discussion of translation is based on such an understanding of multi-sited-ness, I aim to make an intervention concerning the two interrelated issues of “what” translation is actually meant to engage and “how” this can happen.

The question of “what” translation is concerned with has grown increasingly vague over the past decades due to an excessive use of the term. Traditionally, translation has referred to “languages” in the sense of systems of signs that are tied to distinctive nation-based units (“German,” “Turkish,” etc.). This understanding has been opened up for instance by anthropologists and actor-network theorists who have also looked at objects and practices as being subject to “translation.” Translation has been used here as a broad and rather unspecific

metaphor. Such a broad understanding has had the advantage of moving beyond the focus on nation-bound “languages” that has been problematised as will be further elaborated below. However, in becoming merely metaphoric, the notion of translation has simultaneously lost some of its specific analytic capacity. I will elaborate what this capacity consists of by drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s (1980/2004) notion of “semiotic translation,” which moves beyond the alternatives between understandings that link translation to nation-bound languages, on the one hand, or those that use translation in an unspecific and metaphoric way, on the other. Translation, from this perspective, is concerned with “expressions.” It is furthermore concerned with affective dynamics that simultaneously enable and exceed the semiotic framing and transformation of expressions. Translation may enable such affective dynamics, which function as a kind of expressive “excess,” to be apprehended in new ways.

The issue of “what” translation engages cannot be separated from the question of “how” it takes place, since there are different ways in which the affective dynamics enabling (and emerging from) translation can unfold. Translation, it will be argued, demands first of all a capacity to respond to the singularity of an expressive world, a way of becoming “responsible” with respect to its semiotics and “excessive” affective dynamics. Furthermore, the kinds of projects in which particular “translation moves” take place also play a vital role. While translations often become powerful means of appropriating and subjugating otherness, they may also give rise to “becomings with” as characterised by Donna Haraway (2008). A truly responsible practice of translation, it will be argued, needs to engage the uncertain ground where heterogeneous expressions are able to acquire agency in the joint “worldings” (Haraway) they are entangled in. This announces a “translation in excess,” a translation that mobilises expressive excesses for responsible becomings with.

This paper thus addresses “translation in excess” in a double sense. On the one hand, it aims to overcome some of the conceptual weaknesses that have ensued from the excessive usage of translation, and, on the other, it argues for the need to responsibly engage with expressive excesses. I will start with a rather unlikely place in Walter Benjamin for a discussion of translation. His text “Butterfly hunt” from *Berlin Childhood around 1900* provides an evocative example for interrogating the connections between the “what” and the “how” of

translation. I will then go into a conceptual discussion of translation and use some vignettes from my fieldwork with lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people in Brazil to indicate ways in which the notion of semiotic translation can be deployed. My research addresses relations between everyday experiences, governmental, activist and media discourses and practices, in particular around issues of security and what German-speakers call “*Geborgenheit*,” meaning something like security and sheltered-ness, however in an immediately positive sense rather than indicating the aversion of dangers (see Hutta 2009). The aim is to relate the heterogeneous sites under consideration by amplifying and enacting translation movements between them. In order to exemplify this work of translation, I will discuss different ways in which the gay kiss becomes semiotically framed.

### **Dancing with butterflies**

In his *Berlin Childhood around 1900* Benjamin (1938/2006) poetically invokes intense moments and places of the world in which he grew up, mobilising his memory as a critical resource of situated knowledge. In the section “Butterfly hunt,” the child of Benjamin’s remembrance gets lured ‘away from well-kept garden paths into a wilderness, where [he] stood powerless before the conspiracy of wind and scents, foliage and sun, which were bound to govern the flight [*Flug*] of the butterflies’ (50).<sup>1</sup> As the child surrenders to a ‘conspiracy’ of forces, he playfully enters the intense world of the fluttering creatures. This self-surrendering and playful engagement is coupled, however, with a desire to subjugate and capture the butterflies. If the child wishes to ‘dissolve’ into the conspiring forces of light and air, it is in order to ‘approach the prey unnoticed and be able to subdue [*überwältigen*] it’ (51). This scenario resembles a recurrent dynamic in traditional fieldwork, where the researcher leaves the (seemingly) well-kept space of the academic institution temporarily and enters a field of forces for which her or his body is not quite a match. On the one hand, the boy’s playful entering of the world of butterflies shares a lot of the curiosity about the

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<sup>1</sup> The English translations of Benjamin’s texts have been modified at several instances in order to approximate the original German wording. Benjamin’s translators time and again fall into the trap against which Benjamin himself warns when he quotes Rudolf Pannwitz: ‘[Our translations] have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign work’ (1923/2004, 82). For examples see notes 2 and 13. I will come back to the issue of letting the own language be affected by the foreign one in the last section of this paper.

emergent novelty resulting from encounters with difference which Haraway (2008) considers vital to response-able “becoming with.” Haraway proposes this notion of “becoming with” in order to address ethical ways of responding to one another, taking into account one’s own necessary entanglement with, and constitution through, multiple other beings. “Becoming with” for Haraway also means “becoming worldly,” participating in a joint “worlding” where different beings respond to each other in ethical ways – rather than enactments where the powerful subdue subalterns. On the other hand, however, the extent to which the boy is willing to surrender and become with the butterflies is radically limited. His wish to become invisible in order to ‘subdue’ his ‘prey’ brings to mind the troubled ethnographic attempt to “go native,” which tends to render the ethnographer’s distinctive project and position of power transparent, unwittingly turning surrendering into violent appropriation (for critical discussions of ethnographic authority see Clifford 2003; Marcus 2001).

This tension between becoming with the butterflies and their violent appropriation has implications regarding the question of “how” to translate. The boy returns from the hunt not only with a butterfly in his net, but also with a new knowledge of its ‘language,’ which creates a potential for translation:

On that laborious way back, the spirit of the moribund creature entered into the hunter. The foreign language in which the butterfly and the flowers had communicated [*sich verständigt hatten*] before his eyes – he now had won some precepts from it. His lust to kill had diminished; his confidence [*Zuversicht*] was grown all the greater. (Benjamin 1938/2006, 52)

As a consequence of his wish to dissolve into the very forces of light, scents and air that conspire before his eyes, ‘bound to govern the flight of the butterflies,’ the boy achieves an embodied learning of the butterfly-flower language. ‘And this wish of mine,’ the narrator notes, ‘got fulfilled to such an extent that every quiver or palpitation of the wings I was gapingly smitten by grazed me with its puff or ripple’ (51). During the hunt the boy develops a sensitivity to the very forces that make up the world of butterflies, beginning to become-butterfly himself:

Between us, now, the old law of the hunt took hold: the more I nestled in all fibers up against the animal [*je mehr ich selbst in allen Fibern mich dem Tier anschmiegte*] – the more butterfly-like I became in the inner world – the more this butterfly itself, in its doings, took on the color of human volition [*EntschlieÙung*]; and in the end, it was as if its capture was the price at which alone I could obtain a hold again of my human existence [*meines Menscheindaseins*]. (Ibid.)<sup>2</sup>

While the boy bodily enters the world of the butterflies, he simultaneously clings on to the project of the hunt, which promises to avert the entire loss of his ‘human existence.’ He thus interpellates the butterfly into his project, so much so that it seems to respond to his actions with ‘the color of human volition.’ The boy’s becoming-butterfly is bound up with the butterfly’s becoming-human.

The “Butterfly hunt,” then, brings out the powerful, and dangerous, projects translation may be entangled in and support, which raises the question about more response-able/responsible forms of translation. At the same time, however, the text indicates an important dynamic that opens up a potential for responsible translation – even if this potential gets articulated in a project of appropriation and domination. The boy’s moment of surrendering to a foreign conspiracy, his opening up towards new modes of expression and his embodied discovery of new capacities of being affected allows him to gain some intimate knowledge of the ‘foreign language’ of flowers and butterfly. Such an intimate knowledge forms a precondition for responsible translation, as Gayatri Spivak (1992/2004) has argued. “Surrendering to the text in this way means, most of the time, being literal,” she notes (378). The boy’s engagement with the butterflies, his “nestling in all fibres up against the animal” brings out the embodied dimensions of “being literal.” He follows the little bodies and movements in all their details as the translator follows the words of a text. Yet, at the same time, the boy’s learning of the butterfly-flower language coincides with an imposition of the human language of the hunt onto the butterflies. Becoming-butterfly goes only as far as is necessary for subduing, and killing, the prey.

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<sup>2</sup> The translator Howard Eiland renders ‘*im Innern*’ – literally ‘in the inner’, which I translate as ‘in the inner world’ – as ‘in my heart and soul,’ which evokes an image Benjamin does not seem to intend.

If an intimate engagement with the other is a precondition for responsible translation, it is thus by no means a sufficient one. What is important is rather within what kind of project such an engagement happens – a question which the anthropological attempts to ‘go native’ often elide. This leads us to a search for figurations beyond the hunter. Spivak proposes a form of solidarity that arises from inhabiting the uncertain ground where another language gains an agency of its own – and is not merely subdued or given voice to within one’s own frame of representation. Donna Haraway’s (2008) discussion of inter-species encounters resonates with Spivak’s argument. Haraway points out the ‘situated histories, situated naturecultures, in which all the actors become who they are *in the dance of relating*, not from scratch, not *ex-nihilo*, but full of the patterns of their sometimes-joined, sometimes-separate heritages both before and lateral to *this* encounter’ (2008, 25; emphases in the original). Haraway’s characterisation of ‘material-semiotic dancing’ (26) indicates a way of imagining processes of “becoming with” that exceed the regime of hunting, marked by the oscillation between going native and violent appropriation. Bringing to bear the both joined and separate heritages of researchers and of the various others encountered before, during and after research, means situating translations within the singular worldings made possible by these encounters. We could only speculate how the boy of *Berlin Childhood* may have learned the language of the butterflies if he had danced with them instead of hunting them, if he had entered a joint worlding instead of the heroic masculinist plot where animals are killed in order to render them amenable to knowledge and where nature is staged as man’s feast (Haraway 1997). At any rate, what seems to bear the biggest potential for entering a joint worlding and enabling responsible translation in the “Butterfly hunt” is the boy’s moment of playfulness and curious surrendering, the unwitting dance happening before the capture of the butterfly.

Benjamin’s text also poses the “what” question in interesting ways, although no translation proper takes place. The embodied learning of part of the ‘foreign language in which the butterfly and the flowers had communicated’ forms however a precondition to translation. Let us consider Benjamin’s use of the term ‘language’ in this formulation. Language is radically extended here beyond a traditional understanding of nation-bound human languages, a notion that will be further problematised below. However, Benjamin’s use becomes by no means imprecise or metaphoric. It relates specifically to the “communication”

of butterfly and flowers, to their ‘communicable nature’ [*mitteilbares Wesen*], as Benjamin (1916/1979) calls it. The ‘foreign language’ of butterfly and flowers denotes the particular expressive scenario they stage before the boy’s eyes – the ‘spell that the flowers seemed to cast on the pair of wings,’ the way in which ‘the delicate body would glide off sideways with a gentle buffeting of the air,’ the peculiar ‘hesitations, vacillations, and delays’ of vanessas or sphinx moths (Benjamin 1938/2006, 51) – all being governed by the peculiar ‘conspiracy of wind, scents, foliage and sun.’ All this does not constitute a “language” in the traditional sense but rather an expressive scenario, which is however consistent enough to form a kind of butterfly-flower ‘language.’ The process of learning and intimate engagement that forms a precondition for response-able translation thus concerns not nation-bound languages but what we may call regimes of expressions.

In the following section, I want to introduce Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980/2004) understanding of “semiotics” and semiotic translation, which resonates with the way in which Benjamin poses the “what” question. This enables a further elaboration of the actual dynamics of “how” translation takes place, the particular potential which an attentiveness to responsible translation opens up.

### **Semiotic translation**

In the classical understanding, translation occurs between “languages,” understood as homogeneous and nation-bound structures of signs organising words and meanings in relation to each other.<sup>3</sup> Beyond linguistic endeavours, the notion of translation has also had an appeal within strands of social research not primarily concerned with “language.” The anthropological notion of the “translation of cultures” or “cultural translation” is interesting in this respect. While this notion gained popularity with the shift towards a more textual and discursive understanding of cultures from the 1950s and 60s (at least in English-speaking anthropology), it was simultaneously meant to engage with meanings, concepts and beliefs implicitly embedded in cultural practices (Asad 1986). “Translation” has thus come to be

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<sup>3</sup> For a classical account of such an understanding of “language” see Ferdinand de Saussure (1916/1986). For a critique of the classical notion of translation – which I will come back to below – see Sakai (2006).

concerned with a range of cultural practices beyond oral and written discourses. Actor-network theory (ANT), and what has been called the “sociology of translation,” has moved even further away from “language.” ANT, which was first formulated in the 1980s by Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, John Law and others within sociology and science and technology studies, has been concerned with the processes of emergence and transformation ensuing from connections between heterogeneous actors or “mediators” pertaining to a range of (human and non-human) fields. The notion of “translation,” Latour (2005, 106-9) explains, is meant to designate precisely the establishment of a relation or connection between heterogeneous mediators (see also Brown 2002). George Marcus, in his account of multi-sited ethnography mentioned above, draws on this ANT notion of translation.

A detachment of “translation” from a necessary association with “language” in the classical sense seems reasonable to the extent that such an association is limiting for social research. The unspecific and metaphoric use that has ensued from this detachment, however, has stripped ‘translation’ of its specific conceptual power in relation to other concepts like “transposition,” “transduction” or “displacement.” The emergence of objects through the connection of different actors – as posited by ANT and picked up by George Marcus – might possibly be better addressed along the lines of Rosi Braidotti’s (2006) notion of “transpositions.”<sup>4</sup> The specificity of the notion of translation derives by contrast in fact from its association with “language,” a notion which can however be specified and moved beyond its traditional “linguistic” and nation-bound fix through a concept of “semiotics.” A notion of semiotic translation may move beyond the alternatives between a narrow linguistic and an unspecific metaphoric use of translation, offering a productive tool for social research. Let me briefly outline the notion of “semiotics” I have in mind here before elaborating further on the implications of such an understanding with respect to translation.

Semiotics has from its inception had a broader agenda than linguistics. It is concerned with the study of “signs” pertaining, as Umberto Eco notes, to ‘a series of human (and maybe animal) behaviours, be they vocal, visual, termic, gestural, or other’ (1984, 7). The focus on

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<sup>4</sup> Braidotti suggests using the term “transposition” in relation to a range of issue from the transferral of genetic information to the cross-referencing between disciplines or discursive levels and the connection between theory and practice (2006, 5-7).



signs in semiotics has opened up a field of inquiry that goes beyond traditional understandings of linguistic structures, human language as well as beyond the question of “representation.” Of particular relevance in the present context are the conceptual innovations of the Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev, which got picked up by Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2004). In his *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* Hjelmslev (1943/1953) reconceptualises Ferdinand de Saussure’s notion of signs – understood as relations of signifier and signified that together form the smallest entities within a linguistic system – in terms of a function between two correlative planes: content and expression. With this conception, Hjelmslev moves away from the traditional understanding that views content as a material reality (addressed by the signified) that is opposed to a non-material linguistic form (signifier) (Chandler 2007, 56-7). Instead, both expression and content are material, both have form and substance. Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2004) have developed this conception further, positing “contents” as complex formations of power, technology and practice that stand in reciprocal presupposition with “expressions,” conceived as equally complex formations of signs. They follow Hjelmslev in calling a formation of signs also a “semiotic,” which thus needs to be distinguished from “semiotics” as the study of signs and sign regimes. Engaging with semiotics, then, entails much more than considering words, representations and signifiers – it entails considering the specific ways in which formations of power and practice and formations of signs get articulated together.

This conception of semiotics opens up an intriguing mode of analysis. Diverse matters get formed into specific “substances” and attributed to correlating planes of expression and content. Instead of starting from nation-bound structures of signs (or, for instance, from a set of abstract grammatical rules that would instantiate in terms of different lexica as in Noam Chomsky’s 1965 conception), a semiotic analysis proposes to engage with the contingent ways in which various kinds of (vocal, textual, pictorial, bodily, atmospheric etc.) expression are organised. The questions posed by such a kind of semiotic analysis are hence: Which elements operate as “expressions” in relation to which kinds of “contents”? And according to which regularities do these expressions operate? Furthermore, in organising expressions and contents in particular ways, different semiotics necessarily have different effects with respect to subjects and objects. Semiotics are thus fundamentally performative, they constitute

“speech acts” (Austin 1962) that are inextricably bound up with particular kinds of practices and technologies (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2004, 83-7).

Deleuze and Guattari give a vivid example of a semiotic with what they call the “paranoid despotic regime of signs.” This semiotic performs a staging of the subject as threatened from all sides. Everything that happens, all expressions, become signs conspiring against oneself:

Your wife looked at you with a funny expression. And this morning the mailman handed you a letter from the IRS and crossed his fingers. Then you stepped in a pile of dog shit. You saw two sticks on the sidewalk positioned like the hands of a watch. It doesn't matter what it means, it's still signifying. (1980/2004, 124)

Simultaneously, the subject is elevated in omnipotent control above all threats: ‘they are attacking me and making me suffer, but I can guess what they’re up to, I’m one step ahead of them, I’ve always known, I have power even in my impotence: “I’ll get them.”’ (125) While the signs cross-referring to one another effectuate a strange impotence and uncertainty, they are all arranged around a despotic centre: ‘mighty is the signifier that constitutes the chain’ (ibid.). The wife’s look, the mailman’s crossing his fingers, the stepping into dog shit – all these expressions lose their concrete contents and become deterritorialised signs that cross-refer to one another in a signifying chain that is organised around the central despotic signifier. The paranoid does not even need to speak for enacting this semiotic, it is enough for the signs of his world to operate in this particular way.

Apart from such “signifying” semiotics, however, Deleuze and Guattari also mention pre- and countersignifying semiotics, which do not function by means of such cross-referral of signs. Presignifying semiotics, for instance, are characterised by a “polyvocality” of expressions that ‘preserves expressive forms particular to content; thus forms of corporeality, gesturality, rhythm, dance, and rite coexist heterogeneously with the vocal form’ (130). Signs in a presignifying semiotic do not abstract (or deterritorialise) to the same extent as in a signifying one but are instead directly extracted from a variety of heterogeneous expressions, pertaining to bodies, movements etc. An infinite range of further semiotics can be analysed in

relation to their specific effects and the different practices and technologies they are bound up with.<sup>5</sup>

This mode of analysis becomes especially interesting, however, when confrontations or transformations between different semiotics are considered. By appropriating an expression originating elsewhere, a semiotic transforms this expression, and thus also the way it relates to, and co-constitutes, contents. This is the semiotic understanding of translation (Deleuze and Guattari 1980/2004, 150-4). Deleuze and Guattari provide a vivid example of semiotic translation:

The songs of black Americans, including, especially, the words, [...] show how the slaves “translated” the English signifier and made presignifying or even countersignifying use of the language, blending it with their own African languages just as they blended old African work songs with their new forced labor [...]. (1980/2004, 152)

Translation happens here in the transformation from one semiotic into another, signalling a shift on the corresponding planes of content. Despite Deleuze and Guattari’s seemingly abstract conception of semiotics within which translation is situated here, it is thus highly specific: it cannot refer to any kind of matter moving from one context to another, but has instead to do with matters operating as expressions in relation to contents and, more specifically, with shifts from one semiotic regime to another. The strength of the concept of translation derives precisely from the fact that it addresses the particular field of complexity opened up by an engagement with heterogeneous semiotic formalisations of expressions.

Any translation, as well as any semiotic enactment as such, has particular preconditions in order to become possible. Let me elaborate a bit further on this issue, since it is crucial with respect to the question of responsibility. Benjamin’s “Butterfly hunt” has provided an example of the intense spatiality situating and enabling the boy’s playful, and simultaneously

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<sup>5</sup> Johanna Motzkau (2009) has analysed, for instance, the effects that a “semiotic of accusation” performs as critical psychological texts are read within mainstream psychology. Motzkau’s analysis shows in particular how semiotic effects may unfold against the explicit intentions of the ones producing the texts: while the explicit strategy of the theorists she engages with is “deconstruction,” the semiotic effect of their expressions tends to be one of “accusation.”

violent, enactment. The boy gets lured into a “wilderness” where he faces a bewitching “conspiracy” of wind, scents, foliage and sun that situates the paradoxical process of becoming-butterfly/becoming-human. An affective dynamic unfolds here in the sense of a complex interplay of forces. There is a set of conspiring natural forces that bodily act upon the dancing/hunting boy. At the same time, there is also the boy’s desire to subjugate the little animal and recover his own human-ness. Both this desire and the conspiring intensities conjoin and give rise to a becoming-butterfly that simultaneously targets the butterfly’s becoming-human. The more the boy surrenders to the intensive world of the butterflies, the closer he gets to attain the goal of subduing his prey and the greater his desire to subdue it grows. This affective dynamic, this bundle of relations of forces, situates and enables the learning of the butterfly-flower language which forms a precondition of its translation.<sup>6</sup>

Taking into account the affective preconditions of translation also calls attention to the dynamics unfolding in the process of translation itself, since this process entails some kind of shift in the concrete articulation of relations of forces. In the last section of this paper I will indicate Walter Benjamin’s argument regarding an effect of “untranslatability” ensuing from translation, which addresses this dynamic. First, however, let me provide an example from my research with gay and trans people in Brazil in order to open a discussion of semiotic translation and the question of responsibility.

### **Gay kisses in translation**

A kiss is hardly ever just a kiss, that much we know. The kiss, in Western and Christian cultures, seals marriage, it signals the “first love,” it features in conventions like greeting, and it forms the culminating and harmonising point of many romantic plots. Simultaneously, kisses that challenge the classed and raced heteronormative order have given rise to anxieties,

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<sup>6</sup> Deleuze and Guattari (1980/2004) address what I have termed “relations of forces” by borrowing Foucault’s term of the “diagram.” Deleuze (1986/2006) adds a subtlety by arguing that for Foucault a diagram designates ‘the fixed form of a set of relations between forces’ (Deleuze 1986/2006, 89). This fixed set of relations between forces, however, ‘never exhausts force, which can enter into other relations and compositions’ (ibid.). Instead, it needs to be seen in relation to dynamics of “resistance” that exceed and precede it (1986/2006, 89). When I talk about “relations of forces” and “affective dynamics” I mean both “diagrams of power” (such as the subjugation of nature in the butterfly hunt) and dynamics of “resistance” (such as the dance-like moment of curiosity and play).

violence and efforts to control or discipline them. The repeated damaging, after its opening in 2008, of Berlin's "Memorial to Homosexuals persecuted under Nazism," which shows a short film of two kissing men, is only one recent example of the disruptions a homosexual kiss may provoke by troubling the semiotic regimes of heteronormativity.<sup>7</sup> In the Brazilian context, Nelson Rodriguez' famous play *O Beijo no Asfalto* ("The Kiss on Asphalt"), published in 1960, has dramatised the eerie capacity that a kiss between two men may acquire to wreck not only an individual person's life but to incite a concerted hysteria running through interconnected fields of media, police, workplace, family, community life and public city spaces. The kiss, in other words, is a form of expression intensely featuring in semiotic regimes pertaining to a range of assemblages including romance, morality and self-revelation – sustaining as well as destabilising them.

For gay people, then, enacting a same-sex kiss is often charged and problematic – in public as well as in family contexts. I want to discuss two examples from my research in order to consider different ways of semiotically framing the kiss as well as translation moves. The first example is taken from an interview with Jonas,<sup>8</sup> aged 29, who does voluntary work at an LGBT organisation in the Baixada Fluminense region in the state of Rio de Janeiro. The passage below follows from my question of whether Jonas ever experienced physical aggression due to being gay, which he answered in the negative. The name of the city where Jonas lives and works has been replaced with "[D.]"

**Simon:** But with your boyfriend, for example, do you kiss in the street? Do you=

**Jonas:** I kiss my boyfriend in the street, I walk hand in hand, but I know my limits, for example I know where I can go if anything happens, you see? ((**Simon:** Yes.)) So, like, yes, fear does exist in [D.], of kissing one another, of walking hand in hand. Because here, only women can walk hand in hand, here in [D.] Because if men walk hand in hand they are fags. So when a guy does this with his partner, he really needs to know

<sup>7</sup> The fact that heterosexual kisses may also be considered problematic is illustrated by the attempt to ban kissing at a British train station in 2009, as reported by AFP (see <http://news.ninemsn.com.au/world/754016/no-kissing-please-were-british>; accessed on 14 Aug. 09). While a spokesman for operators Virgin Rail mentions the blocking of traffic as a reason for this ban, he also makes an argument in favour of exchanging affection in the much more private space of one's car.

<sup>8</sup> All names of research participants have been changed for the sake of anonymity.

what he's doing and recognise himself as gay and know where he can scream for help [*aonde ele vai gritar*] when someone hassles him. ((**Simon:** Yes.)) But I do walk, I walk hand in hand with my boyfriend in [D.]. They can say whatever they want... We exchange a quick kiss [*dá beijinho roubado*] on the street. [*Both laughing*] I think, like, there's no reason to hide from society what I feel, you see? If I'm loved, I have to... but in a civilised [*educado*] manner, of course, without offending society.

After giving an affirmative answer to my question, Jonas points out the risk and fear involved in showing male homosexual affection in public by kissing or holding hands. In order to do it, one has to be prepared to respond to the risks involved in being stigmatised as “fag.” Apart from knowing where to go, one needs to recognise oneself as gay, he says, which means being able to defend one's position and actions. Two kinds of danger are implied here, the stigmatisation demanding self-affirmation as gay and a (potentially physical) aggression that demands finding help. Kissing and holding hands are thus situated in a scenario of danger, fear and defence. This scenario shifts after Jonas affirms that he still walks hand in hand, no matter what other people say (now bracketing the issue of physical aggression). His statement, ‘We exchange a quick kiss on the street,’ provokes our laughter as it evokes a vivid sense of how a fleeting assertion of affection (and possibly gay identity) can be pleurably inserted into heteronormative public space. The need to claim one's rights is evoked here: ‘I think, like, there's no reason to hide from society what I feel.’ This semiotic twist from a scenario of danger and defence into one of assertion and pleasure gives then way, however, to a moral concern about not ‘offending society.’ The concern about being stigmatised for one's difference thus gets turned around into a concern about causing offence because of one's difference.

Within a couple of sentences, the affirmative statement of kissing the boyfriend and holding hands in the street gets translated into semiotics of fear and defence, assertion and pleasure, and morality and concern. Interestingly, the semiotic of morality and concern ends up outweighing the other ones, which becomes clear in the continuation of Jonas' narrative. He complains about some of today's gay men – who are, as he puts it, ‘the gays from the 21<sup>st</sup> century’ – by saying they don't respect the values of people from older generations. He then remarks: ‘Because they think they have to kiss in front of their grandmother, or in the middle

of the road.’ Kissing in the middle of the road is now seen first of all as an expression of disrespect, rather than as something to be asserted against stigmatisation. Jonas goes on: ‘Kissing in the middle of the road is more like an educational thing. There are hetero couples who don’t kiss in front of their children.’ The concern about old people now gets extended to children, positing kissing as an issue of moral concern and hetero couples not kissing in front of their children as a model. The questions of danger as well as of pleasure and assertion of one’s rights disappear in this translation into a semiotic of moral concern. This does not mean that Jonas is exclusively concerned with morals. In fact, he also affirms kissing his boyfriend in the street. A moral sensitivity, furthermore, does not necessarily need to be seen as a wholesale adoption of social norms, but may also have to do with questions of mutual ‘respect,’ as Jonas suggests. In considering these translation moves, it is vital to attend to the specific relevance and complexity of each semiotic. (This relates to the question of responsibility, which I will come back to.) Nonetheless, the question ensues of what relations of forces are at play here that evoke the translation into a semiotic of moral concern, where other issues tend to disappear. Instead of trying to answer this question, however, I would like to juxtapose Jonas’ narrative with another conversation, where different relations of forces are at play.

It is a warm Saturday afternoon in another part of Baixada Fluminense, a small town, or *bairro*, in the municipality of Nova Iguaçu. As Nando, Josué and I come to the house of Sasha, a nurse and gay/trans activist in his 40s, he invites us to have coffee on his veranda and, after an initial conversation, agrees that I switch on my mp3 recorder. Nando and Josué are gay men living in the centre of Nova Iguaçu, where I organised a queer workshop through which I met them. Josué used to live in Sasha’s *bairro* and suggested that we make the visit. Enjoying the calm atmosphere, seeing the smiling faces of the three men and listening to their stories, I sense a kind of *geborgenheit*, or what in Portuguese is called “*aconchego*,” that resonates with the way in which they depict and enact life in the *bairro*. The noun “*aconchego*” derives from the verb “*aconchegar*,” which means “put/turn close to (someone/sth.); embrace; wrap/cover (oneself/someone/sth.) in; make more comfortable” (Houaiss). Accordingly, “*aconchego*” is a state of comfortable embraced- or nested-ness.

During the conversation, the three explicitly point out that the *bairro* for them is a place of *aconchego*, a place where they feel “*aconchegado*” as gay and trans people. One of the things that especially Josué and Sasha, who know the area best, point out as they depict the place’s *aconchego* are festivities and carnival events that foster pleasurable and transgressive enactments. Josué, who is in his late 20s, states: ‘What a blast [*Que bomba*], this carnival of... At this carnival, I saw a colleague of mine who I hadn’t seen for a long time, and I kissed him on the mouth in front of everybody!’ Kissing ‘in front of everybody’ is framed here not as a fleeting assertion, but as an act staged much more intensively as part of the ‘blast’ of carnival. A similar way of evoking pleasure is engaged at several moments of the conversation, for instance as Sasha talks about another festival that used to take place in the area: ‘Oh, that used to be fantastic, the fags [*bichas*] went wild – they would make out with the guys a lot [*namoravam pencas os bofes*]<sup>9</sup> – they came here from all kinds of places from the state of Rio, it was *o fervo*.’ *O fervo* – deriving from the verb “*ferver*,” “to boil” and meaning here something like “crazy,” “hot,” “wild” – is a term Sasha repeatedly uses in these depictions. It evokes a carnivalesque and festive atmosphere where camp expressions and erotic relations can joyfully, and publicly, be enacted. The semiotic staged here thus dramatises transgressive movements and events related to encounters between queer and straight bodies – *bichas* “going wild” and making out with *bofes*, gays kissing ‘in front of everybody.’ It thereby also evokes amazement: ‘Oh, that used to be fantastic’ ... ‘it was *o fervo*’ ... ‘*Que bomba*.’ The semiotic of *fervo* thus invites the subject to indulge in the amazement evoked by the series of pleasurable transgressions.

Josué’s narrative staging of the kiss ‘in front of everybody’ evokes such a semiotic of *fervo*. This way of semiotically framing the kiss is supported by the dynamic of our conversation where several events get narrated in a similar way. The moments of carnival and festivity addressed here form part of the context for Josué’s and Sasha’s much stronger emphasis on acts of transgression as compared to Jonas’ rather tentative affirmation discussed above. Josué does not seem, however, to consider his story as specific to exceptional moments of

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<sup>9</sup> *Namorar* has a range of connotations, from “to flirt” or “covet” to “to go out with,” “make out with,” etc. *Bicha* and *bofe* are somewhat complementary notions referring to effeminate and masculine men, respectively, as well as to (sexual) passivity and activity (cf. Parker 1999: 28-46).



carnival.<sup>10</sup> This is indicated by the fact that he is talking here about the *aconchego* of this *bairro* in more general terms, using the story of the gay kiss and the *fervo* of carnival as an intensified example. The resonance between *o fervo* and the positive affectivity of *aconchego* thus plays a vital role for the way in which the kiss is semiotically framed. The enjoyable atmosphere, and *aconchego*, of our conversation contributes further to this kind of resonance. The *aconchego* pervading the *bairro*, the carnival and our conversation, then, forms at least part of the relations of forces enabling this particular semiotic move. Moreover, the statement regarding the kiss is itself both evocative and constitutive of this *aconchego*, indicating a kind of expressive excess subsisting in the statement. The kiss *evokes aconchego* in providing an example of why gay people can feel *aconchegado* in this *bairro*. It is *constitutive* of it in contributing to the positive atmosphere emanating from the veranda during our conversation: In narrating this event, Josué *performs aconchego*, affectively opening up to us and sharing stories he may for instance not tell in spaces experienced as exclusionary of gays. The statement regarding the kiss, we may thus say, is excessive with respect to the particular semiotic in which it is framed: It is not exhausted by the effects of the semiotic of *fervo*, where the focus is on the moment of transgression ('in front of everybody') and indulging in the amazement ensuing from it ('*Que bomba...*'). This excess, however, also forms part of the very dynamics enabling this semiotic framing. It "subsists" so to speak within the semiotic, functioning as a precondition and unfolding further effects in the moment of articulation.<sup>11</sup>

I have used these two vignettes in order to exemplify – if only in a very schematic way – how a particular expression, a male same-sex kiss in public, can become actualised within and translated across a number of different semiotics. Every actualisation and translation entails a different framing of this expression, such that it evokes certain effects rather than others. Actualisations and translations are moreover – as the second example has illustrated – enabled by affective dynamics, which subsist within semiotic expressions as their excess.

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<sup>10</sup> I am pointing this out since some accounts of the 'carnavalesque' (e.g. Eagleton 1981; Langman and Ryan 2009; Matta 1984/1997) have emphasised the merely temporary inversion of the dominant order during such festivities. See also James Green (1999, 203) for a critique of these accounts with respect to gay and trans people in Brazil.

<sup>11</sup> Deleuze (1969/2004) addresses this excess subsisting in semiotics in terms of a difference between the "expression," i.e. the concrete words or phrases articulated, and the "expressed," i.e. the affective dynamics occurring in the moment of expressing. For a fuller explication see Motzkau (2007, 352-8).

Although these dynamics are impersonal or “a-subjective” to the extent that they are not in the control of any particular subject, various subjects, such as researchers and participants, are implicated within them, which relates to the issue of responsibility.

### **Engaging the untranslatable**

Issues of responsibility have been raised with respect to both the classical understanding of translation concerned with nation-bound languages and the notion of cultural translation. Both notions have been critiqued for contributing to the framing of the “languages” or “cultures” across which translation happens as homogeneous and essentially distinctive. Translation has, according to these critiques, served as a tool for establishing a regime of domination where the “West” dominates the “Rest” by appropriating foreign languages and cultures into the own one (Appiah 1993; Asad 1986; Sakai 2006; Spivak 1992/2004). Asad points in particular to inequalities of power between the language of Western academia and ‘Third World’ languages as engaged by anthropologists.<sup>12</sup> The issue of responsibility thus circulates in particular around the question of how to carry out translation without letting the familiar, and often more powerful, meaning structures of the own language dominate the foreign ones. Asad follows Benjamin (1923/1969, who follows Rudolf Pannwitz) in calling for a need to let the language of translation ‘be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue’ (Pannwitz quoted by Benjamin 1923/1969, 80 in Asad 1986, 157). Benjamin captures this challenge of translation in an image:

Fragments of a vessel, in order to be articulated together, must follow – although not equate – one another in the smallest detail. In the same way a translation, instead of making itself similar to the meaning [*Sinn*] of the original, must lovingly and in detail, in its own language, mould itself to its [the original’s] manner of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as the broken parts of a greater language, just as fragments are the broken parts of a vessel. (1923/2004, 80-1)

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<sup>12</sup> Asad explains: ‘The reason for this is, first, that in their political-economic relations with Third World countries, Western nations have the greater ability to manipulate the latter. And, second, Western languages produce and deploy *desired* knowledge more readily than Third World languages do.’ (1986, 158)

Spivak follows this line of argument when she, as mentioned earlier, calls attention to the need of ‘surrendering to the text’ (1992/2004, 378). In my discussion of the “Butterfly hunt” I have already indicated the relevance of this argument in relation to the understanding of translation proposed here. However, I want to suggest that in the context of semiotic translation the issue of responsibility is more complex than in the classical and anthropological understanding. In these understandings, translation is concerned with the evocation within the own language of the meanings formulated in a foreign language and culture (what Benjamin 1923/2004 calls ‘*das Gemeinte*’). With the movement from one semiotic to another, by contrast, the intended meaning of the translational statement itself changes – as in the example of the kiss that comes to evoke danger, pleasure or moral concern. The aim of translation is thus not necessarily to evoke the same meaning. Accordingly, “surrendering” or “becoming powerfully affected” concerns not only the ability of one language to mould itself word by word to another one. Instead, it has to do with the capacity to enter into a process of joint worlding, where heterogeneous expressions, and their excesses, are able to acquire agency.

This poses, firstly, the challenge of becoming attentive to the particular enactments that each semiotic is expressive of. This is a challenge since semiotics differ in their relative prominence or “power,” similarly to the language differences pointed out by Asad. The semiotic of morality evoked by Jonas’ narrative, for instance, may be problematic in its normalising effects, but also indicate dynamics that are highly pertinent to gay people (and to others). To a certain extent it may furthermore be expressive of an enactment of respect, even though this issue is not as clearly pronounced. Secondly, such joint worlding entails becoming attentive to and engaging with what I have called the excessive expressivity subsisting within semiotics. An affect of *aconchego* may subsist within a semiotic of *fervo*, as in the case of Josué’s statement on the kiss. My own affective implication within the intensities of *aconchego* unfolding during the conversation with Josué, Sasha and Nando opened up possibilities for attending to and engaging with this excessive expressivity. It indicated how it can become possible for gay and trans people to create positive affective relations in public spaces. It moreover made me bodily experience, and join in, some of the intensities enabling this particular semiotic enactment. The challenge for social research, then, is to promote entanglements of researchers and participants that give rise to responsible

worldings. In the case of the example provided – although there is no space to elaborate further on this issue here – I had as researcher together with Josué and Nando the possibility to carry the experience of *aconchego* from the *bairro* in Nova Iguaçu back into the group workshop and to further enact, explore, and interrogate, its productive potential.

Let me end by coming back to Walter Benjamin's insight that 'to some degree all great texts contain their virtual translation between the lines [...]' (1923/2004, 83).<sup>13</sup> The 'virtual translation' of an expressive assemblage – and what 'great texts' means would need further discussion – is constituted by the excessive intensities subsisting within its concrete semiotic formalisation, which can give rise to new worldings. For Benjamin, translation itself has a particular capacity to bring about such new worldings, as it enables an undoing of the concrete semiotics involved in translation. When a semiotic gets "powerfully affected" by another one, moulds itself according to the foreign 'manner of meaning,' as Benjamin puts it, this evokes an effect of estrangement or alienation with respect to both semiotics involved. Since this effect of alienation ensues from the particular movement of translation, it is not a stable meaning that could simply be transferred and "translated" again. Rather, the translation expresses something which 'does not lend itself again to translation' (Benjamin 1923/2004, 78). Instead of simply producing new semiotics, then, translation evokes an effect of untranslatability, indicating an excess that may articulate into new kinds of worlding. Bringing out this potential is for Benjamin the 'task of the translator.' While this resonates strongly with my argument regarding the specific potential of response-able/responsible translation, to what extent the effect of estrangement identified by Benjamin with respect to languages is also relevant to semiotic translation could also be explored – further research is clearly needed. In social research, at any rate, translations between different semiotics may not only be effectuated by researchers. Accordingly, the researcher's task is not only to enact responsible translation but also to witness how translation moves get carried out in the various discourses and articulations at stake and to responsibly insert her or himself into these enactments of translation. This may entail amplification, interrogation and critique – and

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<sup>13</sup> Note that Harry Zohn translates '*virtuell*' as 'potential,' thereby rendering Benjamin's conception less clear. On the difference between "virtual" and "potential" see Boundas (1996). While notions of the "possible" or "potential" commonly refer to non-real states that need to be "realised" and which can be represented as such, the virtual is itself real although precisely not representable, it does not possess any particular form. Its reality consists rather in the capacity or efficiency of producing a formed "actuality."

often more than one thing at once. It also entails, however, attentiveness to the affective dynamics that enable translation and that unfold as its untranslatable excess.

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