Queer Theory and Translation Studies: Language, Politics, Desire

Brian James Baer (2021)

London and New York: Routledge, 227 pp.

Reviewed by Chenchen Wang

Queer Theory and Translation Studies: Language, Politics, Desire is Brian James Baer's latest book in queer translation studies, an interdisciplinary field which has not received a lot of attention from scholars either in translation studies or in gender and sexuality studies (Epstein and Gillett 2017; Baer and Kaidl 2018). As an effort to 'make up for the lost years' (14), Baer's monograph provides a paradigm in this field by showing counter-hegemonic approaches to global sexuality studies and ways to understand otherness in translation studies.

The volume provides an overview of contemporary academic perspectives. Baer's negotiation of the relationship of queer theory to translation studies and of translation to gender and sexuality studies places the two in a 'productive and mutually interrogating relationship' (3). It reflects and critiques 'a queer approach to Translation Studies' (14) and advocates 'translation as a method to understand the transnational circulation of queer sexuality' (11). The book begins with an introduction of the linguistic relevance of translation, queer sexuality and the notion of the modern nation. By tracing how translation and queer sexuality have been alienated from the modern nation, Baer tries to lay the theoretical foundation of queer translation studies. He is also concerned with how translation challenges hegemonic Western epistemology of sexuality and how it serves as a site

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of cultural negotiation by seeing language as 'heterogenous, multiple and fundamentally indeterminate as the recognition in queer theory' (14). To answer these questions, Baer explores the theoretical interfaces between queer theory, translation studies and global sexuality studies, and examines the relevant elements in the process of transnational circulation of queer texts through a range of case studies. According to Baer, queering translation means dismantling the binary models of intercultural exchange; specifically, translation is necessary to trace the transnational circulation of knowledge about sexuality. Baer emphasises the importance of the framings of translated texts for readers whose culture, location, language and historical period are quite different from the original texts' readers. To this end, he focuses on the role of the life stories of queer people in understanding the transnational circulation of queer sexualities through translation.

Baer organises his analysis into seven chapters. After a theoretical investigation of the interfaces between queer sexuality and queer textuality, Baer traces the transnational circulation of queer texts such as the translation of 'gay' anthologies, lyric poetry and queer life writing. In the first chapter, Baer investigates the possible intersections between queer theory and translation studies. In the second chapter, he focuses on the theoretical relations between translation and global sexuality studies. In the next two chapters, he explores the role that anthologies and their translations play in the process of circulating a Western disciplinary history. In Chapter 5, Baer questions the novelistic readings of lyrics which marginalise the lyric poetry in gay anthologies. Chapter 6 discusses the life story of a queer person – Charlotte von Mahlsdorf – who lived through Nazi Germany and socialist translation into 'a queer counterhegemonic pedagogy' (189).

The most innovative contribution Baer makes to the field is his attention to the 'internal other' of the anglophone world. As an expert on Russian, Baer focuses on those Eastern European languages and cultures marginalised within the anglophone world. In his opinion, paying critical attention to translation can trouble the hegemonic pretensions of the anglophone global gay culture. In addition, Baer's analysis of anthologies and their translations in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 is seminal and innovative as anthologies are considered a privileged vehicle for the consolidation and circulation of a Western sexual epistemology. Specifically, Baer examines anthologies as historical documents and vehicles for the operation of social dominant value. He argues that there is no clear distinction between the investigated national and international anthologies in terms of criteria for text selection. In terms of the arrangement of texts, Baer illustrates the ideological inferences made by alphabetical and chronological arrangement, through which anthologies contribute to monolingualisation of the modern nation-state. By comparing the theoretical framing in United States, Russian and

Ukrainian anthologies, Baer reveals the complicated politics that pertain to various kinds of anthologies and translation. Although it still focuses on white, middle-class people, Baer's research provides inspiration for scholars who research cultures and languages outside the so-called Western world.

This groundbreaking book will be essential reading for advanced students, scholars and researchers in translation studies, gender and sexuality studies and related areas.

References

- Baer, Brain J. and Kaindl, Klaus (2018) *Queering Translation, Translating the Queer*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315505978>
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