

Accessing *Bodies that Matter*

On queer activist practices of translation

Karolina Krasuska, Ludmiła Janion and Marta Usiekiewicz
University of Warsaw

In this self-reflexive paper, co-written by scholars currently collaborating on the Polish translation of Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter*, we discuss the political and activist stakes of translating a canonical queer theory text over 25 years after its original publication, in the context of anti-lgbtq+ public discourse in today's Poland. We argue that the collective character of our translation process turns it into an activist workshop that negotiates social norms and works on the invention and application of their alternatives. This activist practice results in a programmatically accessible translation, written in gender-inclusive and queer-sensitive language that follows the poststructuralist philosophical underpinnings of the 1993 source text and its gendered language. Discussing examples of Butler's use of grammatical gender and her politicized style in our translation, the article contributes to understanding the queer activist practice of translation and, specifically, under-written questions of translating queer theory in a contemporary Polish (linguistic) context.

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Introduction

“Within the reception of this already well-known academic text, its translation is only a cherry on the cake,” so reads a review of our recent unsuccessful grant application to obtain government funding for the translation of Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Meaning of “Sex”* (1993). This statement may be interpreted as symptomatic of how translation of canonical (queer) theory texts is perceived. Translation may be a superfluous exercise when we consider solely those academics who speak English fluently and are familiar with Anglophone theory, especially queer theory, but not when we take into account other audiences and other purposes. Accessing theory in its original language is a

privilege. Translations into other national languages make theory more accessible and open new conceptual possibilities. Consider, for instance, teaching a queer theory syllabus in Polish that consists largely of translated texts: the quality of teaching is predicated on existing translations and the queerness of these translations. Given the activist implications of most queer theory texts, these translations read in classrooms and outside of the academy can have activist potential. It is from this perspective that we have approached Butler's *Bodies that Matter* as a translation collective.

In the following, we reflect on how a praxis of translation of a queer theory text works in the specific geotemporal location of post-state-socialist Poland in 2020. As feminist scholars-translators researching and teaching queer theory, programmatically interested in this translation that could incite queer thinking, we analyze the conditions we encounter and the strategies we employ translating a canonical, over twenty-year old, queer theory text. The queer political/activist potential of *Bodies that Matter* as a target text is predicated on, first, the environment of translation defined by the status of "queer" in Polish politics and in the Polish academy, and second, the queer theory under translation, its central assumptions and language use. This underlying potential is amplified through our particular translation decisions, produced in an activist-shaped collaborative manner, that stress accessibility.

To circumscribe the sociocultural environment of our "committed translation project" (Simon 1996: 3), we consider the interconnections between activism, the academy, and public discourse today in Poland from a gender/sexuality perspective in three steps. First, we reflect on the existing connections between Polish queer activism and the academy. Then, we review the political conditions of our work vis-à-vis the increasing politicization of queer/feminist work in the public discourse, especially with reference to Judith Butler. Finally, we consider the ambivalent status and fragmentary reception of queer theory within the Polish academy. This leads us to think about our translation project and our translation process in activist terms that we theorize using both queer and feminist translation theory and work from other disciplines, here specifically anthropology. From this perspective, we move on to demonstrate our translation praxis and show how concrete decisions on respectively grammatical and then stylistic and lexical levels reflect our purpose: producing a legible, accessible translation written in gender-inclusive and queer-sensitive language that follows the poststructuralist philosophical underpinnings of the text and the gendered language use of the original text produced in the early 1990s. Discussing examples of Butler's use of grammatical gender and her politicized style in our translation, the article contributes to understanding the queer activist practice of translation and, specifi-

cally, underlying questions of translating queer theory in a contemporary Polish (linguistic) context.

Bodies that Matter between the academy and activism

Even within turbulent debates about the often troubled relations of theory and practice, the academy and activism, the Polish context exemplifies productive intersections between these spheres and the role of academics in queer activism (see Struzik 2020), which can feed off our theorizing of translating *Bodies that Matter*. In the context where queer studies were sparsely taught at the university, the NGO KPH (Campaign Against Homophobia) was offering queer studies courses and published a handbook (Abramowicz, Biedroń, and Kochanowski 2010). A significant part of queer studies work available in Polish, including the majority of Judith Butler's works, fragments of Sedgwick's texts (2005), and one book by Halberstam (2018), have been published by Krytyka Polityczna, a publishing house run by a leftist think tank which is engaged in intellectual production, as well as activism and political action. This intersection of academy and activism is also present in the initial issue of *QueerStoria*, a magazine on Polish lgbtq+ history, published by Lambda Warszawa, which (re)publishes archival texts alongside contemporary scholarly works (Kliszczyński 2019). The debates about the use and possible translation of the term "queer" in Polish, which took place from the 1990s to mid-2010s, also show the overlapping of academy and activism.¹ More generally, the queer theory upsurge in Polish academia that has been happening within the past two decades can be read as intersecting with the

1. The debates on various possible Polish equivalents for the word "queer" took place among the pioneers of queer studies and activists (see Basiuk 2000; Basiuk, Ferens, and Sikora 2002; Mizielińska 2006). The main question was whether to leave the word untranslated (and if so, how to spell it), or to look for a Polish equivalent (and if so, should it be gender inclusive and/or offensive). As both the proponents and opponents of the English term agreed, "queer" – unintelligible outside of closed academic circles – was a safe choice in the academy. The English word connoted academic sophistication and, paradoxically, respectability. "Instead of screaming, the word 'queer' [in Polish] says nothing," wrote activist Anna Laszuk, who called the Polish usage of "queer" "a hip closet" (2010: 4, 6). Indeed, activists were sometimes inclined toward experimental uses, such as the polonized spelling (*klir*) or employment of slurs. However, after twenty years, it is impossible to disagree with Basiuk's claim that everyone who deals with queer theory in Poland uses the English term (2000: 28). The attempts to translate "queer theory" as *teoria pedalska*, literally reclaiming the slur *pedał* (faggot) did not take off (see Culler 1998; Abramowicz, Biedroń, and Kochanowski 2010: 7).

dynamics of activism.² Namely, it can be interpreted as propelled by an evolution of queer activism from “local, informal, and apolitical, comprised of friendship networks oriented toward self-help and services” in the 1990s (O’Dwyer 2018: 5) to a highly political and organized movement, transnational in its character (Ayoub 2016: 3).³ At the same time, recent research on the queer movement explicitly seeks to propel activism itself (Struzik 2020: 265), following calls in the international academy for “activism-oriented scholarship” (Meyer 2005: 192).

The current political context makes us further rethink the interconnections between the academy and queer activism and, possibly, expand the notion of what activism means within the academy and beyond. The conservative turn in Poland with its attendant ideological war has cast gender and gender studies as the antagonist against Christian values (Graff and Korolczuk 2017; Dietze and Roth 2020). Similarly to the (ab)uses of Butler’s philosophy described by Baldo (2018) in her essay on translating *Undoing Gender* into Italian (2018), “gender” has been used by the Polish right and the Catholic Church to discredit progressive movements, including feminist and lgbtq+ rights movements.⁴ While the anti-gender mobilization peaked around 2013 (Duda 2016; Graff and Korolczuk 2017; Peń 2015), in 2019, the populist right wing government of Poland began a new campaign of lavender scaremongering that has resulted in a wave of violence and anti-lgbtq+ charters that declared some municipalities “LGBT-free zones,” further weakening the legal protection of queer people in Poland.⁵ While the earlier anti-lgbtq+ backlash that followed Poland’s joining the EU has been interpreted as productive for the queer movement because it helped to heighten lgbtq+ visibility (O’Dwyer

2. Scholars have produced works focusing on the applicability of queer theory for specific academic fields, including Polish art history (e.g., Leszkowicz 2002), cinema (e.g., Jagielski 2012), and sociology (e.g., Kochanowski 2013), while others have authored notable case studies giving prominence to a queer theory approach (e.g., Warkocki 2007; Kaliściak 2011, 2016; Szcześniak 2016; Sobolczyk 2017; Sępnia 2017; Warkocki 2018; Basiuk and Burszta 2020). Also the number of translations of queer theory texts is growing, if slowly. The Polish reception of queer after 1989, often simultaneous with the reception of LGBT studies and activism, has been theorized by Mizelińska and Kulpa as knotted temporality (2012).

3. As Struzik suggests, because of the current legal situation, the story of the movement has been narrated as a story of failure (see Kochanowski 2013), but she argues that due to its dynamic and increasingly intersectional framing, this story can be also told differently (2020: 271).

4. In this text, we use queer and lgbtq+ as synonyms. Other acronyms or other kinds of spelling occur to signal their use by the authors or movements that we refer to at specific moments.

5. See a comprehensive report on the current “legal and policy situation” of LGBTQI people in Europe and specifically in Poland. According to the ILGA ranking and within its parameters, Poland has dropped to the last place among EU countries since 2019 (ILGA 2020).

2018: 5), it remains to be seen what consequences for activism the current local and national anti-LGBT campaign will produce.

As in other countries, such as Brazil or Italy,⁶ the status of Judith Butler as a public figure has been politicized within the Polish context beyond the academy. In the “gender wars,” Butler was announced as the key villain of so-called “gender ideology”: discredited as a Jewish lesbian who in a fit of Marxist madness allegedly claimed that there is no gender and/or everyone can freely “change sex” (see Duda 2016: 181, 258, 299–301). It is therefore now particularly timely to make her canonical works available in Polish, even though selected chapters of *Bodies that Matter* are known and have been cited to some extent in Polish cultural studies (Nacher 2008; Rudnicki 2013; Rogowska-Stangret 2016; Szcześniak 2016). The act of translation itself may be regarded as an act of activism against misconceptions around Butler’s theory; activism understood as an attempt at disseminating academic knowledge by producing an iteration of the original which may work against its homophobic distortions within the political sphere.

Our translation also enters into the conversation about academy/activism because of the general status of Butler in queer activist circles in Europe. For instance, in Germany, she has the status of a public intellectual and academic who is central, almost symbolic.⁷ Indeed, despite – or maybe even precisely because of – the criticism of her notion of agency and style, in interviews and prefaces Butler has emphasized how much she sees her work as political in its effect and inspired by political events or actions (see Olson and Worsham 2000: 745–746; Salih 2002: 137–138).

We see our translation as an intervention in the Polish reception of Butler with only *Gender Trouble* functioning in the Polish progressive academy as an almost dogmatic text. The reception of Butler’s works remains uneven, even though multiple of her works have been translated into Polish in full: *Excitable Speech* (2010 [1997]), *Antigone’s Claim* (2010 [2000]), *Frames of War* (2011 [2009]), *Parting Ways* (2014 [2012]), *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2016 [2015]), and *The Psychic Life of Power* (2018 [1997]). The reception of her writing on gender is mainly limited to gender performativity and drag, with the insights on queer psychoanalysis and critical race theory or

6. In 2017 Judith Butler was attacked when visiting Brazil and her effigy was burned in front of the building which held a conference she helped organize (Jaschik 2017); Baldo describes the reception of Butler in Italy (Baldo 2018, 2020).

7. Butler’s works have been almost immediately translated into German, sparking a heated debate; her theory has been widely popularized in tertiary publications such as handbooks and widely informed German academics (see Hark 2005).

contemporary gender/sexual regimes left unexplored.⁸ At the same time, Butler appears as an almost unique pivotal figure in queer theory within a relatively empty field of translated queer theory texts. Characteristically, no single full monograph by Sarah Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Lisa Duggan, Lee Edelman, José Esteban Muñoz, Jasbir Puar, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, or Michael Warner, to name a few canonical queer theory authors, has been translated.⁹ As Tymoczko (2010: 6) observes, “the non-translation (or zero translation) of entire texts ... [is] fundamental in revealing the politics of translation in a particular cultural context.” In the particular context of Polish publishing, “zero translation” of these texts signals a gap that activist translation could fill.

Let us spell out once more the political stakes of translating *Bodies that Matter* in Poland today. Our translation engages the conservative offensive within which Butler is demonized: the translation can work against the homophobic distortions of her work within the public sphere. Within the politics of the academy, our translation clearly further solidifies Butler’s canonical position, but attempts at nuancing her reception. In relation to activism, it seems to be, at least partly, in tune with the changing frame of the Polish queer movement today. As Struzik’s (2020) research suggests, the movement increasingly defines itself within the category of solidarity, building coalitions with other groups, mostly those disadvantaged economically. For example, a passing glance at Lambda Warszawa’s website today shows an attempt to explicitly address immigrants, in this case Ukrainians (Lambda Warszawa, n.d.). Butler’s theorizing of the intersection of race and sexuality in *Bodies that Matter* can be read as parallel to this direction in organized activism. Consequently, taking into account the environment of our translation, defined by the intersection of queer politics and the academy and Butler’s importance to both LGBTQ+ activism and gender and queer studies in Poland, we aim to

8. This may be illustrated by the selection of the chapters from *Bodies that Matter* that have been translated. The translation of “Critically Queer” first appeared in a lesbian activist journal *Furia Pierwsza* (Butler 2000) and was later included in a leading textbook of literary theory in a “Gender, feminism, queer” section (Butler 2006); the two other translated chapters – “Gender Is Burning” (Butler 2004) and “Bodies that Matter” (Butler 2011) – were published only in print journals with very limited availability. *Gender Trouble [Uwiktani w plec]* (Butler 2008) was Butler’s first monograph to appear; it was initially received as a key text in feminist theory, which was supported by the social action titled “Do you know you have gender?” that was organized by its Polish publisher. Butler’s two other monographs focusing on gender and sexuality, namely *Bodies that Matter* and *Undoing Gender*, have not been translated into Polish.

9. The selection available is scarce: one book by Steven Seidman (2012) and one by Jack Halberstam (2018), short passages by Kate Bornstein, Edelman, Warner, and Muñoz in an anthology designed as a gender/queer studies textbook (Gajewska 2012), “Thinking Sex” by Gayle Rubin (2004), as well as short passages from Sedgwick’s *Between Men* (2005).

translate in a way that reconciles the legibility of the target text and its theoretical subtlety.

Queer theory and the activist practice of translation

Political queer organizing in Poland and the politicization of queer theory shape the environment of our translation. So does the growing literature on engaged translation in the context of queer and feminist theories (Gramling and Dutta 2016; Castro and Ergun 2017; Baer and Kaindl 2018; Baldo 2019a, 2019b; von Flotow and Kamal 2020). Thinking about translation as queer activism requires stretching the notion of activism itself. Within recent scholarly theorizations of activist translations (e.g., Tymoczko 2010), the cluster of queer/activism/translation seems to be under-represented. While defining the major element in activist translation as partaking in cultural struggles and “inevitably involving values” (Tymoczko 2010: 8) is key, we need to better understand how it functions as a process and, specifically, a process of activist translation of queer theory. Looking at Dave (2012) on queer activism allows us to better parse out the workings of activism and, as we suggest, the activist practice of translation. Following Dave (2012: 3), we would like to think about activist translation as an “ethical practice.” Dave sees this practice as consisting of three elements: “the problematization of social norms, the invention of alternatives to those norms, and the creative practice of these newly invented possibilities” (ibid: 3). Within these terms, translation is not a solitary process. It is a collective task of negotiation and dissent that takes place between actors involved in the translation within their sociocultural environment and then among the target audience.

If we wanted to rewrite Dave’s three elements to theorize a queer activist translation practice, the “problematization of social norms” would require us to think how Polish language works in relation to gendered queer issues and what the received norms of language usage and use are. This problematization happens here in the service of translation and is instigated by Butler’s queer thinking and writing. For Butler (2003), social and linguistic norms are parallel. Everyday language, she claims, in its smoothness and easiness tends to perpetuate exclusions and inequalities, “the doxa of the common,” and hence the need for criticism and linguistic alternatives that may lead us to political alternatives (203). At the same time, the problematization of social norms is aided by translation since translatory work requires constant comparisons between the source text and the target text being produced, which helps to reveal what is tacitly assumed as the gendered heteronormative linguistic norm in the target language.

It is already here, within the problematization of social norms of language use, that the collective character of this translation project becomes key. Our translation collective involves seven persons with backgrounds in American and gender/sexuality studies, women and/or queer people at various stages of their academic careers: a Ph.D. student, a junior adjunct professor, junior faculty members, and a mid-career professor, all of whom engage to various degrees in translating, editing, copy editing the text, and providing feedback on the translation. Especially at the beginning of the process, regular, approximately monthly, team meetings were at the center of the project as this was when the collective was engaged in a critique of political workings of English and Polish, the highlights of which we discuss in the last part of this article. Our regular discussions were similar to intense close reading seminars in an atmosphere of an informal activist group and created an intellectual and emotional support network. These debates will be reflected in the footnotes and in a co-written postscript to the published translation. By doing this we invoke feminist and queer translation theorizing (Baer and Kaindl 2018; von Flotow and Kamal 2020). Specifically, following feminist translation theorists, Epstein (2017) explicitly advocates for making queer people visible by, among others, supplying “footnotes, endnotes, a translator’s preface, or other paratextual material to discuss queerness and/or translatorial choices” (121), which she calls “acqueering.”

The collective and the regular meetings also served as the second key to activism present in Dave’s theorization: “the invention of alternatives to these norms,” that is bending the Polish language to think queerly with Butler. While queer translation theorizing has been on the rise (e.g., Epstein and Gillett 2017; Baer and Kaindl 2018), it predominantly considers the translation of literary texts and not, as in our case, high queer theory. Analyses of queer translation into Polish are only beginning to be published (see Król 2016), and as a result we faced multiple challenges that have not been previously analyzed in the literature on the subject. A queer theory text, such as *Bodies that Matter*, is self-aware of the embeddedness of language in the heterosexual matrix. Moreover, it programmatically pushes the language beyond its grammatical and stylistic norms, which we will discuss in detail below. We entered into a relationship with a source text which was already pre-shaped by a certain conceptualization of gender and sexuality that goes beyond what is received as straight knowledge – a key consideration in coming up with linguistic solutions. It is a text that already does what a queer translation theorist asks of queer translation: to “hijack a reader’s attention by bringing issues of sexuality and gender identity to the fore” (Epstein 2017: 121).

Our quest for translation strategies for *Bodies that Matter* made us, however, return to the existing Polish translations of literary texts that Butler discusses, such as Willa Cather’s work, translations which may obscure queer meanings.

Exposing these queer displacements is another field of queer intervention in our translation. The most interesting instance here is “Paul’s Case,” the only Willa Cather text that has been translated into Polish twice (Cather 1969, 1971). Neither translation retained all the homoerotic cues that together solve the mystery of the titular “case,” i.e., Paul’s homosexuality. Thus, we decided not only to retranslate individual words and crucial passages, but also to annotate the text explaining these modifications.¹⁰ These footnoted interventions constitute another layer of queer activism in our work – they challenge the queer displacements or erasures in the existing Polish translations, but also emphasize the fragility of the homoerotic coding from the early twentieth century on which Butler’s argument is based. Our translation of *Bodies that Matter* calls for a return to Cather, whose five novels and numerous short stories have been translated into Polish in the 1960s and 1970s, without appreciating their homoerotic qualities.

From a practical vantage point, translating as a collective or collectively inventing alternatives to normativizing language usage in Polish resulted in a prolonged process, lasting now for two years, with around one more planned till the publication. The collective vetting of translation decisions, which are heavily politicized, introduced multiple steps of negotiation into the process. Each chapter has a core translator whose first draft is vetted by another team member before it is discussed in the forum. Clearly, this idealized model of collaboration – with no remuneration as of yet – undergoes necessary modifications: members work at different speeds and sometimes are unable to meet intermediary deadlines or their tasks need to be re-allocated. As a result, the whole process lengthens, and becomes more complex: for example, chapters have not been translated in the original order, leading to problems with coherence. While sometimes frustrating due to its perceived ineffectiveness, the collective work has been educational and empowering.

Both the functioning of the collective and our engagement in translation goes against the norm of “proper” academic work that translates into grants and promotions. The status of translators in Poland has never been as marginalized

10. In footnotes referring to Butler’s quotes from “Paul’s Case” we indicate, for example, that in the 1969 Tadeusz Jan Dehnel’s translation, “belladonna,” the drug that Paul is significantly stated not to take, was rendered as *atropina* (atropine), which erases the important cue connected to femininity (Cather 1969: 17), and that in the 1971 Zofia Siwicka’s translation a “dandy” was not expressed as *dandys*, but a less suggestive *elegant* (smart dresser) (Cather 1971: 204). Similarly, in Cather’s telling phrase “he continually used [his eyes] in a conscious, theatrical sort of way, peculiarly offensive in a boy,” “a boy” is translated as *niedorostek* (a youngster, p. 17) in 1969 and *taki chłopiec* (this kind of a boy, p. 205) in 1971 – in both cases, gender inversion is obliterated as it is suggested that Paul’s behavior would be acceptable in an older boy or a boy of a different kind.

(Tabakowska 1998) as in English-speaking countries (Venuti 2008), and there are renowned and respected translators recognized for their craft. However, in the academic context of today, there is no place for translating theoretical texts: the labor-intensive process of translation is officially not considered scholarly labor and has no place in the governmental indexes of academic achievement or in faculty reviews. Institutionally speaking, translation is more an act of love – and in our case, engagement, and activism – than a sound “investment.”¹¹

Our decision to translate and the resulting translation strategy have been dictated by our dedication to Butler’s theory, our affiliation to her thinking and, simultaneously, our commitment, and our practical aim: making Butler’s multi-layered text accessible, making it a text that – as a the third element of Dave’s theorization of activism – we want to teach with and others can use creatively.

We would like to think about our work process as an activist practice of translation because of its highly politicized Polish sociocultural environment in relation to queer thinking and queer lives. Our collective translation process, understood as an “ethical practice,” is informed by our affiliation and dedication to the queer source text. The organization of the process mirrors, to some extent, activist practice, going against the norms of our professional lives in the academy and material gratification. This empowering collectivity may help us be less exposed when possible political attacks on the translation happen when the text is published. This brings us to the particular challenges we encountered during the translation process and solutions we developed in relation to the two most charged aspects of *Bodies that Matter*: its gendered grammar and its politics of style.

Queer and grammatical gender

Political and institutional contexts and activist translation practice shaped our translation strategy which is based on the text’s accessibility for students and non-academics interested in using Butler’s theories in activist practice and public debate. This general principle resulted in numerous individual and systemic translation decisions. In this section we focus on the gendered aspects of grammar, particularly translating personal pronouns and nouns in Butler’s theorizing

11. Indeed, even though the collective involves experienced translators and editors of theoretical texts, our work till now has not been remunerated, with a tentative promise from a publishing house holding the publication rights to pay a rather low translation fee upon the publication of the book; also, a bid to obtain a translation grant from the government within their translation program has failed twice despite very favorable reviews.

as well as in her queer readings of primary texts. Given that Polish inflects for gender, we employed numerous strategies of defamiliarizing grammar with the motivation that Butler's argument is not overshadowed by our attempts at radical language experimentation and playfulness, which is not characteristic of Butler's prose.

While in multiple texts Butler theorizes that the naturalization of gender happens in and through language, in *Bodies that Matter* her own use of grammatically gendered categories, nouns and pronouns, may be read as relatively conventional and bearing a clear mark of its times: the 1990s. As Butler claims, contesting grammatical gender is a strategy to contest gender as a normative social category. She invokes Monique Wittig, who on the basis of the French language suggests that dichotomous grammatical gender establishes a gender binary as a naturalized horizon of understanding (1999: 28–29). Butler argues the following: “If gender itself is naturalized through grammatical norms ... then the alteration of gender at the most fundamental epistemic level will be conducted, in part, through contesting the grammar in which gender is given” (1999: xix). However, as already noted, Butler's attempts to trouble grammatical gender in *Bodies that Matter* are in fact limited. We can trace some efforts to include gender-inclusive language: Butler uses both “he/she” and “his/her” as well “she/he” and “her/his” – the latter choices seem to constitute a step toward linguistic equality at the expense of the common idiom. Nevertheless, Butler's language is not queered in a way that would surpass the gender binary. She does not opt for singular “they” or any gender neutral pronouns such as “e” or “xe.” This is, of course, reflective of the language of the 1990s, just as the unproblematic use of nouns such as “homosexuals” (Butler 1993: 182) or “a preoperative transsexual” (84), which we translate respectively as *homoseksualiści i homoseksualistki* (male homosexuals and female homosexuals) and *transseksualistka przed operacją korekty płci* (a female transsexual before gender reassignment surgery). Thus, our translation choices remain within the gender binary as well, in order to do justice to the source text and times of its production.

The difficulty of translating grammatical gender is compounded by how highly Polish language grammar is normatively shaped by grammatical gender and, in this respect, goes even further than Romance languages, resembling French more than English. In short, most noun forms that refer to people differ when applied to boys/men or girls/women; for example, *czytelnik* means “a (male) reader,” and *czytelniczka* “a female reader.” The question of the extent to which masculine forms can be treated as universal is debatable.¹² However, Polish

12. While pre-war Polish tended to favor feminine derivatives, these have disappeared during state socialism. Currently, some feminine variants, especially the ones that refer to prestigious

feminists call for a broad usage of feminine forms to acknowledge the diverse roles of women in society. This change is on the way; the trend to incorporate feminine nouns has been visible in the media in the last decade (Małocha-Krupa 2015). In addition, plural forms also differ depending on gender, with *czytelnicy* meaning “male readers,” but used as “readers in general,” and *czytelniczki* as “female readers.” While it is grammatically correct to use the masculine plural form to refer to a mixed group, feminists indicate that this constitutes gender-exclusive language which renders women invisible. A gender-inclusive phrase would be *czytelnicy i czytelniczki* – “male and female readers.” However, since adjectives and verbs in the past tense also reflect grammatical gender in Polish, and the appropriate verb form for coordinated subjects referring to both women and men is masculine, as in French, while modifiers should be repeated for both conjuncts, an entirely correct gender-inclusive language requires longer, more intricate and repetitive syntax. The phrase “many readers” becomes *wielu czytelników* (male) *i wiele czytelniczek* (female). In response to such perceived clumsiness, there are techniques, used mainly by politically progressive writers, to shorten such sentences, for example into *wielu/e czytelników/czek*, which is a strategy used, for example, by Michał Abel Pelczar in his translation of an excerpt from Michael Warner’s (2012) *The Trouble with Normal*. These forms, however, create stumbling blocks while reading and still remain within the gender binary.

As feminist translators, we want to reject the most convenient and apparently neutral gender-exclusive language. At the same time, when a sentence is long and complex, inclusivity may compete with accessibility of the text. Consequently, our choices vary. In most cases, we opt for the longer forms in the name of inclusivity but we do not go beyond the gender binary; for example, “critics” are translated into *krytycy i krytyczki* (male and female critics). In other cases, we opt for not inherently gendered nouns as the grammatically feminine *osoba* (person). For instance, we have decided to translate “many readers” as *wiele osób, które przeczytały* (many persons who have read). In other cases, for the sake of brevity, we have opted for the feminine forms only. For example, the phrase “feminist philosophers” has been translated into the feminine *feministyczne filozofki* (feminist female philosophers) – although to some readers it may falsely imply that there are no male feminist philosophers, it is a price to pay for avoiding the longish *feministyczne filozofki i feministyczni filozofowie* (female feminist philosophers and male feminist philosophers). Our rationale here is to employ language

and authoritative jobs, such as *profesorka* (female professor) or *prezydentka* (female president), sound ideologically tinged or carry less prestige to some, usually more conservative, language users.

that is gender inclusive, but, at the same time, mainstream and reflecting gender politics of the source text written in the early 1990s.

The grammatical gender in Polish leads not only to stylistic problems, but also complicates queer readings of, as in this instance, literary texts. In the chapter on Willa Cather's fiction, "Dangerous Crossings: Willa Cather's Masculine Names," Butler analyses the narrative "I" of the introduction to *My Ántonia* – the "I" which remains anonymous and whose gender is unknown. Cather opens her novel: "Last summer, in a season of intense heat, Jim Burden and I happened to be crossing Iowa on the same train" (Cather 1988: 1). The gender ambiguity of this "I" is crucial for Butler who proposes to read it as a site that disrupts the masculinity allegedly assumed by Cather in her "cross-gender" writing. In Polish, however, such gender ambiguity is hardly possible to express because in the past tense all verb forms are gendered. We decided to render the anonymous narrator female to amplify Butler's reading and further "ac queer" (Epstein 2017: 121) the text. This choice, then, accentuates homoerotic undertones of the narrative "I," clearly infatuated with the titular Ántonia. Moreover, it underscores the interpretation that it is Cather who ostensibly transfers her voice to a masculine narrator, whom she nevertheless controls as the author of the novel. This is a key point for Butler who claims that Cather, through such a maneuver, problematizes gender and sexual identity. Interestingly, the "I" was also gendered feminine by the Polish translator of the novel, Ryszarda Grzybowska in 1981 (Cather 1981). What is lost as a result of this decision is gender ambiguity of the "I," which otherwise most probably would be read simply as masculine – this is what typically happens to a voice unmarked by gender, which here can also be linked to the conventions of male authorship. In Polish, the past tense verbs need to agree with the subject in gender; thus, the "I" may remain unmarked by gender when verbs in present and future tenses are used, but in sentences in the past tense – and this is the case with Cather's Introduction – the "I" has to be rendered either male or female.

Grammatical gender troubled us also when we considered Butler's analysis of *hypodochē* in the titular chapter and negotiated gender and gendered connotations of the word. *Hypodochē*, which appears in Plato's *Timaeus*, was translated into English as "receptacle" by A.E. Taylor. The word is grammatically feminine in Greek and associated with normatively feminine qualities in the dialogue. While marginal within the text, where it appears only twice (49a, 51a), it reentered metaphysics thanks to Derrida's influential essay *Chora*. The English translation "receptacle" underlines the "receiving" normatively feminine quality, present also in Greek and crucial for Butler's analysis. Among the two Polish translators of the Plato's dialogue, Paweł Siwek proposed *schron* (shelter – grammatically gendered masculine, with warfare connotations as in "bomb shelter") (Platon 1986: 62, 65), while Władysław Witwicki used *coś takiego, co łonem swym obejmuje wszystko*

(something that envelops everything with its womb, neuter) (Platon 1993:326) and *podłoże* (foundation/ground/basis, neuter) (328). Derrida's translator from French Maria Gołębiowska suggested *matryca* (matrix) (Derrida 1999:18, 20), grammatically and etymologically feminine, but misleading in the context of Butler's own use of matrix, as in heteromatrix. We decided to translate literally after Butler "receptacle" to *naczynie* (vessel, container), grammatically neuter in Polish. It is short of the obvious connotation of active "receiving," but introduces the potential of being filled in, especially with liquids or powders. This translation, chosen also by the previous translator of the chapter, Monika Rogowska-Stangret (Butler 2011), inevitably misses some of the normatively feminine connotations of the Greek and English words, but introduces new ones due to its domestic associations – a typical *naczynie* is a bowl or a pot. This example illustrates challenges of translating grammatical gender across multiple languages and traditions of interpretation that inform the source text.

As William Spurlin suggests in the context of translation: "analyses of gender and sexual difference are not reducible to feminist and queer studies respectively; rather, they intersect with each other as well as with other disciplines and modes of inquiry" (Spurlin 2014:301). As we attempted to show above, this intersection of feminist and queer modes of thinking was especially poignant when approaching grammatical gender in our translation, either through translation choices pertaining to gender pronouns in Butler's theorizing or her reinterpretation of literary texts and the philosophical canon. In the case of Cather's narrative "I" and Butler's use of *hypodoché*, we were forced to take into account not only the pragmatic consequences of grammatical gender, but also the translation itineraries of these texts and terms. Though it would seem that Polish falls short of the gender ambiguity afforded in English, the necessity to choose a grammatical gender including the neuter added a new layer to the target text and reflected on the possibilities or limits of gender ambiguity in standard Polish. Generally, in Butler's own theorizing, our specific translation choices pertaining to gender pronouns are not linguistically radical and do not follow the more defamiliarizing solutions suggested by some Polish queer theory scholars.¹³ The main motivation behind

13. In contrast, the graphically innovative but rarely employed linguistic solution using an underscore visibly troubles (grammatical) gender. Devised by a Polish queer scholar and activist from the early 2010s, this solution adds the feminine suffix to the root to form the noun which is then followed with the masculine suffix preceded by an underscore graphically connecting the two: *wiele_u czytelniczek_ów* (Weseli 2010), where the underscore stands for all that falls between the gender binary. This practice has been adapted by some Polish queer theory scholars, but has not even entered the mainstream queer use. Importantly, decisions in all the above mentioned cases reflect also on the author/translator's political commitments since in

such a decision is that Butler's style adds a queer dimension to agency, temporality, and spatiality, but not grammatical gender. Her spatial metaphors and specific syntax can be traced back to poststructuralism and psychoanalysis, and not queer postmodern playfulness, nor the antinormative creative language use in queer activism. The English prose of *Bodies that Matter* is not queer in the sense of anti-assimilation or posing a radical challenge to the gender/sexual status quo, and not in the sense of queer inclusivity. Consequently, we aim to follow the source text as we employ feminist academic language, without the linguistic play characteristic of some strands of queer activism. Next, our choices are also predicated on our belief that the major activist potential of this text lies in its classroom and public sphere use, thus we emphasize legibility, not language experimentation. The further challenges to this striving for legibility lie also in Butler's style with its specific syntax, which is the subject of the following section.

Style and political impact

Informed by volumes of poststructuralist and psychoanalytical language translated back and forth from French and German into English, complete with her own notions of politics of style, Butler's well-known idiolect required a meticulous balancing act between responsibility and legibility in the target language to achieve our overarching activist goal of an accessible translation. Butler's academic style is known for her numerous very complex sentences that sometimes transgress syntactic norms, as well as her heavy reliance on metaphor, puns, and polysemy. Butler's dense, hardly accessible style was defended by her and others as necessary to defamiliarize philosophy and induce subversive qualities of language, which would allow for politically radical thinking (Butler 1999; Birkenstein 2010). "It would be a mistake to think that received grammar is the best vehicle for expressing radical views," Butler states (1999: xviii). Moreover, she claims that critics tend to "underestimate the reading public, its capacity and desire for reading complicated and challenging texts" (1999: xviii). While Butler's argument is valid, the question of mirroring her style in Polish proves challenging with reference to what Lawrence Venuti has criticized as the "regime of fluency" (2008:1).

As translators, we work under the pressure to "ensure easy readability by adhering to current usage, maintaining continuous syntax, fixing a precise meaning" (Venuti 2008:1). Venuti identifies both colonial and market aspects in this regime, noticing that adapting the text for the English readership, "domesticating"

contexts other than explicitly feminist or queer, masculine forms are typically treated as universal and neutral.

it, erasing difficulties and cultural differences, makes the text more fit for commercial success as well as preserves the imbalances of power between the English and the source language/culture. In our case, the regime of fluency works differently. Also, the perceived forces of the regime vary. We are pressed into fluency and smoothness, since one of the risks of our project is that the translation turns out to be set in unwieldy Polish, full of anglicisms or hardly understandable.

Specifically, Butler's poststructuralist style poses numerous translation dilemmas. Polish past participles inflect for gender, thus gender-inclusive language in the passive voice leads to syntactic prolongations and complexities. Similarly, the doubled prepositions so often used in *Bodies that Matter* may require different cases in Polish, which entails the need to repeat the noun or phrase which they govern and further prolong the sentence. Finally, the passive in Polish seems less idiomatic; often it is not the way a Polish native speaker would construct a sentence (Departament Języka Polskiego 2012: 41). One example could be Butler's preference for the passive voice, which is explained with her poststructuralist assumptions about agency (Butler 1999:xix, xxv), a perspective in which an emphasis is put on an action and the constraints within which it happens, not an active agent. For this reason, Butler also tends to use two prepositions with one verb and a noun phrase, often with the passive voice, as for example in the following: "[m]ateriality is constituted in and through iterability" (39). Here the claim is not that iterability constitutes materiality, but that it provides space or conditions ("in") and means ("through") for this constitution, without being a separate active force in this process. A similar construction occurs in these two sentences: "Identity is secured precisely in and through the transfer of the name" (110) or "organs ... are in some way maintained in and by the notion of the phallus" (46). In our translation, "[m]ateriality is constituted in and through iterability" (39) becomes: *materialność jest ustanawiana za pomocą ponawialności* [materiality is constituted by the means of iterability], which retains the passive voice, but shortens the more literal "materialność jest ustanawiana w ponawialności i za jej pomocą" [materiality is constituted in iterability and by its means].¹⁴ As a result, we simplify the syn-

14. We understand the practical need to provide a back translation from Polish to English, so that non-Polish speaking readers of this article could more easily grasp the translatory maneuvers conducted in our examples. However, we are also aware that this practice exposes us to linguistic scrutiny and further reinforces the hierarchy between the hegemonic English and the linguistic periphery of the Polish language. Importantly, as the translation into Polish cannot fully and neutrally mirror the language of the original, so is the translation back to English necessarily unable to transmit the complexities of Polish meanings. The back-translations provided in brackets should be thus approached with caution, as doubled approximations, not just indices of failure.

tax, which is motivated by readability and retaining as much as possible of both the literal meaning and philosophical underpinnings.

Our approach to Butler's specific, idiosyncratic spatial metaphors, again, linked to poststructuralist discursive constraints on agency, further illustrates our translation strategies. The text of *Bodies that Matter* is rich in various "sites," "domains," "spheres," "zones," and "terrains." Moreover, in Butler's usage one can, for example, "inhabit" a name (171), an identification (200), or a practice (181), and "occupy" a term (83), an interpellation (83), or a law (82). For the sake of accessibility, we often decided to offer less figurative equivalents, based on the Polish common idiom that is less prone to such metaphors. The following phrase may serve as an example: "Are there other ways of being addressed and constituted by the law, ways of being occupied and occupying the law that disarticulate the power of punishment from the power of recognition?" (82). It has been translated into: *Czy istnieją inne sposoby bycia wezwanym i ustanowionym przez prawo, sposoby bycia zagarnianym przez prawo i przejmowania prawa, które rozdzielają władzę karania od władzy rozpoznania?*¹⁵ [Are there any other ways of being addressed and constituted by the law, ways of being seized by the law and taking over the law, which separate the power of punishment from the power of recognition?]. Similarly, in our translation someone *przyjmuje* (accepts, assumes), not "occupies," a name, and instead of "inhabiting" one *osiąga* (achieves) an ideal or *przejmuje* (appropriates or assumes) a practice. Our equivalents of Butler's spatial metaphors may lose the physical, bodily aspect of "inhabit" and "occupy," but – we hope – are more casual and thus intelligible to Polish readers.

With reference to the text's particular style, we repeatedly ask ourselves: "Is this sentence Polish enough?" and, on the other hand, "is it still Butler?" When is the moment that the text becomes not complex, but rather ineffectively clumsy? When to give up on "Butler's style"? How do we avoid the potential stigma of unskilled translators who vulgarize Polish while reproducing English syntax and lexis? We need to navigate these questions, keeping in mind that "[p]artialities are what differentiate translations, enabling them to participate in the dialectic of power, the ongoing process of political discourse, and strategies for social change" (Tymoczko 2010: 9). Thus, as translators who insert their (stylistic) judgment into a Butlerian narrative, we avoid defamiliarizing Polish to the limits of legibility, we push back and edit, hoping that this is the strategy against her demonization in the public sphere and the homophobic distortions of her text.

15. In this example, the masculine forms of the Polish past participles stem from the implied attribute, that is the grammatically masculine noun "*podmiot*" (subject), explicitly present in the previous sentence of our translation.

Conclusion

Making a canonical queer theory text accessible in a national language at a time when queer life is being stifled by conservative forces constitutes an act of queer activism, not only because it adds to the existing discourses on norms and sexualities, but also because it offers material for education and activist use outside of classrooms. By virtue of being a collective translation process undertaken for intellectual and political empowerment rather than the traditionally perceived gratification of academic labor, the very practice of translating queers the conventional solitary practice and neoliberal academy. Understood as an “ethical practice” (Dave 2012: 3), it connects to the academic-activist queer theory-practice nexus that has shaped some important aspects of Polish queer thinking and organizing.

As shown above, the activist potential of our translation is circumscribed by the current historical sociocultural environment. Thinking about accessibility makes us consider the audience, our readers, and ways of intervening into the existing Polish (linguistic) epistemological order. At the same time, this strategy results from our devotion to the source text: our target text is a product of translation understood with Gayatri Spivak as “the most intimate act of reading” (2012: 205). As Spivak writes: “If you want to make the translated text accessible, try doing it for the person who wrote it” (214). In this particular context, even though language hierarchies are very different than in Spivak’s Bengali example, with Butler and queer theory stereotyped and demonized in current Polish popular political discourse, this dictum becomes key. On a more practical level, then, making Butler accessible means choosing such strategies, such gender-inclusive and queer-sensitive alternatives in the target language that keep the text “acqueer[ed]” (Epstein 2017: 121), but – following Butler’s prose – do not rely on radical linguistic experimentation. The same approach makes us retain the specific language of 1990s queer writing rather than ahistorically updating the text that will hopefully soon enter into syllabi, instigate conversations in the classrooms, and find its other uses beyond the (activist) academy.

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Address for correspondence

Ludmiła Janion
American Studies Center
University of Warsaw
al. Niepodległości 22
02-653 Warsaw
Poland
l.janion@uw.edu.pl

Biographical notes

Karolina Krasuska is an associate professor at the American Studies Center at the University of Warsaw and the founding director of the research unit Gender/Sexuality at the ASC. She is the author of *Płeć i naród: Translokacje* [Gender and nation: Translocations], Warsaw 2012, and the Polish translator of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble (Uwikłani w płeć*, Warsaw 2008).

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1693-3377>

Ludmiła Janion is an assistant professor at the American Studies Center, University of Warsaw, where she teaches gender studies, discourse analysis, and methodologies of cultural studies. Her research on gender variance in 1990s Poland has been published in *Sexualities* and *Central Europe*.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7325-1172>

Marta Usiekiewicz is an assistant professor at the University of Warsaw’s American Studies Center. She is a founding member of the Gender/Sexuality research unit and her research interests include gender and body studies, queer theory, and popular culture and feminism.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4416-4619>

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