

The Power of the Untranslated  
Sámi-Swedish Multilingualism in Ann-Hélen Laestadius' *Stöld* and Elin  
Anna Labba's *Far inte till havet*

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*Abstract*

This essay aims to present three main aspects of postcolonial literary multilingualism – i.e. its innovative stylistic implications, its political significance, and the pivotal role that translation plays in it – focusing on two novels by Sámi authors Elin Anna Labba (2024, *Far inte till havet*; *The Home of the Drowned*, translated by Elizabeth Clark Wessel, 2026) and Ann-Hélen Laestadius (*Stöld*, 2021; *Stolen*, translated by Rachel Willson-Broyles, 2023). The novels are written in Swedish with a significant number of Sámi expressions, sometimes without translation. Exploring how the untranslated Sámi passages invite to a decolonial reading and commenting on some translation strategies for the two novels, I finally suggest a decolonial translational approach based on a theory of untranslatability and reinforcing the stylistic and political efficacy of the untranslated.

*Keywords*

Ann-Hélen Laestadius; Elin Anna Labba; literary multilingualism; Sámi literature; untranslatability

1. Sámi-Swedish Multilingualism and the Postcolonial Perspective: A «Born Translated» Literature

«Multilingualism is an essential feature of Sámi literature, culture and society» (Ahvenjärvi in Grönstrand, Huss, Kauranen 2019, 87). The Sámi area, called Sápmi and situated in the extreme North of Scandinavia, stretching across Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia, is constitutionally both multilingual and transnational: many Sámi people are multilingual



in that they often speak one of the Sámi languages (today, nine of them survive) and a majority, national language (Finnish, Norwegian, Russian, or Swedish). In addition, most Sámi people today use English on a daily basis (Lindgren *et al.* 2017, 127).

All Sámi languages are currently threatened, partly due to repressive, national linguistic politics that – especially before the 1960s – did not allow the use of such languages in school nor in public offices; but even if Sámi languages speakers are not that many (20.000 to 30.000 according to the annual report for 2024 published by Sámi Giellágaldu)<sup>1</sup>, what we witness today is an extensive process of revitalization of the languages, supported and carried on by governments, cultural institutions, publishing houses, activists and writers.

Also, due to the abovementioned linguistic politics, today many Sámi authors have lost their mother tongue, and decided to learn it as adults. Thus, writing in Sámi does not appear to be a self-evident choice at all, on the contrary, it is often a difficult one and sometimes even impossible. Generally, in most postcolonial contexts, multilingual indigenous writers have an array of choices regarding the language they want to use: it can be their indigenous language, the majority language, or both – meaning that they can translate their own texts from one to another, or they can produce heterolingual texts that reflect their multilingual contexts. In this regard, it is interesting to learn that

Sámi and Greenlandic literatures are the only indigenous literatures mainly published in the indigenous languages – despite the fact that Greenlandic and Sámi are small languages with very limited readership and a short tradition of literary culture. (Ahvenjärvi in Grönstrand, Huss, Kauranen 2019, 88)

In his work about minority language writers, Iban Zaldúa considers the decisions they have to make between publishing in a majority language, with a potentially larger audience, and in their own minority language. At the same time, these writers have to choose between drawing attention to

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<sup>1</sup> Sámi Giellágaldu is a Nordic professional organization established by the Sámi parliaments of Norway, Sweden, and Finland specialized in working for the Sámi languages. ([www.giella.org](http://www.giella.org))

the «native exoticism» or introducing themselves as «universal» writers. Zaldua further asserts that, however, these decisions mostly concern writers whose work no longer needs to be a mere instrument for defending the minority culture or saving the minority language (ivi, 91). It can be claimed that Sámi literature is transitioning by this very edge, with the ability to be both «ethno-literature» and World Literature regardless of the language it is written in, nonetheless literary multilingualism mixing Sámi with a majority language has the potential of bringing out political issues that are still pivotal for the survival of the Sámi language and culture.

So, even if Sámi literature can be considered «universal» and – as we will see – it can represent an innovation of the Scandinavian literary canon, both its content and its multilingualism show that for the most part there is still a need to deal with the trauma of colonial history. «När jag har skrivit färdigt om trauman, då ska jag börja berätta de andra historierna» (When I'll be done writing about the trauma, then I'll start telling the other stories)<sup>2</sup> (Lundströms Bokradio 2024, 42:25), as Elin Anna Labba puts it in an interview.

Both Ann-Hélen Laestadius (b. 1971) and Elin Anna Labba (b. 1980) belong to the generation of Sámi people who 'lost' its language, but they are taking it back and working for its revitalization; they both do so also by writing their novels in the majority language (Swedish), while inserting a significant number of Sámi words and expressions throughout them – sometimes even without translating them, and this way they unfold a space of unintelligibility for the Swedish reader (that will be explored later on in this essay), since Swedish and Sámi are mutually unintelligible languages<sup>3</sup>.

As is the case for most postcolonial multilingual literature, Laestadius' and Labba's heterolingual novels express a resistance to monolingual norms that open to a series of interesting sets of reflections regarding (1)

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<sup>2</sup> Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>3</sup> Although it must be mentioned that part of the Sámi people of Sweden cannot speak the Sámi language, it is not the purpose of this article to take into account their exclusion and its specific outcomes. Because of all its implications, this subject deserves being addressed on its own, while this paper focuses primarily on the functions of multilingualism in the dynamics between the linguistic minority and majority in Sweden.

multilingualism's stylistic innovative implications, (2) its political load, and (3) the crucial role of translation.

(1) Starting by focusing on style, creativity and experimentalism, I would like to point out how literary multilingualism not only brings innovation on an aesthetic level – «introducing an unpredictable element of creativity into language» (Raveggi 2023, 63) – but also stimulates metalinguistic reflections – undermining the fixity of the boundaries between languages<sup>4</sup> and stressing their fluidity on a visual and auditory level as well. If it is true that literary and linguistic innovations often come from these places of dissent that are «peripheries» and «minorities» (Pietikäinen 2015; Grönstrand, Huss, Kauranen 2019; Deleuze, Guattari 1986 [1975]), Sápmi and Sámi literature can be considered respectively as the Scandinavian periphery and the «minor literature» which are promising such literary and linguistic innovation. This is attributed to the influence of Sámi's indigenous literary traditions, such as orality and transmediality, as well as the widespread use of multilingualism. Among the outcomes of this multilingualism, as will be discussed, is the potential deterritorialization of the dominant language.

In addition, literary multilingualism creates also the possibility of doing something new on a communicative level: when intelligibility is no longer an unbreakable rule, authors can start a different kind of communication with their readers, one that does not necessarily involve complete linguistic comprehension, and which calls instead for stimulating challenges to the readership, who at times needs to become 'creative' as well. These challenges, as we will explore, do also have an identitarian, political nature: «code-switching turns the power relations of majority and minority languages upside down: the reader who does not understand the Sámi words becomes "the Other"» (Ahvenjärvi in Grönstrand, Huss, Kauranen 2019, 90).

(2) Multilingualism challenges every national, nationalist, or worse, colonialist rhetoric language (Raveggi 2023, 24). Exposing the false myth of monolingual nationalisms, literary multilingualism furthermore tests national canons and threatens to shatter them: in the case of Sápmi and Scandinavia, the category of 'Scandinavian Literature' – including Danish, Icelandic, Norwegian, Swedish, Fenno-Swedish national literatures, and

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Sakai (2009) and Deleuze and Guattari (1986 [1975]).

sometimes Faeroes' and Greenlandic literatures written in Danish – does not traditionally include Sámi literature<sup>5</sup>. Of course, on the other hand, it is difficult to define what Sámi literature is, whether such definition should be based on the writing language, on the content of the book or on the ethnic background of the writer (Ahvenjärvi in Grönstrand, Huss, Kau-ranen 2019, 88). As Sámi literature is published in several languages, the most important criterion for its definition seems to be the Sáminess of the author (ivi, 88), but then can a Sámi-Norwegian or a Sámi-Swedish author be considered also a Scandinavian author? Does not this question alone call for a reconfiguration of both transnational (Scandinavian) and national (respectively Norwegian and Swedish) literary canons in a non-ethnocentric and multilingual perspective<sup>6</sup>?

This matter is highly sensitive on several levels and, far from being only a matter of literary categorization, it is a highly political one, because it deals with the postcolonial and decolonial contestation of nationalisms, involving the dynamics of power between minority and majority communities and literatures. In a postcolonial context, rewriting the canon, which coincides with rewriting history, means to «write back» and, in fact,

postcolonial literature, especially if written in former colonial languages, is often not a rupture with the past but a radical rewriting of it. [...] The postcolonial desire to “write back” (Ashcroft *et al.* 1989) to the centre is in fact a desire to re-write and to translate that must be understood in its political and epistemological meaning as the desire to rewrite history and change the future. This political dimension is an essential component of any understanding of translation in postcolonial terms. (Bertacco 2023, 133)

(3) This brings me to my third point: the pivotal role of translation. Postcolonial, multilingual literature shows an intrinsic, multilayered, translational nature: the first translational aspect concerns the fact that if

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<sup>5</sup> Some recent publications may in fact except, but they need to be thoroughly studied to understand their criteria for categorization, as well as the role and definition of Sámi literature in these compendia.

<sup>6</sup> With «multilingual» here I refer not only to the inclusion of the different Scandinavian languages, which is already the case, but to the inclusion both of heterolingual literature (mixing Norwegian and Swedish with Sámi) and of Sámi literature written in Sámi.

the most incisive way of «writing back» is showing what risks remaining hidden and/or disappearing (that is: the indigenous threatened language and culture), it is also crucial to be able to spread the word to the widest possible public (for example by writing or translating into the majority language, as well as writing in the majority language *about* the minority language and culture).

Moreover, regardless of the language it is written in, a text born in a multilingual context is intrinsically «born translated»<sup>7</sup>, because it is the result of the never-ending translational process the authors are immersed in. Everything is in translation, perpetually translated – being that explicit or not.

Consequently, as we will see, a multilingual text often requires that the readers stop reading monolingually:

Some postcolonial writers in fact contest the monolingualism and ethnocentrism of national literatures by choosing to highlight, in their writing, forms of linguistic pluralism to show that “no language is neutral”, to quote the title of a powerful long poem by Dionne Brand (1990); but also by actively blocking monolingual readings and demanding “heterolingual reading pacts” from their readers (Suchet 2010, 211). In other words, postcolonial texts have the unsung potential to “*multilingualise*” their readership. (Bertacco 2023, 133, my italics)

Postcolonial, multilingual literature ultimately constitutes a «translation zone» (Apter 2006), an area of intense interaction across languages that can include conflict and incommensurability (Raveggi 2023, 34).

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<sup>7</sup> «Rebecca Walkowitz created the label “born translated” for works that are written as translations (2015, 4). While Walkowitz was not primarily discussing postcolonial texts in her work, the term aptly describes literature that is born within a multilingual environment and that intentionally explores and plays with “the array of possibilities by juxtaposing or mixing languages in literature”» (Bertacco 2023, 132).

## 2. Political Heterolingualism in *Stöld* and *Far inte till havet*: To Multilingualize the Readership

Tänk om jag kunnat skriva på samiska. Om jag kunnat. Men jag är en samisk författare som är analfabet. Ännu en. Så många vi är. (Labba 2024d)<sup>8</sup>

Both Labba and Laestadius come from Sámi speaking families, but they were not taught the Sámi language, not at school nor at home. As they declare in interviews and write about in their respective articles, essays and novels, for too long the Sámi language has been socially, culturally and therefore also intimately associated with shame, a sense of inferiority and even of illegality. For this reason, their families did not pass the language down and the two writers – together with most of their generation – share the experience of growing up ‘without the language’, as well as the engagement in the fight to take it back, both on a personal and on a collective level.

Jag har haft tre språk i mitt liv men två har jag aldrig fått lära mig. (Laestadius 2021, 440)

Min mamma är same men jag fick inte lära mig samiska. Utan språket är känslan av tillhörighet inte helt komplett. Min mamma gick i nomadskola och fick där lära sig att skämmas för sitt språk. 1970-talet var också en tid när man avrädde föräldrar från att lära sina barn två språk samtidigt, man sa att det gjorde en halvspråkig. (Lindve 2023, 47; cfr. Reynolds 2025)<sup>9</sup>

In interviews with Elin Anna Labba we find similar statements which at the same time are deeply personal and deeply political:

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<sup>8</sup> Imagine if I was able to write in Sámi. If I was able. But I am a Sámi writer who is illiterate. One of many. We are so many.

<sup>9</sup> I grew up with three languages in my life, but two of them I was never allowed to learn. // My mother is a Sámi, but I could not learn the Sámi language. Without the language, the feeling of belonging is incomplete. My mother attended the nomad school, where she was taught to be ashamed of her language. The 1970s were also a time when parents were discouraged from teaching their children two languages at the same time: they were told that children risked ending up speaking half a language.

Hemma hos mig pratar vi svenska och därför slutar folk prata samiska när jag kommer. När en svensktalande person kommer in i rummet kryper minoritets-språket in i väggen. Eller kanske in i träden som står kvar. Det är ett språk som kan göra sig lika osynligt som jag. (Labba 2024d)<sup>10</sup>

Labba and Laestadius grew up in Kiruna/Giron, they both left Sápmi to study as journalists and started their journeys for the reappropriation and revitalization of the Sámi languages and culture, for the strengthening of the self-perception of the Sámi people, and of their social and political rights. Thus, learning the language and using it in their writing is surely a strong political statement by these two authors. When she was asked in an interview about what one can do to support the culture and the survival of Sámi way of life, Labba said that the most important thing in her opinion is to reclaim the language – that is, to learn it, to use it, and to spread it: evidently, not only inside the Sámi community, but also outside, thus confronting the Swedish majority with minority languages.

Elin Anna Labba has won several prizes for the nonfiction book *Herrarna satte oss hit. Om tvångsflyttningarna i Sverige* (2020; *The Rocks Will Echo Our Sorrow. The Forced Displacement of Northern Sámi*, translated by Fiona Graham, 2024), which is a blend of historical reportage, memoir, and lyric telling the story of the forced displacement of several Sámi communities in the early twentieth century. Deportation and forced displacement of Sámi reindeer herders from their homes are recurring themes in Labba's fictional and nonfictional work, as these experiences are part of her own family history. The novel *Far inte till havet* (2024; *The Home of the Drowned*<sup>11</sup>, translated by Elizabeth Clark Wessel) deals once more with these subjects, and tells a story – based on true events – of a community trauma and an environmental disaster that took place in Northern Sweden starting from the 1940s and affecting a great number of families for generations, due to several forced displacements connected with the construction of hy-

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<sup>10</sup> In my home we speak Swedish, so people stop speaking Sámi when I arrive. When a Swedish-speaking person enters a room, the minority language crawls into the walls. Or maybe into the trees that are still standing. This language is capable of becoming as invisible as myself.

<sup>11</sup> The English version of the novel is expected to be published in 2026 with this title.

droelectric power plants that caused floods and the consequent repeated destruction of entire villages.

Ann-Helén Laestadius finds her stories in real life as well: her prize-winning, world-famous, and bestselling Sámi trilogy *Stöld* (2021; *Stolen*, translated by Rachel Willson-Broyles, 2023), *Straff* (2023; *Punished*, translated by Rachel Willson-Broyles, 2025) and *Skam* (2025; *Shame*) deals with different traumas of the Sámi community in different historical times: the contemporary abuses against reindeer and reindeer-herders in Northern Sweden (*Stöld*), the compulsory attendance at nomad schools in the 1950s (*Straff*), and the search and acceptance of their own identity and language as Sámi persons in the 1980s (*Skam*).

In all of her works, Laestadius refers directly to the topic of the lost Sámi language and makes use of it. This includes her previous novels for children and young adults: in *Sms från Soppero* (2007; *Sms from Soppero*), for example, her use of multilingualism and Swedish-Sámi code-switching has been interpreted as expression of «a space where the reflection, construction and reconstruction of hybrid identities and experiences of ‘in-betweenness’ can take place» and in the light of its «empowering functions, as the use of minority language legitimizes the often silenced voices of the minority» (Ahvenjärvi in Grönstrand, Huss, Kauranen 2019, 90), while in *Tio över ett* (2016; *Ten Past One*) it has been suggested that the author uses multilingualism to implicitly teach some Sámi language and culture (Lindve 2023, 46).

It can be observed that these tendencies are still there in *Stöld*, whose heterolingualism reflects the multilingual community<sup>12</sup> and fulfills both the function of (1) raising questions about different ways of embracing the Sámi identity, of (2) shedding light on injustices and unbalanced power dynamics between majority and minority groups from the Sámi perspective, and of (3) being a compendium of Sámi language and culture – offered by a Sámi

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<sup>12</sup> «We owe to Rainier Grutman the term “heterolingualism” to talk about the simultaneous presence of distinct languages or varieties of language in a literary text as a literary feature (Grutman 1997), as something different from the multilingualism of societies and individuals. The import of this shift in perspective is a radical revision of how we read, because it makes us see and hear many voices, languages, registers, accents as we read» (Bertacco 2023, 132).

author who more than others is aware of their worth and fragility having personally risked to be deprived of it.

As Labba puts it, this is their way of contributing to the development of a Sámi literature, that is the very foundation for ‘saving’ the language:

Hur FN räknar ut hur ett språk är hotat vet jag inte, men i praktiken betyder det att inget finns att läsa. Inga romaner. Några få ungdomsböcker. Ingen facklitteratur. [...] Jag lär mig att språk kan ligga kvar och vänta på en. Man kan stryka över träden och be det komma ut igen. Men för att språket ska våga helt ut krävs det böcker. Jag läser jag läser om [sic.], jag intervjuar samisktalande äldre och jag känner språket börja röra sig. Det porlar i mig. Jag hör rytmen i huvudet och låter samiska meningar nästla sig in svenskan jag skriver. In och ut far språken och när samiskan kommer lyser texten. Det är märkligt. Att ta tillbaka ett språk är att ta sina tankar tillbaka. Hur kan det vara så att jag tänker klarare på ett språk jag inte helt behärskar? Jag har inget svar på det. (Labba 2024d)<sup>13</sup>

«Infiltrating» the Swedish, the Sámi language deterritorializes it – it changes it, it expands it, it pushes it towards the north («jag trycker svenskan norrut», as Labba states in the same interview), potentially producing innovation (introducing new words in the Swedish vocabulary by making the Swedish public gradually acquainted with them, just to mention one example) and provoking reactions (such as surprise or perplexity in a reader confronted with new graphemes and ignoring how they sound).

Moreover, as style is concerned, the use of the Sámi language recalls the Sámi literary tradition, introducing a specific, hybridizing trait to the Sámi-Swedish text: Labba and Laestadius repeatedly declare their literary

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<sup>13</sup> «I don’t know what it takes for the United Nations to consider a language to be threatened, but in practice it means that there is nothing to read. No novels. No children’s literature. No nonfiction literature [...] I’m learning that a language can resist and wait for you. You can caress the trees and ask it to come out. But for a language to dare coming out books are needed. I keep on reading, I interview old Sámi-speakers, and I feel that the language starts moving. It bubbles inside me. I hear the rhythm in my head, and I let Sámi sentences infiltrate my Swedish. The languages move in and out and when Sámi arrives the text shines. It is strange. Taking back a language is taking back our thoughts. How is it possible that I think more clearly in a language that I do not master? I don’t have an answer».

debt to the Sámi tradition of oral storytelling and their need to transfer this orality to their works. (Lundströms Bokradio 2024, 13:00, 14:30)<sup>14</sup>

The combination of a marked use of orality, multilingualism and several untranslated passages in Sámi may in fact lead to literary texts where Swedish can be perceived as «perforerad av nordsamiska» (Labba 2024d, 'perforated by North Sámi'). To infiltrate, to perforate are not neutral verbs: they express an aware, 'defiant', take of action, and the same holds true for the decision of non-translating the Sámi passages. The attempt to have an impact on the language and on the reader is a political, decolonial act.

Samiskan ger också texten flera lager. Olika läsare får med sig så olika saker. Jag älskar hemliga meddelanden. Plötsligt finns det plats för blinkningar för de som kan. Jag vet att folk i Sápmi kommer förstå att de är vinnarna här och inte förlorarna som det brukar vara. Att låta vissa saker förbli hemliga för majoriteten är balsam för folk som genom historien har varit tvungna att ge upp sig själv. Tappat musiken, landet, gudarna men det är slut med det nu. Inte tolka allt längre, inte översätta sönder sig. Att använda samiska gör texten trotsigare. (Labba 2024c)<sup>15</sup>

While the above-mentioned stylistic and political effects of untranslated Sámi passages are found in both novels, the authors differ significantly in their multilingual strategies and their approach to the reader. Most of the untranslated terms we find in *Stöld* are strictly connected to Sámi culture,

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<sup>14</sup> In his essay on literary multilingualism, Raveggi quotes the Filipino-American writer Elaine Castillo reporting three reasons why an author can decide to leave some expressions untranslated: (1) a phonetic choice based on the «weight and vibration of that word, in that sentence»; (2) a commitment to authenticity when the author «know[s] exactly how that character would deliver a line, and it's not an English word» (Swedish in our case), and (3) finally, an exquisitely literary inclination for a specific word because words are not only means to convey a meaning, but «they have a material, historical and emotional life all their own» (Raveggi 2023, 12). All these reasons are surely significant for the two Sámi authors as well.

<sup>15</sup> «Sámi gives the text several layers. Different readers get different things. I love secret messages. Suddenly there is space for winking to those who can get them. I know that people in Sápmi will understand that they are the winners here and not the losers as usual. To let some specific things remain secret for the majority is a balm for a people who throughout history has been forced to give up itself. Who lost their music, land, and gods, but it's over now. No more interpreting everything, no more losing themselves in translation. Using the Sámi language makes the text more defiant».

concerning for example reindeer-herding practices (*rátkin, stávrá, suohpan, girdnu, bealljebinnát*), food (*gáhkku, goike biergu, gurpi, suovas*), clothes (*gákti, liinnit, nuottahat*), the seasons, natural phenomena, and other traditional practices regarding healing or *joiking*. The other Sámi terms are the ones regarding family relations (creating a sort of ‘affective vocabulary’ for the reader), the spelled-out numbers on top of every chapter and, finally, some occurrences of spoken Sámi in dialogues, as in: «“Nu dat lea”, sa hon. “Man kan inte vara ond mot djuren och komma undan med det. Så är det.”» (Laestadius 2021, 390)<sup>16</sup>.

The latter is a feature of orality, as well as a reminder of the highly multilingual context and of the constant translational process that both the characters, the author and the reader are required to perform or at least to acknowledge.

I would therefore say that in general it is not a matter of untranslatable terms, but rather a deliberate choice by the author, who uses Sámi words in order to bring the reader closer to the Sámi world and perform a personal and collective linguistic reappropriation and validation. She intends to give the people back their vocabulary and thus their voice, and at the same time she makes the majority aware of the minority’s point of view, possibly obtaining acknowledgement and change.

At a closer look, Laestadius’ multilingual strategy can be perceived as rather ‘friendly’: instead of resulting in a challenging reading experience for the Swedish reader, her multilingualism results in a learning experience. In fact, every Sámi term is either translated or explained within the same sentence, so that the reader – although «enstranged» (Raveggi 2023, 44-49) by the foreign, exotic language – is given the means to understand the context and the references. Readers are possibly made uneasy, but they are not excluded.

Moreover, even if the Sámi words and expressions are naturally integrated in the Swedish text without being marked in any way, they are usually explained to the reader in a discursive fashion which not only does not interrupt the flow of the prose, but also integrates the two lan-

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<sup>16</sup> «“Nu lat dea” [sic] she said. “You can’t be cruel to animals and get away with it. That’s the truth”» (Laestadius 2023, 343).

guages by plain juxtaposition: «Gidda övergick i giddageass, vår övergick i vårsommar» (Laestadius 2021, 335); «Renarna var biekka oapmi, vindens egendom» (346); «Norrskenet! Hon fick bråttom upp och slängde på sig jacka, täckbyxor, mössa och vantar. Den här gången skulle hon lyssna noga och höra guovssahasat» (91)<sup>17</sup>, just to give a few examples.

Thus, while still pointing an accusatory finger at the Swedish government, Laestadius is also opening to a dialogue and using multilingualism in a manner that not only destabilizes the Swedish language and readers in the ways suggested above, but also enables the integration of realities. This approach gained her great national and international success.

Labba's multilingual strategy, on the other hand, is not as 'friendly' as Laestadius'. The two texts apply almost the same heterolingual devices, i.e. «implicit multilingualism» (where the reader realizes that there are more languages at play without noticing them directly, usually via metalinguistic comments or contextual clues such as adding «she said in Sámi» after a dialogue line in Swedish, cf. Lindve 2023, 2), and explicit, mostly unmarked, multilingualism (the insertion of Sámi passages perfectly integrated with the Swedish text, without the use of italics or any other different text formatting, cf. *ivi*, 32-33). Nonetheless, *Far inte till havet* presents a more extensive use of North Sámi insertions compared to *Stöld*, and we find many more sentences and dialogues in Sámi that the reader is not enabled to decode. Labba's multilingualism often makes the outside readers feel lost and left with only a few options: ignore the untranslated Sámi insertions and accept missing something (whether they get annoyed by the voluntary «enstrangement» or enjoy the unintelligible exotic foreignness), or look up the phrases, make an active effort and learn a little Sámi. Whilst increasing the authenticity of the spoken language in the text, this 'less friendly' multilingualism seems to strengthen the roughness of its political statement: it makes the non-Sámi reader feel excluded, it is demanding, and it requires a voluntary step towards the Sámi community.

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<sup>17</sup> «Gidda became giddageass, spring became spring-sommer» (Laestadius 2023, 293); «The reindeer were biekka oapmi, belonging to the wind» (302); «The northern lights! She quickly threw on her coat, snow pants, hat and, mittens. This time she would listen closely and hear the guovssahasat» (*ivi*, 79).

Such an intention can be very explicit in the following passage, for example: «“Moadđe ruvna fállá ja dákk dákk mii dadjat”, fräste Rávdná och upprepade sig inte, det var inte tänkt att Gagge skulle förstå. Hon lät bli att översätta sig själv som de hade lärt sig”»<sup>18</sup> (Labba 2024a, 256). Not the Swedish lawyer Gagge nor the non-Sámi readers are meant to understand.

Similarly, the latter are denied access to comprehension in certain dialogues, like the following: «“Varför gav du det inte med en gång?” “Det var sent.” “It don nu goit sáhte.” Rávdná hade lust att ruska om henne”» (Labba 2024a, 61) or «“Lea gus borranmiella?” frågade hon. “Man blir hungrig av att komma inomhus» (134)<sup>19</sup>, where a non-Sámi reader can vaguely grasp the context, but not the meaning.

These examples also contribute to clarify how Labba’s intense multilingualism presents some very powerful «perforating» stylistic effects, even more visible when the two languages are not only juxtaposed, but seamlessly intertwined: «Ingá öppnade rákkasen och bäddade ihop. Kåtan såg i alla fall lite mer ut som ett hem nu. Giisán stod längst in i boaššu, som den skulle»<sup>20</sup> (Labba 2024, 51). The Sámi language is doing something to the Swedish language. And it is doing something to the Swedish readership, multilingualizing it. If for a Sámi-speaking reader these kinds of passages possibly sound beautiful and *empowering*, for a non-Sámi reader they may appear beautiful and *depowering*: destabilizing because incomprehensible. It can be suggested that readers excluded from an immediate understanding (the linguistic decoding of the meaning) are instead invited to notice that there is another kind of communication at play – specifically for them – a hidden message to be found<sup>21</sup>, and that in this concentrates the incredibly rich potential of ‘the untranslated’: displaying linguistic and communica-

<sup>18</sup> «“Moadđe ruvna fállá ja dákk dákk mii dadjat” hissed Rávdná and did not explain herself, Gagge was not supposed to understand. She abstained from translating her words the way they had been taught to do».

<sup>19</sup> «“Why didn’t you give it right away?” “It was late” “It don nu goit sáhte”. Rávdná wanted to shake her; or “Lea gus borranmiella?” she asked. “One gets hungry coming inside”».

<sup>20</sup> «Ingá opened the rákkasen and made the bed. The cot looked a little bit more like a home now. The giisán was back in the boaššu, as it was supposed to be».

<sup>21</sup> «As Sommer (2004, 63-64) shows, the effect of multilingualism only takes place when readers notice that something happens, that is, when they become aware of their incomprehension, surprise, irritation or whatever affects the multilingual text rouses in them. [...]

tive creativity and acting, decolonially, to restore a power balance between minorities and majorities.

Laestadius and Labba declare to take up Sámi author Johan Turi's legacy in that «han skrev för han ville berätta ur samernas synvinkel för att folk inte skulle förvränga»<sup>22</sup> (Lundströms Bokradio 2024, 11:38), and they both tell stories and send a message whose clarity, paradoxically, can be perceived as enhanced by untranslated Sámi-Swedish multilingualism: building on Turi's premises, they are finally communicating *with* and *on* their own terms. If this means writing decolonially, it is up to us to let these texts multilingualize us and to learn how to *read* decolonially. And, finally, also *translate* decolonially.

### 3. Multilingualism in Translation: For a Politics and a Praxis of Untranslation

«How can translation be used to read decolonially? Isn't translation [...] the ultimate act of colonial coercion and epistemicide?» scholar Simona Bertacco (2023, 135), expert in Postcolonial Studies and Translation, asks herself. Of course, the risk of homogenization and a tendency toward a centralizing, monocultural dominion of the main global languages are detectable in a vision of World Literature as a unifying notion, with translation as its main means. Nevertheless, translation is also intrinsically highlighting the differences and giving space and voice to peripheries and minorities; more importantly, translation has its own countermeasures to resist such centripetal, monolingual forces; untranslatability being one of them.

As I introduced the intrinsic translational nature of literary multilingualism at the beginning of this essay, I already mentioned the philosopher who more than anyone else stands out for her work against a unifying conception of World Literature and translation, namely Emily Apter, whose contribution is crucial for our discourse as it fosters «untranslatability as a theoretical fulcrum of comparative literature»:

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readers are a part of the text coming into being» (Tidigs in Grönstrand, Huss and Kauranen 2019, 227). We will come back to this point later in the essay.

<sup>22</sup> He wrote with the aim of telling from the Sámi people point of view, so that people would not distort.

Many recent efforts to revive World Literature rely on a translatability assumption. As a result, incommensurability and what has been called the Untranslatable are insufficiently built into the literary heuristic. [...] With translation assumed to be a good thing *en soi*—under the assumption that it is a critical praxis enabling communication across languages, cultures, time periods and disciplines—the right to the Untranslatable was blindsided. (Apter 2013, 8)

In this perspective, untranslatability is not referred to as the mere (linguistic and cultural) ‘impossibility’ to translate, but as the active, political claim not-to-translate. My point is that not only this claim has evidently been embraced by postcolonial authors in their heterolingual texts, as we have seen, but it should also initiate the development of a set of methodological translational choices when such heterolingual texts are to be translated into other languages.

As *Stöld* and *Far inte till havet* have shown, Sámi-Swedish multilingual literature can result in a multilayered reading experience: a «translational experience of reading» (Bertacco 2023, 135) for both Sámi and non-Sámi readers, and an encounter with the incomprehensible and the unfamiliar for the Swedish readers. Now, in transferring these heterolingual texts to an international context, should not the translator try to preserve this experience at its fullest, also in the attempt to support the politically charged intent of multilingualism? And if so: how would the target context (the language, the readership, the publisher) react to untranslated multilingualism?

Both Labba and Laestadius work on their novels with a double readership in mind – the Sámi and the Swedish one, the *insiders* of the cultural community described in the texts and the *outsiders* belonging to the national majority. Gaining an international readership, though, an *external* community joins in, which is not involved nor probably informed about the colonial history of Sápmi. Anyway, as the Swedish readership is expected to get multilingualized and learn how to read ‘translationally’, so is the international one:

contemporary literary multilingualism demands that readers turn from passive “consumers” of multilingual texts into active co-creators of multilingualism, and it reveals how conventional categories of “ideal” versus “linguistically incompetent” readers of multilingual literature have lost relevance with regard to the newest forms of literary multilingualism. (Grönstrand, Huss, Kauranen 2019, 18)

Not only the linguistic competence is not required, but in some way, in order to activate some specific aesthetic effects, the more a readership is linguistically incompetent the better. According to Julia Tidigs, who have extensively studied the participation of the readership in multilingual literature, the role of incomprehension in the multilingual reading experience is pivotal. Together with Sommer (2004), she «connects the aesthetic experience of the multilingual text to the *work* the reader has to put in, thereby stressing the active and processual character of reading» (Tidigs in Grönstrand, Huss, Kauranen 2019, 226). Therefore, in this perspective, incomprehension, untranslatability, and 'the untranslated' are not to be perceived as a loss when multilingual texts are transposed into a new linguistic and cultural context, but rather as challenging opportunity for the reader, the translator and the publisher to 'work' multilingually, and to contribute to the strengthening of the political outcomes of multilingualism.

An attempt to translate decolonially might consider stressing the performative character of multilingualism, «enstrangement» and «untranslation» by adopting an utmost source-oriented translation strategy and keeping the untranslated as such. The translator may need to stimulate the uninformed, external reader if the goal is not to downplay or even dissolve the subversive potential of multilingualism with a homogenized, monolingual translation. Here the involvement of the publishing house comes into play and the process often discloses to be a matter of negotiating and compromising.

The role of publishing houses in allowing or even promoting literary postcolonial multilingualism is crucial: while in Sweden the increased social and political awareness about the national colonial history operated a substantial shift in publishing practices towards an increasing approval of the publishing and marketing of challenging Sámi-Swedish multilingual literature, in other countries that might not be the case. Why should an international publishing house – that is already bold enough to bet on the distribution of a minor, peripheral literature such as Sámi literature – be wanting to bewilder its readership with untranslated multilingualism?

Caught in the tension between a publishing house that needs to accommodate its clientele and an author whose intention is to trigger the readers, the translator may act as a mediator. A first step can be to acknowledge, for example, that when the primary receiver is no longer the colonial majority,

something concerning the political focus changes. As I tried to show, in the original novels Sámi-Swedish multilingualism conveys its political efficacy through the stylistic and communicative features: *politically* innovating, «perforating» and deterritorializing the language, and at the same time *politically* destabilizing the Swedish readership through untranslation. I think that this is hardly achievable in a translation outside of the Swedish context, and in order to maintain its effectiveness it may be necessary to separate the stylistic devices of multilingualism from its political purposes. What I mean is that, to make an example, in an English version of the novels, maintaining Sámi-English heterolingualism and untranslated sections may certainly preserve the stylistic impact of the text, but the political recoil of multilingualism may dim or even vanish in translation. To restate it in an efficient way, some other paratextual tools may be necessary, such as a translator's note or a preface/afterword where to contextualize the political reasons that drive such a pressing heterolingualism. In the attempt to preserve literary multilingualism and persuade the publisher to keep some portions of the text untranslated, the international readership could thus be assisted either by an explanatory text or even a wider paratextual framework, such as a glossary.

In the case of international translations of the works of Labba and Laestadius, I noticed that both authors favored the inclusion of glossaries as a support for international readers. And yet, their different multilingual strategies and approach to the reader may as well lead to different translation strategies. Laestadius' friendlier, educational disposition toward the Swedish readership makes it easier for the international readership as well, and in the case of *Stöld* the insertion of a glossary may even seem in line with the author's intention. Some untranslated, confusing expressions may remain, activating the co-creative work of the reader, and resulting in a stimulating rather than irritating experience. On the other hand, in my opinion, Labba's more abrasive multilingualism needs to be addressed more carefully: since *Far inte till havet* displays a more substantial presence of the Sámi language, and a larger amount of untranslated passages, the international publisher would need to accept a certain degree of unintelligibility, but a more nuanced paratextual equipment could also be negotiated

in order to assist the international readership without compromising the power of the untranslated.

In conclusion, based on the observation of the work of multilingual authors Labba and Laestadius – who are writing decolonially and addressing a public that is hopefully learning how to read in the same way – decolonial translation appears to be a collective, widely collaborative practice as well, one that needs the active participation of both authors, translators, publishers and readers, and that should be solidly grounded in a theory of untranslatability intended as a respectful practice – or even a movement – towards literatures and languages coming from minorities who are fighting for their survival. Confronted with incommensurability, the readers can start by just listening and being defamiliarized; then hopefully they will take a step into the unfamiliar.

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