

## **Languaging and Emergent Scapes of the Intelligible: Thinking through an Experiment in Affective Mapping**

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**Abstract:** What would it mean to explore questions of translation and linguistic diversity from within an ecological approach that foregrounds the constitutive entanglement of languaging patterns with place-making behaviours, whereby language-use signals the affective import of belonging as much as its precarious hold within cosmopolitan urban contexts characterized by extensive phenomena of displacement, mobility and migration? Drawing on insights brought about by contemporary research in ecolinguistics, affect theory and science and technology studies, this paper explores the potential value of such an approach by means of discussing an art project designed as an experiment in affective mapping of a central artery of the city of Toronto, called *Transitions in Progress. Making Space for Place* (2015).

**Keywords:** languaging, diffraction, affect, translation, ecolinguistics

**Résumé :** Pourrait-on envisager des questions de traduction et de diversité linguistique dans une perspective écologique qui met de l'avant l'entrelace des concepts de mise en mots et des comportements d'insertion – l'utilisation de la langue témoignant tout autant de l'importance affective de l'appartenance que de sa fragilité dans des contextes cosmopolites urbains marqués par des phénomènes profonds de déplacement, de mobilité et de migration? Cet article, qui s'appuie sur de récentes recherches en ecolinguistique, en théorie des affects et en études scientifiques et technologiques, explore la valeur potentielle d'une telle perspective, en présentant un projet artistique, *Transitions in Progress. Making Space for Place* (2015), conçu comme une expérience de cartographie affective d'une artère principale de la ville de Toronto.

**Mots clé :** mise en mots, diffraction, affect, traduction, ecolinguistique

**Resumo:** O que significaria explorar questões de tradução e diversidade linguística através de uma abordagem ecológica que ressaltasse o entrelaçamento constitutivo entre os padrões de linguajamento e os comportamentos de constituição de lugar? São questões por meio das quais o uso da linguagem sinaliza o significado afetivo do pertencimento e de sua precariedade em contextos urbanos cosmopolitas caracterizados por grandes fenômenos de deslocamento, mobilidade e migração. Com base em pesquisas contemporâneas na ecolinguística, teoria do afeto e nos estudos de ciência e tecnologia, este trabalho explora o valor potencial desta abordagem através da discussão de um projeto artístico desenvolvido como um experimento em mapeamento afetivo em uma artéria da cidade de Toronto, denominado *Transitions in Progress. Making Space for Place* (2015).

**Palavras-chave:** linguajamento, difração, afeto, tradução, ecolinguística

**Resumen:** ¿Cómo explorar cuestiones de traducción y diversidad lingüística a partir de un acercamiento ecológico que resalte los entramados entre el lenguajear y las formas de construcción de un lugar, en los cuales el uso del lenguaje, en especial en contextos urbanos cosmopolitas marcados por fenómenos de desplazamiento, movilidad y migración, revela el sentido de pertenencia, tanto en su carga afectiva como en su condición de precariedad? Con base en perspectivas desde la ecolinguística, la teoría del afecto y los estudios de tecnología, este artículo explora el valor potencial de este tipo de acercamiento a partir de una reflexión sobre un proyecto artístico titulado *Transitions in Progress. Making Space for Place* (2015), diseñado como una cartografía afectiva de una vía arteria central de la ciudad de Toronto.

**Palabras clave:** lenguajear, difracción, afecto, traducción, ecolingüística



**Soundscape for Transitions in Progress Gallery Installation**

The audio file inserted at the beginning of this essay is part of the soundscape of a gallery installation, which was showcased at Ryerson University in Toronto in October 2015 as part of *Transitions in Progress*, the art project discussed in this paper. It stands, epigraphically, as an engineered acoustic reminder of the diffracted languaging experience through which the project itself took shape, and, more generally, of the entangled dynamics through which urban ecologies of linguistic diversification take hold. Feel free to leave the audio file in the background while you read, as this option may facilitate a synesthetic and immersive apprehension of the question this paper explores. Namely, what kind of productive openings may happen to our received ideas of language and space when we approach these concepts as unfolding diffractive processes that require attunement to their own patterns of affective resonance or interference, rather than as bounded systems that can be known only when framed by procedures of categorical parsing?

Taking heed of recent perspectival shifts in the field of ecolinguistics, which re-centre language as situated emergent behaviour before (and in excess of) its reification as code (see Kravchenko; Steffensen and Fill; Thibault), and connecting them to the conceptual prism of diffraction, which articulates knowledge practices as inherently bound up in relational patterns of interference, amplification and boundary-making (see Barad; Haraway; Kaiser), this essay discusses some aspects of a community oriented art project as a springboard to argue for the value of paying attention to languaging<sup>1</sup> in the study of multilingual urban realities and the dynamics of translation (and non-translation) attendant to their environmental entanglements and socio-symbolic stratifications. My request, then, that readers immerse themselves in the aural

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<sup>1</sup> “Languaging” is a concept that gestures at large to dimensions of linguistic behaviour that cannot be captured by, or are purposefully excluded from, approaches focused on delineating language primarily as a rule-driven formal system. These aspects include embodied processes of sense-making wherein relational negotiation of meaning, attunement to context, and the non-linear unfolding of implicit assumptions demonstrably enact the constitutive entanglement of language use in the situational dynamics of its enactment. The gerund declension of “language” into ‘languaging’, which draws attention to the verb-like quality of the concept, provides the most important clue to its dynamic conceptual deployment, which has traversed a number of fields since the 1980s, including cognitive psychology, applied linguistics and language education studies (Jensen; Gynne and Bagga-Gupta; Phipps and Gonzales; Swain), post- and de-colonial cultural theory (Chow; Mignolo), and translation studies (Becker). A cursory search for scholarly articles with the keyword “languaging” on the University of Toronto online library catalogue yields 4390 publications in the fields mentioned above since 1980, indicating a fairly widespread use of the term. My specific use of the concept is indebted to the conceptualizations provided by Becker and Chow especially, but also to the perspectival shifts enacted in contemporary studies in ecolinguistics. My underlying argument is that such shifts enable a very interesting transdisciplinary convergence with contemporary strands of “agential realism” in feminist science and technology studies (Barad), in the political sciences (Bennett) and, more recently in methodological debates in Comparative and World Literature (Kaiser), which foreground diffraction and diffractive reading practices as modalities that both enact our constitutive being *of* the world (rather than just *in* the world), and through which we can attune ourselves to the many more-than-human worlds we (consciously and more often than not, unconsciously) inhabit.

dimension of the art project discussed herein serves as a kind of experiential grounding for the theorizing threads I will be weaving through my writing.

Let me begin by describing the project at large: its conception, its composition and its goals. [\*Transitions in Progress: Making Space for Place\*](#) is a multimedia collaborative experiment, which I carried out with two colleagues in Toronto between 2013 and 2015, in the context of an international EU-Canada initiative on issues of migration, storytelling and geolocate media platforms.<sup>2</sup> We conceived the project as an experiment in affective mapping of the nature-culture entanglements that comprise the urban landscape of Toronto. Specifically, we were interested in raising questions around modes of representation of the city's celebrated diversity, by means of bypassing top-down models of mapping and data extraction, and instead engaging people on the ground, through an in-vivo, bottom-up approach designed both to valorize subjective experiences and to open unexpected trajectories of communication between different publics<sup>3</sup>—an “art” public and a “street” public—that move through the urban space. Moving from the assumption that the urban space is constituted by contradictory and heterogeneous stratifications of flows of settlement and displacement that sediment across it over time, our project sought to elicit people's memories of the city, their perception of its differentiated natural and built environments, their modes of moving through it, and their ways of cultivating a sense of place within it. The following were among our guiding questions: How do people turn space into place? What factors contribute to turning the urban landscape into a space of belonging? And, inversely, what are the conditions that produce tenuous attachments, diminished living conditions, alienation and displacement? How do different dimensions of language use and behaviour contribute towards feelings of belonging, and how do they relate to other environmental conditions of attachment?

As might be inferred from the bipartite arrangement of its title, *Transitions in Progress: Making Space for Place* seeks to underscore the tension between mobility and dwelling, between the city's transient memories of everyday life<sup>4</sup> and those memories that are given space to sediment over time and become embedded in the city's own built environment—either via commemorative monumentalizing or via uneven and accretive absorption within the urban infrastructure. Our contention was that both kinds of memories—depending on who (or what) enacts them—can be made invisible

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<sup>2</sup> The EU-Canada initiative was titled *Performigrations: The People are the Territory*. The artists collaborating in the making of *Transitions in Progress* were myself, Elena Basile, media scholar and curator Roberta Buiani, and videographer Valentina Sutti.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Warner was likely the first scholar to articulate the notion of “public” as a special kind of metacultural formation referring to a “virtual social world” made up of strangers virtually brought together by a shared set of spatial, stylistic, textual and cultural references at large (*Publics and Counterpublics*). The concept has since been deployed extensively in the fields of cultural and communications studies. In our case, the differentiation between “street publics” and “art publics” draws attention to some of the incommensurables at work between the shared world of people belonging to and/or moving through a “neighbourhood” and the one projected by a common set of specialized references, stylizations, modes of address, peculiar to the art world. The projected shared world of “street” publics is broader and more heterogeneous compared to the one shared by “art” publics. Since many more people circulate in the former than the latter, our goal was to encourage a cross-hatching of sorts, opening the gallery space to interactions outside and beyond the enclosure of its anodyne, aseptic white box domain (and all of its implied classist and racial connotations).

<sup>4</sup> That is, the habitual memories that accrue from everyday trajectories of urban life connected to work and leisure-related activities such as commuting, shopping, dog-walking, bar-hopping, movie-going, etc.

and forcefully erased by systemic forces entrenched in the city's dominant geographic, historical, social and economic logics of development. We called it an experiment in affective mapping because we wanted to render the elusiveness of such memories by means of eliciting how Toronto feels to its inhabitants—and how that feeling sustains, or diminishes, the everyday decisions people make about where, how and in what/whose proximity they live. Importantly, languaged interactions proved to be a crucial component of the affective dimensions we were trying to tease out, insofar as they were part and parcel of the multisensory assemblage that enacted the ecological situatedness at large of our project. Specifically, the embodied relationality through which linguistic diversity made its way into our project was constantly diffracted through the environmental conditions of its enactment, alternatively amplifying or conversely attenuating our own awareness of the layers and entanglements of multilingual realities that traversed the neighbourhoods we visited. Before I go any further, let me describe the component parts of *Transitions in Progress* and how they unfolded.

### ***Transitions in Progress: The Project's Components***

*Transitions in Progress* (or *TiP*) was conceived as a nomadic performance, an in-gallery installation, and an [online archive](#) that documented the different phases of research, construction and execution of an evolving idea. From the start, our goal was to draw attention to the nature-culture entanglements through which the city is experienced and remembered. Our research method was pointedly qualitative. In other words, we were not focused on devising a method for large-scale, clearly defined and delimited data extraction and collection, which would enable us to map out city life according to a given set of quantifiable attributes. On the contrary, we were interested in small-scale, situated interactions with people on the street, which would convey some of the topological complexities of urban life—that is, the manifold boundaries and connectivities that traverse the city in both visible and invisible ways.<sup>5</sup> For this purpose we built a mobile repository designed to offer a range of sensory cues (kinetic, visual, haptic, olfactory and auditory) that would solicit social interaction, draw attention to the expanded sensorium of everyday life, and briefly preserve the ephemera and mementos collected in the process. This became our [TiP Lab](#), a bike-powered mobile lab, which acted as our calling card and faithful companion for the whole duration of the project.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For a study of the specifically *cartographic* aspects of the project, see Buiani.

<sup>6</sup> The TiP Lab was built by students Maral Ali-Mirzaei and Faezeh Ehsani at the Ryerson School of Interior Design, under the supervision of professor Lorella Di Cintio. The TiP Logo and the stylized map of Queen Street on the top cover of the mobile lab were designed by student Shahrzad Khosroshani.



Figure 1. The TiP Lab on the first stop of its nomadic performance in Parkdale, Toronto (September 1, 2015). Wearing the aprons, from left to right: Nahed Mansour, Roberta Buiani, Elena Basile. Photo: Yvonne Bambrick.

For the nomadic performance component of our project, in September 2015 we hauled the TiP Lab across Queen Street, one of Toronto's major downtown arteries, over a period of four days, stopping in four different neighbourhoods. This street, which runs parallel to Lake Ontario and traverses the city's downtown lengthwise (east-west), has been subjected to extensive urban reshaping and the changes have been unevenly acknowledged—if not utterly neglected—in the city's public consciousness. Like most of the gridiron urban blueprint of Toronto's downtown first devised by Alexander Aitken in 1793, Queen Street was built *over*, rather than *in relation to*, the land's natural topography of valleys and waterways. Originally Lot Street, it was named after Queen Victoria in 1843, ironically only a decade after the colonial outpost "York" officially renamed itself in accordance with the indigenous designation of the land: Toronto (Armstrong). What rules the street today, however, is less the Queen than the logic of real estate speculation, gentrification, and a homogenizing trend towards upwardly mobile and fast-paced cosmopolitanism, all of which constitute pervasive features of the downtown core of major urban areas across the world (Sassen) We knew this when we first chose the street; however, our preliminary research and the encounters we then had during our nomadic performances gave us the full measure both of the pervasive violence of that logic, and of the multifaceted forms resilience enacted by people (and life-forms) recursively displaced and dispossessed by it.

A few preliminary workshops<sup>7</sup> and many months of community outreach preceded the TiP Lab hitting the street. We connected with local BIA (Business

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<sup>7</sup> One of the workshops took place on June 23, 2015, at the Summer School organized by the Graduate Program in Translation Studies at Glendon College, York University. At the workshop, I asked participants to write in their own languages letters to faraway friends about their own experience of Toronto. I then asked each one to read their letters out loud and comment on each other's exposure to the un/familiar sounds of their reciprocally foreign languages.

Improvement Area) organizations, churches and different community centres serving a range of marginalized populations: seniors in ethnic communities (specifically Portuguese and Vietnamese); mental health survivors; precariously housed people, and newcomers. The focus, scope and reach of each local institution oriented our attention towards specific aspects of the street, the perceived boundedness of its neighbourhoods, their lived and imagined (missed or desired) geographies and the socio-cultural tensions traversing them. Thus, in the street's west end of Parkdale—a neighbourhood with an infamous history of past grandiosity, recent neglect and ghettoization, and present-day condo-led gentrification—we connected with [PARC](#) (Parkdale Activity and Recreation Centre), a social-justice oriented centre that self-describes as a “community where people re-build their lives” (PARC) and that concentrates on poverty reduction, mental health support and human rights. We participated in some of the weekly group activities held at the centre (such as the creative writing group and the knitting group) and recorded an extensive [interview with Bob Rose](#), one of the centre's founders, which eventually made its way into the gallery installation and on our website. On the opposite east end of the street, instead, we made connections with the local BIA (Business Improvement Area) of [Riverside](#), a more market-oriented institution servicing the interests of local storefront owners and more generally a local class of professionals eager to advertise their services via building a tourist-friendly image of the neighbourhood's working class history as a sample of Toronto's welcoming diversity. Between these two extremes, in the centre-west part of the street we connected with the [West Neighbourhood House](#), a community centre located just northwest of Trinity Bellwoods Park, where we stopped the second day of our nomadic performance. Here we visited with groups of Portuguese and Vietnamese elders who used to live in the vicinity. On the centre-east side of the street, we reached out to the parish of the [Metropolitan United Church](#), one of the oldest surviving churches in the downtown core, which sits on the corner of Queen and Church, beside St. Michael's hospital, on the south end of the city's gay village and just east of one of the most downtrodden areas of Toronto's downtown, Moss Park. The social relations established and cultivated via the workshops and the outreach proved instrumental to the project's success. Coupled with an extensive research into the city's archives, they oriented our attention to different aspects and problems specific to each neighbourhood's socio-cultural ecosystem and its relation to the city as a whole. Furthermore, it provided a first layer of socializing activities, which would eventually be incorporated into the gallery exhibition.

When it finally did hit Queen Street, the TiP Lab became an extremely versatile *place-making* device—as professor Lorella Di Cintio aptly described it (“Performigrations”). Indeed, the Lab's contained dimensions, its drawer functionalities, top display case, and especially the visual appeal of the different maps that decorated it, transformed it into a focal object of attraction and a facilitator of street level interactions. People would gravitate towards it, and would then invariably approach us to ask all kinds of questions about it (“Where was this thing built?”; “Where did you get the

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Some of the readings were recorded, and are included in the soundscape you are listening to. They are likely the loudest and clearest voices in the audio file, since they were taken indoors and thus in a more controlled environment than the others, which were all taken outside on the street.

maps?"; "Wow, this is cool, I can see my street on this map!"; "What are the petri dishes for?"; etc.). This enabled us in turn to further encourage interaction with the detachable parts of the lab itself. As can be seen from the picture, the lab's top drawer is a display case whose layout mimics a scientific display drawer, complete with petri dishes (see figure 2), test tubes and their appropriate index cards. Whenever people approached to ask about the display, we would encourage them to donate any small size item that could fit in the petri dishes and would ask them to write or talk about their object.



Figure 2. Petri dishes in the TiP Lab. Photo: Yvonne Bambrick

The lab also carried transparencies of archival pictures of the city, which showed how a particular landmark looked in the past. Passers-by were invited to look at the transparencies against the backdrop of the contemporary landscape and comment on the changes either by talking with us or by means of writing. In the great majority of cases people preferred to interact with us by chatting in English—and occasionally in Italian and French, the two other languages in which we, the artists, are competent speakers. However, our written handouts—which we had taken care to translate into six languages<sup>8</sup>—proved to be invaluable when language barriers made talking interactions difficult or impossible.

Dynamics of both translation and *non*-translation played an important role in the project. Their significance, however, can be fully grasped only in relation to the wider context of affordance-supported languageing behaviours, which we engaged in on the street. Indeed, it is from within the emerging patterns of those interactions that entangled -scapes of unacknowledged urban intelligibilities made of ephemeral, displaced, discarded and buried traces of everyday nature-socio-cultural interactions made their way into the project at large. Specifically, I want to emphasize how the Lab's own affordances and visual prompts, coupled with the kind of visibility our embodied

<sup>8</sup> We made the TiP handouts available in Arabic, French, Greek, Mandarin, Portuguese and Vietnamese.

selves—two<sup>9</sup> apron-clad, white, able- and female-bodied artists—enacted on the street, provided a loosely structured space for orienting the attention of passers-by, for delineating the tenor of our interactions, and for enabling overall the surfacing of a complex and constantly shifting understanding of the urban environment as a shared yet discordantly perceived land-scape, governed to a great degree by imaginaries of local, trans-local and diasporic (non)belonging. In other words, the TiP lab as a dynamic assemblage of human and more-than-human agents, came to constitute a loosely structured apparatus of diffraction through which languaging interactions took shape and came to matter. In calling the TiP Lab an “apparatus of diffraction”, I am referencing Karen Barad’s definition of apparatuses as “material (re)configurings or discursive practices that produce material phenomena in their differential becoming,” wherein determinate meanings emerge as effects of boundary-making activities, themselves open to being “sedimented out or enfolded in further materializations” (170). In the many exchanges that took place in, around and through the TiP Lab, differential adjustments of language codes and registers, of body postures and of affordances enacted such “material (re)configurings” so that unexpected urban realities emerged, bringing into view languaging scapes of multilingual co-existence in the city, both as horizons of potential intelligibility *and* as pointedly marked borders of insider access and outsider exclusion. In the next section I elucidate my use of the suffix “-scape” in relation to languaging at large and offer two examples from the TiP Lab’s nomadic performance, which illustrate its value.

## Languaging Scapes

I borrow the term “scape” from the work of trans studies scholar Bailey Kier, who deploys the suffix in lieu of sphere (as in, bio-sphere) as a “terminology tactic to highlight the open-ended and dynamic entanglements of different materialities, energetic flows and semiotic chains across an assumed field of observation” (197). This shift in framing of ecological milieus from “sphere” to “scape” is particularly useful insofar as talking about “scapes” draws attention to the open-endedness and potential heterogeneity of phenomena that may enter their field. Whereas “sphere” in “biosphere” (or “system” in “ecosystem”) tends to recall a bounded totality (however dynamic and interactive it might be), the notion of “scape” is inescapably partial and incomplete, though not fragmentary, insofar as it is constitutively oriented towards a *horizon* that gauges the limits of the observer’s perception, while at the same time anticipating the possibility of new phenomena emerging into being within its mobile boundaries. Such an orientation towards a horizon anchored by the observing body’s position makes the notion of scape a particularly useful one when it comes to figuring some of the dynamics through which different languages unevenly coexist, circulate or fracture along (in)visible border zones in the cosmopolitan city.

What kind of “scapes” and their relative horizons of perception and intelligibility emerged then, during our nomadic performances on Queen Street? How did our

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<sup>9</sup> Most of the performances were attended by Roberta Buiani and myself. For the performance in Parkdale (shown in figure 1) we received the help of video-artist Nahed Mansour.

languagings assemble into viable (but also non-viable) vectors of sense making? What role did the perception of *foreignness* play in the augmenting or diminishing of interactive possibilities enacted on the street? This latter question reframes the issues of translation and linguistic diversity away from code-centric explanatory models subordinated to the use-value of referent-oriented communication, and towards a more dynamic account of the affective environment within which they came embedded. Specifically, I am thinking of how the street-scapes and their perceived embeddedness in local, cross-town, and trans-national imagined geographies contributed to orchestrating the manifestation of power relations between the TiP Lab artists' vehicular use of english and the minoritized languages, accents and sound-scapes they encountered.

Let me dwell a little on the dynamics of some of those encounters, both the successful and the apparently unsuccessful ones, because they are exemplary of the methodological issues I am trying to tease out. As you can see from the panoramic picture of our first stop in Parkdale (figure 1), the TiP Lab functioned as one component within a set of ongoing, fluid and transversal interactions (between the artists and passersby, and among passersby themselves), the range of meaning-making potential of which was both visibly and invisibly regulated by how our embodied presence—three apron-clad, clipboard wielding, white, able-bodied English-speaking and female-gendered selves—was perceived on the street. This is what I called earlier a complex apparatus of diffraction. I mention the aprons and the clipboard because that particular dress code was read in a way that we had not anticipated, producing what I might call here a heightened moment of interference in the expected flow of communication we had anticipated in the street. Indeed, both the clipboard and the apron publically signalled some kind of official status, and seeing that the federal elections in Canada were just around the corner (they would take place just a month later, in October 2015), we found ourselves more than once mistaken for canvassers doing an electoral stint under the guise of an art project. This perception lingered just below the surface of a few of our interactions, producing in a couple of instances a sudden surfacing of aversion and mistrust, which would abruptly end a conversation that had started on completely pleasant grounds. One particular instance of such an abrupt affective shift stands out in my memory as exemplary of unexpected stumbling blocks, where slippages of accented english revealed incommensurable, and profoundly segregated, geographies and imaginaries of belonging.

During our performance in Parkdale, a man with east-Asian features first approached me with great curiosity and started chatting, but then suddenly closed off communication when I asked him—clipboard in hand—“why do you come here?” after I learned he no longer lived in Parkdale. He got suddenly very upset at my question, and told me it was the wrong question to ask. He said he had come to *Canada* long ago, and in short, I had no business asking him that kind of question. I had been momentarily surprised by his response, seeing that the question I asked referred to his attachment to the *neighbourhood* and not to the country. My attempt to explain the misunderstanding only seemed to make things worse. I tried unsuccessfully to qualify my poor wording, insisting that I meant to ask what makes him feel at home in Parkdale—but it was all for naught. Within a few seconds I had morphed from being an object of mild curiosity to

being a threatening figure of authority, who was there to question his right to belong, and the exchange was brusquely interrupted.

I have many times since returned to that moment of translative blockage experienced in the sudden slip between accented languages in a space of (in)visibly hierarchized belonging, where my (assumed) benign question seeking to elicit a *local* feeling of home quickly morphed into a threatening interrogation of the addressee's own *precarious* sense of *national* belonging. When I later discussed the episode with a colleague, she explained that the misunderstanding could have originated from the fact that many East Asian languages don't make a morphological distinction between verb tenses, relying instead on temporal adverbs and syntax to situate one's own utterance in time. My question "why *do* you come here?" then, could have just as easily been heard as "why *did* you come here?"<sup>10</sup> This code-based explanation certainly goes some way towards explaining the mistranslation that took place in the encounter, insofar as hearing the past tense rather than the present tense in my question might have made my interlocutor wonder about my true intentions. It does not, however, account for the entirety of the enunciative assemblage, with all of its heterogeneous components and vectors of affective resonance, that became quickly activated around that poorly worded question.

It might then be more useful to talk about this as a moment of *diffractive interference*, rather than of translation failure, since it made visible something that an exclusive focus on the refusal of communication would inevitably veil. Indeed, what the slippage of translation suddenly made visible was the steep divide in entitlement to place enacted in the conversation. The discordant horizons of two vastly different -scapes of belonging surfaced into perception *thanks to* (rather than in spite of) the referential failure of translation. Indeed, in my own ears my question did not evoke the nation (with its inescapably racialized imaginaries—both aural and phenotypical) as a horizon of belonging, partly because it wasn't the focus of the project, but more subtly because *I took it for granted*. The answer, however, revealed my interlocutor's different orientation towards the urban landscape, as one constitutively welded to the imaginary geography of the nation, and—at least in relation to *me*—one that could not be separated from it without perceiving in my question a veiled threat to his entitlement to calling home the very ground we were standing on. In other words, the failure of translation revealed a lot more than a simple failure of misapprehended codes. It revealed a different perception of the urban landscape, one marked by a precarious sense of belonging overdetermined by the bounded imaginaries of the nation. In the complex composition of our languaging interaction, characterized by an asymmetrical mastery of vehicular english in relation to a minoritized foreign language in/visibly informing it,<sup>11</sup> what decidedly tilted the scales of the exchange towards interruption

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<sup>10</sup> I thank Lyse Hébert for her insightful comments.

<sup>11</sup> I should specify that I never got around to asking what that foreign language was. The language code-centric explanation of mistranslation offered above is a conjecture borne out of an abstraction of accent and physical appearance inescapably mapped onto aural and visual—in other words *racial*—codes of intelligibility. I owe these insights to Rey Chow's pointed discussion of the aural dimensions of racialization in the first chapter of *Not Like a Native Speaker*.

rather than further engagement was the sudden affective resonance of a perceived power imbalance in relation to how we inhabited the same space.

The horizon of meaningful connection to the local neighbourhood, which I was trying to elicit from within the scape of a touted cosmopolitan city, could not emerge in my interlocutor's ears free of the weighty shadow of the nation-scape and the conditional welcome within *its* space. His answer, "You have no business asking me why I came to Canada", with its metonymic displacement from neighbourhood to nation, underscored how he perceived my body and voice as hegemonic within that space, but also as outside of (and to some degree irrelevant to) his own minoritized experience of it—an outsider status which his walking away made clear he wanted to keep in place. His departure unexpectedly displaced (and abstracted) my body onto the nation and repositioned his own into a neighbourhood whose opaque thickness came fleetingly into view.

What also came forcefully into view in this and many other encounters, was the Anglophone city's dimension as a *translation zone*, that is, an area of "acute consciousness of cultural negotiations [...] of resistance to—or forced—translation [...] where language relations are regulated by the opposing forces of coercion and resistance, of wilful indifference and engaged interconnections" (Cronin and Simon 120). Such consciousness in Toronto is not as overtly marked, as it tends to be in linguistically contested cities such as Montreal (to name an example in Canada). Nonetheless, our orientation towards languaging scapes made the city come alive precisely as such a zone, both over the four days of our performance and during the week of our gallery installation.

Overall, the majority of our encounters with people whose everyday linguistic environment is other than English, French or Italian (the three languages we, the artists, are fluent in), were not as abrasive as the one described above. However, the difference in outcome crucially depended on the presence either of a trusted interpreter,<sup>12</sup> or of translated written forms that explained the purpose of our TiP lab and supplemented our tentative gestures on the street. In the latter case, the patterns of relating which we engaged in paralleled the three component moments of "affordance", "joint attention", and "triadic interaction", which Leo van Lier identifies as crucial to an ecological understanding of languaging practices.<sup>13</sup> In the two pictures in figure 3, you can see the moment of triadic interaction established in relation to one of the archival transparencies we were carrying in the lab. When I approached the couple shown in the photograph, I simply gestured to the transparency and showed how it could be superimposed on the landscape of that particular street corner, then presented them with different versions of the written forms I had with me. The couple quickly chose the form in Mandarin, read it and then started writing on it holding the transparency in front of them. They quickly figured out that the transparency was an archival photo of that same street corner a century earlier, and the form simply asked them to write down what their own experience of that corner was and what the image evoked for them. The

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<sup>12</sup> Isabel Palmar and Tuyet Le were precious mediators in our interactions with the Portuguese and the Vietnamese seniors' groups respectively, at the West Neighbourhood House on the corner of Ossington and Dundas streets.

<sup>13</sup> Though Lier's specific focus is language acquisition, his ecological approach offers insight into the dynamics of our languaging interactions on the street.

transparency and the written form functioned as affordances, i.e. “meaningful ways of relating to the environment through perception-in-action” (van Lier 147), and my pointing to the transparency established our “joint attention” to the street-scape which eventually became the topic of the written commentary. Through the affordances of the transparency and the written form, we thus established a triadic interaction that was fully “embedded in pointing, establishing joint attention and commenting” on what each of us saw (van Lier 147).



Figure 3. A moment of triadic interaction. Photos: Yvonne Bambrick.

Van Lier points out that the primarily indexical nature of this kind of triadic interaction in language-learning settings is key to enabling an “invitational culture of learning” that allows one to “become a member of a community,” even if provisionally so (154). While this street-level interaction was by no means a language-learning setting, in that brief moment the TiP lab established a common horizon of perception, where the written translation provided the necessary affordance for what Cronin and Simon call an “engaged interconnection” (120) across languages, enabling this time an *amplifying diffraction* of city-scapes and their differential memories.

### **Diffraction Scapes: TiP in the Gallery**

Compared to the dynamic, messy and frequently ephemeral interactions that had taken place over the course of our four-day nomadic performance on Queen Street, the fixed nature of the gallery space which was to be the site of *Transitions in Progress's* installation required that we find new ways of arranging our material, so that the documentary aspects of our project could be kept in tension with its interactive and participatory scope. We wanted the gallery to become more than just an archival space for the artefacts and stories we had collected. More to the point, we wanted the documentary aspect of the project to be folded into an installation that would keep triggering visitors' memories and offer them opportunities to leave a trace of their own lived perception of Toronto's geography. In other words, we needed to keep working from within the diffractive logic that had sustained our approach from the beginning, extending into the gallery our ongoing attending “to the relational nature of difference,” making visible “patterns of difference that make a difference” (Barad 72). From the very beginning, we had committed to offer an openly *partial* view on Toronto. Partial both in the sense of constituting itself as a small segment of a larger whole, and in the sense of being biased or having a particular attraction towards something. We had committed to

paying greater attention to the discarded and the ephemeral, over and against the monumental and the memorialized. Accordingly, we needed to figure how to render such commitment within a space whose boundaries of institutional and architectural containment were more clearly delineated than on the street. Our goal in the gallery then became one of turning a fixed space into a dynamic locus for experimenting with, and extending further, the ongoing effects of our own entangled experiment.

By the end of four days we had collected a wide range of materials: natural specimens (leaves, stones, feathers), small objects (from tennis balls to cigarette butts to bus transfers), writings, drawings, photos and mementos of all kinds. We had also recorded plenty of stories, as people sat or walked with us chatting about themselves and their city. Indeed, everything we had recorded and collected on the street, however ephemeral and minor, had come to us sustained by a thick web of languaging gestures that valorized the objects in the there-and-then of our street conversations. Once in the gallery, while we could not restore the (impossibly fleeting and never univocal) correspondence between each object and its story, we could, however, arrange our different materials so as to transform the space into an evocative environment that would invite visitors to pursue their own meaningful trajectories within it. The gallery thus turned into a re-situated apparatus of diffraction. That is, we materially reconfigured the space and rearranged what we had collected on the street so that new “patterns of resonance and dissonance” could emerge, which would not re-present our street performances, but would yield “new possibilities for understanding and for being” urban dwellers at large (Barad 143). We thus chose a tactic of de- and re-contextualization, whereby we grouped the sounds, the objects and the pictures into differential arrangements across the gallery space. We arranged the small objects into three light-boxes in the middle of the gallery floor, all surrounding our centrepiece, the TiP mobile lab. On two of the gallery’s three walls we hung photos of the places where we had our performances, each accompanied by the transparencies we had used on the street, so that visitors could see for themselves the various landscape changes across time. We then remixed our recordings from the street and played them in a loop (the one you might still be listening to right now), positioning the speakers so as to suffuse the whole gallery space with a background murmur of voices, whose intermittent intelligibility mimicked the everyday experience of walking down any of the city’s streets and being met by all kinds of familiar and unfamiliar languages being spoken in conversations on patios, worksites, cellphones. Four video interviews with local activists, each displayed on one of four small screens around the gallery’s central column, offered food for thought towards further engagement with the natural, socio-economic and historical dimensions of the neighbourhoods we had visited.



Figure 4. View of the installation in the H. G. Crocker Gallery, Ryerson University. Photo: Roberta Buiani.

All of these re-assembled materials from our street performances powerfully resonated with the one gallery-specific object, which invited the contribution of gallery goers: the Map. Cut out from a homasote board<sup>14</sup> in the shape of the GTA (Greater Toronto Area), the Map soon became the installation's focal point of visitor interaction. The only part of the city highlighted on the Map were Queen Street, the inner boundaries of the old city of Toronto, and the two major rivers, the Humber and the Don, which constitute its east and west landmarks. Beside the Map we positioned a few threads, which people could unravel and pin across it however they wanted. The threads were colour-coded to represent people's habitual and non-habitual travelling trajectories across the city. Gray, for example, stood for "commuting", green stood for "exploring", yellow for "remembering" and purple for "daydreaming". Visitors were invited to pin the threads across the Map and add their own written notes onto any part of it.

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<sup>14</sup> Homasote is the widely used brand name for cellulose fibre-based wall boards frequently used for sound reduction, model construction and other purposes. It is ½ an inch thick, and its dimensions are usually 4 by 8 feet.



Figure 5. Detail of Map being populated by gallery goers. Photo: Yvonne Bambrick

The purposeful lack of detail was meant to encourage participation, and soon enough the Map became the centerpiece of an exercise in an intensely textual and multilingual collective mapping, which re-appropriated bird's-eye view conventions of space visualization towards more imaginative ends. If during our nomadic performance our mapping exercise had consisted in a practice of “walking with” people at street level in accordance with indigenous modalities of map making (see Buiani), in the gallery this exercise morphed into an open invitation for visitors to pinpoint their stories on a textured surface, thus offering a vivid visual rendition of the city's entanglements of everyday life, which resonated with the sounds and materials disseminated across the gallery space. Visitors did not shy away from writing their notes in different languages, offering their texts to the aleatory possibility of meaningful reading encounters unmediated by English hegemony. In doing so then, gallery visitors iteratively re-activated into new aleatory patterns some of the trajectories of non-translation and triadic interaction that we had experienced on the street—this time diffracted not through the artists' bodies and the mobile Lab's affordances, but through the gallery's own rearrangements of matter.

In short, a different instantiation of diffractive languaging practices took hold in the gallery, which continued the work of offering snippets, slices and partial vistas on the swirling micronarratives that compose the city with and against the grain of governing economic and political forces. And while the goal of *Transitions in Progress* was not to give an exact measure of just how much and what gets recursively

“Forgotten”, “Missed”, “Changed” or “Displaced”<sup>15</sup> from the city’s official memories, the project overall positively rendered a composite and manifold image of the resilient and transversal connections that pattern Toronto’s affective geographies of belonging beyond and away from its increasingly dominant image as a gentrified cosmopolitan city. And highlighting the situated languagings through which those geographies emerge played a crucial role in the process.

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<sup>15</sup> “Forgotten”, “Missed”, “Changed” and “Displaced” were the titles we gave to the note cards on which people could write their memories, which we distributed on the street and made available in the gallery. Each of the four interviews displayed in the gallery was introduced by one of the four titles.

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