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## **ANNA/ASJA LACIS AND THE MULTILINGUALITY OF THE OTHER**

The study of nationally defined contexts has tended to undermine attention to multilingual realities, something that has long been a rallying cry of sociolinguists and translation studies scholars, among others [cf. Blommaert et al. 2012; Simon 2012]. While it may have become something of a truism that “there are no monolingual cities” [Simon 2012:2], it is also true that the range of multilingual realities that have existed in and beyond Europe poses challenges to nationally oriented scholarship both at the level of writing and critical practice. In terms of writing, Gramling has helpfully established monolingualism to be “an unmarked critical category, as whiteness, maleness, and heteronormativity once were” by discerning a similar aesthetics in a group of twentieth-century multilingual authors writing in dominant languages, namely, Franz Kafka, Primo Levi, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, and Orhan Pamuk, that demonstrates their common double-bind with monolingualism and how they translate their multilingual dilemma into spatial figurations [Gramling 2008]. In terms of criticism, Kuzniar’s study of Croatian-German Irena Vrkljan shows how the bilingual Vrkljan, who has lived in Berlin since 1966, composed an intriguingly bilingual oeuvre and continues to split her time between Berlin and Zagreb, has been turned, in both the Croatian and German (*Germanistik*) reception of her work, into a monolingual Croatian writer [Kuzniar 2013:262]. Even the transnational vein of German Studies, such as the work of Azade Seyhan [Seyhan 2001] and Leslie Adelson [Adelson 2005] supports the notion of a monolingual rather than a translangual subject, for, as Kuzniar points out, “only the dominant, official language of the written word (*Literatursprache*) bestows recognized authorship” [Kuzniar 2013:263]. Multilingualism continues to be dangerous, as the title of the 2012 edited volume *Dangerous Multilingualism: Northern Perspectives on Order, Purity and Normality* draws attention to, because it calls into question the ethnolinguistic assumption that “aligns language use and ethnic or cultural group identity in a linear and one-to-one relationship and in which the modern subject is defined as monolingual



Māra Ķimele unveiling the plaque to Walter Benjamin.  
Photo: Susan Ingram.

and monocultural” [Blommaert, Leppänen and Spotti 2012:3]. Despite the fact that this view has been regularly debunked since Edward Sapir’s 1921 critique of it, the ethnolinguistic assumption continues to persist and remains a stubborn, entrenched aspect of modernity.

Anna/Asja Lacis’s multilingual memoirs draw graphic attention to the shifting language dynamics over the course of the twentieth century and issues that have arisen in the wake of the rise of global English that communication technologies have served to accelerate. That her memoirs have failed to receive the academic attention they deserve can be attributed to their crossing a number of academic and geopolitical fault lines that are underpinned by ethnolinguistic assumptions. While the politics of language relations is more pronounced in places colonized by English speakers, the complexities of which Gayatri Spivak’s translation work was done to demonstrate [Debī and Spivak 1995], they have also had an impact on the cultural and academic production in the new Europe. The “Parole – Asja / Password – Asja” conference on which this publication is based was a significant marker of these new language realities. Having attended conferences

in neighboring countries whose languages I have not studied, where the program was almost entirely in English and yet mine was one of the only papers actually given in English and all I could understand was, as the Germans say, *Bahnhof* (train station, i. e., practically nothing), the simultaneous translation that took place during the “Parole – Asja” conference and the intended bilingual nature of this volume are striking.<sup>27</sup> They are also in keeping with the anti-monolingual character of Laci's autobiographical production, the nature of which this contribution seeks to determine by analyzing the shifting language politics of the various linguistically specific terrains with which Laci's multilinguality has had to contend. While it might initially appear that English has simply taken the place of Russian, examination of Laci's autobiographical oeuvre, its Latvian context, and the cultural and scholarly work it has motivated demonstrate that the situation is rather more nuanced. That nuance, it should be noted, while inherent in the situation, is a matter of method and not mere hermeneutics. Specifically, it is about trying to respect what Spivak has termed the “ethical singularity” of the text [Debī and Spivak 1995:xxiv]. Spivak has made clear that she chose to translate Devi “because she is unlike her scene” and that there are ethical implications to working with writers “who are against the current, against the mainstream” [Spivak 1993:189]. This contribution tries to determine in how far these ethics, what one might see as a multilinguality of the other, are related to the idea of leftism in culture.

Laci is by no means the only woman to have written multiple memoirs, with one of the most prolific being Catherine the Great. The versions Catherine produced “in 1756, 1762, 1771, 1791, and 1794 do differ markedly from one another, even though they tell and retell the same stretch of time”; however, they were all written in the same “swift and stylish French,” and all “stop... short of the ‘originary crime’ of her own reign, the assassination of her husband Peter III” [Greenleaf 2004: 409]. Laci, in contrast, may have “only” written three versions of her life story, but they were all written towards the end of her life, and they were all in different languages for different audiences.

The impetus for Laci's life-writing came from abroad, namely in the person of Hildegarde Brenner, a West German literary scholar born in 1928 and still alive at the time of writing. Having in 1952 graduated from the FU Berlin with a dissertation on Hölderlin's poetic theory and having in 1964 taken on the editorship of *Alternative*, the literary journal of the West German new left, Brenner was primed to track down the references she kept coming across to “Asja Laci”. As she

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<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, the organizers did not receive enough financing to ensure translation of all the papers so that they could be included in both English and Latvian, as was their original plan. However, the volume is still bilingual, with contributions in both English and Latvian.

notes in her afterword to *Revolutionär im Beruf: Berichte über proletarisches Theater, über Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin und Piscator* (A Revolutionary by Profession: Reports on Proletarian Theater, on Meyerhold, Brecht, Benjamin, and Piscator): “Only when the social conflicts set in motion by the period of reconstruction once again brought the tradition of the workers’ movement to the attention of the West German public’s conscience and political interest turned to the class conflicts in the Weimar Republic; only when organizations such as the revolutionary proletarian writers’ union and the workers’ theater union were rediscovered; only when progressive bourgeois intellectuals inquired into the state of political affairs back then and freed activities from bourgeois historical constraints, only then did one repeatedly stumble over the name of Asja Laciš.”<sup>28</sup>

It is therefore somewhat misleading to suggest that Laciš “wrote” her German memoir. As Brenner enumerates in her afterword, the volume was assembled from nine German-language sources, including “freely told reminiscences, which [Brenner] recorded in February, 1968; selections were broadcast in 1969 on the West-German Rundfunk, Cologne... and additions to her memoirs, which Asja Laciš wrote in 1971” [Laciš and Brenner 1976]. Brenner stresses that “All texts were written by the author in German. Where the text of the memoirs published here goes beyond or differs from the publications in *Alternative* and *Sinn und Form*, it follows the recordings and the passages written in 1971.” Publication of the German volume on the occasion of Laciš’s 80th birthday, on 19 October 1971, motivated Laciš to prepare a volume in Latvian [Laciš 1973]. As Paškevica documents in *In der Stadt der Parolen: Asja Laciš, Walter Benjamin und Bertolt Brecht* (In the City of Words: Asja Laciš, Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht), Laciš’s simply titled Latvian memoir *Anna Laciš* appeared with the Riga-based publisher Liesma in 1973 and is “understandably” (“*Verständlicherweise*,” as Paškevica puts it) more oriented towards a Latvian readership. It contains reports about her theatrical activities in Latvia, and “the important German contacts are dealt with very briefly” [Paškevica 2006:14]. The last version of her life that Laciš compiled was the posthumously published Russian-language *Красная гвоздика. Воспоминания* (*Krasnaya Gvozdika*; Red Carnation: Memoirs), which was also published in Riga by Liesma [Лацис] and which included an introduction provided by Arvīds Grigulis, a prominent writer of the Soviet Latvian literary establishment who gives as his title “National Writer of the Latvian SSR.”

Laciš’s three memoirs draw attention to the shifting linguistic valences of a constellation of key urban locations, with Riga as their centre. As we know from *In der Stadt der Parolen*, Laciš’s early schooling at an elite private school

<sup>28</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

for girls in Riga, run by the Keninshes, was primarily in Russian because until 1905 Latvian was only permitted to be used as the language of instruction for a limited number of subjects [Paškevica 2006:20]. Whether German was part of the school's curriculum is not mentioned; however, some of Laci's key early theatrical experiences were in German: a performance of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in particular [ibid 21]. There were both Russian- and German-language stages in Riga, as well as guest performances by German troupes, such as from Berlin's Ibsen Theatre, and while her German was supposedly not very advanced at the time of her first visit to Berlin in 1922, it was apparently sufficient to allow her to participate in discussions that involved Kant and Nietzsche [ibid 23]. One can imagine that two years later, when Benjamin came to her aid in that shop in Capri where she was trying to buy almonds, how happy she was to be addressed as "Gnädige Frau" and to be able to converse in German [ibid 171].

Rather than analyzing Laci's erotic libinal economies, which, as I have established elsewhere, is what scholarship has generally tended to concentrate on [Ingram 2002], what I am drawing attention to here are the circuits of her linguistic desire as well as those in which her work has been taken up in, or not, since. The fact that Laci became known in German and Anglo-American scholarship as 'Asja', whereas her Latvian and Russian memoirs were published under the name 'Anna' is indicative of her own relationship to these languages as well as the type of character she has been treated as. 'Anna' was the official party functionary, the esteemed artist of the Latvian SSR, whereas the diminutive 'Asja' indicates that it is Laci's relational identity that is of interest. It is the name her daughter chose for her own memoir, the name that Paškevica uses in her German-language monograph, and the password, the *Parole*, for the conference on which this publication is based. Many participants at the conference, however, referred to 'Anna Laci' in their papers, including me, signaling a desire to treat Laci more formally and in keeping with the feminist injunction to call a woman as one would a man, that is, by her last name not her first or, even worse, a diminutive form of her first name.<sup>29</sup>

What I am attempting here is, then, an initial stab at mapping out the relations of the linguistic permutations of the ménage à trois that Laci and her work have been involved in, whether Latvian-Russian-German or some variation of German-English-Italian, Russian, Portuguese, and/or French.<sup>30</sup> In doing so, I would like to reiterate the caution that both Daina Teters and I have shown is warranted when

<sup>29</sup> This point came up repeatedly in the Rigoberta Menchú controversy, cf. Arias and Stoll.

<sup>30</sup> A more in-depth study would take into consideration the work of her partner, Bernhard Reich, and the languages of his professional and autobiographical production as well as the translations of Laci's memoirs.

dealing with relational spatial concepts like centre and periphery [Teters 2014 and Ingram 2014]. These terms may indeed have initially proven useful in the early days of postcolonial scholarship, but one does need to attend to their homogenizing, stabilizing, a-historicizing tendencies, as well as the way that they draw attention to the positionality of those who use them. Berlin, Riga and Moscow, not to mention Naples and Capri, have all served as centres and peripheries. If one posits them as centres, as Teters has established in the case of the historical avant-garde, that means one also needs to look at the peripheries that have played an active role in shaping them [Teters 2014]. From that perspective, Lacis was able to mobilize Riga's and the Latvian language's peripherality in order to actively participate in the shaping of two distinctive national cultural centres, Berlin and Moscow, at key periods in their development. Adroitly drawing on German and Russian to propel herself along, Lacis positioned herself as "*Informantin aus dem Land der Revolution*" [Paškevica 2006:12] for the leftist Germans who arrived in Soviet Russia, just as she proved a source on Soviet Russia during her sojourns in Berlin. In doing so, however, as Paškevica points out, she became much more, namely, a mediator among cultures, "who made a substantial contribution to the theater of the Germans, the Russians, and *especially* the Latvians" [ibid 13, italics added].

The linguistic discreteness of these three groups is strikingly reflected in Lacis's three memoirs. If one takes Benjamin's translation essay as an example, multilinguality usually manifests itself in the mixing of languages, the insertion of "foreign" languages into a main text to draw attention to the fact that they come from elsewhere, such as Mallarmé's French, which Benjamin expected his readers to be able to read in the original and so did not provide a translation of. The conference at which Derrida first presented the ideas that became *Le monolinguisme de l'autre: ou la prothèse d'origine* (Monolingualism of the Other: The Prosthetics of Origin) was called *Renvois d'ailleurs* (Echoes from Elsewhere) in an attempt to complicate and thereby mitigate the sense of a colonial male penetration of a female-coded, ethnically pure originary culture with a mother tongue, etc., which was inherent in the early German Romantics' cultivation of a national culture. It is noteworthy that Lacis and much of the work that has been done on her (that is, work that takes her as its focus and shows what stories relate to her, rather than what stories she fits into) does not tend to fit this pattern, but rather works to disrupt it by working in and across a number of languages. That, I think, is one of the significant contributions of the Latvian parts of Lacis's oeuvre that are now, thanks especially to Beata Paškevica's book, the "Parole – Asja" conference, and this volume, starting to come to light outside of Latvia. They do not presume a monolingual reader but rather one whose multilinguality does not include Latvian.

The fate of Russian in this context would seem to be the crux of the matter. *Krasnaya Gvozdika* was not only Laci's final memoir but, as Paškevič puts it, the "offenste" [Paškevič 2006: 14], or most forthcoming, yet there was no palpable Russian presence at the "Parole – Asja" conference, by which I mean that there were papers by participants coming from Germany, Italy, Poland, Brazil, and Canada, but none from Russia and none who identified as Russian ethnic nationals. On the basis of Evgenii Bershtein's article "The Withering of Private Life: Walter Benjamin in Moscow," which appeared in the 2006 edited volume *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia*, one cannot help but wonder what that presence might have been, had there been one [Bershtein 2006].<sup>31</sup> Bershtein is an Associate Professor in the Russian Language and Literature Department at Reed College, an elite institution in Portland, Oregon. According to his website, he grew up in Leningrad and received a PhD in Slavics in 1998 from Berkeley, and his position at Reed the following year. His publications indicate an interest in sexuality studies and fin-de-siècle decadence; he has examined, for example, the cult of Otto Weininger in Russia and Oscar Wilde in Russian modernism. In "The Withering of Private Life: Walter Benjamin in Moscow," Bershtein sets out to provide "new *factual* information about the circumstances and characters of Benjamin's journey (to Moscow) and address the question of how these influenced Benjamin's conceptualization of early Soviet 'private life'" [Bershtein 2006:218, italics added], and he situates "the mix of the erotic and the political" that one finds in *Moscow Diary* against the trip's discursive background, namely the "leftist intellectual's trip to Soviet Russia" [ibid 219]. It is in the footnotes, specifically footnote six, that we discover where Bershtein has his "new factual information" from: "the main source of biographical information on Asja Laci is an interview that I conducted in August 1993 with her daughter Dagmāra Ķimele," and he thanks "both her and Yuri Tsivian, who helped [him] arrange the meeting." Bershtein was motivated to conduct the interview because, as he further notes, "the two published autobiographies of Asja Laci... unfortunately do not furnish reliable *historical data*" [ibid 228, italics added]. I think it bears questioning why a theoretically informed scholar as steeped in Foucault as Bershtein would presume that an interview with a 74 year-old (Ķimele was born in 1919 and the interview took place in 1993) who had made her own subject position very clear in her own memoirs, which she titled with the diminutive of her mother's name, that is, with

<sup>31</sup> A shorter version of this essay was first published in Russian: Е. Берштейн. "Отмирание частной жизни": Вальтер Беньямин в Москве. С. 284–296. *Studia Russica Helsingiensia et Tartuensia IV: "Свое" и "чужое" в литературе и культуре*. Ред. Р. Лейбов. Тарту: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 1995. С. 330.

the name Lacis became known outside of Latvia on account of her famous connections, would provide more reliable historical *data* than Lacis's own memoirs [Ķimele and Strautmane 1996]. My point is not to discredit Dagmāra Ķimele's recollections in any way, but rather to draw attention to Bershtein's presumption of their reliability, their trust-worthiness, something Benjamin had addressed, and implicitly warned against, both in his "Moskau" essay ("*Doch wer 'an Hand der Fakten' sich entscheiden will, dem werden diese Fakten ihre Hand nicht bieten!*") However, one who wants to decide 'on the basis of the facts', will not be spoken to by those facts or won't receive them), as well as in his *Einbahnstrasse* (One-Way Street): "Die Konstruktion des Lebens liegt im Augenblick weit mehr in der Gewalt von Fakten als von Überzeugungen / the construction of life lies at the moment far more in the force of facts than in convictions" [cited in Paškevica 2006:230]. The force of these facts is that Bershtein attends to the discursive background of the trip understood singularly as the "leftist intellectual's trip to Soviet Russia," which is shorthand for European male leftist intellectuals, so that the imaginaries surrounding those trips tended to turn the guides they met there into Pocahontas figures. Nor are the various layers of mediation that affected either that trip or the interview he conducted with Dagmāra Ķimele addressed, beginning with the fact that it was presumably held in Russian.<sup>32</sup>

This brings me to the idea of leftism in culture, and the question of the languages of its transmission and how they have been affected by globalization and the growth of global English. The linguistic logic of the "Parole – Asja" conference and the presence of several non-Latvian speakers whose only common language was English dictated that German and Russian could not be more than non-official presences. However, it was certainly the case that German and Russian, as well as Italian and Portuguese facilitated communication for attendees whose knowledge of those languages was stronger than their knowledge of English. It is here that the trap of ethnolinguistic assumptions arises. While the conference taught us not assume that the person attending from Poland would be an ethnic Pole or that Brazilians always travel directly from Brazil and only speak Portuguese, Latvians per se present a particularly forceful challenge to this assumption: "Latvia differs from other east and central European states in the demographic position of the titular nationality; in 1997, Latvians constituted just over 56 percent of the population, a lower proportion than in all former Bloc states and most states of the former USSR" [Stukuls 1999:538]. However, the nature of that challenge

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<sup>32</sup> In personal communication, Bershtein confirmed that he "conducted this interview in Riga, in Dagmāra's place, in Russian, over tea with cookies and chocolates" (e-mail of 17 April 2015).

has begun to shift under capitalism. A recent study found that ethnic Russians in Latvia have adopted various strategies in the face of an increasing emphasis on Latvian and devaluation of Russian in light of shifting geopolitical realities, something Putin's move into, first, Georgia and, now, the Crimea has done nothing to alleviate [Tughushi and Gogolashvili 2015]. Cheskin has shown how: "...in order to marginalise the Latvian hegemonic position, 'We', for Russian-speakers, embraces the 'civilised' nations of old Europe. By linking their own discourses with European discourses of equality, racial and cultural tolerance (which are in fact Russian-speaking discourses as much as they are somehow 'European facts'), we can see a shift in the relational nodal network that Russian-speakers are attempting to operate within. On the other hand, Russian-speaking elites have carefully been crafting out a space for themselves within the narratives of an independent, post-Soviet Latvia. In order to find such a place, however, they have been forced to adopt many positions congruent with Latvian discourses. In so doing they have moved away from wholesale 'pro-Russian' and '*homo Sovieticus*' identities and instead have sought a meaningful role as Latvian Russian-speakers. Increasingly, it would seem, it is this dual, or 'bridge' identity which Russian-speaking elites are attempting to promote" [Cheskin 2012:347].

These tensions correspond to the ones Blommaert et al identified in Finland between "a late-modern sociolinguistic phenomenology and a high-modern ideological instrumentarium... (which) yields a wide variety of concrete problems, ranging from language-political anomalies, through inefficient and discriminating systems of 'integration' and education, to uncertainty and unease about language and language use" [Blommaert, Leppänen, and Spotti 2012:9]. In Latvia, as in Finland, "English has rapidly acquired the status of an international vernacular" and Russian cannot be ruled out as "a language of importance for the future generation," [ibid 11] despite its being "an actively disfavoured language" [ibid 15]. Moreover, both Latvia and Finland are members of the EU, whose translation policies foster national identities and for whom the presence of both Russian and multilinguality are "a disruptive, impure and abnormal state of affairs" [ibid 11].

Work on *Lacis*, and the "Parole – Asja" conference in particular, draws into stark relief the "moving away from wholesale 'pro-Russian' and '*homo Sovieticus*' identities" that Cheskin found Russian-speaking elites in Latvia are attempting to promote, and encourages this tendency to be seen in tandem with the problems of intellectual elites elsewhere. At least since the rise of Thatcherism and Reaganomics in the 1980s, there has been a mournful lament in Anglo-American English about the failures of the left to be able to appeal to the people, something that has been no less true in Europe with the rise of populist far-right parties. When and why leftist culture lost its "rousing-ness", its ability to rouse, or even speak to, the

masses in terms of culture – and, more to the point, *shto delat?* – are questions that the “Parole – Asja” conference and this volume amply demonstrate. Lacis’s scholarship is well positioned to answer. Just as Lacis herself served as a conduit that connected leftist cultural, and specifically theatrical, developments in Weimar Germany and early Soviet Russia, with proletarian realities in places like Naples and Riga, so too are multilingual Latvian knowledge and cultural workers well positioned to translate that history so that it can make its way into the global academic English that has replaced Russian as the language of the left in order to initiate and facilitate conversations with knowledge and cultural workers located in places like Germany, Italy, Poland, and Brazil, not to mention Canada.

As Birgit Wagner reminds us in her work on Gramsci’s views on translation, the translation of leftist thought into capitalist structures will never be easy, and she draws attention to a passage from the *Prison Notebooks* that is seldom analyzed to make this point. In the 11th notebook, called *Introduction to the Study of Philosophy* (“*Introduzione allo studio della filosofia*”), she notes that: “Gramsci remembers a remark made by Lenin where the Soviet leader mourns a lost occasion in international politics. Lenin actually talks about the Third International Congress of Communists (1921), and he criticizes the fact that the final resolution paper ‘did not succeed to ‘translate’ our [Russian, B.W.] language in the other European languages” (Gramsci 1975a, p. 1468 – “*non aveva saputo tradurre nelle lingue europee la nostra lingua*”)” [Wagner 2012:58].

Wagner quotes this sentence “in the form Gramsci remembered and wrote down without having Lenin’s text at his disposal” and asks “Why did he remember exactly this passage, why was it important to him?”, something she answers by showing how remembering Lenin’s observation allows Gramsci “to address what he considers the political necessity of cultural translation” [ibid 58]. Gramsci understood, Wagner underscores, that: “Lenin did not wish to question the professionalism of the translators of the resolution; he did not refer to the question of literal translation. Lenin criticized the fact that when the paper was drafted, the question of what we call interdiscursive and/or cultural translation had been neglected: so, a resolution that had been written by the standards of ‘Russian’ Soviet conventions had little chances to be rightly understood by the addressees who would not share this particular mentality, readers to whom the paper, as a matter of fact, had been dedicated [ibid 58–59].

This matters because, as Wagner translates, “Let us put it in other terms: a person, or a political entity, who does not take into account the ‘translatibility’ of his or her discourse will not be able to achieve political goals” [ibid 59]. She further attributes Gramsci’s recognition of this problem, namely, “the difficulty to ‘translate’ the language of Marxism to not specially trained auditors”, to “his

experience of a very special relationship, namely that of the Sardinian culture of his time with the ‘national’ Italian culture” [ibid]. In other words, it was on account of Gramsci’s originary bilingual, which was also an anti-monolingual, orientation that he developed a sensitivity towards, or to put it more strongly, an allergy against “‘philosophical and academic Esperanto’ [Gramsci 1975a:1467 – “*Esperanto filosofico e scientifico*”, headline to §45, the one which precedes the section “Translatability of scientific and philosophical languages”], that is, a stereotyped jargon which tends to fossilization and consequently to political inefficiency” [ibid 60].

One immediately notices that this is a rather different orientation to translation and translatability than the one in Benjamin’s translation essay, which has come to be understood as an ode to foreignization. Rather, Gramsci, in Wagner’s reading, emerges as much closer to Spivak, who argues that because “it is not possible for us as ethical agents to imagine otherness or alterity maximally, we have to turn the other into something like the self in order to be ethical” [Spivak 1993:183]. The problem with that position, as I have pointed out elsewhere, is that it reinforces “the way subjectivity continues to be disciplined: namely, the common assumption is that the self can only be understood as separate from an “other,” which inevitably seems to turn out to be marked by difference; even if one “perform[s] the other as self,” both ‘self’ and ‘other’ are still conceived of as separate entities” [Ingram 2015:189], which opens up a space for the insertion of hierarchies. The pluralizing Gramscian approach, on the other hand, which Gramsci has in common with Lacis and which is encapsulated by the dual Anna/Asja form of address, maintains the disruptive, dangerous potential Blommaert et al associate with multilinguality.

To understand why such disruption remains crucial, one only needs to turn to work done on the changing status of women in postcommunist Latvia: “while the end of communism has seen a clear expansion of rights and opportunities, not the least of which are freedoms of speech and of the press and the creation of multiparty democracy and a free market, women have been disproportionately affected by the negative processes engendered by the postcommunist transformation, including the deepening impoverishment of the population, the widespread loss of employment opportunities, the open discrimination against women, and the expanding market in bodies for sexual consumption” [Stukuls 1999:558].

While it may seem a deep irony that the work of someone who became globally known as someone’s “Latvian Bolshevik girlfriend” could make a useful intervention into the re-assertion of the ethno-nationalist forces that demean women in the country of her birth, it is something inherent in the idea of leftism that Lacis worked in service of. Lacis’s lifelong ability to play centres and peripheries

off against one another and find outsides to hegemonic structures, whether those structures were in bourgeois or Soviet Latvia or beyond, make her work a treasure trove of possibility for a gender-aware left. However, we should not underestimate the enormity of the task facing us. A highlight of the program of the “Parole – Asja” conference involved the unveiling of a plaque to Walter Benjamin [see photo] while there are still no physical traces of Lacis in Riga’s cityscape – the site of Lacis’s and Reich’s apartment, for example, which we know from Brenner was “in Riga, 145 Gorky Street” and served as “a meeting place for young, not only Soviet artists”, remains anonymous.

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## ANNA/ASJA LACIS AND THE MULTILINGUALITY OF THE OTHER

## Abstract

The article discusses the multilingual nature of Anna/Asja Lācis's own works as well as those devoted to her. When Anna Lācis's memoirs were published in German in 1971, the editor Hildegard Brenner pointed out that the name Asja Lācis should appear more often in the research on Walter Benjamin and the cultural scene of Weimar. Asja Lācis did not receive well-deserved acclaim over the subsequent decades either. The conference, which is devoted to Asja Lācis and her work in the context of proletarian theatre and the ideas of leftism, indicates that the situation has changed under the influence of geopolitical and technological circumstances.

The article analyses the influence of changes in the world on approaches to translation in culture and ensures an insight into Walter Benjamin's translation work before meeting Asja Lācis in Capri. The goal of the paper is to analyse the efficiency of such work in order to understand both the difficulties in their relationships and the reception of their literary heritage, which are closely intertwined, as well as to facilitate the dialogue between this reception and leftism, which juxtaposes it to Antonio Gramsci's works about translatability.

**Keywords:** *multilingual realities, memoirs, linguistic, ethnolinguistic assumption.*