

Image Sequence 187  
2016  
Stills from “PDGN,” with subtitles in Swahili,  
Mandarin, Italian, and Swedish.

Woman on the Edge of Time 203  
1976  
Book excerpt.  
This passage describes one of the protagonist’s temporary  
mental escapes to the future, away from the psychiatric  
hospital where she is kept against her will.

Woman on the Edge of Time by Marge Piercy. (Alfred  
A. Knopf). Copyright © 1976 by Marge Piercy.  
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## Global Englishes, Rough Futures Avishek Ganguly

In 1905 Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a Bengali Muslim woman in British-ruled India published a short story titled “Sultana’s Dream,” in *The Indian Ladies’ Magazine*, an English-language periodical based in Madras (now Chennai). In the story, the narrator has a dream in which she is transported to a “far-off Ladyland [where] ladies rule over the country and control all social matters, while gentlemen are kept in the mardanas to cook, to mind babies and to do all sorts of domestic work.”<sup>1</sup> In a nod to a feminist critique of science, this witty, utopian tale of radical gender-role reversal (*zenanas/mardanas*) also invoked technological innovations that made life easier: solar cookers, flying cars, cloud condensers for providing clean water. “Sultana’s Dream” was one of the earliest published examples of “self-consciously feminist” speculative fiction written by a woman in English—10 years before American feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s influential utopian novel *Herland* (1915),

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1 Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana’s Dream: A Feminist Utopia and Selections from The Secluded Ones*, ed. and trans. Roushan Jahan (New York: The Feminist Press, 1988), 15.

and decades prior to Marge Piercy's classic *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976).<sup>2</sup> English, however, was Hossain's fifth language after Bengali, Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. Deprived of the opportunity of formal schooling within a conservative social milieu but determined to get an education, she was able to learn the language with a little help from a couple of progressive men in her life—first her brother, who supposedly taught her in secret, and then her civil-servant husband, who encouraged her to write in English. Begum Rokeya, as she is better known, also had a thriving writing career in Bengali and is remembered today as a trailblazing educator, political organizer, and activist for gender equality and women's rights. When I teach the Global Englishes seminar at my college, I usually begin with "Sultana's Dream." We start with Englishes elsewhere and "look in" on the Anglo-American dominant, to modify slightly the term Edward W. Said had used to describe a similar intellectual journey in *Culture and Imperialism* nearly 35 years ago.<sup>3</sup> Our goal: to read and listen to a selection of texts across media that confound normative notions

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2 See the excerpt of Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time* on page 203 of this book.

3 I am thinking of Edward W. Said's notion of the "voyage in" in his book *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), a reverse journey undertaken by authors and texts from the "Third World" toward European and US locations that seek to dislodge the dominant discursive status of the latter.

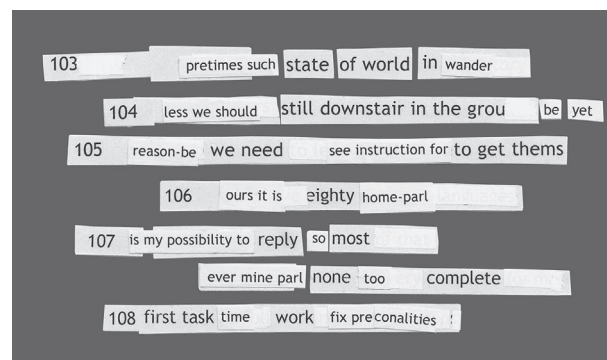
of a "native speaker," to reveal the idea of the original and the authentic as fiction. Evidently, the practice of women using the English language to imagine feminist utopian futures has a history that is longer than the postwar twentieth century and a geography larger than Anglo-America.

Non-native speakers of English and feminist speculative fiction all play compelling roles in the artistic production of Nicoline van Harskamp. Inspired by the fact that non-native speakers of English already outnumber native speakers, the artist tries to imagine the future shape of a "global link or mixed language" through a series of performance-based works. *PDGN*, a video piece from 2016, shows a group of women working and chatting in a setting that cuts between a construction site and an arid landscape, which looks like a cross between an industrial wasteland and an abandoned open-cast mine. Shot in soft brown hues, the sparse setting is strongly suggestive of manual labor with a hint of the apocalyptic, but it is not quite dystopian. That might entirely be due to the cadence of the conversation among the women—warm, friendly, contemplative. This is an interesting conjecture since the language in which these women speak to each other remains completely unintelligible to the viewer. Perhaps the experience of incomprehension constitutes a way of seeing the work? For now, one way to describe the language in *PDGN* might be to

call it “not quite not English.” And there lies the crux of van Harskamp’s artistic endeavor, insofar as a work of art can ever have something like a crux.

There is an undeniable richness to this artifice, this “unlikely but desirable” linguistic medium that van Harskamp has created in *PDGN*, which invites multiple ways of listening. Most prominent among them is the matter of Englishes. The artist calls it a “vehicular language,” perhaps drawing upon the work of Martinican thinker Édouard Glissant. But we could also describe it as a simulacrum of English with a residual attachment to Esperanto, or even to Basic English, an erstwhile aspirant to a simplified global English. What animates van Harskamp’s work, as she has stated on more than one occasion, is a desire to co-opt English for purposes other than those that consolidate its current hegemonic status. What follows then is a performance of a link language in *PDGN*, an aesthetic proposal for communicating in the future that is based on varieties of English spoken by real people who use them as their second or third or even fourth language. These Englishes have been recorded by the artist and then “fast-forwarded” to resemble their imagined use in “video futures.” This “scripting methodology” employs a list of interesting text-change algorithms that the artist calls “distorters,” relating primarily to sound and speech.

Before I started writing this essay, I rewatched the version of *PDGN* without subtitles: an experience of viewing that immediately called the politics of citation into crisis. (How does one quote from a pidgin that is not subtitled?) The artist asserts that there isn’t a Standard English script that exists for *PDGN*.



But the work employs a further conceit: some aspects of the language “distortion” as well as the narrative are “borrowed” from speculative-fiction novels, such as *Woman on the Edge of Time*. This brings us back to the beginning. Speculative fiction has often speculated about the possibility of alternate, experimental languages (for Hossain it was English itself, as a (F)ifth (L)anguage—what/who is an “EFL” writer?), and Piercy’s novel is no exception. *Woman on the Edge of Time* tells the story of Consuelo (Connie) Ramos,

a Mexican-American single parent in New York who has fallen on hard times and goes through a series of traumatic experiences to do with poverty, the criminal justice system, and psychiatric institutions. Connie, who retains her powers of thinking and empathy throughout her time in an institution, is offered a glimpse of a just and equitable future society by a time-traveler figure, Luciente. Characters in the novel speak English in what van Harskamp calls “an appropriated, but relatively unchanged form.” Another aspect of this language use that appeals to the artist is the novel’s “attitude to naming,” how the characters in Luciente’s utopian community modify and add names, how they share their naming-stories. The fictional world of Bato, Chingshi, and Sayyida, the three women in *PDGN*, is much like the world of Luciente. The borrowing van Harskamp talks about essentially consists of the use of a few words from this and some other novels to “distort” scripts built up from recordings of Englishes spoken by non-native speakers to create the “future language” in the video *PDGN*. Her express intention was to render this language somewhat indecipherable for the viewer, although she says that “with careful reading,” or rather listening, the viewers/listeners might be able to understand it.

Staying with the question of Englishes a little longer, van Harskamp’s use of this new pidgin

in *PDGN* brings to mind another theatrical conceit famously employed by the Irish playwright Brian Friel in his landmark play *Translations* (1980): even though all the characters in the play appear to speak in English onstage, the audience is asked to imagine that the Irish characters are speaking in Irish among themselves. A classic of postcolonial theater, the play refers primarily to the translations of toponyms, or place-names. The events in the play are set in nineteenth-century Ireland under British colonial rule, a time when the Ordnance Survey was being carried out to standardize Irish maps, mainly through the Anglicization of place names, and when the famous Stanley Letter of 1831 initiated changes in the educational system that led to the institutionalization of English as the language of school instruction.<sup>4</sup> All this while the specter of the Great Famine (1845–49) lurked in the shadows. It is therefore not surprising that *Translations* became an intertext in *My Name Is Language*, van Harskamp’s third piece in the extended Englishes series, when it was staged at the Project Arts Centre, Dublin, in 2018. The question of names, specifically their untranslatable nature across languages, is also taken up in all versions of *My Name Is Language*, titled *Mein Name ist Sprache* when it was staged in

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<sup>4</sup> This letter written by Edward Stanley, then Chief Secretary of Ireland, addressed to the UK government would become the foundational document for the national school system in Ireland.

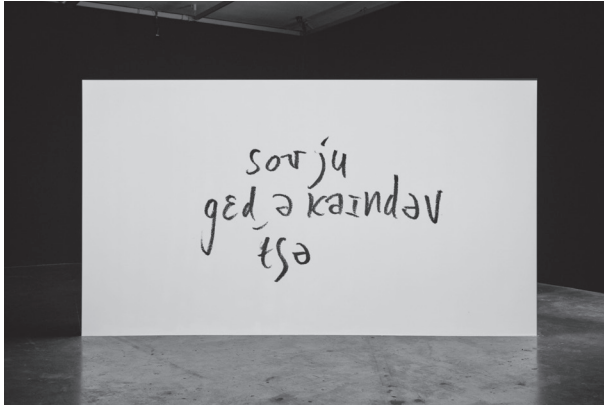
Graz and Oberhausen, and *Mijn Naam is Taal* in its Antwerp and Amsterdam renditions.

So much for Englishes. Two other interrelated aspects of van Harskamp's performance installations and videos that deserve extended attention are first, her singular emphasis on voice, and second, the ideas of distortion and incomprehension. These are also important strands in my own ongoing work on global Englishes. In fact, I would suggest that how we think about these two vectors of operation of a language might have profound ethical and political implications for conceptualizing the present and future of Englishes. "In my video works and staged works, the spoken word, i.e., embodied language, is a medium and a central topic," van Harskamp writes in her notes. As a complement to this act of speaking, one critic has rightly identified "a careful forensics of listening" in her practice.<sup>5</sup> I would venture further and read the artist's foregrounding of a non-textual mode in her work as symptomatic of a new and interesting shift in the ways in which we are used to thinking about global Englishes. But first a telegraphic description of the current scholarly situation on the topic: the

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5 Nicoline van Harskamp, interview by Skye Arundhati Thomas, *Studio International*, August 3, 2019, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/nicoline-van-harskamp-interview-thinking-about-names-as-languages>.

discourse of global English, predominantly thought of in the singular, has been primarily situated within two disciplinary formations: linguistics, and English and comparative literature. While the linguistic approaches, and van Harskamp has engaged with many of them during the course of her own research, have occasionally focused on the spoken aspects of global English, scholars of literature have mostly directed their attention to its literary, and hence mostly written manifestations. The latter impulse has led to extensive academic focus on a single genre: prose fiction or the novel in English from most of the world, mediated by prestigious literary prizes and festivals. While other genres like poetry or drama have recently started receiving increasing scholarly attention, prevalent ideas and insights about this linguistic-cultural formation that goes by the name of global English have been largely generated on the basis of the production, circulation, and reception of the global (novel in) English. Instead I would argue that we can gather a more representative, and dare I say egalitarian sense of the lives of global Englishes, now necessarily plural, from directing our attention to the soundscape of these languages, to their use in everyday life, to their production, circulation, and reception in and as performance. This, I believe, is the burden of Englishes in van Harskamp's work.



The succinct version of the assumption behind my argument is that English circulates more widely in the world in its *spoken* and *heard* avatars than in its *read* or *written* manifestations. In other words, the number of people who use English for official work or listen to English news bulletins for instance, are significantly more than those who are able to read novels in the language. Even if this sounds commonsensical, it is still only a conjecture at present and needs to be backed up by empirical research. But to mark this shift in and simultaneous expansion of the domain of global Englishes, we could start by asking some direct questions related to the knowledge of and access to the language in the first place: Who speaks English in most of the world? Who has the opportunity to learn English and under what circumstances?

Where do most people come across English? What purpose does English serve for most people with varying degrees of proficiency in the language beyond promising the ability to read novels or watch films? (It should, of course, be obvious that “non-native speakers” are not a homogenous group.) And then there is the matter of accents: Which pronunciations of English are widely heard and in which situations? Which accents secure someone a job interview or enable them to access a helpline in a crisis? Whose English is considered “difficult to understand,” which accent outs someone as a misfit, sets them up for discrimination? Which accents sound suspicious, trigger secondary screenings at border checkpoints, warrant demands for “documents”? These questions are not exhaustive, merely an inventory of possible ways to direct our inquiries. In van Harskamp’s work, for instance, many of the voices we hear belong to national minorities or groups of recently arrived immigrants who have learned to speak the language, often under duress. As has been well documented, that English, particularly in societies that have experienced British colonial rule, functions as a language of power and upward mobility. What has perhaps been less examined are the various vibrant circuits of English beyond the production and circulation of texts, especially those of literary fiction written in the language. This situation also holds true for how

we have come to understand the act of translation, another significant practice for van Harskamp's work, as primarily a textual transaction. Efforts to imagine a transmedia concept of translation that does not only privilege writing resonate with what I am trying to argue here about the extra-textual manifestations of Englishes. In spite of years of efforts by scholars and writers to counter dominant notions of translation and "English" (or "French" or "Hindi" or "Arabic") and dispel the cult of the authentic and the original, the idea that there is a pristine version of a text or artwork or music or language that will always be better and truer than every rendition or variation that came afterward.

Perhaps this is a good place to add a disclaimer that even though I am presently making a case for reframing the study of Englishes, I firmly believe that the prospect of a monolingual world—be it in English or Mandarin or Spanish—is neither just nor interesting. I am only trying to point toward an arena of thought and practice that appears to have received insufficient attention from scholarly positions that either generalize about the status of English on the basis of primarily studying prose fiction or argue for a rejection of English because it threatens to overshadow the spread of most other languages. My contention about a shift from the mostly read/

written to the largely spoken/heard paradigms of English is not framed as an opposition but rather as a supplementary gesture; a move that could allow this discussion of global Englishes to take on board a range of popular cultural forms (like stand-up comedy or an international television series), or bring together practices of everyday life of people wherever English is spoken in the world (think call-center workers or immigrant caregivers). I should also mention that there is an excellent body of work to draw upon in this endeavor, from Walter Ong's work on orality and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's notion of "orature" to the extensive literature on spoken word, rap, and hip-hop cultures that have focused on the sonic and oral dimensions of languages in general but also Englishes in particular.<sup>6</sup> A recent example from the American public sphere of what I have in mind when I am talking about focusing on the politics of Englishes in this expanded sense, for instance, has to do with the practice of white actors voicing nonwhite or mixed-race characters in popular American television shows like *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, and *Central*

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6 See, for instance, Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982); Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); and Tricia Rose's pathbreaking book *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

*Park*.<sup>7</sup> Often these portrayals of the only nonwhite character in the show would play up pernicious identity stereotypes primarily through the depiction of their supposed accents. After years of criticism and skepticism directed toward this problematic casting dynamic, it was only in the past few months that this conversation became prominent enough to prompt some of the actors to step down from their roles and highlight the structural inequities in the industry.

Talking about her conception of the medium of her work, van Harskamp says: “In *PDGN* a future language based on English is largely opaque. The characters explain something about themselves to each other, not to the public. The public has the task to relate to them and learn to identify them. Opacity forces the dominant culture to do what Glissant calls the experience of relationship, an experience of kinship.” The apparent inscrutability of these link-Englishes from the future, the artist claims, exhorts the audience and the viewer to do some “careful reading” in the interest of forming a relationship. Glissant, of course, offers a brilliant way to think about such a poetics and politics of relation and I would come back to

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7 See Sonia Rao, “‘The Simpsons’ and ‘Big Mouth’ Are Recasting Nonwhite Roles. But It’s about More Than Finding the Right Voices,” *Washington Post*, July 2, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2020/07/02/the-simpsons-jenny-slate-voice-actors-recast/>.

him in closing. But what happens if a work of fiction stages an encounter with incomprehension?<sup>8</sup> What transpires when the audience is unable to “read” the language being staged? Thinking about these questions will take us beyond the domain of Englishes and toward the ethics and politics of translation. A few years ago, I had the opportunity to have a conversation with Raqs Media Collective about their artistic practice just before the opening of their new work at the 2015 Venice Biennale. We talked about the place of translation in their aesthetic inventory and how they thought about the ways in which a viewer might approach the experience of incomprehension that is sometimes staged in their work. Talking about *The Translator’s Silence* (2012), a luminous takeaway piece with contiguous, fragments of poetry in Urdu, Bengali, and English from three famous South Asian poets, they said: “When people ask us ‘How am I supposed to know what the other languages are saying?’, our response is always, ‘Find someone who can read it for you.’”<sup>9</sup> The experience of incomprehension here becomes an occasion

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8 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

9 See Raqs Media Collective, interview with Avishek Ganguly, “Invoking the Translator: A Conversation with Raqs Media Collective,” *Public Books*, January 8, 2016, <https://www.publicbooks.org/invoking-the-translator-a-conversation-with-raqs-media-collective/>.

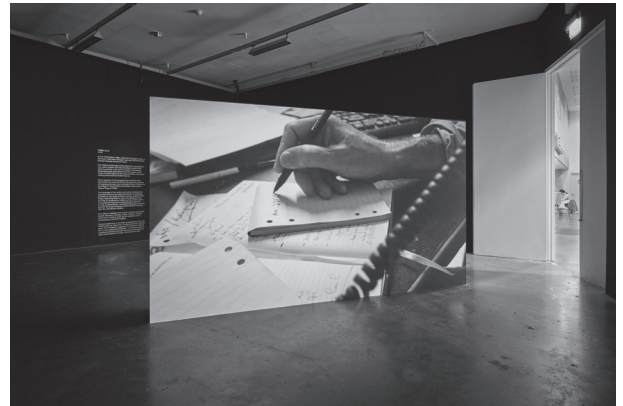


for companionship, an open-ended invitation to the stranger. In the “waiting rooms” of *My Name Is Language*, in which over a dozen languages are used during a single performance, a lack of complete comprehension is a given. When van Harskamp’s work stages incomprehension in its use of a language that is “best imaginable instead of [being] the most likely future scenario,” it offers an invitation to listen better, it provides an almost playful exercise to train the ears of the audience to unfamiliar sounds and phrases. Writing about the encounter with incomprehension in the act of translation a couple of decades earlier, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak had described it like this: “The experience of contained alterity in an unknown language spoken in a different cultural milieu is uncanny.”<sup>10</sup> When Spivak uses the word “uncanny” to describe the “determining experience” encompassed by an unknown language, its otherness, she emphasizes its German sense of being *das unheimlich* (the unhomely) as it was used by Freud, the meaning of which does not entirely come across in the English translation. Do the distorters in action in the language in *PDGN*, borrowed in some cases from feminist speculative fiction, un-home “Standard English”? The experience of the limits of one’s knowledge and comprehension faced with the unfamiliar is

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10 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Politics of Translation,” in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 181.

usually alienating and unfamiliar—uncanny even—for speakers of a dominant language who are used to “getting it,” used to understanding things. But in Spivak’s deconstructive practice, this experience of the impossible must become an occasion for the ethical. It is possible, indeed desirable, to approach such an experience with humility, even self-effacement. That is the challenge for the hegemonic monolingual speaker of a dominant language; not an occasion to resent and recoil at the limits of one’s comprehension but to learn to respond to an invitation to be ethical, to remain intended toward the other.<sup>11</sup>



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11 This is a recurrent notion in Spivak’s extensive body of work but for a quick reference, see her essay “Imperatives to Re-imagine the Planet,” in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

Nicoline van Harskamp's body of work lets us ponder all of these questions about the workings of language, about Englishes specifically but not exclusively, in the contemporary world. My discussion of staging incomprehension in a work of fiction was specifically provoked by the artist's use of distorters to imagine a new, utopian future English. Van Harskamp mentions the detailed research she has done—with linguists, computer scientists, and performers as well as various speakers of nonstandard English—to come up with the list of distorters to generate the script for *PDGN*. However, I would like to end by posing a somewhat bold question that I am confident van Harskamp's practice can take on board: What if we let go of the idea of distortion entirely when it comes to imagining future Englishes? Perhaps the idea of a "distorted English" risks echoing unflattering earlier nomenclatures like "broken English" and unintentionally ends up reinforcing the binaries between "standard" and "nonstandard" Englishes? The notion of distortion seems to me to carry a charge of disfigurement of what is presumably the acceptable, the standard, the dominant. It may be that van Harskamp, given her anarchist political sympathies, has a different resonance in mind? Either way, the aesthetic proposal that she advances in her work helps us imagine a future with English in a minor key, if you will. That could move us closer to creolization. As Glissant

observes, "There is one thing we can be sure of: a lingua franca (humanistic French, Anglo-American sabir, or Esperanto code) is always apoetical."<sup>12</sup> By eschewing a desire for a lost and therefore recoverable universal language evident even in the inheritance of Esperanto or the International Phonetic Alphabet for instance—or in the perpetual search of a hallowed "original" of a translation, a desire shaped by a specifically Judeo-Christian origin myth of Babel that equates multiplicity of languages with confusion and unintelligibility—we are offered a glimpse of a future poesis where English is not only not dominant but is also made, unmade, and remade every day. A future about which I will let Spivak, via Glissant, have the last word: "Creolity assumes imperfection, even as it assures the survival of a rough future."<sup>13</sup> A "rough future" is what I would like to envision for global Englishes.

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12 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 112.

13 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "World Systems and the Creole," *Narrative* 14, no. 1 (January 2016): 110.