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Struggling with words in a quest for a gender-free identity: Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* in Greek

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Abstract

A journey of self-exploration while traversing a trajectory of identities lies at the core of Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015). Through this experimental hybrid book, a fusion of autobiographical writing with theoretical intertextual fragments, or what Nelson herself calls *autotheory*, readers are invited to navigate a queer world in which real characters explore how to live through redefining gender. *The Argonauts* was translated in Greek by Maria Fakinou (2020). Given Nelson sheds light on the performative construction of gender, sex(uality), and identity pointing to the signifying and transformative powers of language, this article discusses linguistic configurations of gender in English and Greek, aiming at exploring strategies for applying gender-inclusive language. By adopting a humanizing and translator-centred approach (Pym 1998, 2009; Baker 2000; Kaindl et al. 2021), this paper positions Fakinou in the centre of translation focusing on her voice and views that have affected her choices while addressing the challenge of rendering gender-unmarked terms in Greek. Drawing on epitexts, mainly on an interview given by Fakinou, this study shows that translation and translators can question and resist dominant policies, practices and attitudes, promoting polyvocality and countering the silencing of marginalized voices, thus revealing their capacity for effecting social transformation.

1. Introduction

Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015) is about an adventurous journey of self-discovery and change. It is a book that defies easy classification as it can be seen as a fragmented novel, a memoir, a gender treatise, a philosophical manifesto, etc. Nelson herself defines it as *autotheory*; that is, an encounter between first person narration and theory as an established body of contemporary academic thought.[1] Similarly to Ovid's multiple narratives of transformation in an ever-shifting world, Nelson also proffers manifold motifs of flux as a means to represent her world in which transitioning, partnership, motherhood, parenting and family dominate. Nelson calls for more inclusive and expansive definitions for all these terms, while inviting readers to her self-reflection voyage through the polymorphous waves of her unconventional, queer life.

In short, *The Argonauts* is the story of the author and her love(r), Harry Dodge. They fall for each other, get married and have a baby boy. Nevertheless, it is not the typical love story of two people falling in love and making a family. For, theirs is a queer love story and their family is queer. It is at the same time a story about two humans experiencing transformations—physical, emotional, spiritual and mental ones. In a nutshell, *The Argonauts* is about Nelson's pregnancy with her first child, Iggy (she gets pregnant using IVF), and Dodge's concurrent transition from female to male (he has top surgery and starts taking testosterone). However, his "transitioning" is not easy to explain, as Nelson (2015, 54) underlines, because for Dodge "who is happy to identify as a butch on T [testosterone] … it doesn't mean leaving one gender entirely behind." Their reality is as fluid as their becomingness is with Nelson (2015, 81) drawing readers' attention to this fluctuation:

> On the surface, it may have seemed as though your body was becoming more and more "male," mine more and more "female." But that's not how it felt on the inside. On the inside, we were two human animals undergoing transformations beside each other, bearing each other loose witness.

She embraces the looseness of identity, constant metamorphosis and the limitless possibility of change. This is apparent even from the title

[1] In an interview with Jennifer Doerr, Nelson says: "I basically stole it [the term] from Beatriz Preciado's book called *Testo Junkie*. I think she's using it … from a longer tradition, probably stemming from feminism in the '70s, [as] a kind of shorthand for theoretical inquiry that uses the self as some kind of ethnography, an ethnographic source. It just seemed convenient" (Doerr 2015).

of the book which clearly refers to the sailors of the ship Argo,[2] cited by Roland Barthes as the subject of Theseus' paradox—that is, the ship is rebuilt entirely from new parts but nonetheless keeps its original name. Barthes (1977, 114) invokes the *Argo* in a discussion about how lovers communicate:

> Like the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name, the subject in love will perform a long task through the course of one and the same exclamation … the very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new, thereby creating an unheard-of speech in which the sign's form is repeated but never is signified.

These three simple words (I love you)—a subject, a verb and an object—are reflective not only of humans' need for love but also of their reliance on language. Nelson's reference to Barthes is her way to cast light on the paradox of selfhood—the "I" is liable to constant change: "we develop, even in utero, in response to a flow of projections and reflections ricocheting off us. Eventually, we call that snowball a self (*Argo*)" (2015, 91). A paradox, Nelson (2011, 268) writes, "signals the possibility—and sometimes the arrival—of a third term into a situation that otherwise appeared to consist of but two opposing forces."

Deeply personal, this polyphonic, conversational, and confessional novel, laced with italicized statements by other writers, reflects Nelson's study of the meaning of gender, queer(ness), love with a focus on the transformative power of language because it is through language that the perception of heterosexual love and identity is embedded within the practices and structures of society. Assumptions are institutionalized as the only, "natural" way of living, while all other aspects such as transgender, gay, or lesbian relationships are understood as a dissenting approach to life, one transcending the conventional, prevalent heteronormative mentality and stance which Nelson contests as they are intimately related to the patriarchal, androcentric nature of society. She thus raises the issue of providing proper identities and using the right language to deconstruct the heterosexual imaginary and disrupt the hegemonic binary world-view. For, as Nick Enfield (2000, 16) stresses,

[2] Jason was son of Aison, the king of Iolkos, Thessaly, whose half-brother, Pelias, usurped the throne. When Jason demanded his rightful inheritance, Pelias sent him on what was thought to be an impossible deed and probably fatal expedition—to bring the fabled Golden Fleece back to Iolkos. Goddess Athena helped Jason by having the great craftsman Argo build a strong fast boat to take the hero across the seas to Kolchis. The ship was named after its maker and it could carry 50 oarsmen [the Argonauts].

it is difficult to "isolate anything cognitive or cultural which is not already imbued with language at a profound level."

What happens then when Nelson's text is translated and recontextualized? Could language, namely, the choices made by translators alter the vision readers hold of the social-cultural world? Could they escape the gender binary through language and translation? To answer these, among other questions, the present study draws on the translation of Nelson's book in Greek and on the translator, Maria Fakinou. Focussing on epitexts, and mainly on the interview Fakinou gave to the author of this paper, and relying on the translator's approach to translation and views on the issue of gender and language, it shall present several translation examples with an emphasis on (pro)nominal linguistic configurations of gender in English and Greek, aiming at exploring linguistic strategies for tackling gender discrimination in and through language.

Translators are key agents in decision- and meaning-making and their subjectivity, creativity and authority play a cardinal role in the translation process as evidenced by research (Woods 2006, 2011; Paloposki 2009, 2017; Munday 2013, 2014, 2016; Guzmán 2012, 2013; Kolb 2013; Karpinski 2015; Kujamäki 2018, among others). To this end, by adopting a humanizing and translator-centred approach (Pym 1998, 2009; Baker 2000; Kaindl et al. 2021), this paper puts Maria Fakinou in the center of the process of translating *The Argonauts* in Greek, throwing light on her actions and views that have determined her choices, especially those related to gendered language use. My intention is not to provide a translator's biography; rather, my focus is on seeing through Fakinou's eyes in order to understand the subjectivity of translatorial action and the diverse forces that shape the subject and the decisions made. Fakinou is not merely one of the most recognized contemporary translators and writers in Greece; she is also a woman, a reader, a friend, a daughter, and many more.

Fakinou is thus perceived and studied as a person, as an individual against a certain social and cultural background, being subject to contextual and situational constraints (Kaindl 2021, 11). In this context, and firmly believing in the role of paratextual[3] materials in revealing

[3] Following Gérard Genette (1997), paratexts consist of 'peritexts', the prefaces, forewords, dedications, introductory notes, etc. that surround the book, and 'epitexts', the reviews, commentaries, interviews, etc. about the text following its publication. Paratexts exert influence on the target audience while extending the text, fulfilling thus a metatextual function. In this vein, my use of the concept follows the definition offered by Kathryn Batchelor, who examines paratexts

important information about the translated text, I interviewed Fakinou. By asking her to reflect and report on her work, share ideas, thoughts and feelings in retrospect with regard to this translation project, her voice is allowed to be heard. Voice is related to translators' certain stylistic characteristics, specific values or to their positioning with regard to the source text (Kaindl 2021, 21) and can be applied to paratextual elements and translated texts themselves (Hermans 1996, 27). Inevitably, a translator's voice is related to the attitude (Hermans 2007) they adopt and they convey in the translated narrative influenced by their own experience(s), ideology/-ies, and ethics, among others. Several examples discussed below, reflective of Fakinou's paratextual and textual voice, demonstrate the power of both translators and translation to contest the hegemonic heterosexual language which excludes other forms of expression relying on the dominant male-and-female-only culture.

2. *The Argonauts'* translational voyage across the Greek waters

The Argonauts was published in Greek in 2020 by Antipodes Publications, a publishing house founded in 2014 with the aim of promoting new, emerging voices (Spatharakis 2024). It was translated by Fakinou, a well-known Greek translator and writer whose short story *A Daughter's Anatomy* also deals with gendered identities and the ways these affect the relationships people, and especially women, form with others. The translation of Nelson's book came out in a period characterized by the #Greek MeToo movement with the broader political and social climate favouring change in Greek society (Misiou 2023, 8). 2020 was also the year when the first queer liberation march took place in Athens and the year the Queer Archive Festival was founded.

When Fakinou's translation saw its second publication in 2021, Édouard Louis's *Combats et métamorphoses d'une femme* (2021) was translated in Greek and published by Antipodes Publications again. That year was marked by other noteworthy events too: the first openly queer novel to become a best-seller in Greece, Sam Albatros's *Defective Boy*, was published (Hestia Publishers); Evá Papadakis made their debut with the poetry collection *meraklina|koukibiberissa|obladi* (Stigmos Publications) aiming at "revolutionis[ing] tradition and fram[ing] society's

in relation to translation, and describes paratext as a "consciously crafted threshold for a text which has the potential to influence the way(s) in which the text is received" (2018, 142). Interviewing Fakinou and allowing for her voice to be heard may affect the ways Nelson's book is read in its Greek translation. For more information on the relationship between translation and paratexts see, among others, Pellatt (2013) and Tahir-Gürçağlar (2002, 2011).

response to current gender, equality, inclusion, and belonging narratives by re-shaping collective memory" (https://www.evapapadakis.com/work); and AUThors, a group of students from Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, held the first Greek Feminist and Queer Literature Contest and published a collection of the works awarded. Additionally, the first Festival of Queer Approaches was held in the city of Xanthi, and Μπαταρία (bataría) [battery], a small publishing group, was founded in Athens envisaging to support the publication of works produced by queer writers and other marginalized groups. *The Argonauts* was thus translated and published in Greece in a context of public discussions about human rights and equality in the public sphere which seemed to espouse the need to effect change towards diversity and inclusivity.

During our phone interview, Kostas Spatharakis (2024), publisher of Antipodes, noted that it took them more than a year to get the rights to translate *The Argonauts* into Greek. They were determined to succeed in the negotiations as they truly wanted to introduce the target readership to Nelson and this work in particular (Spatharakis 2024). *The Argonauts* "is not a radical book; it is a contemporary classic work. Yet, given other Greek publishers do not publish such books, it is we who will keep doing it" (ibid.), Spatharakis (2024) said, clearly alluding to the largely conservative Greek market. Despite the success of the translation and its two publications within a year, he (ibid.) stressed that sales were not as expected and one would not see the book in mainstream newspapers." Spatharakis (2024) did, however, share their optimistic view of Greek society noting that "more time is needed and careful steps need to be taken for the publishing industry in Greece to be educated and prompt more people into action for diversity and inclusion." As emphasized, the publishing industry, and by extension writers and translators, "enter a dialogical relationship with readers who are nowadays more gender aware asking for more gender-informed practices and policies" (Spatharakis 2024). Therefore, the Greek publishing-scape, "a gendered, conservative one" in the words of Spatharakis (2024), needs to be transformed. In this context, what was of importance to the publisher with regard to the translation of Nelson's book was their treatment of language. Sharing with Fakinou a common view of language and its impact on areas in which it plays a pivotal role, they "decided to defy standard frameworks, wishing to show that language is inevitably political being endowed with the resonances of certain ideologies and their normative perspectives on people's life" (Spatharakis 2024). To this end, a writer and an academic well versed in the politics of language, both members of the Greek LGBTQIA+ community, offered their help when contacted by Spatharakis (2024).

The visibility of individuals whose identity does not fall within the binary category of men and women had started to increase in Greece

when the translation of Nelson's book came out, with discussions revolving around our not being "a" gender, but our having/becoming one. The presence of a genderqueer character in the novel and the creation of a queer family shapes readers' encounter with the possibility of intervening in their construction as gendered subjects—the possibility of their acting as "human constructors," to use the term employed by Judith Butler (1990, 12), against that construction. This certainly strikes readers living in contexts where normative heterosexuality dominates and who are asked to test their own assumptions about gender and sex(uality) repeatedly through the questions raised by Nelson, while she embraces the simultaneous adequacy and weakness of language to make sense of herself and the world around her.

Language reinforces stereotypes and perpetuates misguided notions relating to individuals and their gender, sexuality, identity and experiences, shaping beliefs and ideas in subtle ways. It is in language and through language that fights for the representation of the existence and resistance of LGBTQIA+ people can be materialized. In the context that emerged in Greece, as delineated above, there was marked interest in the use of strategies to linguistically include all genders or neutralize any gender references, as evinced by events on language, gender and translation taking place for the first time in the country (i.e. the #5 Translation Meetup on "Translation, Language, Gender and Feminism," part of the Translation Month project of the Athens 2018 World Book Capital programme). To translate employing gender-neutral and gender-inclusive language is notably challenging for translators in Greek, as "grammatical gender is an integral part of the language system, pertaining to all nouns, articles (definite and indefinite), pronouns, participles, adjectives, and certain numerals" (Pavlidou 2003, 177). Gender is inflected in the singular and plural, in all cases. Nouns fall into three inflectional paradigms or declensions, namely masculine, feminine and neuter and they "may be assigned to specific genders according to semantic, morphological and phonological rules" (Alvanoudi 2015, 1). What then was Fakinou's response to Nelson's use of gender-neutral language? How did she deal with the translation of trans and non-binary characters in the book? What was her telos?

3. Rethinking gender while translating gender indeterminacy

The Argonauts engages profoundly with gender issues and multivalent perceptions of identity, addressed by Nelson through the use of new writing styles and forms and deviating from phallocentric textual conventions. Through its portrayal of the confrontations faced by the protagonists with societal norms and gender expectations, the book urges readers to reflect on the constraints of gender and identity

representation in language. How did Fakinou tackle the challenges posed by a gendered language such as Greek? Did she avoid the use of gendered discourse? How?

During our phone interview, Fakinou (2024) argued that this book "shook her to her core. Her whole universe was rocked. Nelson's writing deeply affected her own writing and translating style." She therefore drew attention to the merging identities of translator, author, and reader while asserting she "had become one with the text" (Fakinou 2024). Also, importantly enough, Fakinou (2024) highlighted that "while translating *The Argonauts* she found herself confronted with her very own language upbringing, ofttimes questioning and opposing it." Fakinou came to the realisation that she had to go against the language she was taught to use while examining, just like Nelson, whether language can keep up with the ways we live. As pointed out by Fakinou (2024), she actively engaged in a mental conversation with Nelson throughout the translation process and before finalizing decisions. It is interesting, therefore, to explore how Fakinou responds to Nelson's alluring and intriguing use of language, which, as she publicly admitted,[4] it had been one of the main challenges she was called to handle.

This yearning for a language that does not discriminate and includes all readers in a fair fashion, that is a bias-free language which does not lead to misinterpreted communication reminds us also of Walter Benjamin and his seminal work "The Task of the Translator," in which he (1968,74) suggests that translation ought to strive towards what he calls "pure language." Drawing from Benjamin (1968, 74), can the "hidden meaning" of words reveal itself through translation? Can Fakinou render meaning which is "in a constant state of flux" (Benjamin 1968, 74)? Nelson's language allows herself, Dodge and all genderqueer individuals to speak freely outside of the codes created in society by men for men. What language has Fakinou used after all? How did she address the polymorphous challenges to gender representation during the translation process? As this study shows and based on Fakinou's views shared during the interview, she writes herself into the text by deliberately genderhandling[5] it. This approach enables her to embrace uneasiness in her

[4] Being one of the main speakers in the event "How does queer translate into Greek?" held by PEEMPIP (Panhellenic Association of Professional Translators Graduates of the Ionian University) at the Thessaloniki International Book Fair, in May 2023, Fakinou commented on her struggle with words in her attempt to use inclusive language while translating *The Argonauts*.

[5] Informed by Barbara Godard's (1989, 45) concept of *womanhandling* a text, where women write "their way into subjective agency," I have

attempt to deconstruct rigid gender divisions and identities and call readers to resist conforming to established language use inextricably linked to Greek male-dominated society.

3.1. Advocating for gender diversity

Throughout the text, Nelson employs and refers to gender related and gender diverse terms—butch, boi, cisgendered, andro-fag, queer(s), lesbian, gay, transgender(ed), trans, faggot(s), dykes, among others—while asking in an assertive tone early in the text: "How can words not be enough?" (2015, 13). Even to correct the person who misgenders other persons is not feasible, she notes, because the words are not good enough. The solution, suggests Nelson (2015, 13-14), "is not to introduce new words (boi, cisgendered, andro-fag) and then try to reify their meanings (though there is power here) … One must also become alert to the multitude of possible uses, possible contexts, the wings with which each word can fly." Therefore, Nelson (2015, 106) would rather "refuse terms" in "the menacing pressure to take sides" that do not do justice to a genderqueer person like Dodge. And this is a view endorsed by Fakinou as well, considering her approach to translating these terms and her comment on the choices she made. As she (Fakinou 2024) revealed during our phone interview, she decided not to translate gender diversity terms but rather introduce the wider Greek readership to their original form. Thus, readers encounter in the Greek text terms such as boi, cisgendered, andro-fag, butch (Nelson 2020, 16), cis (74), and genderqueer (42) which are simply reproduced. At the same time, they find the translation of terms such as lesbian—rendered as λεσβία (lesvía) (79; also in other pages throughout the book), transgender(ed)—rendered as διεμφυλικός (diemfylikós), a neologism in Greek, and fag(s) and faggot(s)—translated into αδερφές (aderfés) [sissies]. Last but not least, Fakinou offers the transliteration of terms such as gay (γκέι), trans (τρανς) and queer (κουήρ) which have been borrowed into Greek.

When invited to comment on these renderings, Fakinou emphasized that her choices are the result of extensive research carried out. She "read articles and visited all Greek websites the content of which is related to the LGBTQIA+ community, as well as she contacted members of the said community asking them about their preferences" (Fakinou 2024). Following this research, it became clear that most words are introduced in their original form to Greek and are not translated, and this is how LGBTQIA+ individuals use them. Additionally, Fakinou (2024) believes that she would

proposed the concept of *genderhandling* a translation (Misiou 2023, 11), i.e. pointing to the translator's conscious agenda or strategy while exerting their subjectivity and authorial presence in the new text.

turn "a bold, contemporary text into a conservative one" thus "betraying" its author if she attempted to translate new words such as butch into Greek. In this case, she would probably feel the need to insert a footnote to provide further information only to make readers say at the end "Oh, it means butch. Ok" (Fakinou 2024). Something which was not at all "desirable" by her as a translator and as a reader. When asked her opinion on the dominance of English gender-related terminology and on its leaving or not room for other, alternative terminologies to emerge and bloom, Fakinou (2024) pointed out her use of the neologism διεμφυλικός which has been established and it is used in all kinds of texts. Hence, even if translations and translators may frequently opt for the universal, this does not mean that local vocabularies cannot resist linguistic imperialism and form new terms whose meaning stems directly from the original term (Fakinou 2024). Regarding the rendering of the two terms fag(s) and faggot(s) as αδερφές and her choice to use just one term in Greek, Fakinou (2024) claimed that she could have used πούστη(δε)ς for faggot(s) but she did not want it to sound too harsh. The Greek word πούστης/πούστηδες (poústisSING./poústidesPLUR.) is very derogatory and used as "a tool of oppression and conformity" (Kalovyrnas 2021, 397), originally being used to refer to a male prostitute. Nowadays, it means "faggot" and it is one of the words most often used in Greece to refer disdainfully to homosexual men. Fakinou (2024) also expressly stated her wish to draw readers' attention to terms that can be reappropriated and reclaimed while denuding them of their negative connotations.

3.2. Gender-inclusive language: A translator's tantalizing quest

Drawing on her choice to render queer using the English loanword in its transliterated form (κουήρ), Fakinou was asked whether the term was of concern to her when it was encountered as an adjective or noun. Adjectives in Greek have gender, number and case and they must agree in number, gender, and case with the noun they modify. Thus every adjective has all five cases (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, vocative), two numbers (singular and plural), and all three genders. Likewise, nouns are marked for gender, case and number and they are accompanied by articles which show agreement with the noun they specify. For instance, when Nelson (2015, 28) refers to the time when they "called 411 and asked for the name of a wedding chapel in West Hollywood," she hears a voice asking, "isn't that where the queers are?". In the translated text, readers encounter the normative masculine form of the participle μαζεμένοι (mazeméni) [gathered] and the nominative masculine plural form of the adjective όλος (ólos) [all]: "εκεί δεν είναι μαζεμένοι όλοι οι κουήρ;" (38-39) [isn't that where all the queers are gathered?]. But, "all" means everyone, the whole of something,

it emphasizes completeness or entirety. Fakinou has complied with the grammatical rule which asks for the masculine grammatical gender to be used for generic reference in Greek as in other Indo-European languages. A Greek-speaking language user could perceive the use of όλοι and μαζεμένοι in the example cited above as referring to human beings in the general sense [άνθρωποι (ánthropoiNOM.MASC.PLUR.) in Greek]. However, the generic use of the masculine gender is linked to "a metonymic cognitive model that incorporates the sociocultural stereotype of man with the category of human/universal" (Alvanoudi 2015, 9) and, having witnessed other strategies used by Fakinou towards gender inclusivity in her translation (discussed below), it was almost certain that this was not a lightly made decision.

As she (Fakinou 2024) stressed during the interview, if she "were to translate this sentence now, she would definitely opt for alternative solutions, such as τα κουήρ άτομα (ta kouír átoma) [the queer personsNOM.NEUT.PLUR.] or τα κουήρια (ta kouíria) [the queersNOM.NEUT.PLUR.], a neologism noun formed in the neuter gender in the plural number. Back then, Fakinou (2024) highlighted, she avoided the use of τα κουήρ άτομα also because she does "not like the word άτομα." This does not mean though that she did not wish to question the dominance of generic masculine forms prevalent in Greek. On the contrary, she (ibid.) had "consciously decided to try to resist the generic male nouns, adjectives, pronouns, etc." This example demonstrates how difficult it is even for a gender-conscious translator to avoid the use of gender marked language when nurtured in a grammatical gender language environment. If seen from the perspective of her translatorial self which is interlaced with the professional self, this choice of Fakinou also reflects the "interactions, events and developments, which span a person's entire life" (Kaindl 2021, 16) shaping their subjectivity and the decisions made.

Quite importantly, Fakinou's response is revealing of the changes witnessed in Greek language and in society. In 2020, there were far less people using the neuter to refer to genderqueer individuals and/or to employ the use of terms such as τα κουήρια. Regarding the use of neuter with generic and abstract reference there has been strong opposition to its use from many LGBTQIA+ members (and the same holds true for the term τα άτομα) because the neuter form is mostly used when the noun or adjective refers to or describes an abstract concept, an inanimate object rather than a person. Additionally, neuter in Greek is used as diminutive. However, diminutives do not merely denote smallness. Also called hypocoristics from the ancient Greek verb ὑποκορίζεσθαι (hypokorizesthai), that is to call by pet names, or to call by endearing names, such formations can "express a whole range of emotional attitudes—endearment, playfulness, jocularity, familiarity, and contempt" (Palmer 1961, 77). For these reasons, language users have not favoured the use of neuter

viewing it as a dehumanizing strategy. Nevertheless, there has been a change regarding its use over the last four years in people's attempt to use non-gender discriminatory language. Neuter is also now encountered in daily newspapers when there is news about non-binary individuals. A most recent example is the reference made by mainstream daily Greek newspapers (Kathimerini, To Vima, Protothema, Ta Nea, LiFO, etc.) to this year's Eurovision winner, Nemo (the first non-binary person to win the song contest), by employing the nominative and accusative neuter singular form. Consequently, despite the inconsistency still witnessed—an inconsistency that is the result of society's lack of determination to decide on strategies that will enable users to avoid the generic masculine—the growing use of the definite neuter article το [to] shows that Greek allows users to openly challenge heteronormative language practices as well as expectations and ideas of gender. And this reminds us of Nelson's (2015, 106) reference to Roland Barthes's book *The Neutral* which, as she claims, could have been her "anthem": "the *Neutral* being that which … offers novel responses: to flee, to escape, to demur, to shift or refuse terms, to disengage, to turn away." And as noted by Fakinou (2024), who is "still not that in favour of the word άτομα in Greek," she could have escaped taking sides, by availing herself of novel responses and forms employing the word τα κουήρια. Despite there not being a consensus on its use yet, it shows that language can resist and expand benefiting from its negotiable and adaptive nature.

3.3. Translating gender-neutral pronouns

Nelson uses several gender-neutral indefinite pronouns (i.e. everyone, anyone, someone, whomever) and reflexive pronouns (i.e. themselves) throughout her text inspired by Barthes and his concept of "neutral". Barthes (2005, 6) describes the "neutral" (le neutre) as that which bemuses or undoes the paradigmatic binary oppositions that create meaning in discourse and thought. To deconstruct or break free from these paradigmatic binaries that affect all aspects of society from language and identity to sexuality and politics is a gesture bound up with profound linguistic implications which is the focus of this paper. Writers and translators enter conflict when they choose one term against another, and "all conflict is generative of meaning: to choose one and refuse the other is always a sacrifice made to meaning, to produce meaning, to offer it to be consumed" (Barthes 2005, 7). Unsurprisingly, Nelson addresses this issue quite early in the text when she refers to Dodge and the start of their relationship. She became, as she (2015, 12-13) notes,

> a quick study in pronoun avoidance. The key is training your ear not to mind hearing a person's name over and over again. You must

> learn to take cover in grammatical cul-de-sacs, relax into an orgy of specificity. You must learn to tolerate an instance beyond the Two, precisely at the moment of attempting to represent a partnership—a nuptial, even. Nuptials are the opposite of a couple. There are no longer binary machines: question-answer, masculine-feminine, man-animal, etc. This could be what a conversation is—simply the outline of a becoming.

Taking the above into consideration, the way(s) Fakinou approached the translation of pronouns in Greek were studied. As can be seen from the examples below, through which Nelson refers to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's views and theory on queer, Fakinou has not used gender marked pronouns, employing instead first-person plural verbs which do not require the use of a subject and, by extension, a pronoun. Hence, "anyone's use of 'queer' about themselves" (Nelson 2015, 33) is rendered as "όταν χρησιμοποιούμε τον όρο 'κουήρ' για να μιλήσουμε για τον εαυτό μας" (Nelson 2020, 45); that is, the pronoun anyone has been replaced by the subject pronoun we which is inferred from the verb conjugation, χρησιμοποιούμε (hrisimopioúme) [we use], and is gender unspecified. Similarly, when a couple of pages later Nelson (2015, 35) refers to people asking her whether she would like to have a baby ("Whenever anyone asked me why I wanted to have a baby"), Fakinou (Nelson 2020, 50) renders anyone by using a first-person plural verb form again, ρωτούσαν (rotoúsan) [they asked], "Όποτε με ρωτούσαν γιατί ήθελα να κάνω παιδί"), thus not ascribing sex to referents nor constructing certain identities.

Nelson's avoidance of pronouns becomes conspicuous also with her use of the impersonal pronoun one. When she (2015, 12) narrates the time one of her friends offered to Google Dodge on her behalf, "to see if the Internet reveals a preferred pronoun," she (2015, 60) makes sure to clarify that she "has always sympathized with those who refuse to engage with terms that feel like more of a compromise or a distortion than an unbidden expression." Nelson does not wish to endorse terms and labels that divide up individuals forbidding them to just be, to exist without definite categorization. Interestingly enough, Fakinou (2024) herself also commented on the presence of "one" in Nelson's text underlining her decision not to translate it into κανείς [kanís, masculine indefinite pronoun], which means someone/one, and instead adopt strategies that would help her fulfil her telos, that is to linguistically include and address all. The examples below illustrate Fakinou's choice to employ first-person plural verbs that do not require overt subjects in Greek:

Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*	Maria Fakinou's translation	Back translation
For it doesn't feed or exalt any angst *one* may feel about the incapacity to express, in words, that which eludes them. (2015, 9)	Επειδή δεν τρέφει ούτε εξιδανικεύει την αγωνία που μπορεί να νιώσου*με* μπροστά στην ανικανότητα να εκφράσουμε, με λέξεις, αυτό που διαφεύγει από τις λέξεις. (Nelson 2020, 9-10)	For it doesn't feed or exalt the angst [*we*] may feel about the incapacity to express, in words, that which eludes words.
"*one* must reject the temptation to extricate *oneself* from the affair" (2015, 39)	«πρέπει να κατανικήσου*με* τον πειρασμό να αποστασιοποιηθού*με* από το ζήτημα» (2020, 107)	[*we*] must conquer the temptation to distance *ourselves* from the affair.
The pleasure of recognizing that *one* may have to undergo the same realizations, write the same notes in the margin, return to the same themes in *one*'s work, (2015, 107)	Την απόλαυση του να αναγνωρί*ζεις* ότι πρέπει ίσως να συνειδητοποιήσου*με* τα ίδια πράγματα, να γράψουμε τις ίδιες σημειώσεις στο περιθώριο, να επιστρέψουμε στα ίδια θέματα στο έργο *μας*, (2020, 161)	The pleasure that *you recognize* that we may have to realize the same things, [*we*] write the same notes in the margin, [*we*] return to the same themes in *our* work,

Fakinou has crafted naturalness by employing verb forms instead of pronouns and she has offered a text that reads fluently and convincingly in the target language, without resorting to the use of gendered terms, as has been a common practice in Greek so far. Her translatorial action as shaped, among others, by her subject(ivity) proves that translators in Greek can make use of verb forms to escape the use of gender-discriminatory language. In the last example presented above, Fakinou is seen to have utilized also the second-person singular verb αναγνωρίζεις (anaɣnorízis) [you recognize], with which anyone can identify, to render the present participle recognizing. She benefited from this verb form several times throughout the text. Having devoted lots of time to editing her translation, holding regular meetings with the editor and proofreader and discussing the translation of several terms with the two members of the LGBTQIA+ community who have assisted them, Fakinou has deliberately attempted to put aside forms that reflect patriarchal thinking reinforcing oppression.

3.4. Gendered nouns and adjectives: challenges and resistance

English provides Nelson with several gender-neutral nouns (friend, student, reader, doctor, feminist, etc.). Greek nouns, on the other hand, are classified into the three genders, as already mentioned, with translators confronting many challenges when prioritizing linguistic inclusivity. At some

point, Nelson (2015, 25) directly addresses readers: "You, reader, are alive today, reading this…". In this example, reader could be rendered in Greek as either αναγνώστη (anagnósti) [readerVOC.MASC.SING.] or αναγνώστρια (anagnóstria) [readerVOC.FEM.SING]. Typically and in compliance with the grammatical rule and the prevalence of the established masculine generics, the masculine term αναγνώστης would be used to refer to reader(s) in general. Nevertheless, Fakinou (Nelson 2020, 33) opted for the second-person plural form of the verb to read (διαβάζω) accompanied by the second-person plural pronoun εσείς (esís) [you] to address all members of the target readership. The sentence thus in Greek reads as: Εσείς που διαβάζετε τώρα αυτό το βιβλίο ζείτε σήμερα… [You who read now this book, you live today…].

Another term upon which Fakinou remarked during the interview was that of doctor. In Greek, the equivalent term is denoted by a noun of common gender γιατρός {η γιατρός (i ɣiatrós) [the.NOM.FEM.doctor] and ο γιατρός (o ɣiatrós) [the.NOM.MASC.doctor]}. When Fakinou first encountered the term doctor in the sentence "I asked the doctor rolling the sticky ultrasound shaft over my belly for seemingly the thousandth time" (Nelson 2015, 89), she (Fakinou 2024) "immediately translated it as τον γιατρό [the.ACCUS.MASC.doctor] without questioning her choice." However, in the sentence that follows suit, it becomes clear that the doctor is a woman as Nelson (2015, 89) refers to her with the pronoun she: "Well, most mothers want to know as much as possible about the condition of their babies, she said, avoiding my eyes." The moment Fakinou read the feminine pronoun, she (2024) was "shocked to realize that she had reproduced the prevailing stereotype that doctors are men." A stereotype that persists despite there being almost as many women doctors as men in Greece. She became "painfully aware," as she (2024) voiced, of how "deep-rooted prejudices are" and how "rigidly ingrained gender hierarchical notions" are in our minds.

And this can lead now to a discussion of her translation of the term feminists. Nelson (2015, 17) refers to many feminists' claim for "the decline of the domestic as a separate, inherently female sphere and the vindication of domesticity as an ethic, an affect, an aesthetic, and a public." Although feminist is a gender-neutral term denoting a person who believes in feminism and calls for women's equal opportunities and treatment, Fakinou (2024) argued that she deliberately translated it into φεμινίστριες (feminístries) [feministsNOM.FEM.PLUR.] because she still believes that "it is mostly women who are feminists." Resisting gender neutrality in this case and making a statement through her interventionist choice could be seen as a political statement and as an act of symbolic and activist character emphasizing that this is not just a woman's issue but rather a human issue. To Fakinou (2024), feminist is not a gender-neutral term. Despite acknowledging that the advocacy for women's rights is not limited

and restricted to women alone, she deliberately selects the feminine form of the noun in order to stress that women have not received the support they need in their struggle for their rights and position in the world. Also, in a way she reappropriates a negatively loaded word given feminists are very often viewed as a group of angry women, men-hating beings and extremists. In the example above, feminists argue for the need to shatter discriminatory gender norms and practices that shelter the status quo while oppressing women in the domestic realm. "Who and why could possibly oppose such a claim?" asks Fakinou (2024). As she explained, she (2024) wishes "to challenge inaccurate perspectives of feminism" but she aims at doing this in a fashion that works for equality and inclusivity drawing readers' attention to women, and by extension to all non-male individuals, who are still marginalized and discriminated against by patriarchal power hierarchies. By resisting, also, the use of generic masculine terms and/or binary logic, Fakinou's language and the strategies applied signal a genderqueer and gender-free subjectivity that defies the norm of a stable, gender-conforming subject.

Nelson writes fluently across registers intertwining personal and confessional narratives. She explores critical and theoretical inquiries while creating a space within language and society where she and Dodge can construct their life together without worrying about gender. In this context, her (2015, 54) emphasis on Dodge's transitioning not signifying favouring one gender over the other ["for some, 'transitioning' may mean leaving one gender entirely behind, while for others—like Harry, who is happy to identify as a butch on T—it doesn't"), led Fakinou to reject the choice of translating happy into the Greek equivalent adjective ευτυχισμένος/χαρούμενος (eftihisménos/haroúmenos) [happyMASC.] or ευτυχισμένη/χαρούμενη (eftihisméni/haroúmeni) [happyFEM.]. Instead, she rendered the adjective with the adverb ευχαρίστως (efharístos) [gladly] which is gender unmarked and conveys similar meaning in Greek: Πώς να εξηγήσεις ότι για ορισμένα άτομα, η μετάβαση μπορεί να σημαίνει ότι αφήνεις πίσω σου ολοκληρωτικά ένα φύλο, ενώ για άλλα –όπως ο Χάρυ, που ευχαρίστως προσδιορίζεται ως butch που παίρνει T– δεν ισχύει το ίδιο;" (Nelson 2020, 77-78). Just like the book, Fakinou's translation depicts a life in which pronouns, conventions and norms can be meaningless.

4. Conclusion

Nelson's *The Argonauts* is a portrait of people exploring how to live through redefining gender. By studying its Greek translation this paper has attempted to show that there are several options available to translators who can creatively rewrite a text into a language with a grammatical gender system going beyond binarisms and without marking gender. *The Argonauts* enables Nelson to engage readers in a life

of multiple interpretative journeys and boundary crossings of all kinds. Her writing is transgressive, uncensored, and rule-transcending—there is no fixed meaning. Translation can thus be used, and has been used in the case of Fakinou, as a means to contest the dominant phallogocentric language and suggest alternative ways of representation.

Fakinou has provided Greek-speaking readers with a glimpse of how translation can operate as a trope that challenges sex/gender binaries as a given. Though discreet and not "overtly present" (Hermans 1996, 27; 2023, 132), her voice has not "vanish[ed]" (2023, 20). Fakinou's translation, much like Nelson's book, is hybrid and polyphonic, and her "discursive presence as a distinct voice and speaking position" (Hermans 2023, 36) is there. In the text itself. It is present in the decisions she made committed to specific translation choices and strategies as discussed in this paper, contributing to questioning and/or modifying long-held values and assumptions by Greek society. Translation and translators have the agency to proliferate identities, providing the site for infinite possibility and for resistance. Pointing to a galaxy of interpretation, translation suggests respecting the possibility of multiple ways of being. And Fakinou has seen herself transform after translating this book and experiencing the dialogic encounter between herself, the book and Nelson—a new translating and writing self has been created. She has redefined herself while translating Nelson's and Dodge's questioning of "What is a mother?" and "What is a man?" in their attempt to redefine their identification with these terms (Fakinou 2024).

Nelson provides an expansion of options even for people leading more conventional lives wishing to promote the principles of mutual understanding among human beings against the tendency for division among sexes and subjectivities. *The Argonauts* is about real people, objects of societal expectations and boundaries that set them apart and Nelson makes sure to visibilize these people, while casting light on the meaning and value but also cost of freedom. The dialogical nature of the characters depicted engages readers in exploring them, revisiting meaning(s) and reflecting upon experience and beliefs. Translators can respect Nelson's wish to use language without marking gender and for words that do not harm, and construct a new world in which the sex/gender of someone is not what matters or what matters most, focusing therefore on the need to respect one's subjectivity. Translators too can take care of the other, relying, among other things, on what Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 296) calls "dialogized heteroglossia"; that is by gazing "one language through the eyes of another language." Languages and the worldviews in these languages interact, they "interanimate" each other while entering into dialogue. Hence, seeking for alternative options and gazing Greek through the eyes of English, Fakinou has been allowed to convey what is both explicit and implicit in Nelson's book. She has cast aside

preconceived ideas of gender identity, for as Nelson (2015, 10) herself stresses, words do "more than nominate."

Representation, and in the context of the present case study, gender representation, is the product of an active and dynamic process since meaning changes from one context to another, and it also changes over time according to the needs of users. Nelson takes advantage of language to consciously and deliberately dislodge sex(uality) from both gender and identity and dismantle the static binarism that chokes the voices of those who do not fall in the narrowly tailored categories deemed natural and normal. When it comes to translating the novel in a language that is characterized by grammatical gender, however, the lack of gender marking poses further challenges. Yet, Fakinou was determined to explore and manipulate, on the one hand, the power inherent in language and discursive constructs, related to fluid social contexts, and, on the other hand, the power of translation to (re)construct subjectivity, being open to infinite becoming. Fakinou placed emphasis on the ability of translation and translators to break free of the shackles of gender dysphoria, to voice otherness and contribute to efforts that collectively challenge dominant ideas and policies with the aim of bringing about social transformation.

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