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Translational Poetics

Our Creative Horizon

The newest thinking in the subfield of poetic translation studies is overwhelmingly concerned with the poet-translator. What is their poetic, social, and political role in the translation process? What is their day-to-day, and even moment-to-moment, translational process, and how does it relate to their own poetic practice? What assumptions and motivations underlie the reception of the poet-translator's work? Reading recent developments in the field alongside the exciting new work by the contributors to this special cluster, it becomes clear that translator creativity is at the heart of new theories of poetic translation. Or, rather, what appears to be driving the consensus in thinking from both practitioners and scholars alike is the discovery that translation is at the heart of creativity, period. The poet-translator has always contended with conflicting stereotypes about their work: on the one hand, the poet is often considered the best and sometimes only translator qualified to translate poetry; on the other, the poet is just as often denigrated as the worst possible translator of poetry, one who constantly allows their own poetics to overrun that of the source text. Wary of arbitrary designations of quality and morality, today's scholars embrace poet-translator creativity in all its variations and emphasize poetic translation's simultaneous roles as world-revealing critique and world-making creativity.

This vision of translation is made possible in large part by Lawrence Venuti's radical updating of the hermeneutic model of translation, which he developed in a series of essays published in the collection *Translation Changes Everything* (2013) and in the manifesto *Contra Instrumentalism* (2019). In the latter, Venuti argues against the prevailing model of translation as an instrument for conveying the "invariant"

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of the source text, because every aspect of the text is subject to interpretation. His study of proverbs of untranslatability reveals that any failings attributed to the translator or to the process of translation are made possible by the ideology of the invariant. He analyzes the classic *traddutore traditore*; Frost's "poetry is what is lost in translation"; and even Jacques Derrida's "Rien n'est intraduisible en un sens, mais *en un autre sens* tout est intraduisible," which points to the double dissatisfaction of equivalence-based and purpose-based (or *skopos*) translation, that is, the view that any addition of commentary means the translation has failed, but word-for-word translation is also a failure (*Contra* 122). Instead, Venuti advocates for a hermeneutic model that recognizes translation as a form of interpretation of the source text. In all translations, the translator applies formal and thematic "interpretants"—lenses or frameworks—to the source text, to produce a translation that responds primarily to issues animating the receiving (target) culture, which, he contends, plays a much larger role in the process of translation than we are accustomed to thinking (*Contra* 20). Instead of "reducing" the translation to the source text, readers must apply their own translational interpretants to the translation, to apprehend how the translation speaks to the translator's literary and historical moment.

Translation's creative world-making begins with critical world-revealing: revealing already existing worlds, or aspects of our world, that monocultural, monolingual, nation-centric hegemonies of reading have obscured. In *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature*, Pheng Cheah presents the notion of literature as a normative force to argue that postcolonial literature constructs inhabitable worlds for those whose worlds capitalist globalization is destroying (5, 12–14). We can extrapolate from Cheah's arguments about literature's normative powers to think of translation as a normative force, one that hermeneutically constructs and reconstructs worlds that are inclusive of the interstices of language, culture, and nation. Recent developments in translation studies have focused on how translation foregrounds, centers, emphasizes, makes visible heretofore marginalized, minoritized, invisibilized worlds. Venuti argues that the translator's unconscious itself often acts as a critical force, so that, in opposition to the perception of translation as a neutral practice, translational choices may express a wish to articulate and resolve a conflict at a personal or intercultural political level, or even a rivalry with the source author (*Changes* 36–51). Translation may present an opportunity to reveal marginalized aspects of one's own culture, as Haun Saussy demonstrates in his study of the *Zhuangzi*, the fourth- to third-century BCE compilation of philosophical texts attributed to Zhuang Zhao, as a "gateway text" through which texts from the Buddhist and Jesuit traditions, as well as Charles Baudelaire's poetry, became legible in Chinese, so that these expansions of the Chinese worldview

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also revealed lesser-acknowledged aspects of already existing Chinese culture. For Sara Kippur, the practice of self-translation by authors working in French and English or Spanish reveals the substance of interstitial existence between two languages and produces innovative textual effects, such as what Kippur calls "translatedness" in Nancy Huston (24); furthermore, self-translation points to the intersections, misalignments, and exclusions of the Anglophone world literature market and the French and Francophone call for a "*littérature-monde*" in the 2007 manifesto printed in *Le Monde* (6–13). We can also understand translation as the coproduction of embodied experiences not available elsewhere: as Christine Lombez argues, the act of translation goes beyond rendering the content of words or form, toward ineffable textual qualities or effects, such as "sound, color, movement, atmosphere" (20) that expand our experience as embodied beings in our world.

In the practice of translation, the distance between critical world-revealing and creative world-making is small if not nonexistent. Mona Baker describes translation as a vehicle for changing language to take down power and adopts the activist idea of prefiguration for translation and language work: "Prefiguration involves a commitment to creating the future in the present, by not allowing the present to shape or constrain the horizon of possibility and by rejecting the traditional logic of 'the ends justify the means.' . . . [T]ranslation, interpreting, subtitling and other forms of mediation must be brought to the center of the political arena and conceptualized as integral elements of the revolutionary project" (6). She furthermore challenges the non-translator perception of translators as outside the struggle they're translating; for example, she describes the importance of involving subtitlers in decisions about filmmaking from the very beginning (11). In his study of the adoption of forms of classical Arabic poetry in contemporary Francophone poetry, yasser elhariry argues that translation, as a "translingual" "embedding" of form and Arabic language, of foregrounding the so-called foreign, has always already existed within poetic traditions and as such constitutes an ongoing expression of love for the foreign (4, 12, 29). Don Mee Choi's poetic documentation of the United States' implication in atrocities committed in Korea during and after the Korean War seeks to shape a world where superpowers are held accountable for the effects of their ideological domination. In her essay *Translation Is a Mode=Translation Is an Anti-neocolonial Mode*, she works toward "impossible connections" between the necolonial misalignments between countries, cultures, and languages (4–5). Her poetic work *DMZ Colony* creates these impossible connections through her use of deliberately asymmetrical translation strategies, including a powerful rendering of a war crimes survivor's account that marks the limits of what translation, and literature, and documentation, can do: "I'll leave it up to your imagination what a

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DMZ village looks like, what his house looks like, what his dogs look like, how many of his teeth are missing, how fit he still is" (23). This strategy, she eventually reveals, is a canny translation of her witness's own acknowledgment of the impossibility of recounting it all.

Many of today's translation scholars have come to view translation as the quintessential mode of late capitalist creativity, one that critiques inequitable hegemonies of globalization and returns our attention to the material interconnectedness of our planetarity. Ignacio Infante shows how the translational transfer and circulation of modernist poetic forms produces innovation in oeuvres as diverse as Vicente Huidobro's cubist and *ultraismo*-inflected *creacionismo*, Stefan George and Federico García Lorca's influence on the Berkeley Renaissance poets, and Ezra Pound's foundationality for Brazilian concrete poets. In his work on the poetry of the Americas movement, Harris Feinsod finds that the mid-twentieth-century proliferation of inter-American intercultural exchange deemphasized geopolitical inequalities to highlight the benefits of what he calls "polygenesis" (7). Karen Emmerich has reoriented our understanding of both translations and "original" texts: while the former are iterative re-creations of the source text, translations themselves create or iterate originals, for what constitutes an "original" text changes from translation to translation. This fact holds true for texts as ancient as *Gilagamesh* as well as the most contemporary, including her own English translation of Vassilis Vassilikos's *Glafkos Thrassakis* (2002), which involved a restructuring of the source text and even led to its reediting in a final edition in 2015 (5–7). In Heather Cleary's study of representations of translation in contemporary Latin American literature, "iteration and play" emerge as practices of translational creativity as opposed to the ideas of "author and authoritative original" linked to global capital's underlying structures of property and propriety (15). In the introduction to the 2022 retranslation of Juan Felipe Herrera's *Akrílica*, a collection of decades of poetry written contemporaneously with his visual art production and Chicano activism (originally published in 1989 as a bilingual edition), Farid Matuk theorizes translation as an invitation to iteration and reiteration: "*Akrílica* is always a book given over to its own rearticulation. Our aim was . . . to take seriously *Akrílica*'s call to keep inventing and to take seriously traditions of creative, generative, and avowedly politicized translation" (29). With foresight that recalls the messianic "teleiopoiesis" that Gayatri Spivak identified as conditioned by and the condition of planetarity (25–70), Matuk finds that *Akrílica* does not entirely belong to its time, nor even ours, but calls forth communities of the future and "belongs in the hands of those finding one another in a gathering that has yet to take place" (23).

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To date, then, the current enthusiasm for poet-translator creativity, or what I am calling translational poetics, casts it as interpretation, world-revealing critique, world-making activism, and resistance to the inequities of global capitalism. This synthesis of perspectives suggests that the work of poet-translators is a massive, ongoing, even sublime upheaval that unmakes and remakes our world many times over, countless times a day. While that description is not entirely inaccurate, the contributors to this special cluster remind us that these transformations take place iteratively, not on a grandiose scale but a human one, in translational dialogue with a single poet, often a single text, one translational choice at a time. *Iterativity* has become a key descriptor of translator creativity because, as a form of repetition that produces singular effects each time, it perfectly describes the relational structure between the life of a text and its multiple afterlives in translation and retranslation. We can also read this special cluster, which features emerging voices in the field framed by reflections from seasoned theorists and practitioners of translation, as a series of iterations on the question of translational poetics, and on the responsibilities poet-translators have toward their translational poetics. All our contributors have engaged with poetry in multiple roles: as scholars, translators, poets, editors. Their multidimensional perspectives enrich their essays and testify to the power of working intimately with poetry at the interstices of texts, languages, and cultures.

In this issue's "Prelude," meditating on twentieth-century self-translations from Italian dialects, Giorgio Agamben recognizes the "constitutive bilingualism" of poetry. Describing the "polar tension" between the poem's own language and the one from which it translates, he argues that the poem cannot be located, can "no longer dwell within the identity of one language," and, in a bilingually presented edition, moves "ceaselessly from one text to the other, as if to signify that its true place is now in the white space that joins and divides them." For an exemplary case, he turns to Friedrich Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles and Pindar. Hölderlin argues that in any poem its "foreign" aspect is its point of excellence, while its "native" or "national" or "proper" aspect is its point of weakness. In his view, the Greeks' native elements are "passion" and "holy pathos," and therefore they "excel" in a foreign "clarity of exposition," whereas Germans' native elements are "sobriety and clarity," and so they excel at "holy fire and passion." Agamben argues that the translational tension between renouncing the native element and excelling at the foreign element is the universal source of poetic creativity. Working against this paradigm, Hölderlin exemplifies it in the most emphatic possible way with his extraordinarily "hyperliteral" translations of Sophocles, which go so far as to reproduce Greek syntax in German and to create neologisms following the structure of Greek words.

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We turn from the hyperliteral to the hyperfree in Chris Clarke's essay, which plumbs Muriel Rukeyser's archive to chart the devolution of the correspondence between Rukeyser and Octavio Paz regarding her translations of his poems. Though their letters begin in the 1950s with Paz's concurrence with Rukeyser's distance from a "form-based approach" to his poetry, by the 1960s Paz becomes increasingly preoccupied with Rukeyser's deviations from the literal translations of specific words. By the 1970s, Paz's letters are peppered with accusations of inaccuracy while Rukeyser ardently defends her stances, even though in a contemporary essay Paz argued that the role of the poet-translator necessitates interpretive creativity. Clarke attributes the crescendo of disharmony between Paz and Rukeyser to a disparity in their thinking about poetics. Throughout her career, Rukeyser's approach to translation remained the same, to produce poems aesthetically on par with what she considered the best poetry in English, a strategy Clarke describes as "sono-imagic," a sensuous mode of discursive creativity that aptly describes her own poetics. However, Paz's poetry, as Eliot Weinberger put it, became increasingly "drastic and spare" over time. Clarke's archival account of the reception of Rukeyser's translations reveals at least one critic who admires her "expansive" approach to translation, even as it spurred a wave of admonitions of nonequivalence and non-literalness. Ultimately, Clarke challenges us to consider what happens to the role of creativity in poetic translation when the translation becomes a battleground between two poets and two poetics.

While Clarke contrasts Rukeyser's sono-imagic translation with Ashbery's "idiomatic" translation of Rimbaud's *Illuminations* (as the book's blurb describes it), Matthew Smith asks us to turn the equivalence paradigm on its head by offering a Borgesian reading of Ashbery's translation as an "original" text and Rimbuad's as a "translation." For many Anglophone readers, Smith argues, Ashbery's translation may be their first encounter with the text, and therefore plays the role and does the work of an original. Close comparative readings reveal Ashbery's lofty, majestic, but most often carefree, playful signature style in his rewriting of the French poet's seminal text. Rimbaud's version seems restrained and muted in comparison. This contrast was largely made possible, in Smith's view, through Ashbery's reworking, even performing a kind of "intralingual translation" of Louise Varèse's earlier translation of Rimbaud, which was Ashbery's first encounter with the text in college. Here Smith asks us to more closely understand the relationship between first translations, retranslations, and source texts wherein neither production nor reception happens in a linear fashion. Smith challenges us to prioritize the creativity of the translation itself and to study its genesis and effects as we would those of any "original."

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In our "Interlude," the Algerian poet, novelist, essayist, editor, and anthropologist Habib Tengour reflects on the indispensable role that translation has played in his poetic creativity. From his empathy with the foreign writers he read in translation in his youth, to his translational exchanges with poet Pierre Joris, to his editorial work of bilingual collections and anthologies, every interaction with poetry in translation and every translation project have forced him to reconsider what is at stake in his own poetics. His bilingual education in the colonial Algerian context also fully informs these questions. He attended a local school with a French curriculum while learning the Arabic of the Qur'an at Qur'anic school and speaking his local Algerian dialect at home and in public. He claims that any of his own translations into French are thus "doubly foreign" because his French is steeped in his Arabic culture and language. Tengour emphasizes how the peaceful coexistence of any two languages, and especially the postcolonial coexistence of Arabic and French, can be one of mutual enrichment, an inclusive translational approach to Algerian bilinguality that has informed his own creative process throughout his lifetime.

Following Tengour's meditation on translation in a bilingual postcolonial context, Josué Rodríguez reads the oeuvre of the Peruvian surrealist César Moro, himself a translator of French surrealists, as the embodiment of the poet-translator's decolonial and ecocritical potential. Moro revises the colonial nature/culture binary foundational to French surrealism, which takes for granted the reification and exploitation of nature as property to exploit for capitalist gain, turning instead to the Indigenous concept of *Pachamama*, or "mother nature," which valorizes the non-hierarchization of humans and non-humans sharing the same planet Earth. The convulsive beauty of Moro's poetics arises not from a fetishistic attachment to mysterious, unknown natural objects but, rather, from a harmonious lived and textual coexistence with them. Moro's diamond motif analogically transforms the banalities of daily life into poetry of great value to all and enables a refractive poetics in which lyric subjectivity metaleptically becomes "fractured and immersed within the broader milieu of natural forms" so that the poet-translator transfers knowledge and history through a dynamic, recursive ecopoetics. Creativity takes place here through critical transfer, and formal strategies of revision and redeployment iterate a decolonial surrealist ecopoetics very much ahead of its time and poised to reshape how we think through translation as textual agent.

Lindsay Turner turns a poet-translator's critical eye to the oeuvre of one of her own translatees, the French poet Stéphane Bouquet, himself a translator of New York School poets. Noting how a translation-grounded ethos of openness and directness in relation to the world—which Bouquet identifies as proper to

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"American-ness" in general and the New York School poets in particular—"infuses" Bouquet's own poetry, Turner shows how Bouquet links the practice of translation both to the futurity of the text (the translation coming after the writing of the source text) and to queer desire and intimacy. For Bouquet, both the translation of queer poetics and translation itself as a form of queer poetics signify hope for the future of queer desire and joy, even as this hopefulness must take into account historical and ever-present tragedies that have ravaged the queer community: the AIDS crisis, the rise of homophobic bullying and hate crimes, and the ongoing crisis of LGBTQ+ youth suicide. Building on José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity,* Turner argues that Bouquet's approach to translation envisions queerness as a "horizon of possibility" that critiques the present in the service of a better future: "It shows what must not be settled for and by contrast what is *not yet here*, with the necessary and true implication that things could be otherwise." And thus translation opens toward what Turner calls "utopian possibility": the creation of queer communities where desire, intimacy, love, and joy prevail over fear and loss, even as Turner's essay urges us to take the measure of the staggering risks and costs this investment in upholding the right to creativity has incurred on the queer community.

While Tengour, Rodríguez, and Turner each engage with their own unique visions of what we have previously encountered as prefigurative, messianic, or teleiopoietic creativity, Karen Elizabeth Bishop's "Toward the Radical" closes our issue with a veritable manifesto of the poet-translator, one that courageously makes space for our utopian future today. She argues that the crafting of translation deserves to be equally valorized with that of the craft of poetry, for, if they are not identical processes, they are the same in every meaningful way. "The poet is already a translator," Bishop writes, whose skills at rendering radical transformation and movement in language they also bring to the practice of translation. The consequence of this valorization is necessarily the recognition of the autonomy of the translation from the source text. A "translated poem is always a new poem," enjoying a life of its own beyond its status as a Benjaminian afterlife, which contains "new echoes" and "repeats the call from 'the center of the language forest.'" By revealing to us the always already primarily poeietic dimension of poetic translation, Bishop's text creates a world in which we accept this vision of translation not as horizon but as point of departure, giving poet-translators—as this special cluster also hopes to—the recognition and equity they are due.

As this issue goes to press, ChatGPT and similar platforms have emerged as a fraught harbinger (or red herring) of the changes (read: decimation) artificial intelligence (AI) will have wrought on human intellect and creativity in five or

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ten, not to mention one hundred years. At the same time, even as the wide range of machine translation applications becomes more complex and efficient every year, the translation industry and its clients continue to insist on the necessity of human translation, and the translation profession expects robust growth for the foreseeable future. The poet-translator may live a precarious existence in the twinned age of globalization and late-stage capitalism but does not need to fear their disappearance with the rise of AI. Their well-placed confidence in their perseverance is due to the role of translational poetics at the heart of human writerly agency. Apps come and go, but poetry in every language remains, and with it the poet-translator endures, for their painstaking, iterative efforts at the interstices of text, language, and culture build new worlds where no one else would know to go.

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