

# Tasks of the Spivakian Translator

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Comparative Literature as a discipline, in the era of postwar area studies, global independence movements, postcolonial and decolonial theory, has been powerfully inflected by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak throughout a long and politically engaged career. *Death of a Discipline* (2003), which took stock not only of how the dial had moved from traditional Eurocentric paradigms of comparatism, but also of the way in which digital technologies were transforming modes of cultural production and dissemination at the expense of communities with limited access to costly media, was the work most pointedly focused on rethinking the discipline's remit.<sup>1</sup> But Spivak's concern with "comparativism's rethinking" was substantiated by hefty works that bracketed it, notably *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999) and *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012).<sup>2</sup>

In 2005, I published *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* and in the lead-up time to its completion, I was listening to Spivak, channeling her rewrite of Comp Lit's playbook through the lens of deconstructed area studies and linguistic specificities. *The Translation Zone* was included in a book series that I founded in 2000 at the invitation of Mary Murrell, a visionary editor at Princeton University Press.<sup>3</sup> Titled *Translation/Transnation* the series was conceived with the aim of bringing the study of minoritized languages and literatures into focus, emphasizing how their inter-relationality had been elided by publishing networks operating out of western capitals and global centers of power. At the crux of the series, and of my own work (not just *The Translation Zone* but also its sequel *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* published by Verso in 2013), was Spivak's translational praxis. Translation was at the core of her much-discussed concept of "planetary," with linguistic regionalisms and untranslatable idioms a crucial part of her understanding of territorially grounded modes of expression. This grounding, as she emphasized recently in the Nabaneeta Dev Sen Memorial Lecture, (2022) reads agriculture quite literally as an anthropocenic writing, decipherable as earth's scar.<sup>4</sup> Translating planetary emerges as a central project of ecocriticism, even if Spivak remains wary of the "eco" prefix, so often conscripted to give capitalism a human face. She also remains guarded in relation to translation itself, a process that potentially kills the phonic and phonetic presence of a given source language. From these concerns is born a disciplinary perplex: how to do things with translation that allow the resonances and *ritornelles* of language to persist and to be heard?<sup>5</sup> To answer this question we would recall Emile Benveniste's insistence on the *nuntial* [enunciatory] dimension of language, with *nuntial* underscoring the power of the vocative, the capacity to "proclaim or utter the real," to "transform a lexicon into a discourse," and thereby subjectivize vocalization.<sup>6</sup>

Emphasizing the live aspect of discursivity in language-specific contexts in an ongoing project on translation and justice, I try to delimit "what is just translation" across sound and sense spectrums and under conditions of force of law. This commitment to hearing and translating "justly" is fully beholden to the kind of listening practices built into Spivak's pragmatist approach to expertise-sharing within the limits of specialisms. This is where

studying languages, including one's own, proves essential, the key to parsing complex tensions between the imperatives of cultural belonging (predicated on psychopolitical investment in a shared linguistic commons), and the negative fallout of attachments to a fiction of monolingualism that lends itself to ethnonationalist identity politics. The chasm that yawns between the antipodes of language as collective solidarity and language as sovereign zone of exclusion is constitutive of what I think of as untranslatability. It is compounded by another chasm worked over by Spivak: the relative dearth of non-European theoremes.

This dearth is part of what Spivak's rubric of "global criticality" aims to redress. She draws on a repertory of untranslatables marked by the languages and places from which they hail.<sup>7</sup> An example is found in the term *abigarramiento*, applied by the Bolivian critic René Zavaleta Mercado (in *Towards a History of the National-Popular in Bolivia*) to "the motley," with its symptoms of "disjointedness, incongruousness, beyond mere difference."<sup>8</sup> This idea of a non-insular "peripheral-motley" configuration – yielding ground to a greater indigeneity and extended meanings of subalternity, presents an advanced intersectionalism. Entered into the vocabulary of "global criticality," *abigarramiento* opens a space for translocal readings that call on Comp Lit's historic disciplinary identity as an engine of translation. It is this vision of *the translating machine, inside the teaching machine* – that animates Spivakian praxis.

A clearer picture of what that praxis entails emerges from the collection of Spivak's writings on translation published by Seagull press under the title *Living Translation*.<sup>9</sup> It stands as a go-to reference for those committed to decolonizing Comparative Literature and translation studies. I am pleased to include a fleshed-out version of my Foreword to the book in this special issue of the *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* devoted to the topic of untranslatability.<sup>10</sup>

### Foreword to *Living Translation*

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one of the shape-shifting thinkers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, has uniquely contributed to the fields of comparative literature, global feminism, subaltern studies, postcolonial theory, electoral education, the ethics of planetarity, and last but not at all least, translation studies. In *Living Translation*, which performs the invaluable service of gathering her most significant writings on translation, we see in sharp relief the extent to which, throughout her long career, she helped make translation a critical catalyst of the comparative humanities. Starting with her landmark "Translator's Preface" to Jacques Derrida's *De la grammatologie (Of Grammatology)* in 1976, and continuing with her "Translator's Foreword" to Mahasweta Devi's "Draupadi" (and Afterword to Devi's *Chotti Munda and His Arrow*) Spivak tackled translatability as such from the ground up and at the political limit; at border checkpoints, at sites of colonial pedagogy, in acts of resistance to monolingual regimes of national language, at the borders of minor literature and schizo-analysis, in the deficits of cultural debt and linguistic expropriation, and, more generally, at theory's edge, which is to say, where practical criticism yields to theorizing in Untranslatables.<sup>11</sup> (This volume also provides information about how her institution-building as director of Comparative Literature at the university of Iowa—and in her subsequent places of employment—began at the same time.) From this perspective, Spivak takes her place within a distinguished line-up of translator-theorists that includes Walter Benjamin, George Steiner, Jacques Derrida, Benoy Majumdar, François Cheng, Louis-Jean Calvet, Samuel Weber, Susan Bassnett, Abdelfattah Kilito, Barbara Cassin, Abdessalam Benabdelali, Jean-Jacques Lecercle, François Jullien, Lydia Liu, and Lydia Davis, all of them particularly attuned to the processes of cognizing in languages, all of them alive to the co-productivity of thinking, translating, writing.

Like many in this company, but in ways unparalleled, Spivak developed a singular focus on the *politics of translation*. A watershed essay of 1992 on “The Politics of Translation” kicks off with the avowal that “The idea for this title comes from the British sociologist Michele Barrett’s feeling that the politics of translation takes on a massive life of its own if you see language as the processes of meaning-construction.” Spivak would lend left to translation politics’ “massive life of its own,” starting with this essay, in which she situates language within an ensemble of “gestures, pauses [. . .] chance, [and] subindividual force-fields of being which click into place in different situations [and] swerve from the straight or true line of language-in-thought.”<sup>12</sup> Taking recourse to translation as conceived in this expanded field, Spivak will underscore the importance of *gendered agency* as a mode of resisting “capitalist multiculturalism’s invitation to self-identity.” “The task of the feminist translator,” she writes, “is to consider language as a clue to the workings of gendered agency.”<sup>13</sup> When Walter Benjamin coined the expression “task of the translator” (*die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*) in the foundational essay of 1923, gender and agency were predictably absent as conceptual levers of meaning-construction, subject formation and *Überleben* (*sur-vie*, afterlife, survival, living on, or as Sam Weber renders it, “living away”). Spivak’s insistence on placing them at the heart of the translator’s task is no small move. It opens the way to a translation practice that is decidedly unsafe in the way intimate reading—which demands surrender to regions outside the self’s comfort zone—de-secures foundational knowledge and identitarian footholds. In the name of an untameable literarity and in response to the summons to unpack the Foucauldian doublet of *puissance/ connaissance*, Spivak writes evocatively of the frayed “selveges” of the language-fabric.<sup>14</sup> Its raggedy threads, when pulled apart, weave the kind of uncanny relation to alterity that prompts Melanie Klein to look “at the violent translation that constitutes the subject in responsibility”<sup>15</sup> and enables Derrida to insist that speaking in a language not his own (English) “will be more just.” Derrida’s phrase inspires Spivak to claim the right “to the same dignified complaint for a woman’s text in Arabic or Vietnamese, a claim echoed later on in her call for an ecopolitical planetary justice.”<sup>16</sup>

Spivak’s translational model of “planetaryity” overrides difference-shattering globalisms (translatese) and taps into the spirit-orientation of animism, native cosmos and a “native space” of the Third World translator who self-others by no longer remaining oblivious to class privilege or susceptible to the majority-pleasing dictates of the translation market. This alterity, associated by Spivak with seeing oneself as a “planetary accident” rather than as a “global agent” or entity, might be seen as a version of the untranslatable inasmuch as it is *underivable* (“alterity remains undervived from us, it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away”).<sup>17</sup> Like an etymology without a radical, or a metaphysics without first philosophy, or a civilizational history without “step-wise connections” between “sowing cereals in our primeval past and waiting in line at the Department of Motor Vehicles,” alterity is non-derivating,<sup>18</sup> inhabiting a space-time of indeterminacy between the human and the natural (Spivak’s condition of the Aboriginal), and between discrete languages.<sup>19</sup> In its cosmic dissemination, alterity models a kind of antiphilology.

The impress of antiphilology can be discerned in an approach to intellectual history and literary genealogy that bypasses influence paradigms in favor of novel conjunctures: Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Melanie Klein, Emanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida appear alongside Benoy Majumdar, Rabindranath Tagore, James Joyce, J.M. Coetzee, Mahasweta Devi, Assia Djebar, Oe Kenzaburo, Wilson Harris, Maryse Condé, Farhad Mazhar, Toni Morrison, and numerous Bengali poets, lately Sankha Ghosh. This is not just an eclectic array; these figures engage in agonistic dialogue, producing a dialectics of cultural translation that allows conflict, irresolution and interpretive difficulty to have standing. “Cultural translation” in Spivak’s ascription is no mere

blandishment for differences adjudicated according to standardized measures of moral equivalence or specious criteria of same. To translate in the Spivakian mode is to ensure that the translator has effaced her “voice,” always insufficiently, to be haunted, perhaps, by an “original:”

Knowledge depends on cooking the soul with slow learning, not a one size–fits all toolkit. You cannot produce a toolkit for a “moral metric,” or if you do you will be disappointed. What is it, then to translate? Deep language learning of the original, straining to be haunted by it as it can be learned before reason. Effacing oneself, being as little as possible so the text speaks. Never to translate from an imperial language translation, never.<sup>20</sup>

The commitment to counter epistemicide by translating away from imperial languages prompts a profound rethinking of what translation *is* and *does* and *for whom it serves*.<sup>21</sup> The imperative “Never to translate from an imperial language” points to a postcolonial politics of translating that often relies on strategic uses of marked failure or withholding. We see this at work in Spivak’s discussion of dilemmas faced when translating Mahasweta Devi’s *Chotti Munda ebong tar tir* (1980). Expressing dissatisfaction with her rendering of the phrase *hoker kotha bollo na Chotti* as “Didn’t Chotti speak of ‘rights?’” she notes:

*Hok*, in Bengali, a *totshomo* or identical loan word from the Arabic *al haq*, is not rights alone but a peculiar mix of rights and responsibilities that goes beyond the individual. Anyone who has read the opening of Mahasweta’s novel knows that the text carries this presupposition. *I have failed in this detail. Translation is as much a problem as a solution. I hope the book will be taught by someone who has enough sense of the language to mark this kind of unavoidable failure, and that the rare reader will be led to the Bengali.* emphasis added).<sup>22</sup>

The political tasking of translation in a Spivakian frame—with critical pedagogy urgently foregrounded—is fully in play and on display, soldered to expressions of hope and love:

I myself prepare my translations in the distant and unlikely hope that my texts will fall into the hands of a teacher who knows Bengali well enough to love it, so that the students will know that the best way to read this text is to push through to the original. Of course, not everyone will learn the language, but one might, or two! And the problem will be felt.<sup>23</sup>

*And the problem will be felt.* This little phrase packs a great political punch. For it outlines the dimensions of a larger project for translation studies today—how to effectively translate into and from little-taught languages, often of “the Global South”—while addressing, indeed repairing, those weaknesses in contemporary liberal education that hail from North America, specifically curricula that promote packaged sound-bites, standardized deliverables, frictionless learning processes based on supposedly value-neutral data and monocultural accessibility at the expense of plurilingual difficulty.<sup>24</sup> Spivak’s initiation of a Bengali bilingual series with Columbia University Press, with glossary and critical introduction is proof of another kind of institution-building.

When we read the essays assembled in *Living Translation* from beginning to end (and even out of the chronological order in which they were written), what emerges is a picture of translation theory as a critical praxis traversing the history of colonialism and its aftermath, and transforming a range of postwar isms and movements: poststructuralism, deconstruction, global feminism, subaltern studies, anthropocentric humanism, eco-criticism. Throughout, there is an attentiveness to translation as pedagogy—in some ways the only pedagogy—capable of challenging monolingual protocols in the Euro-American academy. In Spivak’s public call for a curriculum in which all students would already know or study a non-European language, what is at stake is not just a way of working in world literatures that acknowledges the risks of translation-as-violation or cultural appropriationism, but a politics of pedagogy that fastens on the singularities and withholdings of each and every idiom.

Translation withheld, marked as failed, and *not*-translated qualify as hallmarks of Spivakian untranslatability even if untranslatability is not a term Spivak herself would necessarily subscribe to – her practice as teacher and translator roundly affirms translatability as a precondition of transnational literacy.<sup>25</sup> If I make the case here for a Spivakian untranslatability, it is in the interest of marking something very particular to her way of working *as a translator*, something we might think of as a *self-resistance* (or autoimmunity?) that maps onto and derives vibrancy from that which is resistant in language itself.

This double helix of self-resistance/language resistance is on display in Spivak's preface to her translation from Bengali into English of Mahasweta Devi's story collection *Breast Stories*. In the story "Drapaudi" Spivak confronts the caste term for "untouchables," always problematic in Indian languages (and giving rise to Mahatma Gandhi's assimilation of untouchables to tribals through the name *Harijan*, "God's people," a mistranslation insofar as tribals should not be confused with untouchables).<sup>26</sup> Spivak notes Devi's decision to follow "the Bengali practice of calling each so-called untouchable caste by the name of its menial and unclean task within the rigid structural functionalism of institutionalized Hinduism."<sup>27</sup> And yet she chooses to go with the phrase: "The untouchables don't get water," admitting bluntly "I have been unable to reproduce this in my translation."<sup>28</sup> The defeated translator finds strength in the caste term's resistance to translation because it sets the stage for a pedagogical scene, one that demonstrates, first, how translating prevents autochthonous meaning from shining through, and second, how the withholding of content can be strategically deployed to disrobe the posture of all-knowingness and entitled access directed by western Anglophone readers towards texts in Indian languages. "I have been unable to reproduce this in translation" is a gesture that points to reserves of untranslatability that lie in the deep structure of discursive hierarchies, themselves imbricated in a specific politics of history.

Spivak channels undercurrents of resistance within language as such by tapping into the untranslatability effects produced by colonial language policy, racial injustice, caste discrimination, religious wars, ethnic cleansing, apartheid, ecocide, cultural globalization, and ethnonationalism. Consider, by way of example, her analysis of Farhad Mazhar's *Ashomyer Noteboi* (1994). In response to Mazhar's lines:

Untimely notebook, I'm giving a fatwa,  
                   you're murtad  
 I'll dorra you a hundred and one times  
                   You're shameless

Spivak avows:

I am unable to access *murtad* and *dorra* because they are *tatshomo* words from Arabic.... Tat in these two words signifies "that" or "it," and refers to Sanskrit, one of the classical languages of India, claimed by the Hindu majority. They are descriptive of two different kinds of words. *Tadbbabo* means 'born of it.' *Tatshomo* means 'just like it.' I am using these two words by shifting the shifter *tat* –that or it – to refer to Arabic as an important loan-source.<sup>29</sup>

Spivak expatiates often on Bengali-Arabic shared etymologies, often obscured by politicized philology. Her attention to loanwords, as in Tamara Chin's recent work on Silk Road loanwords in antiquity, brings together pre and postcolonial approaches to the politics of historical semantics.<sup>30</sup> Spivak's semantics bears little in common with that of the positivist nineteenth-century philologists who tracked a meaning to its mythic origin or *Ursprung* with the aim of shoring up linguistic genetics and the "genius" of a people. As I have already suggested, Spivak practices instead a kind of antiphilology that dredges up histories of linguistic conquest and erasure primarily for the sake of translational justice. To this end, she will call out "the fashioners of the new Bengali prose [who] purged the language of the Arabic-Persian content" by Sanskritizing Bengali.<sup>31</sup> With its Arabic and Persian



components reduced to little more than local color within the refined contemporary Bengali that Spivak was taught in school, terms like *murtad* and *dorra* are rendered opaque, effectively untranslatable.

The story does not end here however. *Murtad* and *dorra* lead Spivak to subtle insights into how *partition* operates in language politics. In abstract terms it refers to a partitive, parthenogenetic process in language, like a splitting of the word's atomic particles which, once combusted, shower the world with potentially toxic elements. As a historically grounded particular, it canonizes the event of *Partition*, applicable on the subcontinent to the division of West and East Bengal in 1947 and the secession of East Pakistan as the People's Republic of Bangladesh in 1971. Spivak's gloss on partition dissects how untranslatability – in this case the suppression of Arabic and Persian roots – becomes a visible symptom of the violent and bloody history of ethnic cleansing:

If the establishment of a place named Bangladesh in a certain sense endorses the partition of 1947 – the language policy of the state, strangely enough, honors that other partition – the gradual banishment of the Arabic and Persian elements of the language that took place in the previous century – and thus paradoxically undoes the difference from West Bengal. The official language of the state of Bangladesh, 99 percent Muslim, is as ferociously Sanskritized as anything to be found in Indian Bengali.

It is over against and all entwined in this tangle that the movement to restore the Arabic and Persian element of Bengali, away from its century-old ethnic cleansing, does its work. And it is because I grew up inside the tangle that, in spite of my love of Bengali, I could not translate *murtad* and *dorra* – though I could crack *ashamoyer* with Nietzsche.<sup>32</sup>

Not-translating *murtad* and *dorra*, grappling with resistant translation in contexts of political violence and ethnic cleansing, is a *worrying task*, with “worry” understood as symptom of anxiety tracing all the way back to Spivak's preface to *Of Grammatology*, possibly her earliest reflection on the auto-inflicted afflictions of the translator:

Derrida's text certainly offers its share of “untranslatable” words. I have had my battles with “exergue” and “proper.” My special worry is “entamer.” As we have seen, it is an important word in Derrida's vocabulary. It means both to break into and to begin. I have made do with “broach” or “breach” with the somewhat fanciful confidence that the shadow-word “breach” or “broach” will declare itself through it.<sup>33</sup>

When Spivak mentions “my special worry,” we could take it in an anodyne way to mean problem-solving, or thinking within the constraints of language. But we could equally well pick up on its more aggressive significations; worrying in the sense of twisting, pulling, biting or cutting away at the verbal thing to arrive at the *right target*, *le mot juste*. In this case, that which is cut out – the alternative word-choice – haunts the translation like a phantom limb. Spivakian “worrying” in this scenario, enters the world of Derridian hauntology.

Living in the cuts where meanings fork and self-divide, living in the break of translation (which implies *living on* its worry-spots, its flesh-wounds), entails experiences of pain and suffering that must be fully tasted because they put us in touch with traumatic hauntings. But these same breaks afford breakthroughs in thinking. This is what happens with the untranslatable loanword *haq*, which Spivak knows is particularly conducive to lucky finds. Taking off on Patrick Wolfe's surmise that it may have a connection to the English word “hock,” (connoting extortion, ransom or bounty) with a history in the violent Crusades narrative of hostage-taking and age-old conflicts between Christians and Saracens, Spivak embarks on a path leading from “hock” to *al-Haq*, the Arabic expression for truth (in the sense of genuine, real, right or righteously) that sometimes stands in for the name of Allah in the Qur'an.<sup>34</sup> She then takes a leap, translating *haq* into a notion of ‘para-individual structural responsibility’ into which we are born – that is, our true being,” with the proviso that “responsibility” be taken as an approximative translation for a “structural positioning”

associated with birth-right.<sup>35</sup> It is this approximate space, this “not quite English sense of my *haq*” that hatches the invention of a new theorem of global criticality – *planetarity*, a term predicated on “a precapitalist feeling of responsibility for the planet” that eludes “a rationally justifiable teleology.”<sup>36</sup> “You will indulge me, [writes Spivak] if I say that the ‘planet’ is, here, as perhaps always, a catachresis for inscribing collective responsibility as right.”<sup>37</sup> This catachresis – a rhetorical figure signaling *mistranslation* (as when one uses *mitigate* for *militate*) – seeds an outline for a planetary bill of rights that “speaks” in a language – precapitalist and paraindividual – that the translator must train herself to hear and to transcribe.

There are many untranslatabilities operative in Spivak’s writings on translation, but they arguably converge in a model of concept-labor – Spivak’s signature task as a translator – that translates towards alterity; towards episteme-logics that do not yet exist.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).
- <sup>2</sup> See, the chapter “Rethinking Comparativism” in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 467–483.
- <sup>3</sup> Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
- <sup>4</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “A Tribute to the Incomparable” Nabaneeta Dev Sen Memorial Lecture, 1/15/2022). Christine Brooke-Rose stages this in Aka’s last dream of the land between two rivers [Mesopotamia] breeding satyrs leading to “lived happily ever after.” <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/84226921825?pwd=bFB0NGZKV2ZRSVkrZlc5OWZZTDEvQT09>
- <sup>5</sup> In “Imperative to Re-Imagine the Planet” Spivak will invoke “Plotinus justifying the ethical as a beautiful *resonating*” (emphasis mine) as a figure for “the ecological practice of living”, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* op. cit. p. 341.
- <sup>6</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “Foreword” to Emile Benveniste, *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society* Trans. Elizabeth Palmer (Chicago: Hau Books, 2016), p. xv.
- <sup>7</sup> Spivak often uses the expression “global criticality” in talks and panels, but has not, to my knowledge, published a text where the term is referred to and defined.
- <sup>8</sup> Anne Freeland, Afterword to René Zavaleta Mercado’s *Towards a History of the National-Popular in Bolivia* (London and Calcutta: Seagull Press, 2018), p. 272. She notes that *abigarramiento* is grounded in “the coexistence of multiple modes of production and multiple conceptions of world within a single national territory” and poses an “obstacle to social-scientific analysis and liberal democratic politics premised on the existence of a more or less unified national citizenry. (275) *Towards a History of the National-Popular in Bolivia* was published in the “Elsewhere Texts” series co-edited by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Hosam Aboul-Ela.
- <sup>9</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Living Translation* eds. Emily Apter, Avishek Ganguley, Mauro Pala, Surya Parekh (Calcutta: Seagull Press, 2022).
- <sup>10</sup> My heartfelt thanks to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Bishan Samaddar for permission to reprint the Foreword.
- <sup>11</sup> Drawing on it as the conceptual catalyst of her monumental *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (2004), Barbara Cassin used the notion of the “Untranslatable” (*P'intraduisible*) to designate how a term or syntactic structure springs to life, becomes, as it were, fully activated, only when the reader or speaker encounters its resistance to translation, its recesses of opacity and obstinate meaning. For Cassin, the Untranslatable is not an exceptional category reserved for select keywords; it applies quite even-handedly to any term or concept in the throes of mistranslation, non-translation, or ceaseless retranslation.
- <sup>12</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Politics of Translation” (1992) in *Living Translation* op. cit. p. 36.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 37. Spivak here anticipates Judith Butler’s relatively recent focus on gender and translation: “I now believe that gender is a problem of translation, and we probably shouldn’t be thinking

about gender outside of the context of translation,” (Butler, “The Countertext Interview,” *Countertext* 3[2] [2017]: 127). In another piece, Butler attacks the issue of “gender” (in English) as a so-called “foreign” term, capable, on the one hand, of arousing exorbitant fear and censorship or, on the other, of functioning as some kind of universal cipher in feminist and LGBTQ theory (“a generalizable concept no matter the language into which it enters”). Butler makes the forceful case that “there is no ‘gender theory’ without a problem of translation,” and that “the fear of ‘gender’ as a destructive cultural imposition from English (or from the Anglophone world) manifests a resistance to translation that deserves critical attention.” See Judith Butler, “Gender in Translation: Beyond Monolingualism,” in Jude Browne (ed.) *Why Gender?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 15–37.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 38.

<sup>15</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Translation as Culture” in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* op. cit. 243.

<sup>16</sup> Spivak, “The Politics of Translation,” op. cit. p. 40. In “Translation as Culture” Spivak cites the discussion of transcoding in Lee Cataldi and Peggy Rockman Napaljarri’s introduction to *Yimkiirli: Walpiri Dreamings and Histories*. Their reference is to the phrase “lost our language” used by the Australian Aboriginals of the East Kimberly region. Spivak adumbrates their account of how the ecopolitics of translation proceeds under conditions of settler-colonialism. Shifting to the Walpiri people of Central North Australia, Spivak observes:

Cataldi and Napaljarri, our translators, inhabit an *aporia*, a catch. Some of their material ‘is derived from land-claim documents,’ already a site of transcoding a mnemonic geography into the semiosis of land as property. [. . .] What is the relationship between standardized environmentalism, on the one hand, and traditional knowledge systems on the other? Mnemonic geography and satellite positioning technology? This is also a transcoding question. Just as we cannot content ourselves with collecting examples of diasporic hybridity, so also can we not just read books translating “other cultures.” See, “Translation as Culture,” in *Living Translation* op. cit. pp. 77–78.

Spivak’s intuition that the trajectory of translation is from the performative to performance is useful here. See, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 18, 404).

<sup>17</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Imperative to Re-imagine the Planet,” in *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* op. cit. p. 339.

<sup>18</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah uses the phrase “step-wise connection” in his review of *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, a book coauthored by David Graeber and David Wengrow that challenges the “cereals to-states arrow of history” and the presumption that “a mode of production comes “with a predetermined politics.” “Digging for Utopia,” *The New York Review of Books* Vol. LXVIII, No. 20 (Dec 2021): 80.

<sup>19</sup> In its anti-foundationalism, this antiphilology, which pushes against inheritance models of philological genesis and transmission, bears pronounced affinities with antiphilosophy, associated in the western tradition with the work of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Derrida, Lacan, and Laruelle among others.

<sup>20</sup> Spivak, “What Is It, Then, to Translate?” *Living Translation* op. cit. p. 182.

<sup>21</sup> In “Necessary yet Impossible,” Spivak writes: “In our time, in postcolonial countries, decolonizing the mind in translation practices has mostly not yet been activated or achieved. We tend to translate from translations into imperial languages.” *Living Translation* op. cit. p. 159.

<sup>22</sup> “Translating into English,” *Living Translation* op. cit. p. 94.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> The theme of repair features strongly in *Living Translation*. Drawing on the work of Melanie Klein (much as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick does for her concept of “reparative reading”), Spivak observes: “This originary *Schuldigsein*—being indebted in the Kleinian sense—the guilt in seeing that one can treat one’s mother tongue as one language among many—gives rise to a certain obligation for reparation” (“Translation as Culture,” *Living Translation* op. cit. p. 72). In *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), Mark Sanders builds on Spivak’s Kleinian model of reparative translation in a discussion of the role of languages in testimonies given to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. On this topic, see also Emily Apter, “Afterword: Towards a Theory



- of Reparative Translation,” in Francesco Giusti and Benjamin Lewis Robinson (eds), *The Work of World Literature* (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2020): 209–28.
- <sup>25</sup> In referring to Spivakian untranslatability, let me affirm the obvious: there are many untranslatabilities in her own work, and in my own as well, even if I have at times implicitly restricted the term’s usage by applying it to fugitive dimensions of style and form, theopolitical interdictions, ethnonationalist ontology as it takes root in linguistic nativism, and language passporting at the checkpoint. The diversity of approaches to the untranslatable is fully on display in Barbara Cassin’s *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, a work that I helped edit and translate into English. Each entry, one could say, represents one of many ways of looking at the blackbird of the untranslatable.
- <sup>26</sup> Spivak, “Drapaudi,” *Living Translation* op. cit. p. 130.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> “Translating into English,” *Living Translation* op. cit. pp. 97, 98.
- <sup>30</sup> See, Tamara Chin, “The Afro-Asian Silk Road: Chinese Experiments in Postcolonial Premodernity,” *PMLA* 136.1 (January 2021): 17–38.
- <sup>31</sup> “Translating into English,” op. cit. p. 99.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 101.
- <sup>33</sup> Spivak, “Translator’s Preface to *Of Grammatology*, *Living Translation*, op. cit. p. 32.
- <sup>34</sup> Patrick Wolfe’s email to Spivak, cited in footnote to “Translating into English,” *Living Translation* op. cit. p. 94.
- <sup>35</sup> Spivak, “Imperative to Re-imagine the Planet,” op. cit. p. 341.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.

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