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The Freedom of the Translator in the Age of Precarious Mobility

The Humanities, Area Studies, and Logistics

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Border Performance: Area Studies and the Humanities in the Neoliberal University

In the following discussion, I will avail myself of a critique of the Area Studies to illustrate the general problematic of mobility and migrancy in the Humanities. In the early phases of Area Studies – prior to the 1980s - virtually no or only a few indigenous scholars or students were present in the classrooms for Area Studies courses at U.S. and other Western universities. An area and its inhabitants were distant objects with which area experts assumed no or little personal relations. Most often, the very few students from the object area who happened to be present there were treated largely as “native informants.” Today, a sizable portion, or sometimes the majority, of such a class consists of students from the object area or who are ethnically related to it. How can we understand these changes in relation to geopolitical changes and the challenges of global population management? In view of the anticipated end of

the old disciplinary formation of Area Studies, what are their purposes still worth preserving? How should we transform Area Studies so as to rejuvenate the intellectual productivity and critical relevance of the Humanities to current global situations? Or should we abolish the Humanities and replace them with an entirely new disciplinary formation?

As a prelude to this discussion, I would like the reader to bear in mind the inherently *social* aspect of knowledge production in the Area Studies. Unlike in the normative sciences, where objects of study can be of a theoretical or general nature, the objects proper to the Area Studies are thought to be an intrinsic part of the communities to which they belong. Yet, in the same way that capital names a social relation abstracted from labor power, the social relations organized by knowledge production in the Area Studies are also subject to a form of abstraction. This is not the time to theorize the passageways between these two forms of abstraction; in lieu of that discussion, what I would like to bring attention to here is the way in which a certain element of *performativity* plays a prominent role in suturing the two together.

In the neoliberal university, where *performance* in general has become the object of elaborate surveillance and self-surveillance technologies (Falter 2015), a special kind of performance has been delegated to those fields like Area Studies, for which the inherently social aspect of knowledge production is always visible. Intellectual workers in these fields are rewarded for embodying and performing in an attractive, "authentic" way, linguistico-cultural borders, if not the implicit equivalence between language and people that is a staple of post-Romantic geopolitical organization. The job of *border performance* engaged by the Area Studies is very much analogous to that of workers in the tourism industry (Schedel 2015); in non-elite universities, especially, they are today often

simply a direct extension of that industry. What I would like to draw attention to here, however, is the necessary element of performativity that binds together the proliferation of borders, making it seem as if the border is prior to the social relation that it codifies.

I understand the term "performativity" in this context as a dramatic form of staging – specifically the staging of the ontological and metaphysical work surreptitiously required to make the areal basis for the disciplinary divisions of humanistic knowledge instituted in the wake of colonial-imperial modernity seem natural and given. This is the work of focalizing ethnocentrism, logocentrism, and phonocentrism into a single unitary stack, grounded and naturalized in the form of the normative area – areas that primarily take the form, in the postcolonial world, of nation-states and civilizational entities such as "the West."

Area is a concept that names not territory so much as the apparatus in which subjects are produced. The comprehensive relation between knowledge production and geopolitical region or area, regularly mediated by the bi-polar structure of colonial-imperial modernity, constitutes together what I call the *apparatus of area*. The Kantian formulation of the relation between the universal and the particular, which Samuel Weber describes as having been historically situated at the center of learned reflection on the role of the Humanities (Weber 1985, 15), is not just a *philosophical* problem to the extent that it is realized in the *disciplinary and social organization* of the Humanities as a whole. It is thus a performative act characteristic of colonial-imperial modernity in general to qualify schools of thought with geocultural appellations. These names, nation-states and civilizations, are both the result of the history of colonialism and imperialism as well as the index for measuring the value and positionality inherent in social relations

on a global scale. The amphibological status of areas, caught between the production of subjectivity and the capture of labor for the extraction of wealth and the accumulation of surplus value is a defining characteristic of modernity. In Marx, it goes under the name of *primitive accumulation* (Walker 2019). One of the reasons why primitive accumulation has become the object of renewed theoretical interest today is because of the way in which it enables researchers to pinpoint a crucial intersection between the commodification of labor and the abstraction of anthropological difference. The name for that intersection is *the production of subjectivity*.

The apparatus of area is a crucible for the production of subjects. The subjects produced by this apparatus are coded by various forms of *anthropological difference* – a term that I use to designate a dual continuum that runs from the relation between *homo sapiens* and other species (typified by the animal/machine dichotomy), on the one hand, to the relations among different human communities (typified by the comparative framework of internationalism and civilizational difference), on the other. Hence, one's status as an academic migrant concerns not simply the borders of the nation-state and the panoply of social differences regulated and represented by it, but also the borders of the humanistic disciplines – and I mean *all* disciplines, not just those that are concerned with foreign areas or specific regions. Here, we are reminded of Samuel Weber's observation about the development of disciplinary autonomy within the historical trajectory of the modern Humanities:

> The university, divided into more or less isolated, self-contained departments, was the embodiment of that kind of limited universality that characterized the cognitive model of professionalism. It instituted areas of training and research,

> which, once established, could increasingly ignore the founding limits and limitations of the individual disciplines. Indeed, the very notion of academic 'seriousness' came increasingly to exclude reflection on the relation of one 'field' to another, and concomitantly, reflection upon the historical process by which individual disciplines established their boundaries (Weber 1987, 32).

In France, this chuckleheaded "seriousness" is accorded the status of institutional writ nowhere more clearly than in the Area Studies, making them an excellent example of the areal basis of the Humanities in general. Section 15 of the Conseil National Universitaire (CNU, "national university council"), the national administrative body that oversees career governance for faculty in Far Eastern and Near Eastern Area Studies, explicitly excludes on its official webpage work that does not "take into account local documentation in the local language" (Section 15, 2018). It would be foolish, however, to place the blame for this founding exclusion, an institutionally-legitimized kind of "racism without races" (Balibar 2007), solely upon Area Studies. The doubling of the local into an identity not just between language and people but also more crucially between epistemological objects and social relations concerns the Humanities as a whole. It concerns, in other words, the distribution of the heterogeneous through an apparatus of area and anthropological difference. Section 15, like the handful of other Humanities sections in the CNU all based on areal difference, is precisely the institutional locus where the Humanities announce a convergence between the epistemological and the social in the control of norms governing population, mobility, and migration. The controls over career mobility, the core task exercised by the CNU, constitute effective leverage over other, more immaterial aspects of mobility. They institute a connection

between the construction of the desire-to-know and the control over social mobility. The fact that the founding exclusion operates in the mode of an invitation to deictic common sense ("the local") only underscores the extent to which the notion of area is ultimately a *densely theoretical* concept. The effects of Area Studies, which consist precisely in suturing place and thought together in a naturalized amphibological construction (for which "Western theory" provides the essential template of mimetic desire in colonial-imperial modernity), are infinitely more theoretical than philosophy itself. Philosophy, even in its function of "generalized translation" (Derrida 2004, 65), could only *dream* of actually producing those kinds of effects. (Hence a great deal of Derrida's work was focused on the problem of fictionality at the heart of iterability that opens up the possibility of metaphysics in general).

From this very schematic discussion, we can draw a simple conclusion: Area Studies have been formed on the basis of a founding exclusion expressed through two elements that should, according to the ethical demands of the apparatus of area, never be brought into communication with each other: the first is the essentially comparative framework at the heart of the international world born out of the colonial-imperial modernity, and the second is the element of the common or the transnational that precedes the framework of comparison (and which is invariably effaced by it). The Area Studies can be conceived as a kind of logistical device designed to interdict inquiry into the conditions that might make legible the notion of a specifically regional, yet somehow ostensibly universal, theoretical production that is both historical and analytical at the same time. The Area Studies, in other words, contribute to the proliferation of amphibological areas for which the fantasy of "Western theory" is the template.

The commonsense exclusion that is the founding gesture of Section 15 in France – and of the areal basis of the Humanities around the world in general – is thus bound up, as Samuel Weber reminds us, with a repression of the historical conditions that gave rise to the organizational matrix of the disciplinary divisions, on the one hand, and the geopolitical divisions, on the other. The bi-polar legacy of the colonial-imperial modernity – the split into the West and the Rest as well as the split into empirical and general or normative social sciences – constitutes *both* the history of disciplinary difference articulated to the geocultural imaginary of a postcolonial world *and* the repression of those differences in a framework of internationality. For the apparatus of area, the interaction between these two heterogeneous types of cross-border mobility function in essentially analogous and mutually-constitutive ways. David Johnson and Scott Michaelsen undoubtedly had something similar in view when they observed, in a volume aptly titled *Border Theory*, that "all of the disciplines and their histories must be brought to bear on the problem of the borderlands if the theorizing of it is not to be blind to the role of nationalist and capitalist 'structure' and 'order' in dominating and disciplining the border" (Johnson & Michaelsen 1997, 2). Borders, whether they pertain to disciplines of knowledge or disciplines of population management, are compositional processes that express movement through time, rather than spatialized stasis. Hence, the notion of "all the disciplines" really points not to the idea of comprehensiveness but to contingency against structure. This element of contingency points to a fundamental indeterminacy and even instability in the areal basis of the Humanities, requiring incessant "re-performance" to sustain itself.

The Humanities Invested in/by Logistics

In an initial phase, the theme of the guest worker can be understood in a positivistic sense as referring to the identity of a certain form of labor within a specific market. In terms of the industry of higher education, the guest worker would be only the most easily recognized figure of "academic mobility" in general. It goes without saying that such mobility cannot be understood without reference to the market conditions that structure and regulate it. Among the disparate processes involved in that process, nothing is more emblematic than higher education's re-configuration, under the auspices of the WTO, into a part of the vast constellation of industries collectively known as the service industries. While finance, information technology and telecommunications, management, retail, and logistics are the earliest primary movers behind the institutionalization of the service industries, the category has expanded to include tourism, law, entertainment, security, healthcare, and education, etc. Many of these sectors represent practices and resources that might have been until recently considered national public goods; today, we might also recognize in them a figure of the common that comes before, and goes beyond, the historically-specific construction of the nation-state.

Within this context, the situation of academic labor reproduces an opposition internal to the attempts, within the juridical frameworks that govern service industries globally or regionally through free trade agreements, to distinguish different, hierarchical forms of labor. Jane Kelsey, one of the leading critics of the proliferation of so-called free trade agreements such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), the Trade in Services Agreement (TiSA), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), CETA, etc., summarizes the distinction in terms of regulatory regimes:

“Rich countries want to define the movement of élite workers as a ‘trade’ issue but treat the international mobility of any other kinds of workers as an immigration issue” (Kelsey 2017, 30). The regulatory regime affects labor by determining organization of the market, turning the distinction between migrancy and mobility into a political issue for the institutions of the modern nation-state. For the growing crop of globalized, exclusively anglophone universities, arrangements akin to those for inter-corporate transferees and guarantees for contractual service providers (both of which are integral to FTAs such as TiSA) could provide important tools for managing global labor mobility under the guise of the trade/immigration dichotomy

While migrant labor within universities today is often subjected to vastly differential treatment depending on which side of the immigration/trade dichotomy one falls, let us also not forget that academic labor – which I’m trying to define in relation to a generalized economy of material and immaterial border management – itself reproduces this distinction internally. This point is somewhat counter-intuitive and requires explanation. First, let’s start by looking at what Kelsey has to say about the position of labor overall in the context of the impending Trade in Services Agreement (TiSA), a transnational free trade agreement designed to create a global operating environment advantageous to the service industries: “Labour is rarely visible, except as a commodity, a mode of delivery, or a ‘barrier to trade’” (Kelsey 2017, 26). The invisibility of labor would not seem, at first glance, to have much to do with academic labor, especially since the 1990s, when it progressively becomes the object of incessant evaluation concerning precisely the indicators of visible performance. Yet when we begin to think of academic labor in general in relation to translation, the picture changes rapidly, and unseen connections

appear. The vaunted "invisibility of the translator" brought to attention during the 1990s by Lawrence Venuti is barely the tip of the iceberg when it comes to an account of the relation between Translation and Logistics. *Logistics* is the name that summarizes the moments when labor in the services industry, described by Kelsey, becomes otherwise "visible": i.e., in the "mode of delivery" of commodities, or commodified resources and services, in cross-border geography.

We should not be surprised to discover that labor in the Humanities today increasingly conforms to a logistical model. After all, that is effectively what the notion of education as a service industry implies. It is more unsettling, however, to realize that Logistics has come to represent, in a very real sense, the core mission of knowledge production in the Humanities. The advantage of a logistical model of the Humanities lies primarily in its ability to profitably manage the performativity of borders. Capital's fundamental interest derives from the conflicting impetus to subject, on the one hand, social relations to a homogeneous measure of value, and to retain, on the other hand, a panoply of material and immaterial forms of social segmentation that index the differential value of labor commodities from which can be extracted surplus value and upon which flourish unequal regimes of accumulation. Logistics is the science of simultaneously managing these conflicting goals through the *index of efficiency* as an absolute value in itself. The index of efficiency, of course, is thoroughly performative, constantly submitting workers to performance evaluations. This type of management philosophy, based on *the self-referentiality of value*, conveniently provides the Humanities with a way seemingly to escape from or avoid the crisis of valorization due to the multiplicity of standards and the collapse of time as the measure of work that has come to characterize a post-Fordist,

globalized economy. It also further occults the paradoxical form of historicity and its forgetting that we saw crystallized in the disciplinary divisions of the Humanities.

Referentiality is not just a concern of hermeneutic value to the Area Studies, but is finally a key infrastructural obsession related to finance and the process of capitalist valorization (Solomon 2017). Throughout the early founding of the Area Studies in North America during the Cold War, the Area Studies were haunted by the ideal of perfect self-referentiality that took the form of hermetic enclosure – researchers could be simply indifferent not only to knowledge outside of their discipline-area, but also of the ways in which cultural knowledge was related to finance, extraction and logistics in their area of specialization. Today, that dream of a perfect self-referentiality that would serve as an alibi for capitalist accumulation has been displaced from Area Studies to Logistics, increasingly indistinguishable from each other.

For the project of a politically-engaged Humanities, Logistics provides a template for understanding how the apparatus of area functions as a device for regulating subjectivity across multiple domains of knowledge production, financialization/audit culture, and global population management. One of the first lessons that the logistical perspective imparts concerns the performative aspect of borders. The *logistics of borders* concerns not just their deployment, surveillance, control, negotiation, and use for capital accumulation, but also the repression of their historicity, hence the need to constantly re-perform the border in a disciplined fashion. The logistics of borders, in other words, is a comprehensive, performative apparatus for dealing with what Samuel Weber has identified as "*the ambivalence of demarcation*" (Weber 1985, 15) at the heart of the bi-polar organization of the Humanities.

In terms of the foundational distinction between reason and culture that lies at the heart of competing philosophies about the mission of the modern university (Clark 2002; Readings 1997), the recategorization of higher education under the rubric of a service industry emblematizes a definitive transformation of that opposition. It is as if the opposition had been short-circuited by a compulsive identification of the two. The "general idea of the university as a site of cultural legislation," which "served to underwrite a vague and expressly anti-theoretical notion of [national cultural identity] as a kind of 'meta-subject,'" has been collapsed into the "ideal of the autonomy of rational enquiry, which in practice become the ideal of the autonomy of a discipline" (Clark 2002). Henceforth, the Humanities become a site of *border performance*, essentially appended to the tourism industry as a figure of global labor management. The historical trajectories and concomitant repression of history paradoxically seen in disciplinary divisions are a crucial point of articulation for any attempt to free both the Humanities and migrant labor from the sort of subjectivation typified by the becoming-service industry of the Humanities. Hence, we should begin by heeding Brett Neilson's call to account not just for the "philological and hermeneutic concerns" of "traveling theory," but also for the "infrastructural conditions of transport, communication, memory, or economy" (Neilson 2014, 132–133) that articulate the production of subjectivity to production as an economic activity. Among those infrastructural conditions, the form of performativity peculiar to disciplinary divisions or borders in their relation to the geopolitical divisions play a crucial role in establishing a paradoxical repression of history in the midst of an overtly historicizing construction.

Translation

In the Humanities, nothing suggests itself as an institutional practice of demarcation as strongly as Translation. As Brett Neilson argues in a pathbreaking essay from 2014 on the relation between Logistics and Translation, if Logistics might be understood broadly as the "technical operation" of globalization-for-capitalist-ends, then Translation is the corresponding "social practice" that coopts various modalities, from establishing the protocols of "cultural interoperability" to redefining the role of human labor as a supplement to algorithmic processes, to that same rationality of ends.

As part of a long-term interest in exploring the relation between the production of knowledge and the geopolitical organization of global populations through the apparatus of area, or again, the relation between the disciplinary divisions in the Humanities and other salient divisions in a world organized through the trope of internationality (such as the division of labor and the division of nationality concretized in the state), my attention has particularly focused on *the labor of translation*. Needless to say, the labor of translation is intimately connected to the notion of migrant labor associated with the figure of the guest worker, yet for that very reason, it could easily be assumed that such labor occupies a peripheral position within the Humanities as a whole, which are still predominantly organized on a national basis (i.e., the distinction between national and foreign language continues to play the dominant organizing role, in terms, variously, of language, labor, disciplinary division, etc). On the contrary, I would like to argue, not just as Mezzadra and Neilson have done, that, "area studies played a crucial role in a new *production* of the world" (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013, 42), but rather that *the*

operation of translation typical of Area Studies characterizes the work of the Humanities as a whole, not just the disciplines concerned with overtly "foreign" languages and peoples. The modern regime of translation, exemplified by the role of translation in the establishment of national language, extends beyond language, becoming a general model for social relations in a capitalist regime of accumulation organized around the nation-state. The labor of translation occupies a central, albeit un- or under-acknowledged, role in humanistic knowledge production, and hence, *the subjectivity of the researcher-as-translator, or the unrecognized quality of a "guest worker" shared by all academic labor, is an issue of utmost importance for understanding the political link between population management and knowledge production*.

Yann Moulier-Boutang's comments a decade-and-a-half ago about *the meaning of freedom for labor* deserve, in this context, to be dusted off and related anew to the curious situation of translational labor caught in the crucible of the apparatus of area today:

> "In its most important material dimension, freedom is the unshackled possibility, not so much to refuse all forms of constraint of an economic nature, but to withdraw from a type of work *in such and such a place* in order to choose another type of work, another activity, other means to make a living, *elsewhere* but always within the economy of exchange..." (Moulier-Boutang 2001, 109).

Two things are clear as pertains to the industry of higher education: 1) the freedom of *exit* is not only heavily constrained by the essentially national configuration of the industry, it is also subject to constraints from an additional layer of disciplinary divisions that are intrinsically connected to the repressed historicity of the modern regime of translation and the apparatus of area. 2)

"The economy of exchange" organized through markets is realized in the Humanities precisely through the historical forms of translation coded by the disciplinary divisions. Precisely because it is mediated through the production of knowledge which itself is the enigmatic, analogical double of all the other social practices that constitute "the world," this "economy of exchange" is always implicated in a practice of *translation*. Translation names the concrete form that exchange value takes in the university, a general problematic of academic labor in the service of capital within the modern Humanities. The reduction of Translation to Logistics that characterizes the transformation of the Humanities into a service industry exacerbates the translation of social value into exchange value, heightening the need to constantly perform borders. In this configuration, the freedom to move "elsewhere" is already registered by the apparatus of area as a form of systemic reinforcement. That is why the West can never be understood simply as a cartographic device, but is always implicated in a paradoxical scheme of logical difference articulated to repressed historical divisions. Hence, the meaning of freedom for translational labor will have to be reinvented to better confront the performative nature of the logistics of borders.

In Translation Studies, the *freedom of the translator* is often contrasted to the importance of norms (Chesterman 2016). Yet if "academic freedom is thus an institutional affair, not solely a matter of individual free speech" (Clark 2002), the institutional aspect of freedom in translation bears a direct relation to the historical trajectory of disciplinary divisions that coalesce in the modern regime of translation. That is why it is crucial to remember the repressed historical difference coded in disciplinary divisions as institutionalized forms of translation and address. An account of the historically-specific reasons why the Humanities have not been

able to mount sustained resistance and present alternative visions to their transformation into a service industry cannot afford to leave out, on the one hand, a critical genealogy of the Area Studies' performative role as a logistical translation machine carefully situated on the institutional periphery – a performative role whose importance has been out of all proportion to their relative intellectual insignificance, nor leave out, on the other hand, the indifferent complicity of those Humanities disciplines thought to be normative, hence disconnected from empirical areas.

Andrew Chesterman's three principles of "emancipatory translation" hold some interest for a possible politics of academic labor as a guest worker/translator. The first, which Chesterman dubs *the TIANA Principle*, is "opposed to the TINA [There is no alternative] principle beloved of certain economists and politicians" (Chesterman 2016, 191). The A, which stands for "always" in Chesterman's revision of TINA ("there is no alternative" becomes "there is always an alternative"), fortuitously recalls the relation between origin and contraband undermined by iterability. Hence, Chesterman's second principle is, unsurprisingly, the *Dialogical Principle* inspired by Mikhail Bakhtin. Dialogue indicates the foregrounding of relationality that occurs when origin no longer occupies the position of an ontological given. To this ontology of transindividuation corresponds a politics that might be summarized, minimally, as the demolition of neoliberal Thatcherism, which holds that the individual is the only meaningful unit of analysis and uses the state to create social conditions propitious to capital accumulation. Yet the object of demolition unleashed by these first two principles returns surreptitiously in Chesterman's third principle, which I have dubbed the *Principle of Individuality*. Rather than seeing translation as an act of transductive individuation, Chesterman takes us back,

with a discussion of the legal rights and responsibilities of a translator, to the realm of the social contract based on presuppositions that amount to an implicit theory of possessive individualism. This is the "orthonomic" trap identified by Myriam Suchet: "The illusion which consists in thinking 'language' as an autonomous and stable entity persists only within a certain program of thinking, an orthonomic paradigm so to speak, through which crystallizes the equation {a single, indivisible language} = {a coherent speaking subject} = {a nation-state}" (Suchet 2016, 48).

With no space left for further discussion, we might quickly turn to Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's emphasis on the affective principle of *hapticality* as a substitute for Chesterman's compromised third principle. Hapticality is a form of feeling that is neither individual nor collective, but transductive: "This form of feeling was not collective, not given to decision, not adhering or reattaching to settlement, nation, state, territory or historical story; nor was it repossessed by the group" (Moten & Harney 2013, 98). Hapticality, "the capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you," is precisely the affective structure of translation. Translation involves speaking as other, without constituting an individual. Herein lies our freedom, the true freedom of the translator/guest worker. This is not the freedom to feel as one likes (consumerism), nor the freedom to control access for others (gatekeeper professionalism), nor the freedom to remain indifferent (disciplinary specialization and managerialism), but rather the freedom to touch and be touched by the indeterminacy, potentiality, and virtuality of what is common and shared. The freedom to translate, atopically and indisciplinarily, is *the freedom to struggle for a radical transformation of the apparatus of area and anthropological difference*.

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