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Translation, Violence, and the Heterolingual Intimacy

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The Biopolitics of Translation

The question that looms ahead of us today is how can we mobilize translation in order to help us survive the potentially violent transition to a global society of one form or another? The assumption of this essay is that the greatest source of violence we face today is not political, but rather biopolitical: it concerns the ways in which life becomes an object that can become treated in terms of "populations" which are then organized according to various competing classificatory schemes that oscillate between the biological, anthropological, and the political.

Translation is related to violence in two, essential ways. The first intrinsically occurs in the operation of translation itself, precisely because it is never definitive and always bears some kind of metaphorical violence towards the original enunciation or text. Any translation is inherently subject to the ever-present possibility of counter-translation, against which further arguments for retranslation can be posed, thus forming a kind of on-going linguistic tug-of-war. Precisely because of this possibility, the institution of preferred, "standard" translations inevitably governs

not just linguistic exchange but social organization. Hence, the second aspect of violence seen in translation concerns the historical dimensions of social praxis, and it occurs precisely when indeterminacy is resolved through institutionalization and its disciplinary measures. It is for this reason that the politics of translation must address the segmentation of society according to gradients of majority/minority relations composed on the basis of gender, class, ethnicity, race and postcolonial or civilizational difference.

In 2006, Naoki Sakai and I co-edited an issue of the multilingual series *Traces* titled "Translation, Biopolitics, Colonial Difference"[1] in which we presented an argument for articulating the indeterminacy of translation as a mode of social practice to the contingent commodifications of labor-power and the nexus of knowledge that governs anthropological difference. The call for papers for that issue proposed to prospective authors the idea of bringing *translation* squarely into a politically-informed discussion about the production of both social relations and humanistic knowledge in the context of anthropological difference inherited from colonialism. We did not hide our ambition to push the idea of cultural translation beyond "strategic essentialism" to present a new vision of syncretic knowledge and social practice that would directly subvert the anthropo-technological status of "the West" as both exception and a form of immunity. Central to this discussion was the notion of a *biopolitics of translation*. In a series of lectures in the late 1970s, Michel Foucault introduced and elaborated the assorted concepts of "biopolitics" and "governmentality" as tools for thinking about the way in which the processes of life – and the possibility of controlling and modifying them through the technical means – enter the sphere of power and become its chief concern. Foucault's effort has generally been understood as an

innovative attempt to introduce a new ontology, beginning with the body, that would provide a way of thinking the political subject outside the dominant tradition of modern political philosophy that frames it as a subject of law[2]. "Biopolitics" thus names a quotidian sphere of ostensibly apolitical (or depoliticized) social action and relations – what Foucault calls "the entry of life into history" – that is nevertheless invested with crucial effects for the production of social subjects. These effects, far removed from the role traditionally ascribed to politics per se inasmuch as they concern population management, nevertheless bear directly upon the construction of what is at stake in the formation of power relations.

In order to use tools from Foucault's conceptual kit, however, we found it was not only possible but also necessary to subject the latent and pervasive Occidentalism in his work to a thorough critique while at the same time opening up possibilities for an understanding of biopolitics in a global context. The notion of a "biopolitics of translation" acquires conceptual validity and critical importance with a view to the specifically modern – which is to say, global – phenomenon of the linguistic standardization associated with nationalization and colonial land appropriation. Ever since the concomitant birth of philology and biology, modernity has been associated with the advent of a global cartographic imaginary that places peoples with no prior 'memory' of migratory contact, or only 'deep memory' such as etymology, into relation through the mediation of an imperial center. As the transition to a global form of spatial imaginary, *modernity* begins, linguistically speaking, when the project of standardization is extended across all manner of social differences to encompass diverse populations in the process of national homogenization (which occurs, as Jacques Bidet argues, on the level of world *system*)

and domestic segmentation (which occurs on the level of "class" difference or *structure*)[3]. This process must be seen, in turn, in the context of contact with other *global* populations undergoing the same traumatic process of systemic definition and structural segmentation. The *biopolitics of translation* thus names that space of exchange and accumulation in which politics appears to have been preempted by the everyday occurrence of language. Our research shows that when "translation" is understood according to a representational scheme of the epistemological subject, it names not the operation by which cultural difference is "bridged", but rather the pre-emptive operation through which originary difference – what is encountered when translation is understood as an act of social practice – is segmented and organized according to the various classificatory schemes of biologico-sociological knowledge emerging out of the colonial encounter.

Seen from this perspective, the modern regime of translation is a concrete form of "systemic complicity" whose primary function is population management within the purview of imperial domination. In other words, it is a globally-applicable technique of segmentation aimed at managing social relationships by forcing them to pass through circuits on the "systemic" level. In Sakai's research on the transnational discursive structure of both Japanese studies and the institution of the Japanese Emperor system, or again in the relation between imperial nationalism and the maintenance of ethnic minorities,[4] we learn that the geography of national sovereignty and civilizational difference that constitutes the geocultural and geopolitical map of both the world and the Human Sciences indicates an important kind of subjective technology or governmental technique that has, until recently, been thoroughly naturalized by an anthropological discourse of "culture". It is only today that we can begin to see how a

multiplicity of disciplinary arrangements forming an economy of translation (in place since the colonial era but far outliving colonialism's demise) actually produces differentially-coded subjects, typically national/racial ones, whose constitution is interdependent and, at specific intervals, actually complicit in a single, yet extremely hierarchical, state of domination. Our aim in the *Traces* volume was thus to trace a series of genealogies within which "translation" is no longer seen as simply an operation of transfer, relay, and equivalency, capable of bridging difference, but rather assumes a vital historical role in the constitution of the social.

Address vs. Communication: a poststructuralist concern

In the remainder of this short essay, it might be useful to backtrack a bit and consider the limits of the poststructuralist approach to translation. The indeterminacy exposed by poststructuralist perspectives provides a crucial base line from which to see how translation is mobilized in a biopolitical way. Predictably, we will argue that this indeterminacy must be further contextualized if it is to avoid formalization and help us establish a truly effective basis for social movements of critical thought.

The two key aspects of Sakai's understanding of translation are: 1) the distinction between separate moments of "address" and "communication"; and, 2) the exceptional position of the translator. Both of these aspects reflect concerns central to poststructuralism: the former with the "event of language"[5] above and beyond the determinate meaning of any particular utterance – the fact, as yet inexplicable to science, that linguistic utterance in general is possible for human beings; the latter with the logic of the exclusion or exception.

According to Sakai, whereas "address" indicates a *social relation* (that between addresser and addressee) that is primarily practical and performative in nature, hence undetermined and open to the negotiation of meaning, "communication" names the imaginary representation of that relation in terms of a series of unities denoted by pronominal identities and informational content, i.e., who we are supposed to be and what we were supposed to mean. Theories of communication, normative by necessity, regularly obscure the fact of address in communication. They are derived from the extra-linguistic assumption that supposedly "we" should be able to "communicate" among ourselves if "we" are a linguistic community. Sakai writes: "addressing does not guarantee the message's arrival at the destination. Thus, 'we' as a pronominal invocation in *address* designates a relation, which is performative in nature, independent of whether or not 'we' actually communicate the same information."[6] The introduction of a distinction between *address* and *communication* has the signal merit of allowing us a way to conceive the radical exteriority of social relationships to the production of meaning without a predetermined, normative approach.

In itself, "address" does not communicate anything, except to indicate the presence of "communication" as a possibility to be actualized or not in the course of translation. Address is thus an initiation to potentiality: it indicates a relationship essential for signification to take place and order meaning, yet it does not signify anything in particular. Although this potentiality is inherent in any linguistic situation, the reason it is particularly evident in translational exchange is because the possibility of failure, of "not communicating", is immediately apparent to all participants. What Sakai calls "the regime of homolingual address"[7] is thus the model according to which this negativity is

understood as a simple lack of signification, rather than as an unconditioned potentiality "to not be" in the context of a positive relation. In other words, if in translational exchange I do not understand you, it is only under the influence of the homolingual address that I can *assume* the reason for this incomprehension is due to sociological factors such as membership in representative communities. In fact, if we really were not to understand each other, there would be no way for us to check with each other to see if the problem in fact arises from any factor (such as communal membership) in particular. To equate not being "in" communication to the notion that addresser and addressee are not "in" the same social group is to confuse potentiality with representation. Being "out" of a social group concerns a question of status that can only be verified through protocols of representation (the "membership card" being only the most obvious). The institution of homolingual address is thus based on a model of community abstracted from the notion of communion or fusion – what Jean-Luc Nancy calls, in a celebrated treatment of the philosophical limits of modern community, "immanentism"[8]. The potentiality to be "out" of communication, however, is the force of address that inheres in every instance of communication regardless of representative social status. Any instance of communication indicates a potentiality (the moment of address) as well as signifies a determinate meaning. This amphiboly bears important ramifications for a metaphysics of language revealed by translation. As such, it includes two sides: one side is the actuality of the event, the fact that there is language. It both *indicates* a social relationship (language is always initially a relation between two or more people) as well as *signifies* a certain meaning. The other side is the fact that this actuality (the failure to communicate) does not present itself as the result of a power that has not been realized, but rather as a potentiality, a power not-to-

realize. Needless to say, if it is possible to choose to communicate, it is always equally possible to try not to communicate. Can one be certain that the attribution of non-communication to "objective" factors such as communal membership is not in itself replete with unexamined institutionalized choices (such as the standardization of language into national forms under the auspices of the State) that would make trying-not-to communicate into a form of communication? Such certainty can only be achieved at the unacceptable price of rejecting the notion of social construction itself. Evidently, the effectivity of this power "to not be" does not occur simply because of presumed gaps between linguistic communities, but also because to try to communicate is to expose oneself to exteriority, to a certain exteriority that cannot be reduced to the externality of a referent to a signification.[9] The social praxis denoted in our age by the word "translation" is the linguistic situation that makes this feature – common, in fact, to all types of linguistic exchange – most evident precisely because it contrasts with the State-oriented representation of exchange between discrete spheres of *a priori* communal difference. Modes of address that take this elementary facet of linguistic exchange into account are what Sakai calls "heterolingual address".

The heterolingual intimacy: a constructive dialogue with poststructuralism

We can now summarize several preliminary conclusions concerning the heterolingual address: 1) it is not based on which *position* one adopts (or, most likely, the position into which one is placed), but is rather based on the potentiality thrown into relief by the exceptional position of the translator; 2) the plurality of languages in a given situation does not in itself guarantee access to the heterolingual mode of address, which still requires the recognition

of and commitment to heterogeneity in all situations, even those normally thought to be "monolingual" (hence the ubiquitous rejection of Jakobson's notion of "translation proper"); 3) the ethics of heterolingual address calls for the invention of new figures that combine the common and the foreign.

What does the experience of heterolingual address tell us, then, about social relations? Significantly, Sakai characterizes it in terms of *distance*: "In our case, failure in communication means that each of us stands exposed to, but *distant* from, the other without grasping the cause for 'our' separation."[10] Or again, a bit further on: "[...] the disparity between addressing and communicating [...] expresses the essential *distance* not only of the addressee from the addresser but also of the addressee or addresser from himself or herself"[11]. The heterolingual address is thus a form of ethics, in which all parties to communication remember, in view of address, the element of distance in every social relation.

"*As you now speak, that is ethics*"[12]. Such is the deceptively simple formula proposed by Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben at the end of a seminal work devoted to the metaphysical implications of pronominal invocation that he calls, following Jakobson, "shifters" (the usage of which oscillates, just as we saw with translation, between indication and signification). Agamben's ethics of enunciation is construed not in terms of *positions* (as was the case in the concept of "enunciative position" adopted by anglo-american Cultural Studies and identity politics) but in terms of *potentialities* – precisely, the potentiality not to be. For the poststructuralist critic of translation, the point of interest would thus inevitably be drawn towards the ways in which such potentialities are variously organized and reorganized into modes of silence, rhetoric and logic.[13]

Does this ethics carry only a negative injunction to maintain "distance", as Sakai apparently maintains, or can it allow, even necessitate, certain forms of proximity? If the "intimate enemy" – to borrow from the title of a well-known work by Ashis Nandy – is a salient feature of postcolonial relations, violence in our postcolonial world cannot be thought without reference to intimacy. Beyond this, we will want to ask: to what extent might the economy of distance required by the ethical relation of heterolingual address be implicated in other practical social relations, such as gender, where the distinction between public and private plays an enormously important role, or again, intellectual difference (Etienne Balibar's term for the division of labor), where the distinction between levels of knowledge plays a crucial role in the organization of property? It is precisely because of these relations and questions that Sakai's notion of heterolingual address (if not Nandy's concept of the intimate enemy) would greatly benefit, I believe, by taking heed of the call for *intimacy* issued by feminist postcolonial critics such as Gayatri Spivak: "the requirement for intimacy," she explains, "brings a recognition of the public sphere as well"[14], especially when it concerns segmentation due to class and gender difference in a postcolonial context of translation. The emphasis Spivak places on the importance, for feminist translators, of being able "[to speak] [...] of intimate matters in the language of the original" can be read as an invitation to rethink the theoretical boundaries of community – precisely the field into which gender relations intervene. Intimacy[15] could thus also be construed as a call to obviate translation by taking a "non-native" language as one's own while at the same time requiring of native speakers a comparable readiness to recognize in foreign accents of all sorts a new kind of social intimacy.

Unfortunately, there is no space here to consider the practical ways in which heterolingual intimacy can be promoted and even instituted. Undoubtedly, the principal obstacle incurred in the effort to mobilize translation against violence without denying either the forms of metaphorical violence that inevitably accompany translational practice or the possibilities for alternative social formation that exist at any point in history, lies, minimally, in avoiding both the kind of immediate fusion seen in Nancy's "immanentism" as well as the kind of distantiation that unwittingly converges upon a fraternal model of community. Precisely because the heterolingual address is based upon the frail ontological potential not to be, it bears an intrinsic relation to the juridico-institutional notion of freedom, espoused by theoreticians of the modern nation-State such as Ernst Renan, that requires a further settling of accounts, particularly, once again, in a postcolonial context. As noted in various ways by Alain Brossat, Roberto Esposito and Jacques Derrida, this juridico-institutional notion of freedom has led, historically, to an obsession with defensive – even preemptive – immunity as the other side of community. The contemporary *denouement* of this obsession is to be seen in the expansion of political *ressentiment* among populations in the wealthy nations of the world (especially the contemporary "return to the West"), and the tendency to use instruments of global power – including especially law – in a unilateral fashion.

One of the areas of study, besides gender, in which translation might be most fruitfully applied to the problem of violence is thus to be found in the historical dimensions of international law in a (post)colonial context. A growing body of engaged scholarship, among which the writings of Blanco, Liu, Dudden and Derrida[16] must be given special prominence, shows that translation has played a crucial, biopolitical role in the transition from ancient

imperial realms to a single, global world divided into a geocultural system of sovereign nation-states and migratory labor markets commanded by a dominant center. Translation not only makes *History* (in the modern sense of subjectivity), but of equal importance, also makes a *World* (the frame or ground without which subjectivity would seem to be impossible). The legacy of this modern regime of translation is not limited to the historical injustice inscribed in the very framework of international law and the geocultural divisions over which it normatively presides, i.e. it is not limited to the Eurocentric legacy of *World History* as such, but extends in fact to encompass the very disciplinary divisions of the Human Sciences, the anthropological presuppositions upon which they are based (even today), and, perhaps most pertinently, the geopolitical divisions of the post/colonial world order that organize, justify, and rationalize biopolitical violence.

Frances Daly's critical evaluation of Agamben's attempt to rethink the categories of "individual", "citizen", "sovereignty", and "general will" that underpin the discourse of rights could be cited here as a final example of the kind of constructive dialogue with poststructuralism needed to fashion a new concept of heterolingual intimacy that could be mobilized against contemporary biopolitical violence on a global scale. Daly's critique would, to my mind, be further enhanced (and surely modified) by expanding the scope of dialogue to including not just the postructuralist reinscription of rights but also language as well (the two are, in Agamben's case, as in Derrida's, intrinsically linked). Indeed, Daly implicitly points to this connection when she writes, the "attempt to rid [...] nation-states of the category of the refugee [in order to cover-up the violence of exclusion]"[17] is both *linguistic* and *practical*.

Precisely the purview of the heterolingual address...

[1] *Traces* is currently published in English, Chinese, Japanese and Korean editions. The English edition of vol. 4, "Translation, Biopolitics, Colonial Difference", is published by Hong Kong University Press (2006). An essay presenting this work to a francophone audience and drawing parallels to the advent of postfordism was published in volume 29 of the French revue *Multitudes*. Cf. Jon Solomon and Naoki Sakai, tr. Christophe Degoutin, "Traduction, biopolitique et différence coloniale", in: *Multitudes* No. 29, summer 2007, pp. 5-13.

[2] Maurizio Lazzarato, tr. Ivan Ramirez, "From Biopower to Biopolitics", in: *Pli* 13, 2002, pp. 100-111.

[3] Cf., Jacques Bidet, *Théorie Générale*, Paris: Presses Universitaires 1999.

[4] Naoki Sakai, "You Asians", in: *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, Harry D. Harootunian & Tomiko Yoda ed., vol. 99, no. 4, Fall 2000, pp. 789-818; "Subject and Substratum", in: *Cultural Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3 and 4, 2000, pp. 462-530.

[5] Cf. Christopher Fynsk, *Language and Relation…That there is language*, Stanford: Stanford University 1996.

[6] Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity* (hereafter abbreviated as *TS*), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997, pp. 4-5.

[7] Naoki Sakai, *TS,* p. 6.

[8] Jean-Luc Nancy, tr. Peter Conner, et. al., *The Inoperative Community*, Minneapolis: Minnesota 1991, p. 3.

[9] Cf. Naoki Sakai, *TS*, p. 7.

[10] Ibid., Emphasis in original.

[11] *TS*, 9. Emphasis in original.

[12] Giorgio Agamben, tr. Karen Pinkus with Michael Hardt, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota 1991, p. 108.

[13] This three-part staging of agency in language is taken from Gayatri Spivak, "The Politics of Translation", in: G. Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, New York: Routledge 1993, p. 179-200. In comparative work devoted to Agamben and postcolonial theorists such as Lydia Liu and Naoki Sakai, we have demonstrated, for instance, how "the West" as hegemonic subject comes to be constituted – in Agamben's work itself, for instance – through the operation of such metaphysical "shifters" in the operation of translation. Cf. Jon Solomon, "Translation as a Critique of the West: Sakai, Agamben, and Liu", paper presented at the Summer Institute, Chilhac, France, September 2007, jointly organized by the Department of Philosophy, Paris VIII and the Institute for Social Theory, Chiao Tung University.

[14] Gayatri Spivak, "The Politics of Translation", in: G. Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, New York: Routledge 1993, p. 188.

[15] A simple reference will have to substitute in this limited space for a detailed discussion of the promising concept of *caress* in translation advanced by Sathya Rao. Cf. Sathya Rao, "Peut-on envisager l'avenir de la traduction sans plaisir ? Pour une érotique du traduire", in: *META*, vol. 50, n°4, December 2005; http://www.erudit.org/livre/meta/2005/000222co.pdf.

[16] John D. Blanco, "'Within and Outside My Ill-Fated Land': The Philippines between Christendom and the Eurocentric World-Order", unpublished manuscript; Jacques Derrida, *The Eyes of the University*, Stanford: Stanford 2004; Alexis Dudden, "Japan's Engagement with International Terms," in: Lydia Liu (ed.), *Tokens of Exchange: the Problem of Translation in Global Circulation*, Durham: Duke 1999, pp. 165-191; Lydia Liu, *Clash of Empires*, Cambridge: Harvard 2004; and Tobias Warner, "Bodies and Tongues: Alternative Modes of Translation in Francophone African Literature," in: Naoki Sakai and Jon Solomon (eds.), *Translation, Biopolitics, and Colonial Difference*, *Traces No. 4* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University 2006, pp. 295-324. I am currently undertaking a similar project on the Japanese scholar of Shinobu Jumpei (1871-1962) who during the 1930s combined a critique of extraterritoriality and international law with a defense of Japanese imperial nationalism.

[17] France Daly, "The non-citizen and the concept of 'human rights'", in: *Borderlands* e-journal Vol. 3, No. 1, 2004, accessed at http://www.borderlandsejournal.adelaide.edu.au/vol3no1_2004/daly_noncitizen.htm.