Interview with Prof. Dr. Emily Apter*

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APTER TALKS ABOUT HERSELF

My work for some years has centered on the politics of translation, on "theorizing in untranslatables" (or what it means to "philosophize in translation" as the French philosopher and translator Barbara Cassin put it). Cassin and I collaborated on the English edition (APTER; CASSIN, 2014) of the *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon,* a kind of new history of philosophy told from translation's point of view. There is no consensus on what an Untranslatable might be: (a mistranslation? A non-translation? A constant re-translation? A word that runs interference? A border zone/warzone in the world of language wars?), but such questions lent impetus to several books: *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (APTER, 2005), *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (APTER, 2013), *Unexceptional Politics: On Obstruction, Impasse and the Impolitic* (APTER, 2018) and most recently *What is Just Translation?*, a project on language inequality, social harming, reparative translation, and the limits of translation as medium and praxis. For over twenty years I have edited the *Translation/Transnation* series at Princeton University Press, and worked in an editorial capacity with the journals *October, Political Concepts, Diacritics, Public Culture, Comparative Literature*

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and *PMLA*. In addition to translation studies, my teaching at NYU covers comparative method (the history and theory of comparative literature as a discipline), continental philosophy, aesthetics across media, psychoanalysis, sexual politics, and literature (19th century to contemporary fiction and poetics). I served two terms (2015-2022) as Chair of the Department of Comparative Literature at NYU and will soon begin a term as Chair of the Department of French Literature, Thought and Culture. In the past two years I worked closely with faculty in the School of Liberal Studies as well as colleagues in national language departments to develop a Translation Studies Undergraduate Minor and was involved in developing the CALAMEGS Certificate (Comparative Approaches to Literatures of Africa, the Middle East and the Global South) in the Ph.D. program at NYU. In 2017-18 I served as President of the American Comparative Literature Association. In 2019, I was the Daimler Fellow at the American Academy in Berlin, in 2014 a Fellow at the Council of the Humanities Fellow at Princeton, and a Guggenheim Fellow in 2004.

Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada (RBLC): *How do you explain your concept of untranslatability today?*

Untranslatables "today" have no ready definition, but the term, as used by the classical philosopher Barbara Cassin in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, [titled in French *Le vocabulaire européen des philosophies: dictionnaire des intraduisibles*] remains identified with ways of doing philosophy – what Cassin called "philosophizing in languages." Foregrounding Untranslatables involved imagining a history of terms or words (rather than concepts) that become philosophical by virtue of their movement in and across languages. As deterritorialized, plurilingual constructs, as political philologies traversing sovereign borders, Untranslatables in Cassin's (and my own) ascription are distinguished by their mistranslation, their retranslation, their non-translation, and their non-negotiable singularities that are negotiated nonetheless. A kind of cartographic differencing or difference-effect may be ascribed to the Untranslatable. To theorize in Untranslatables entails foregrounding idiom and modes of expressionism in philosophy; it implies interrogating how thinking as process and praxis are translational.

To speak of untranslatability "today" is to allude to a set of issues and debates increasingly prioritized in the comparative humanities since the 1990s. But lest we forget, it's important to underscore that untranslatability is a condition of linguistic communication that refers quite simply to anything not translated. This *not-translated* status was imputed by linguistic archeology to ancient scripts, hieroglyphs, alphabets and archival systems that hadn't yet been decoded. Later the not-translated could be detected a hallmark of the philological practice typical of the European "founders of Comp Lit" who treated plurilingual erudition as a given. Leo Spitzer, Erich Auerbach, Ernst Robert Curtius and their colleagues routinely cited texts in the original because it was understood that mastery of Greek, Latin. French, German, English, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian were part of the toolkit (along with a basic familiarity with Old Norse, Old English, Occitan, Norman French, Middle High German etc.). The Orientalists provided an exception to this rule; they needed to translate materials from languages like Sanskrit, Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, or Classical Chinese. But in translating, they produced their own form of the Untranslatable – a bad form! – derived from the non-coeval "Other" of non-European languages and peoples. A strong case has been made by Edward W. Said, Aamir Mufti and others arguing that

modern translation studies and paradigms of World Literature hail from this Orientalist philological tradition, itself mired in the history of Euro-imperialism.

Colonialism and imperialism relied on translational pedagogies to carry out the proselytizing mission that swept across the Americas, South Asia, the Middle East and Africa. But forced conversion produced its own distinct untranslatability effects, many of them identifiable as strategies of anticolonial resistance. They included syncretic, pagan transpositions of Christian iconography and texts, detournements of the colonizer's language (through colonial mimicry, resignifying, decoy translating), communication in secret tongues, and practices of withholding access to inner meanings. To this last point consider *taqiyya*, a term of Islamic jurisprudence meaning "fear" or "guarding yourself against danger," that served as an Islamic dispensation absolving the offense of blasphemy during the renunciation of faith under duress. It carries the sense of keeping one's own council, preserving faith inwardly despite the outward appearance of compliance with the enemy, or speaking truth to power in the medium of vocal dissimulation. Like a private password to an aural contract with oneself, *taqiyya* grants the subject freedom from submission and the right to silence.

If "untranslatability" as a heuristic has brought fresh attention to the empowering potential of withheld, ungraspable, or resistant forms of language, it has also proved to be something of a red herring. Quite a few readers of my book *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* inferred from the polemical thrust of the title that I was advocating a policy of not translating. I undoubtedly asked for it with that title, but my intention was the opposite. Untranslatability, in my ascription, was closely associated with a critical approach to translation history and politics that challenges the *kumbaya* of universal meaning and papered-over differences. To come at translation theory through untranslatability highlights translation-as-violation, the violent erasure of first nation languages, histories of apartheid, ethnic cleansing, white sovereignty cultural domination, and microaggressions (the latter conversationally scored in brilliant works like Claudia Rankine's *Citizen. An American Lyric* and more recently, *Just Us*). Simply put, translation studies at the time I entered the fray in the 1990s had its stand-out theorist/practioners (Walter Benjamin, George Steiner, Antoine Berman, Henri Meschonnic), but few had focused on the violent colonial legacy of forced translation or the imperialism of Globish.

I probably have my experience as an undergraduate researcher on the Harvard Chiapas Project to thank for my earliest interest in untranslatability. In preparation for working in Zinacantán I studied Tzotzil, a Mayan language spoken in the highland regions of southern Mexico. The encounter with a non-European language, one that required training my mouth and vocal chords to articulate glottal stops (an awareness of the *physics of my vocalizing apparatus* as an obstacle to translatability), brought exhilaration, but also an acute feeling of failure. The limitations of my language skills in relation to my project's ambition (the study of how Indian "talking saints" were dealt with as actors in criminal cases adjudicated by the Mexican court system), put the social scientific pretenses of anthropological field work into crisis. I felt implicated in the production of epistemic violence.

Since that formative time, my goal has been to attend to how language puts up barriers to global information flow and easy-access cultural tourism. Edouard Glissant's "poetics of opacity," crucial to his notions of archipelagan discourse and poetic relation, was generative in this regard. Glissant gives full play to the dense patches of ungraspable, unknowable, inarticulable meaning that structure modes and possibilities of expression. The inflections of dialect and creole, so often suppressed because they

don't conform to standard grammars of dominant (read colonial) languages acquire political and poetic force in Glissant's notion of Carribbean discourse. Opacity is a model with traction the world over, especially in diaspora and indigenous communities, the Global South and the undercommons of slang and dub.

For the purposes of condensation, I would mark out the Untranslatable as:

- a problem of transmedial apperception across the senses (the listening, the looking, the reading, the touching)
- a linguistic measure of non-equivalence
- a poetics of opacity
- a theological interdiction in language
- an expression of sovereign exceptionalism in language
- a philosophical limit, a border of sense-making
- a modality of *Unverständlich*, unintelligibility, speaking in tongues, nonsense
- a *praxis* (a way of thinking philosophically)
- the not-translated (transparent language, *reine Sprache*)
- a *Gavagai* (Willard Von Norman Quine's racist example of "jungle language" but interestingly applied to the indetermination of reference and meaning as in the case of these analytic interrogatives: "For, consider 'gavagai.' Who knows but what the objects to which this term applies are not rabbits after all, but mere stages, or brief temporal segments, of rabbits?").
- a mode of translation failure
- a case of withheld, withdrawn or refused translation
- a politics of translation focused on linguistic passporting and checkpointing
- a form of information-jamming or hack, blocking transfer across distinct mediums
- a relational non-relation between natural and digital (or cybernetic) language

This list, it goes without saying, is by no means exhaustive.

Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada (RBLC)*: In The Translation Zone, you address the role of translation in shaping a global literary canon. How can literatures from peripheral countries improve their performance in this unequal game between languages and literatures?*

A problem I've grappled with, and which your question points to, is the deficit in comparative critical lexicons of theoremes grounded in non-European cultures. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has called for a "global criticality" that counters such center-periphery inequalities. She has made a concerted effort to constitute a vocabulary of keywords that remain true to the languages and places from which they hail. 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."[1] 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. Dilip Menon's forthcoming collection *Changing Theory: Concepts from the Global South* also contributes in no small way to philosophizing in non-European languages, with keywords that tap into the unfinished intellectual and artistic legacies of tricontinental internationals: Afro-Asian solidarity movements in the wake of decolonization, the Bandung conference, archipelagan consciousness as defined by Glissant and "epistemologies of the south," as formulated by Latin American theorists Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Enrique Dussel, Anibal Quijano, and Walter Mignolo among others.

In general, I'd say that concept-work of this kind can be a productive means of redressing some of the glaring inequities in the global marketplace of creative and symbolic capital, or at the very least, provide some ways of negotiating the outsized power-structures of World Languages and World Literatures in publishing, pedagogy, IT, and the international art world.

Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada (RBLC): *In Brazil, there are authors who are trying to formulate new theories of translation, based on Amerindian thought. An example is Prof. Alvaro Faleiros, who is formulating what he calls a shamanic poetics of translation. Are you aware of non-Eurocentric initiatives of this kind?*

I don't know Professor Faleiros's work – I'll be interested to check it out. When I worked on the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* we had occasion to meet with editors of the Arabic, Spanish (Mexico), Italian, Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian, Greek and Portuguese (Brazil) editions. As Cassin, who conceived the original French edition, would note in her *Eloge de la traduction: compliquer l'universel,* each team reoriented the *Dictionary* according to the geopolitics of their region and theoretical *habitus.* As Cassin summarizes it, the Anglophone editors situated the original in postcolonial and gender translation zones, occasionally rewriting original entries and or adding new ones. For the Arabic, Ali Benmakhlouf highlighted juridical and political vocabulary that posed particular challenges for transposition into Arabic or European languages. In the case of the Portuguese edition, Fernando Santoro and Luisa Buarque highlighted historic *métissages* of indigenous languages and Brazilian Portuguese, taking inspiration from a linguistic "anthropophagy" central to Brazilian theory, avant-garde art practice and poetics.[2] Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's *Cannibal Metaphysics* was clearly an important influence on Santoro and his research group. There's a common drive to reclaim *the wild* (brought out recently in the English retranslation of Claude Lévi-Strauss's *La pensée sauvage,* canonically known in English as *The Savage Mind,* as *Wild Thought*). The imperative to decolonize philosophy and anthropology by recuperating Amerindian shamanic perspectivism (a multinaturalist "Amazonian cosmopolitics," as

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1   Anne Freeland, Afterword to René Zavaleta Mercado's *Towards a History of the National-Popular in Bolivia* (MERCADO, 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." (MERCADO, 2018, p. 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.

2   See, Barbara Cassin, *Eloge de la traduction: compliquer l'universel* (Paris: Fayard, 2016) p. 75.

de Castro will call it), and the "cosmopolitical turn" to native cosmologies, animism and transversal species-being for conceptual predicates outside the world-philosophical system of neo-Kantianism, also has had a profound impact on the ethics of planetarity. We can register this impact in the important work of (among others) Dipesh Chakravarty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Bruno Latour, Elisabeth Povinelli, Achille Mbembe, Denise Ferriera da Silva, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing and Marie Louise Pratt.

Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada (RBLC): *Do you consider it important to write History (Histories) of Translation in peripheral countries in order to better visualize the power dynamics that were at stake in each historical period?*

Yes! Very important, emphatically so! The desire to make these power dynamics visible historically was and remains a motivating factor of my book series *Translation/Transnation,* founded in 1999 at the invitation of the visionary editor at Princeton UP, Mary Murrell. I will let a selection of book titles in the series stand in for an answer to your question since they limn cultural trade routes and "trans to trans" literary relations that track how peripheries formed alliances and new reception circuits despite the dominant force-fields of metropolitan publishing networks.

- Azade Seyhan, *Writing Outside the Nation* [on Turkish writing in Germany]
- Kirsten Silva Gruesz, *Ambassadors of Culture: The Transamerican Origins of Latino Writing*
- David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*
- Reda Bensmaïa, *Experimental Nations, or the Invention of the Maghreb*
- Isabel Hofmayr, *The Portable Bunyan*: *A Transnational History of the Pilgrim's Progress*
- Etienne Balibar, *We the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship*
- Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood, eds. *Nation, Language and the Ethics of Translation*
- Srinivas Aravamudan, *Guru English: South Asian Religion in a Cosmopolitan Language*
- Gil Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition: Arabs, Jews, and the Limits of Separatist Imagination*
- Margaret Litvin, *Hamlet's Arab Journey: Shakespeare's Prince and Nasser's Ghost*
- Mark Sanders, *Learning Zulu: A Secret History of Language in South Africa*
- Michael Allan, *In the Shadow of World Literature*
- Tarek El-Ariss, *Leaks, Hacks and Scandals: Arab Culture in the Digital Age*
- Robyn Creswell, *City of Beginnings: Poetic Modernism in Beirut*
- Akshya Saxena, *Vernacular English: Reading the Anglophone in Postcolonial India*
- Haun Saussy, *The Making of Barbarians: Chinese Literature and Multilingual Asia*

Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada (RBLC): *Between Brazil and Paraguay, and Brazil and Uruguay and Argentina, we have very fluid borders. There is literature written in Portunhol (a mixture of Portuguese, Spanish and, in some cases, indigenous languages). How to translate this type of literature?*

It's obviously hard to translate hybrid literature and language. I had discussions about this with Hélène Quiniou, the French translator of *The Translation Zone.* In one chapter I cited extensively from Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (a postcolonial, postmodern novel about Nigeria's Civil War), that used Ogoni-inflected, poetized pidgin English to approximate the soldier-speak of a PTSD-stricken conscript obsessed with militaristic big-manism. *Sozaboy*'s existing translation in French did not do justice to Saro-wiwa's off-its-hinges idiolect. Quiniou chose to experiment with what I called (in *Against World Literature*'s chapter on António Lobos Antunes's *Fado Alexandrino*) "translating untranslatably," "a kind of over-translation that embraces wild infidelity to the original and pushes the envelope of translatability."[3] To translate dialect, demotic, creole, pidgin, vernacular and slang – classed as non-vehicular languages by normative grammar and establishment print culture – is to confront the limit-case of translation - extreme untranslatability. The condition of impossible translation that is always-already a condition of all translation, is revealed in stark relief. Translating at the edge – where *translatio* meets sheer improvisation - invites potentially interesting risk-taking on the part of the translator.

In the preface to his translation of Tarashankar Bandopadhyay's *The Tale of the Hansuli Turn* (its Bengali author best known in the west for film adaptations of his work by Satyajit Ray), Benjamin Conisbee Baer describes the need for a "subaltern" model of translation, of "transnational literacy" as defined by Spivak in "How to Read a Culturally Different Book" (see, Francis Barker ed, *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory* 1994). Baer writes that "the novel offers multiple taxonomies of difference within the untouchable world and within the ranks of an indigenous rural society being transformed by colonialism," noting in particular the "hard problem" of translating creolized speech. The solution he adopts, inspired by dialectal avant-gardism in modernist writing (Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Joyce) and transpositions of rustic speech in Hardy and D.H. Lawrence, is fraught with risks of appropriationism, misidentification and regional caricature. But he decides to take the plunge nonetheless: "I have amalgamated aspects of several different English-language dialects and regional accents in order to mime the alien and strange effect of Kahar creole in Bengali." Baer ends up with what he calls a plurality of creoles or "dialects in bits": "There is no one idiom that can be used to make an equivalent to the language of Kahars… a bit like plantation slaves, a bit like Italian rural bandits, a bit like Welsh provincial farmers, a bit like Urban Cockney wide boys and Chicana cholas."[4] Taking such liberties with cultural translation can highlight the impossibility of dialectal translation, and bring out the extent to which, in fact (as the proverbial saying goes) all languages are dialects surrounded by an army and a navy.

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3 Emily Apter, *Against World Literature. On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 147.

4 Benjamin Conisbee Baer, Preface to Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, *The Tale of the Hansuli Turn* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. xxii and xxiii respectively.

When Baer substitutes Urban Cockney or the lingo of Chicana cholas for Kahar creole in Bengali he's of course taking extreme liberties with translation, a decision that could trouble readers who feel that this leads to false cultural equivalences. But in defense o Baer's approach to "translating untranslatably," one could say that it reckons openly not only with the extreme difficulty (if not impossibility) of translating subalternity across discrepant languages and cultures, but also with the problem of class struggle manifest as radical social inequality within orders of discourse. Hybrid tongues, marked as *déclassé*, subordinate, "street," migrant, mixed-race, criminal, alien or prole, read out as material signs of the "low" in high-low hierarchies of linguistic position. They highlight the everyday politics of linguistic dialectics. Jacques Rancière's *Les mots et les torts* is relevant here in its focus on discursive inequality. The title might be rendered "The Order of Errors" (in line with the English translation of Foucault's *Les mots et les choses* as *The Order of Things*), but I prefer "Words and Wrongs" to emphasize the ways in which Rancière prompts us to examine the class violence of discursive harming, verbal exclusion, and linguistic tortiousness (in tort law's sense of wrongful act or infringement of a right leading to civil legal liability).[5]

Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada (RBLC)*: "Finnegans Wake" by James Joyce is a book that welcomes foreigners. A literature in which checkpoints were deliberately brought down by Joyce. Could you comment on the importance of FW for rethinking the flow of languages in contemporary times?*

This question relates to the previous one insofar as it probes the limits separating dialect, or orally-marked expressionism and grammatized literary language which normatively models "writing well." Joyce's *FW* purposely blurs those limits, landing the reader in a no-man's land or unsettled translation zone where no univocal, orthodox, vehicular tongue prevails. *FW* celebrates the joyous, revolutionary cacophony of babel and the overturning of regimes of monolingualism. Etymons and cognates, freed from single words, illuminate the translingual character of all languages. Joycean language puts into question the very possibility of positing such a thing as a discrete tongue.

The paradigm of discretionary autonomy crucial to defining a nominalized language is also challenged (somewhat paradoxically) by the *discretization* of units of translatability in machine language. As alphanumeric, algorithmic variables make translation more like transcoding, and render the whole idea of a "natural" language obsolete, language as such becomes more conceivable along Joycean lines as one long continuum or stream of alphabetic bits; assortable, punctuatable iterations and intervals. Language "flow" now seems more likely to refer to pandigital, transmedial information transfers or to the momentum of sentence-completion operations in a program like Smart-Compose, than to Joyce's ludic plurilingualism and zones of lexical indistinction. But one could also think of Joyce as the master-precursor of cybernetic flow. Certainly, the early cybernetics theorists did. Joyce was a dream-author for Yuen Ren Chao, a pioneer of machine translation, who translated Lewis Carroll's "The Jabberwocky" into Chinese by inventing characters to imitate the "slithy toves that gyred and gimbled in the wabe."[6]

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5 Jacques Rancière, *Les mots et les torts: Dialogue avec Javier Bassas* (Paris: La fabrique, 2019).

6 Rob Gifford, *China Road: A Journey into the Future of a Rising Power* (New York: Random House, 2007), p. 237.

Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada (RBLC): *What research projects are you working on right now?*

As I worked on a book titled *What is Just Translation?* in the summer of 2020, the police murder of George Floyd galvanized protests throughout the U.S. and the world. The Black Lives Matter rallying cry of "No Justice, No Peace, No Racist Police!" was chanted in the streets and emblazoned on signs and boarded-up storefronts. It became a common slogan for disparate movements - Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, the Prison Abolition Movement, Decolonize This Place – all of them facing off against the cumulative effects of white supremacy, misogyny, transphobia, institutional indifference to the deathly impact of racial capitalism, and the damage wrought by Trumpism's dismantling of voting rights, abortion rights, anti-discrimination laws, immigrant rights and environmental justice. For those of us working in the comparative humanities the imperative to address injustice felt increasingly urgent, carrying with it basic questions about how to define a field, justify a discipline, devise a syllabus that is neither tokenist nor appropriationist. More than ever, it was time to question how time-honored academic pedagogies that order the canon of world literature unequally and asymmetrically get reproduced, or how we right the wrongs of inclusions that are also exclusionary. Translation theory, it seemed, could be marshaled more than it had been before to counter authoritarian violence and enable transgenerational modes of collective *survivance*.

Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada (RBLC): *Which new contemporary theoretical trends of comparatism do you consider most promising or disruptive — or both?*

Let me start with a disruptive pronouncement: there really are no good paradigms of comparatism! The divisions between literary "haves" and "have-nots" in the current professional landscape of Comparative Literature will never, I think, be erased until we really manage to level the playing field between Eurocentric and non-Eurocentric critical concepts and aesthetic genre categories. That said, I don't believe critical traditions can be productively examined according to reductive binaries. It's obvious, for example, that the Latin American avant-garde was deeply in dialogue with the Euro-American avant-gardes, that "psychoanalysis," expansively ramified in Argentina (and other Latin American countries) was somehow permanently beholden to Austria, Germany or Paris. To impose a simplified identitarian grid on cultural production is to deny the circulation of ideas and the inmixing of aesthetic praxes. It is this kind of circulation that defined my conception of the translation zone.

As far as new approaches go: multilingual (and multinatural) perspectivism is making rigorous, in-depth comparative analysis more viable. I see more and more students working with indigenous languages, on histories and legacies of slavery, on tricontinental racial justice movements, on new modes of archiving experience where literary documents are lacking (I'm thinking here of Saidiya Hartman's *Wayward Lives*), and on "language" understood transmedially (I have in mind recent work in Black poetics and jazz - Fred Moten's *Black and Blur*, Brent Hayes Edwards *Epistrophes*, Tina Campt's *Listening to Images*).

Comparatist trends in translation theory that I've been following include work in the computational humanities dealing with neural machine learning (which affects how we think about translation and language); the school of "prismatic translation" that came out of Oxford a few years ago, and uses large data corpora to access multiple translations of texts for pedagogy and research; ecopolitical translation (the subject of an essay I just published in French in the journal *Relief*); and the language politics of trade routes (as in Tamara Chin's work on translation and the Silk Road).

But to conclude this interview on a more personal note: I have frankly been amazed and gratified to see the take-off of "untranslatability studies" in the past few years even if I've occasionally been baffled by some of the criticisms that have come my way, pigeonholing me in some projective "untranslatability camp" that I would be at pains to identify with or accept as having anything to do with how I see untranslatability operating as a critical tool of comparative praxis. I've been particularly surprised by several alpha-male attacks from the likes of Lawrence Venuti (who accuses me of "hijacking translation"), Anthony Pym, and David Bellos. I could write something called "Memos from the Untranslatability Wars!"

Fortunately, their negatives have been vastly outweighed by positives. I've been privileged to find theoretically oriented interlocutors (like yourselves, the editors of the *Revista da Associação Brasileira de Literatura Comparada*), and engaged receptions of my work the world over - Taiwan, Barcelona, New Delhi, Berlin, Oxford, Dakar, Beirut, Dublin, Beijing, Phnom Penh, Sydney, London, Montréal, Dundee, Toronto, Paris, Bologna, Brussels, Shanghai, Casablanca, Amsterdam, Ljubljana and myriad U.S. cities. Each place gifted a way of thinking in translation that was entirely unanticipated and conceptually unavailable before.

I have a particular commitment right now to two heuristic problems. The first is what I call "reparative translation," a critical praxis grounded in *tikkun olam* ["repairing the world"]. Reparations is increasingly marked as a focal point of activism today, from the repatriation of stolen cultural property, stolen land and appropriated language, to the call for indemnification and making-whole in compensation for racial extractivism and the continued profiteering off the racial subsidy. But it also harks back to Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick's notion of "reparative/paranoid reading," which sought to avoid the trap of a hermeneutics of suspicion, while seeking to repair social injustice. How to repair conditions of what Spivak calls "translation-as-violation," how to assess the damages of appropriationism, how to develop concepts of expansive liability that address ongoing histories of racial and gender injustice, these are some of the issues that motivate my research and teaching.

The second heuristic points to political concept-work which has grown out of my collaboration with Cassin (and fellow international editors) on the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* and engagement with the *Political Concepts* collective (an online journal and biannual colloquium).What I've learned is that political concepts are not just free-standing predicate terms of political philosophy or political theory, but dynamic ways of doing things with words – they are a kind of "making-political" of ordinary language and phrases. They also refer to a transmigration of concept-words resulting in emancipatory language politics.

I'll conclude with an example of political-concept work of this kind: Senegalese philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne's capacious, translational approach to the concept of *ubuntu* that, much like the Bengali term *sahitya* famously marked by Rabindranath Tagore as a term of "togetherness" and "union," resonates politically in discourses of world peace.[7] In "*Ubuntu* en réponse au conflit des civilisations," [*Ubuntu* in response to the clash of civilizations], Diagne taps into the term's reserves in Bantu philology for a planetary ethics based on collective humanity-making, an expansive vision of the polis in the terms of a communal "force of being."[8] Duly noting Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Tutu's mobilization of *ubuntu* as shorthand for transitional justice in the service of victory over apartheid, Diagne resurrects the term as a spiritual shield against the anti-democratic offensive that is sweeping the globe, leaving in its train a xenophobic frenzy of wall-building, detentional lock-down, immigrant targeting and asylum-denying legislation. Diagne conjugates African *ubuntu,* with its cosmologies of ancestral presence and common properties connecting deity, human, animal, vegetal and mineral elements, with Henri Bergson's *âme ouverte,* the open soul of human receptivity, reciprocity and forthcomingness. *Ubuntu* serves as the antidote to the Cartesian severance of human subjectivity from external nature. In this scheme, philosophical intelligence – including the militant function of reason in the cause of planetary democracy - proscribes justifying the exploitation of elemental resources as a positive right of humans. Diagne gives us *ubuntu* as something like a universal project of planetary humanism that translates out of Bantu metaphysics the principles for a whole new *écosophie* tied, in turn, to diplomatic pragmatism in the sphere of political ecology. It is just this kind of thinking in translation/untranslatables that I find particularly productive for work in the contemporary humanities.

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7   See, the collection of essays originally published (in Bengali) in 1907 by Rabindranath Tagore under the title *Sahitya.* In "The Value of World-Making in Global Literary Studies," Debjani Ganguly makes the claim that World Literature, with the value of *sahitya* at its core, was for Tagore "a panacea not only for a colonially induced provincialism a d divisiveness, but also for nationalistic aggression." *The Value of Literary Studies* ed. Rónán McDonald. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 7.

8   Souleymane Bachir Diagne, "*Ubuntu* en réponse au conflit des civilisations," in *Concerter les civilisations: Mélanges en l'honneur d'Alain Supiot* eds. Samantha Besson and Samuel Jubé (Paris: Seuil, 2020), pp. 134 and 139.

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