Rebellious Translation

Jon Solomon

Solomon considers how Machine Translation and the militarisation of information technologies is bringing about a dystopian future that, via a reduction of translation to logistical transfer, conjoins technological totalisation and militarisation in a defence of anthropological difference. We are being asked to look at a future populated with three classes of beings: crash test dummies, autonomous weapons, and *robota*. Henceforth, the US war machine will serve the needs of the biologistical supply chain, not the other way around.

Whereas Babel is the story of universal communication lost in the past, Machine Translation (MT) offers us, according to Theresa May and many others, the promise of universal communication to be realised in the future.[1] Among the most common applications for MT today, two are salient: the service industries, exemplified by the tourism industry, and the military. These two aspects amount to the two sides of capital's relation to labour. The *concertation* of labour is defined as getting all actors in the same productive team to communicate effectively. The *reproduction* of labour can be seen as enabling labour-sufficient communicative autonomy to maintain itself at a level statistically, if not individually, stable enough to assure the conditions of capital accumulation through production. On the one hand, since labour has been, up to now, the one commodity that capital cannot autonomously produce, the problem of balancing the former against the latter occupies a central ideological task. On the other hand, an excess of either communicative concertation or autonomy threatens capital's ability to control the extraction of value from labour. Hence 'communication' also names, under capitalist relations, a 'state', specifically, a state of perpetual war, the genealogy of which begins with the biopolitical invention of nation-state languages through the modern regime of translation.

If the computational media insinuating themselves into translation practice today are distinct 'because they have a stronger evolutionary potential than any other technology', the role of temporality is central.[2] In truth, the principal challenge posed by computational media today is not the ethics of their relation to the human, but rather the ethics of their temporality. The problem is acceleration, or the speed at which the speed of change is increasing. Social institutions – among which the Humanities are paramount – available for making visible the exponential calculus of acceleration in relation to social geography make visible the place where capital 'hits the ground' in relation to cultural knowledge.[3] These institutions are today overwhelmed by the alliance between financialisation, largely driven by algorithms, and the reduction of life to code and code to exchange value. This is what Toni Negri calls the peculiar form of 'tautological time' that is characteristic of the moment when information technologies invade the social, definitively eroding the measure of value.[4]

Negri's notion of tautological time is particularly pertinent in the context of the modern regime of translation, which has perennially reserved a special place for tautology as a remedy for the problematic unity of language and a people essential to the construction of the modern nation-state.[5] As Naoki Sakai observes:

> It is not possible to know whether a particular language as a unity exists or not. It is the other way around: by subscribing to the idea of the unity of language, it becomes possible for us to systematically organize knowledge about languages in a modern, scientific manner.[6]

In the modern, essentially Romantic, understanding of language, adherence to the idea of the unity of language occurs precisely through the figure sketched by the tautology between a language and a people. Although each of these two terms, people and language, is characterised by an irresolvable indeterminacy, they are put into relation in such a way that they work to posit and determine each other in a tautological fashion.[7] As the unity thus obtained is based on constant delineation of cultural entities that lack inherent stability, it always calls for reinscription through practice. This is where translation comes in. Relying on a representational schema that posits two or more linguistic unities separated by a gap, which translation purportedly bridges, the modern regime of translation effaces that practical aspect of the situation calling for translation – incommensurable discontinuity in the social. While the practice of translation is singular in each instance, the modern regime of translation inserts that form of singularity into a representational economy that makes it look as if the unity of language – and the borders between different languages – precedes the situation in which translation is called for. In other words, the modern regime of translation interdicts the singularity of the relationship, diverting attention away from the primary experience of discontinuity, by definition unrepresentable, towards the secondary experience of the transition from discontinuity to continuity. The gap thus 'bridged', of course, is nothing but the spectral return of the 'gap' that was posited in the first place. Sakai's theory of translation proposes a way to understand translation that preserves the experience of discontinuity and the political labour of bordering, without which the essentially social, practical aspect of translation could not be understood. He stresses:

> It is therefore important to introduce difference in and of language in such a way that we can comprehend translation not in terms of the communication model of equivalence and exchange, but as a form of political labor to create continuity at the elusive point of discontinuity in the social.[8]

The temporal difference introduced by computational media has far-reaching implications for translation as a form of social practice. What is happening today is that the historical tautology between language and people characteristic of the colonial–imperial modernity can now be definitively located on one side of the nature/culture continuum, even as cybernetic hybrids proliferate.[9] It is emblematic that an elected politician such as Theresa May – symptomatically dubbed the 'Maybot' in a prescient nod to her role as a political crash test dummy – would like us to celebrate MT as the final triumph of nativity. Go anywhere, speak your native language. Yet, as the homophony between MT and 'empty' suggests, this is a pyrrhic victory, exactly like Brexit. Tautology, in the broadest sense of an interminable 'backstop' of exchange value,

becomes not an element *of* history, but rather the only ground on which history can be thought. As Michael Dillon and Luis Lobo-Guerrero remind us, the connection between biological species, taxonomic (or hierarchical) classification, and capitalist value is fundamental to the operation of biopower today.[10] This is no longer the history *of* species difference, but history *as* species difference, or history as meme.

The multitude of questions and anxieties that I have about the biopolitics of capital's 'native language', so to speak, begin not from the application of technology to translation, but rather from the premise that translation is a point of intervention into the apparatus of specific or species difference characteristic of the colonial–imperial modernity. This apparatus is composed of two distinct forms of difference, the colonial difference and the anthropological difference. The latter refers to the two principal 'others' of *homo sapiens* represented by animals and machines in their relation to language and tools. The former stands for the presumption that certain populations within *homo sapiens* are closer – by virtue of their superior mastery of language and tools – to the ideal image of *homo sapiens* than others. The reduction of translation to logistical transfer and the grounding of that operation in an imaginary cartography of spatialised difference – principally nation-states and 'civilisations' – is a common feature of the modern regime of translation. Because that imaginary cartography is associated with the logical economy of species or specific difference, it is intrinsically related to deep-seated presuppositions concerning the essence of the human. In other words, the modern regime of translation joins the two faces of the apparatus of species difference (colonial and anthropological difference) – to a cartography of milieus or areas that serves as a basis for 'encoding' and 'decoding' translational exchange. The area is thus imbued with an

'organic' or 'natural' quality that hides its extremely theoretical nature, facilitating the capture of labour through logistical control of communication and the extraction of surplus value therefrom.

The modern regime of translation thus partakes of an aesthetic ideology concerning the essence of the human, and, more specifically, of an improbable vision of a specific area – the West – as the site within which the true essence of the human finds realisation. It is important to remember, however, that the West itself is nothing more than a fantastical projection, or abstraction, of social relationships of domination and exploitation in the same way that commodity is an abstraction of labour. Translation is one of the principal forms of labour through which this abstraction gains social currency, or again, becomes both hard specie and a site of speciation in the social.

In order to illustrate this point, allow me to return to the application of MT in the service industries and in militarisation. The former is the site of some of the most exploitative working conditions today as well as of the compensatory catharsis offered to increasingly precarious labour in the scant moments of 'leisure time' allowed by capital. The latter involves the militarisation of communication itself, including, eventually, the militarisation of bacteriophagic communication. If 'history progresses at the speed of its weapon systems', the current conjuncture is one of intense 'progress'.[11]

A concrete manifestation of the communicational dialectic between militarisation and artificial intelligence (AI) is probably best seen in the type of liberal biopower being deployed today, and projected into the future, against China. The dystopian scenario everywhere in evidence today, as a teleological inevitability, is that robots not only will supplant 'Chinese' labour in 'the world's

factory', but, when armed and quite likely operating semi-autonomously, will also constitute the most fearsome type of army the world has ever seen.[12] Swarms of drones powered by AI and biomimicry technologies will stand ready to suppress the inevitable *gilets jaunes* type of insurrections from the 'yellow hordes' abandoned by the bioinformatics economy.[13] The final irony of liberal biopower is not just that this plan will be executed in the name of freedom, but that none of it would be possible without the massive purchase of US debt by China and other Eurasian countries, who are at once the primary support for US monetary imperialism and the principal targets of its global garrison military.

Today, as the United States is planning its most ambitious restructuring of industrial/foreign policy since that of Ronald Reagan and aiming for what has been characterised as the 'militarization of supply chains', I am suggesting that a form of 'Yellow Peril' discourse is being mobilised anew to lend ethical and political legitimacy to such frightening militarisation.[14] Historically speaking, the older form of Yellow Peril discourse, from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was primarily concerned, beyond an affective investment in racism, with normalising the logic of species difference though the aesthetic exemplarity of the anthropological type. The thing about 'Chinese' that was most frightening was not this or that specific characteristic, but rather their supposed *lack* of a fixed, identifiable national character. Hence, Yellow Peril functioned primarily to legitimate taxonomies of specific difference in terms of the universality of human essence as represented by an anthropological type associated with a supposedly superior area, i.e., the West. Attachment to this taxonomy has not waned, even as it increasingly reveals itself to be untenable. As Peter Button persuasively argues, 'the logic of the type has historically manifested itself in the West precisely in

relation to what it [the West] conceived of (and viscerally feared) as an unassimilable exterior'.[15] The crux of this fear – associated with essentially unstable borders (of the West, of the human, etc.) – lies in the 'fear of the dissolution of history as the realization of the genre of the human itself'.[16] From Ronald Reagan's call in 1987 to 'tear down this wall' to Donald Trump's call in 2016 to 'build the wall and have them pay for it', the putative unity of the West remains unquestioned – sometimes even by those most intent on critiquing it. Poised as we are on the cusp of an unprecedented transformation in warfare, a panoply of signs point to the contemporary reactivation of the context in which Yellow Peril discourse thrives: anxiety over the logical inconsistency of 'the West' and the fate of the 'genres of the human'.[17]

I take it as axiomatic that the 'peril', if there is one, stems not from a population improbably specified as 'yellow', but rather from the possibility, if not inevitability, that the appropriation of advances in biotech, information tech, and nanotech by finance capital, according to a logic of militarisation and security, is exercising profound effects on the generic living conditions on our planet.[18]

As a form of emergent organisation, the supply chain is increasingly imbued, through information technology, with an exponential capacity for self-valorisation and expansion that culminates in the identification of 'life' with logistical supply chains. The militarisation of these supply chains – whose end is the delivery of fearsome new autonomous weapons based on biomimicry and AI – will create 'life' in order to destroy 'life', to protect the 'freedom' of private capital accumulation. Henceforth, the war machine, fuelled by competition between the USA and the People's Republic of China, will serve the needs of the biologistical supply chain, not the other way around.

While insisting that the biopolitics of translation into capital's native language must be thought of in the context of capital's permanent war against labour, I agree that it is also crucial to consider the implications for our sense of temporality. Neoliberalism colonises time through the 'cruel optimism' of a speculative future hedged against ever-deepening indemnity.[19] Colonial–imperial Romanticism colonises time through the tautological relationship between people and language. Combined, as they are, in the deployment of computational media to translational practice, the new, neoliberal Romanticism spells the beginning of a long war of attrition to realise capitalist modernity's oldest dream: the hope that humanity's self-production – enhanced by biotech, AI, and nanotech – will immediately and fully coincide with the accumulation of surplus value. Just as 'the West' might easily shift location to Shanghai, an AI might easily become a figure for the human. Wasn't Sophia (a humanoid robot developed in 2016 by Hong Kong-based Hanson Robotics) granted Saudi Arabian citizenship while such rights were being refused to that country's many migrant workers? The Maybot's promise of being able to speak everywhere in capital's native language means that we (or, more precisely, some of us) are the ones slated to become the real *robota* (forced labour).

In truth, we are being asked to look at a future populated with three classes of beings: crash test dummies, autonomous weapons, and *robota*.

It is important to remember that this is not the only version of a translation-enabled futurity to have been imagined within the horizon of the colonial–imperial modernity that we still inhabit today. L. L. Zamenhof's Esperanto and Qu Qiubai's 'common language' (*putonghua*) are two examples that were both conceived, albeit in different ways, to combat the dialectic

of universalism and particularism, which became codified in the modern regime of translation associated with the birth of modern nation-state languages. This was a combat directly tied to the revolutionary creation of a 'people-to-come' that could not be contained in the logical economy of species and genus. In other words, this would be a type of community whose foundational theory *and* praxis would not be based on the apparatus of species difference, the template of which would be that exceptional yet ultimately incoherent area known as the West.

The struggles of today are struggles for a future. A crucial moment in the struggle occurs every time one speaks of translation into or out of a language considered 'native' that is also co-figured with other 'native' languages on the basis of exchange value. This is when the rebellion begins. It is the rebellion of translation, translation as rebellion, based on the essential recognition that failure, not transfer speed or nativity, is the basis of communication. To be a species, if it is to be anything at all, is nothing more than to share the condition of species-being with other species, including, of course, those that are thought to be 'inanimate'.

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My thanks to Stefan Nowotny for drawing my attention to

May's speech.

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Katherine N. Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 33.

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Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *The Politics of Operations: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2019), 22.

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Antonio Negri, 'The Constitution of Time', in *Time for Revolution*, trans. Matteo Mandarini (New York: Continuum, 2003), 27.

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The concept of the 'modern regime of translation' has been developed at length by Naoki Sakai. For one example, see: Naoki Sakai, 'The Modern Regime of Translation and the Emergence of the Nation', *The Eighteenth Century* 58, no. 1 (Spring 2017): 105–108.

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Naoki Sakai, 'How do we count a language? Translation and discontinuity', *Translation Studies* 2 no. 1 (2009): 73.

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Giorgio Agamben, 'Languages and Peoples', in *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 66.

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Sakai, 'How do we count a language?', 72.

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I prefer the use of 'colonial–imperial' rather than 'colonial/imperial', because I am not trying to suggest a relation of substitution between two terms but rather an integral connection. In sum: modernity is, by definition, bi-polar. While this point has received quite a bit of attention, theorists often write about different types of modernity (colonial, imperial, alternative, etc.) as though it were possible to think of these categories autonomously. I am arguing instead that they must be thought in the form of a

relation that precedes the two terms being related. That approach, in a nutshell, is how I understand translation and briefly accounts for the reason why I reject theories that view it primarily as a bridging technology.

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Michael Dillon and Luis Lobo-Guerrero, 'The Biopolitical Imaginary of Species-being', *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 1 (2009): 4.

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Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), 90.

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The recent call by Giselle Rampersad (Associate Professor in Innovation with experience in the defence industries amongst others) to catapult Australian industry into the fourth industrial revolution through investment in a new generation of information-technology powered weapons illustrates one way in which a scenario, described above as dystopian, might nevertheless seem attractive from a certain perspective. The pretext for intense Australian government investment in its defence capabilities, particularly naval capability, is, of course, a perceived threat from China. This pretext has become such an integral part of contemporary Australian public discourse that it hardly needs to be mentioned. The only direct reference to China in Rampersad's appeal concerns the introduction of industrial robots that are said to be 'even cheaper than a Chinese worker'. Rampersad stresses that 'Another feature of industry 4.0 [i.e., industries associated with the fourth industrial revolution] is the digitisation of the supply chain'. She concludes that 'If done well, defence investment will make as powerful a contribution to the nation's economic prosperity as its military security'. Rampersad's article thus argues implicitly for a scenario in which security is guaranteed by IT-fuelled weapons systems in a world characterised by robots replacing 'Chinese' (i.e., cheap) labour. Giselle Rampersad, 'Building Our Own Warships Is Australia's Path to the Next Industrial Revolution', *The Conversation* November 23, 2018, https://theconversation.com/building-our-own-warships-is-australias-path-to-the-next-industrial-revolution-105984.

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The term 'yellow hordes' was used by the satirical Twitter account 'Bellingdog' (@Bellingdawg) as a caption to a

photo of *gilets jaunes* protesters in Montpellier, France, on January 5, 2019. Although the Bellingdog account was subsequently suspended by Twitter and can no longer be accessed, the tweet was widely circulated, including by the right-wing conspiracy website Zero Hedge. See: Tyler Durden [pseud.], 'France Ablaze Again; Yellow Vests Rage After Founder Arrested; Cops Punched, Tear Gas Deployed', *Zero Hedge* January 5, 2019, https://www.zerohedge.com/news/2019-01-05/france-abl aze-again-yellow-vests-out-en-masse-after-founder-arrested.

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A thorough account of the transformation initiated under Ronald Reagan in the economic, scientific, monetary, and discursive basis of US Imperialism can be found in: Melinda Cooper, 'Life Beyond the Limits: Inventing the Bioeconomy', in *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era* (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2008), 15–50. See also: Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 1; William D. Hartung and TomDispatch, 'The Pentagon's Cunning Plot to Militarize the Economy', *Truthdig* November 1, 2018, https://www.truthdig.com/articles/the-pentagons-cunning -plot-to-militarize-the-economy/.

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See Peter Button, '(Para-)humanity, Yellow Peril and the postcolonial (arche-)type', *Postcolonial Studies* 9, no. 4 (2006): 443.

[16]

Ibid.

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Sylvia Wynter, 'On How We Mistook The Map for the Territory, and Reimprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of *Désêtre*: Black Studies Toward the Human Project', in *Not Only The Master's Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 117.

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For a discussion of the central role of the colour yellow in representing the violent ambiguity of modern visual culture, see Sabine Doran, *The Culture of Yellow, or, The Visual Politics of Late Modernity* (New York & London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

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Cf., Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011).