

Boundaries In Translation At The Margins Of Liminal Excess: Calibrating The Voice Of Empire To The Ear Of Resistance

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We are searching for words; maybe we are also searching for ears.

But who are we anyway?

--Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

Can there exist a common sense, a public, or public space - a *glasnost* - which is not identified with a single tradition, or with a single way of classifying the plurality of traditions, but which is so divided up that each tradition remains exposed to the singularities of the others, and of those yet to come? Can there exist a philosophical community not based in the assumptions of an overarching unity?

--John Rajchman, "*Translation Without a Master*"

Traces. Implicit presences, referring to more than we can say or see:

to be wild is to stand out *and* to disappear.

--Irene Klaver, "*Silent Wolves: The Howl of the Implicit*"

Boundaries and Excess

Boundaries, like horizons, are forever in translation, always receding from our efforts to transgress them. We can only pass *into* boundaries, and only by taking along something of ourselves that cannot pass through, like a question awakening within us. But we do not choose this question. The question arises out of the circumstance of our involvement. The circumstance calls us into the open, decentering our attunement within an atmosphere of questioning. We have entered a liminal space, a membrane between inner and outer. This is a place of uncanny exile, for we still intuit a sense of home: the cultures of domination, the schemes of normalization, exclusion, disruption, resistance, translation, excess. Passing into these boundaries, we encounter a liminal excess we can neither escape nor exceed. Something within us is calibrating the voice of empire to the ear of resistance. Welcome to the Age of Exilic Life. But where are we, exactly? Of his worldly travels, Paulo Freire writes:

It was by passing through all these different parts of the world as an exile that I came to

understand my own country better. It was by seeing it from a distance, it was by standing back from it, that I came to understand myself better. It was by being confronted with another self that I discovered more easily my own identity.¹

This parallels a view expressed by Edward Said, in reflecting on Theodor Adorno's claim that "it is part of morality not to be at home in one's home."² Said writes:

To follow Adorno is to stand away from "home" in order to look at it with the exile's detachment. For there is considerable merit in the practice of noting the discrepancies between various concepts and ideas and what they actually produce. We take home and language for granted: they become nature and their underlying assumptions recede into dogma and orthodoxy. The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are

¹ Cf. Paulo Freire and Antonio Faundez, *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation* (Continuum, 1989), p. 13.

² Theodor Adorno, quoted in Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gevers, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West (MIT Press, 1990), p. 365.

always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience.³

Boundaries in translation mark the interface of empire and excess. There is a strong sentiment within postmodern thought to lodge this translation activity at the margins of liminal excess. Thinkers as varied as bell hooks, Salman Rushdie, Italo Calvino, Michael Ignatieff, Martha Nussbaum, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-Luc Nancy and Georges Bataille have called upon us to investigate this dynamic of translation, and to articulate its relation to the perpetual interplay of normalization (exclusion) and excess. Central to these views, we encounter the presumption that every scheme of normalization implies both exclusion and excess; that is, normalization implicates a fundamental “outside,” --even if, as Judith Butler contends, a universal presumption can only be challenged “*from (its own) outside.*”⁴

On the other hand, if there are no boundaries to empire, if empire has no “outside,” as Hardt and Negri have argued, then perhaps the concept of “liminal excess” becomes a misplaced priority in postmodern reflections. Under the presumption of total immanence, Hardt and Negri argue, translation activity inherent in marginality is morphed into a “swarm” of “constituent power.” The collective yield of constituent power is the saving grace of “a multitude of cooperating singularities.” The destiny of this

multitude is to navigate through the crisis atmosphere of singular events, as one might kayak through a “crisis” rapid, and in the process, to dissolve the imperial grip of normalizing practices and arrangements that otherwise impede the proper consummation of human belonging.⁵

And yet, when bell hooks invites us to join her at the margins of radical openness, I don’t think she is inviting us to join her for the purpose of consummating our belonging as a human multitude. “We greet you as liberators,” she writes. “This ‘we’ is that ‘us’ in the margins, that ‘we’ who inhabit marginal space that is not a site of domination but a place of resistance.”⁶ She then entreats us to “enter that space.” But how are we to understand this invitation, when we find it cast in the form of an intervention? “I am writing to you,” she continues.

I am speaking from a place in the margins where I am different, where I see things differently.... *This is an intervention.* A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/colonizer. *Marginality as a site of resistance.* Enter that space. Let us meet here. *Enter that space. We greet you as liberators.* (hooks, 152, my emphasis)

Is there any leverage in the collective efforts of hooks and the other postmodern thinkers to help us examine the transformative influence of liminal excess? Can we enter the margin as a place of radical openness to determine

³ Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” p. 365. There is an interesting discussion of this theme in Henry Giroux, “The Border Intellectual.” Cf. Henry A. Giroux, *Disturbing Pleasures* (Routledge, 1995), pp. 141-152.

⁴ Judith Butler, “Universality in Culture,” in Martha Nussbaum, *For Love of Country: Debating the Limits of Patriotism* (New York: Beacon, 1996), p. 49, my emphasis.

⁵ Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999), p. 333. Cf. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004).

⁶ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End, 1990), p. 152. Cf. “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance” (pp. 41-49) and “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness” (145-153).

how liminal excess works to destabilize articulations of dynamic, expansive boundaries? Or how liminal excess manages to de-stratify the boundary zones supporting imperial frameworks of normalization and exclusion? What are we to make of the tensions arising at the boundaries of empire, where “globalizing” practices of domination aim to prefigure the domain of nomadic exile under a commonwealth of normalization?

The secret may lie in the work performed by the ear of resistance, when it transforms the boundaries set in place by the voice of empire. Hardt and Negri offer the following comment on the relation between the forces of difference and the forces of unity:

The multitude is composed of a set of singularities. And by singularity here we mean a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different. The plural singularities of the multitude thus stand in contrast to the undifferentiated unity of the people.⁷

Through implicit forms of translation, the ear recalibrates the voice, crossing thresholds of uncontainable excess overflowing the nomadic contexts of exilic life (and bleeding into the cultural fabric of marginal possibilities). Is it possible these “performative contradictions” produce a breakdown in the power of inside/outside boundaries to contain the influence of liminal excess? If so, might such actions serve to interrupt the exclusionary dominion of our dominant normalizing practices?

The mere possibility of such interruptions raises the stakes with respect to any facets of nomadic life that might challenge the overarching dominance of empire. While these interruptions commonly lead to an intensification of the war on nomadic forms of life, such imperial efforts can also stimulate a recalibration of the voice of

empire wherever liminal excess nurtures the ear of resistance. Such progressive logic will challenge the paradigm of cosmopolitan normalization, opening the field of play to regenerative forms of nomadic life. It will also stimulate a “critical parallax” within the indeterminate field of translation activity, which is itself animated by contestation and incommensurate excess. The resulting “ambivalence of the norm” disrupts the culture of domination and strengthens the influence of liminal excess, further weakening the holding power of empire (but also deferring the arrival of anything like a “multitude of cooperating singularities”). Here we return to the overarching theme of “boundaries in translation,” which I consider central to any viable concept of border cultures. Let me attempt to develop this theme somewhat obliquely, implicitly, we might say, through a brief discussion of home-boundaries.

Home and Translation

We seldom inhabit the same home-world for long stretches of time. Even if our own situation remains relatively stable, situations are changing around us all the time. As Salman Rushdie points out in “Imaginary Homelands,” social migration, cultural displacement, cross-pollination, and influences “from beyond the community to which we belong” all serve to expand “our narrowly defined cultural frontiers” and challenge our narrow sense of being-at-home.⁸ We are always already lodged within a cultural confinement from which we cannot escape, always talking and listening from our own position in life. The only way “out” is through translation.

Crossing into the boundary zones of home-life commits us to translation activity. Translation makes it possible for us to move from the familiar “partial” ground of our

⁷ Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, p. 99

⁸ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (New York: Penguin, 1991) pp. 19-20.

home-space into more abstract territory. In the process, Rushdie notes, we are exposed to “new angles at which to enter reality.” Rushdie’s writings are to be valued for the way they celebrate exposure to influences that open our home-worlds to the wild pollens and fragments of different memories, meanings, and descriptions.

The power of literature and other cross-pollinating sources to increase our exposure to new experiences of meaning serves also to expand our capacity to translate intangible features of our private home-worlds into more tangible articulations. As we assimilate translations born from exposure to the wild, we can use these to forge new inroads -- perhaps even new styles-- of reciprocal belonging.

Even so, the gulf between incompatible descriptions and incompatible perceptions remains a feature of our intersections with alien home-worlds. Nevertheless, as Judith Butler echoes in her discussion of “Universality in Culture,”⁹ there is always a need to take other cultures, other descriptions, and other perceptions as seriously as we take our own. But the point here is not that we might bring about some all-encompassing cultural articulation of home. The point is to open up channels for a trans-cultural dialogue, albeit one that can move between various cultural instantiations only by means of translation.

As such, the universal is conceived in movement toward ever-more expansive inclusions of otherness, forever on its way, always “not yet” articulated. Butler’s point is that the universal can never be fixed once and for all. It remains no more than “a postulated and open-ended ideal,” and furthermore, one that can be challenged only “from (its own) outside.” Nor can we ever appreciate the scope of possible challenges to our schemes of normativity, for the range of our anticipations is forever constrained by the

⁹ Cf. Nussbaum (1996), pp. 45-52.

limited attunements of our specific cultural partialities.

The problem isn’t that we simply disagree. As Butler points out, there is nothing in principle blocking us from striving to attain consensus regarding universal values and conventions to anchor our investments in home and identity. But achieving such a consensus could never establish that we have anticipated all future challenges to our universal presumptions. For this reason alone, she reiterates the importance of keeping ourselves open to the always pending arrival of a “futural anticipation” of universality. Such anticipation precludes having a “ready concept,” requiring instead an attunement for articulations that “will only follow, if they do [at all], from a contestation of universality at its already imagined borders.”¹⁰

Butler develops this conclusion in relation to the problem of self-privileging norms, and in the process, she draws out a point that seems quite applicable to the problematic of home-boundaries. Butler writes:

If the norm is itself predicated on the exclusion of the one who speaks, [on] one whose speech calls into question the foundation of the universal itself, then *translation* on such occasions is to be something more and different than [simply] an *assimilation to an existing norm*. The kind of translation that exposes the *alterity within the norm* (an alterity without which the norm would not assume its borders and “know” its limits) exposes the failure of the norm to effect the universal reach for which it stands, exposes what we might underscore as *the promising ambivalence of the norm*. (Butler, 50, my emphasis)

The promising ambivalence of universalizing norms provides our direct link to the wild and situates us in a field of radical exposure to uncontainable excess. Oriented in this way,

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 47-49.

we come face-to-face with the possibility of deterritorializing phenomena reveal the *contingent articulation* of legitimation strategies and trans-cultural norms. Actions of this sort (which Butler terms “performative contradictions”) serve to interrupt the schemes of normalization that were previously cast in terms of a universalizing discourse, but whose legitimacy is now unexpectedly thrown into question “from (its own) outside.” As Butler points out,

The translation that takes place at this scene of conflict is one in which the meaning intended is no more determinative of a “final” reading than the one that is received, and no final adjudication of conflicting positions can emerge. Without this final judgment, an interpretive dilemma remains ... and the complex process of learning how to read that claim is not something any of us can do outside of the difficult process of cultural translation. (Butler, 51)

We can experience this notion of “cultural translation” as our point of entry to home in the writings of Italo Calvino, most forcefully in his classic work, *Invisible Cities*.¹¹ Calvino reveals how unfolding experiences are always partially articulated from the orientation of our specific cultural immersion, especially in our encounters with alterity. If our worldview is forever partial, so too are the accounts we give to ourselves and others of the places we encounter. Each articulation of a place we experience is dependent on the place from which we have come.

If Martha Nussbaum would have us aspire to a cosmopolitan rationality as a way beyond partiality, Judith Butler would counter that any claims to cosmopolitan universals are forever parasitic on our historical location. Calvino’s angle is to see these accounts as specific cultural articulations, and as

reflections of our specific orientation to home. We gain new perspective on home by seeing new places, but in seeing new places, a particular frame of reference is always at stake, the frame of reference of home.

As Calvino writes, “the traveler’s past changes according to the route he has followed.” Each new city calls forth “a past of his he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are (or no longer possess) lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places.”¹² And if we are careful to fight off the stereotypes of home, we will experience the complexities and implicit articulations of place and come to see “home” and “belonging” *as relational terms*.

In the end, we can only understand and appreciate different places. There are only inter-relating translations, translations through the lenses of different places, all connected in a lateral network with no top, no anchor, no privileged cosmopolitan frame of reference. We can only work from where we’ve grown up or where we’ve traveled. Every position we encounter is “translated” out of positions experienced before.

In this sense, no matter what cultural context we are in, new experiences of home will be revealed to us. But if we stabilize too much in words, we risk losing the rich texture of these experiences. Calvino values most our *implicit* relations to home, the ones we experience subliminally as we travel about in new contexts, the ones that speak with our ears as we take in the stories of our life. “The listener retains only the words he is expecting,” Calvino writes; as such, “it is not the voice that commands the story, but the ears.”¹³ Home, then, is a complex of relations (never to remain the same). We live these complex relations between cities, within cities, within ourselves. Relational change is the only constant

¹¹ Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jonanovich, 1974). See especially pp. 27-9, 85-7, and 135-39.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 28-9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 135.