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EMPIRES OF THE EVERYDAY
Poetry as a translator of Empire

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Abstract – This article examines how poetry might act as a translator of Empire and posits that such translation is a critical component of resistance, following Rebecca Ruth Gould and Kayvan Tahmasebian's (2020) framing of translator as witness-bearer. I consider ways that poetry might engage in acts of translation across a single language to reflect the historical and contemporary contexts of imperialism and colonialization, and recognize this as a political process, drawing from scholars working on translation and/or language, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2018), Luciana de Mesquita Silva and Dennys Silva-Reis (2019), and Don Mee Choi (2020). This article specifically examines a collection of poetry I wrote, titled *Empires of the Everyday*, wherein the poems spar with an AI translator to expose the history and ongoing presence of colonialism and state violence. Through this examination, this article asks: How might a poetry versed in a Black feminist praxis render a translation of Empire possible? How might such a translation focus attention on "reflecting, intuiting, making sense of, and undoing the times we live in", which Dionne Brand (2017b, audio recording) has suggested is the liberating work of poetry? How is such a process of translating across paradigms implicated in acts of activism as resistance?

Keywords: Empire; translation; poetry; resistance; activism.

1. Introduction

In this article, I draw from the approaches and theories of translators, poets, and other thinkers and examine a collection of poetry I wrote titled *Empires of the Everyday*[1] to ask: How might a poetry versed in a Black feminist praxis[2] render a translation of Empire possible? How might such a translation focus attention on "reflecting, intuiting, making sense of, and undoing the times we live in" (Brand 2017b, audio recording)? How is such a process of translating across paradigms implicated in acts of activism as resistance? To explore these questions, I begin with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's

[1] *Empires of the Everyday* was published by McClelland and Stewart in 2024.
[2] This article draws from the understanding of Black feminism articulated by the Combahee River Collective (1977, no pagination), including that "liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy".

framing of Empire as "the political subject that effectively regulates […] global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world" (2020, p. xi). Hardt and Negri continue:

> Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries and barriers. It is a decentered and deterritorializing apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontier. (Hardt, Negri 2020, p. xii)

I then draw from Antonio Gramsci's (1971) understanding of cultural hegemony, which articulates that a key project of Empire is to prevent those living within its borders from seeing its imagination and to render unrecognizable the ways this imagination is ever-present and omnipresent. Hegemony,[3] which Gramsci came to view as the "most important face of power" (Femia 1981, p. 26), is exercised through civil society. According to Emeritus Professor of Political Theory Joseph V. Femia, Gramsci identified civil society as "the ideological superstructure, the institutions and technical instruments that create and diffuse modes of thought" (1981, p. 26). This attempt to hide the imagination of Empire can be seen in acts of the State, which, "when [it] wants to initiate an unpopular action or policy, creates in advance a suitable, or appropriate, public opinion; that is, it organizes and centralizes certain elements of civil society" (Gramsci 1971, pp. 27-28). From this, I move to poet Don Mee Choi's articulation of how "the language of capture, torture, massacre is difficult to decipher. It's practically a foreign language" (2020, p. 43), which suggests that life within Empire (that is, within both its geographic location and its imaginative realm) requires a translation.

As a response to the above questions – about the potential role of poetry as activist-translator of Empire – I propose that poetry, as a form that bends language and so invites readers to bend their comprehension of what is possible, might offer opportunity for such a translation. This, in turn, might create the possibility of resistance – and even contribute to the necessary transformation of hegemony "from a principle that mystifies the social situation to one that exposes exploitation and supersedes it" (Femia 1981, p. 53). Drawing from Édouard Glissant's (1997) right to opacity, I suggest that this hegemony – through attempting to make simple or transparent that which is deeply complex – "mystifies the social situation" (Femia 1981 p. 53), making the nuance of social and political contexts less perceptible. Yet, these

[3] Hegemony is "an order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant, in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society, in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all tastes, morality, customs, religions and political principles, and all social relations, particularly in their intellectual and moral connotations" (Williams 1960, p. 587).

social and political contexts (and the associated lived realities) in their complexity and nuance, exist within states of opacity,[4] which Glissant explains as "that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence" (1997, p. 191). By "expos[ing] exploitation and [even] supersed[ing] it" (Femia 1981, p. 53), opacity can supersede a false simplicity created, as explained by poet Dionne Brand below, by the language, and specifically the narrative, of Empire. Similarly, I would suggest that the process of exposing exploitation is not one of rendering greater transparency but rather of "reflecting, intuiting, making sense of, and undoing the times we live in", a process Brand (2017b, audio recording) explains as the liberating work of poetry. Brand (2018b, audio recording) elucidates:

> Poetry is always abstract even when it is narrative poetry. […] Good poetry anyway, that is poetry that fills out its entire capacities on line and meter and metaphor and pressure on the unknown, putting different things together to make new meaning all the time, that work that should keep happening in every line.

Similarly, according to academic Alessandro Corio (2013, p. 922), Glissant argues that "poetry does not utter or appropriate the expression of the living, but relentlessly searches for a word which is capable of listening for the 'cry of the world' and which thereby allows itself to intersect with its enigma".

This article approaches the role of poetry as translator as one deeply tied to activism, in the form of resistance, in that poetry as translator of Empire does not seek to replicate, reproduce, or paraphrase the language of Empire, as reported by mainstream news or other state-backed entities. Rather poetry, as a form of translatory activism, can "reflect" (Brand, 2017b, audio recording) what is implicit, yet often unsaid or simplified, in those texts and communications. Through this, I would suggest that poetry can be seen as taking on a role that is similar to that of the "activist role of the translator", which Distinguished Professor in Comparative Poetics and Global Politics Rebecca Ruth Gould and translator, poet, and critic Kayvan Tahmasebian explain as "the corrector of the false representations" (2020, p. 4).[5] Just as "an activist agenda may motivate a translator to intervene with the meanings

[4] Glissant's "right to opacity" recognizes that "if we examine the process of 'understanding' people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency" (1997, pp. 189-190).

[5] In Gould and Tahmasebian's introduction to *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Activism*, they explain that Bader Eddin (in Chapter 9) writes about the translation on social media of graffiti from Aleppo about the Syrian war. They articulate that in the chapter Eddin "warns against the oversimplification of the disastrous wartime conditions in Syria by the images that circulate, via social media, around the world" (Gould, Tahmasebian 2020, p. 4).

and tones of the original" (Gould, Tahmasebian 2020, p. 4), I would suggest that a poet may also engage in a process of reconfiguring translation, in that

> if there is a fidelity inhering in activist translation, it is to the 'situation' […] which is intrinsically and irrevocably political. This situation is comprised of the socio-political contexts into which the translated text seeks to intervene. (Gould, Tahmasebian 2020, p. 4)

I would offer that the same process is true for the poet's relationship to a poetic text.

From these understandings, this article sees the poet as translator in the role of "poet *engagé*", which Brand explains as the "tradition of poets who think of poetry as a political act, who think about poetry as a kind of making new meaning in the world" (in Bresge 2019, no pagination), and in the role of engaging in "a poetics of liberation [by] not writ[ing] toward anything called justice, but against tyranny" (Brand 2017b, audio recording). Here I am suggesting that engaged poets work in parallel with, as Mourad (2000, p. 165) writes, "engaged translators [who …] make special selections and use specific translation strategies to introduce, serve, or foster an ideology or agenda 'that explicitly challenge[s] the dominant narratives of the time' [quoting Baker 2010, p. 23]". This framing draws from English and Portuguese language lecturer Luciana de Mesquita Silva and adjunct professor in translation theory Dennys Silva-Reis's recognition that "the categories of gender and race are not only social but also categories of linguistic-cultural analysis" (2019, p. 14) and "no use of the word is neutral [therefore] the reading of texts (and later their translations) is a moment of utterance and voicing" (p. 15). This seems to echo Brand's poem *No Language Is Neutral* (1990), in which she writes,

> A hidden verb
> takes inventory of those small years like a person
> waiting at a corner, counting and growing thin
> through life as a cloth and as water
>
> […]
>
> I became more secretive, language
> seemed to split in two, one branch fell silent, the other
> argued hotly for going home. (p. 28)
>
> […]
>
> I have listened to the hard
> gossip of race that inhabits this road. Even in this I
> have tried to hum mud and feathers and sit peacefully
> in this foliage of bones and rain. (p. 31)

Here I posit that poetry is engaged in translation as a process with impacts, echoing Brand's perspective of seeing her poetry as "an action which propels or generates an action, so a poem is an action in the world, a line is an action in the world and so the world will be different the moment I say this" (Brand 2023, audio recording).

In this article, poetry takes on the role of translator as witness-bearer, which Gould and Tahmasebian explain occurs when "the boundary between author and translator is rendered invisible. The particular kind of agency of the translator as witness-bearer often merges with that of the poet" (Gould, Tahmasebian 2020, p. 2). I will examine herein how, in my collection of poetry, *Empires of the Everyday*, this translator as witness-bearer seeks to "make sense of" (Brand 2017b, audio recording) everyday life within Empire. I suggest that poetry in this role is both a form of resistance in and of itself and an articulation of the need for resistance through re-instilling in language the complexity and opacity (Glissant 1997) that exist in the social world. I would suggest that the role of translator as witness-bearer aligns with Brand's explanation of the role of poet as witness; Brand explains: "I've always thought of myself as a writer who follows, who listens, who accounts" (2023, audio recording).

In *Empires of the Everyday*, this translation occurs within – or perhaps across – a single language (in this case English) that translates current events into poetic text. The project is interested in ways that poetry, by not adhering to the rules of the language of Empire and instead leaning into the poetic form, can reflect, intuit, and make sense of (Brand, 2017b, audio recording) historical and contemporary imperial and colonial contexts. While it has been said that poetry is untranslatable, I aim to suggest, instead, that poetry can act as a vital tool for translation – a translation that is embedded in, and perhaps necessary to, resistance and liberatory possibilities.

2. Translating Empire

2.1. The necessary translation of Empire

I am specifically interested in the ways that Hardt and Negri extend their understanding of Empire, articulated above, into a focus on the role of translation in the context of liberation struggles. Hardt and Negri state: "For a cycle [of struggle] to form [across processes of liberation], the recipients of the news must be able to 'translate' the events into their own language, recognize the struggles as their own, and thus add a link to the chain" (Hardt, Negri 2000, pp. 50-51). They continue:

> There is no common language of struggles that could 'translate' the particular language of each into a cosmopolitan language. Struggles in other parts of the world and even our own struggles seem to be written in an incomprehensible foreign language. This too points toward an important political task: to construct a new common language that facilitates communication, as the languages of anti-imperialism and proletarian internationalism did for the struggles of a previous era. Perhaps this needs to be a new type of communication that functions not on the basis of resemblances but on the basis of differences: a communication of singularities. (Hardt, Negri 2020, p. 57)

This statement – a linking to a common language – seems to follow the poet Adrienne Rich's (1991) interest in *The Dream of a Common Language*[6] held within poetry. Haines (2017, p. 207) explains Rich's poetic practice as "commoning; it is an activity that removes life and language from capitalist relations, patriarchal arrangements, and heteronormative compulsions, experimenting with new social relations in the process". This article attempts to explore the ways towards which this common language contributes to understandings of both hegemony and liberation by translating the language of Empire into the language of poetry.

2.2. Empire's narrative and poetry's diacritics[7]

Emphasizing the embeddedness of narrative within Empire, Brand (2017a) proposes "a radical indictment of Narrative", stating:

> For Black people, Narrative, as it is constituted now, is incapable of transmitting or sounding a tomorrow beyond brutalisation. It is incapable of transmitting or sounding a present, a today, since our lived today is cluttered in frequencies of oppression and responses to oppression. (Brand 2017a, p. 59)

Brand continues:

> Narrative is, to my mind, almost always implicated in the colonial/imperialist/racist project – with one's best efforts one writes back to, or against, first the existence and then the persistence of the dominant narratives of coloniality, racism and imperialism. […] So predicated this narrative language compels us to answer in the same language, struck through, enlivened by the action of our bodies in race. […] In effect, we narrate non-being. (Brand 2017a, p. 60)

Brand (2017a, p. 59) suggests that poetry, in contrast, "perhaps, with its capacities to deposit and unearth plural meanings, with its refusals of a

[6] Rich's 1991 poetry collection is titled *The Dream of a Common Language* and contains a poem by the same name.

[7] Diacritics are "small letter-shaped symbols or other marks which can be added to a vowel or consonant symbol to modify or redefine its meaning in various ways" (IPA 1999, p. 15).

particular interrogative gaze might cut out a space toward a description of being in the diaspora". According to Brand:

> the reader interrogates Narrative but Poetry interrogates the reader. […] The reader's response is tangential to poetry, whereas it is crucial to narrative. Poetry requires a deciphering of meaning whereas narrative enjoins, hails the known world. (Brand 2017a, p. 59)

Brand emphasizes the diacritical work of poetry, writing:

> much in the way that diacritical marks supplement certain alphabets changing the sound, tone, or meaning of certain words, Poetry, in my formulation, changes what I see as the racist alphabets of narratives – the prevalent modes of speech and key impediments to Black being. (Brand 2017a, p. 59)

Through this, Brand outlines the ways that poetry allows one to see without the limits of Empire.

2.3. What does translating Empire do?

In this framing of poetry as translator, I extend and offer a slight shift to Professor of Philosophy and French Damian Tissot's explanation of Antoine Berman's articulation of the role of the translator. Tissot states that, according to Berman, "the translator should find a way of making textually accessible to the target reader what is precisely different from their reality" (Tissot 2017, p. 39). I would suggest that poetry as translator can instead make accessible to the reader what is *precisely consistent and opaque but perceived as transparent* in one's reality. Furthermore, I would suggest that it is poetry's capacity to bend language that offers these insights into one's reality (as articulated in Section 3.2 below). This perspective draws also from Kay O'Halloran *et al.*'s understanding of intersemiotic translation as "the constant translation of signs into other signs [forming] the basis of cultural communication" (O'Halloran *et al.* 2016, p. 199). Umberto Eco explains:

> Culture continuously translates signs into other signs, and definitions into other definitions, words into icons, icons into ostensive signs, ostensive signs into new definitions, new definitions into propositional functions, propositional functions into exemplifying sentences, and so on; in this way it proposes to its members an uninterrupted chain of cultural units composing other cultural units, and thus translating and explaining them. (Eco 1979, p. 71)

I suggest that poetry disrupts this cultural translation process and engages in a separate process of translation, operating with a distinctly different set of signs. The poems in *Empires of the Everyday*, some of which are included below, attempt to engage in this process of "reflecting, intuiting, making

sense of, and undoing" (Brand 2017b, audio recording) the contemporary everyday, its signs, and its symbols, and through doing so engage in a deeper refusal to "renovate the narratives of coloniality and imperialism" (Brand 2017a, p. 63). In this way, *Empires of the Everyday* attempts to "render metropolitan language into [poetic] vernaculars" by, like the translator as witness-bearer, "inventing new forms and generating new meanings from felicitous if unexpected linguistic juxtaposition" (Gould, Tahmasebian 2020, p. 3).

Similarly, poetry can (and *Empires of the Everyday* attempts to) do the work of translating between paradigms (Gould, Tahmasebian 2020), specifically the paradigm of Empire and a liberatory paradigm, by "rendering theories" (Wróblewska 2020, pp. 15-16) created from the language of one social and political context into a different form of language. I am interested in ways that this process can "intervene into the existing power relations and alter the composition of the historical bloc" (Wróblewska 2020, p. 18).[8] To do so effectively, "a translator must exploit parallels between source and target culture, taking into account their different points of development" (Wróblewska 2020, pp. 15-16).

Drawing from Brand's discussion of narrative (outlined above), I suggest that the language of Empire cannot in fact translate itself, and so requires a different mode to enable translation. This also extends Gramsci's understanding that different fields of study must be translated (Wróblewska 2020, p. 16). While Gramsci ([1995] 1999, p. 452) explains that an economic argument may be expressed in the language of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, or Karl Marx, poetry can use a language that operates outside the constraints of Empire. In this, I wish to suggest that, as a vehicle for translation, poetry reflects, with the goal of undoing (Brand 2017b, audio recording), the historical and contemporary contexts by existing outside of, and even without, the confines of narrative. This is done with the goal of "making sense of" (Brand 2017b, audio recording) the contemporary moment and its historical lineage. Crucially this understanding and its development is an act of resistance because thinking outside the constraints of Empire, beyond its imagination, is a critical step in "undoing the time we live in" (Brand 2017b, audio recording). I suggest, therefore, that this thinking, enabled through poetry as translator, is a critical component of resistance, and so too of activism.

[8] The "historical bloc" is put forward by Antonio Gramsci as "the social order that produces and re-produces the hegemony of the dominant class through a nexus of institutions, social relations, and ideas" (Gould, Tahmasebian 2020, p. 7).

3. Poetry as translator

3.1. The disorientation of translation and poetry

This examination of the role of poetry as translator is rooted in Frantz Fanon's understanding of the language of the colonizer. As articulated by Professor in African American Studies John Drabinski (2019), Fanon emphasized that,

> if speaking a language means participating in a world and adopting a civilization, then the language of the colonized, a language imposed by centuries of colonial domination and dedicated to the elimination or abjection of other expressive forms, speaks the world of the colonizer. (no pagination)

Similarly, this article also builds on scholar John Patrick Leary's positioning that "the language we have to understand and describe our era's inequality is itself one of the instruments of perpetuating it" (Leary 2018, p. 1), which then moves Leary to ask: "How can we think and act critically in the present when the very medium of the present, language, constantly betrays us?" (p. 2). To respond, I look to academic, novelist, and critic Raymond Williams's *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Society and Culture* (1985), which Leary's book follows and which sought to instill in readers an understanding of language as "not a tradition to be learned, nor a consensus to be accepted, [but …] a vocabulary to use, to find our own ways in, to change as we find it necessary to change it, as we go on making our own language and history" (Williams 1985, p. 24). Here, I suggest that poetry, as a translator that bends language, creates specific and interesting opportunities to make one's own language, and so too make sense of one's own history and future.

While this article attempts to explore the ways that poetry, as a translator, might push the boundaries of "speaking the world of the colonizer" (Fanon in Drabinksi 2019), it also learns from philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin's differentiation between translation and poetry. Benjamin (1997, p. 159) articulates that "the poet's intention is spontaneous, primary, concrete, whereas the translator's is derivative, final, ideal". I suggest that by considering poetry as a specific form of language into which ideas can be translated, a form of language that is primary, concrete, and guided by spontaneity, a different sense and meaning can be offered to ideas communicated in the narrative-based language of Empire. Benjamin also states:

> It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. For the sake of pure language he breaks through decayed barriers of his own language. (2004, p. 261)

This "allow[s] his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue" (Benjamin 1997, p. 163). Here, I invite readers to consider poetry as the "foreign tongue" that can "powerfully affect" (Benjamin 1997, p. 163) the "decayed barriers" (Benjamin 2004, p. 261) of the language of Empire.

In this examination it has been particularly interesting to notice the parallels between the ways poetry and translation are discussed. Earlier, I mentioned the "common language" referred to by Hardt and Negri (2000) to respond to the need to facilitate communication across struggles, alongside Rich's (1991) focus on the common language within poetry. I also mentioned the echo between de Mesquita Silva and Silva-Reis's recognition that "no use of the word is neutral [therefore] the reading of texts (and later their translations) is a moment of utterance and voicing" (2019, p. 15) and Brand's poem titled *No Language Is Neutral* (1990). I would also suggest that other perspectives on translation align with understandings of what poetry does. Patricia Hill Collins's articulation that "individuals who serve as translators not only interpret the varying meanings across different intellectual, political, and social settings, they create knowledge in border spaces" (2000, p. xi) aligns with Brand's interest in following the "tradition of poets who think of poetry as a political act, who think about poetry as a kind of making new meaning in the world" (Brand in Bresge 2019, no pagination). Linguist and translator Michela Baldo's acknowledgement that translators create "new discourses" (2010, p. 34) and Judith Butler's understanding of translation as a process that "will constitute a loss, a disorientation, but one in which the human stands a chance of coming into being anew" (2004, p. 38) converse with Brand's articulation that poetry "can expose the heterogeneous qualities of a life, or of life, in an age when all efforts, both corporate and State, seem to make homogenous. […] Poetry has the capacity to blow oxygen on a stiff existence" (2017a, p. 72). Lastly, this project recognizes poetry as a form that can extend Benjamin's awareness of translation as standing "midway between poetry and doctrine" (1968, p. 77); scholar, literary theorist, and feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's articulation of translation as both "necessary and impossible" (2018, audio recording); and poet Raul Zurita's understanding of poetry as "an X-ray, a history of human emotions, and a history of how individuals are affected by the real" (2014, no pagination).

3.2. Empires of the Everyday

Following Gould and Tahmasebian's (2020) framing of translator as witness-bearer, explained above, the poems in *Empires of the Everyday* look at how a feminist praxis enables resistance though a translation of current affairs into poetry. The collection examines how imperialism is ever-present and often operates invisibly in the contemporary quotidian. In the poems, these

dynamics are examined through the feminist sociological lens of what sociologist Dorothy Smith calls "the everyday" (1987, p. 9), meaning both the particular local places where people live their lives and "a way of seeing, from where we actually live, into the power, processes, and relations that organize and determine the everyday context of that seeing" (Smith 1987, p. 9). The poetry collection also draws from Fanon's (1961) and Gramsci's (1971) work to attempt to uncover the imperial currents present in both explicit acts of racialized state violence as well as cultural meanings implicit within language, media, and technology and their impacts on ideology. To do so, the poems come after Louis Althusser's (2014) understanding of ideological state apparatuses as tools to maintain capitalism and enable the interpellation of people into social subjects – and therefore "political beings" always affected by the actions of the state, as per Ralph Miliband (2009, p. 1).

In the collection, the poems spar with an AI translator, the "I" of the poems, which is fed news and spits out text exposing the history and ongoing presence of Empire, colonialism, and state violence. This speaker observes and examines regimes of power as communicated through technologies and media, and embodies an antagonistic, if observational, stance towards the resulting violence. Following the works of Adrienne Rich (*Atlas of the Difficult World*), Dionne Brand (*Inventory*), C.D. Wright (*Rising, Falling, Hovering*), and other poets, the poems often address multiple, specific individuals ("you") of various subjectivities moving through the landscape of the poems ("the city") and confined within the context of Empire. The use of "the city" in the poems draws from Brand's understanding, as a place that "encapsulates life, captures life, makes life happen" (2021, audio recording). The collection is divided into five "episodes" (or scenes) plus a final episode: in episode one, the poems follow the "you" within the city, but with distant understanding of the impacts; in episode two, the "you" begins to feed the "I" theories from key thinkers, writers, and poets, alongside details of their life such that the "I" can translate the city; in episode three, the "I" translates the city for the "you"; in episode four, the "you", having gained an understanding of the city, attempts to resist it; episode five explores different possible ends for "you" and "I"; and a single contrapuntal poem in the *Final Episode* is read in three voices with different meanings. By peeling back the mundane to reveal the imperial within, the "I" of the poems engages in an explicit critique of Empire. The complexities of such a critique from technology, constructed by and within an imperial context, are explored by drawing from literary critic Edward Said's (1993) framing of the "imagination of empire" as well as the work of philosopher and poet Audre Lorde (1984).

Moving from the understanding of translation explained herein and the recognition that Empire attempts to prevent us from seeing itself and so requires a translatory process, the project traces the "you" of the poems. This

begins with an initial position of presence within Empire, what the poems call "the city", but a distant engagement with its impacts, because of not yet having access to this translator. The collection opens with the following poem:

> ***To the City in Translation***[9]
>
> At twelve, you awake each morning evaporating
> your public faith limits you, your ears inessential
> to the symphony, your uncertainty crawls the cold
> avenues of your clavicle, you siphon your blood
>
> to an anaemic language, by twenty-one, you are steeped
> within a suspended city, the operator says there is no fare
> to pay today, beyond the subway's static walls of each
> other's unknown whereabouts, in this prolific silence
>
> the city always veers from, in this ultimatum to every nation:
> With us. Against us. You stand with an x-ray of the real,
> its massacres difficult to decipher, your own struggles written
> in an impossible language, a necessary one, you parse
>
> the city's wires, at the threshold of doctrine you form
> to be on another tongue, you concrete a common thing.

This first poem of the collection attempts to situate the collection within the theoretical frameworks that are critical to the ideas explored in the poem (as mentioned in the associated footnote). For example, the second line ("your public faith limits you, your ears inessential / to the symphony") both draws from Benjamin's discussion of the role of the audience in art (specifically "no symphony [is intended] for the listener") and, by placing the words "to the symphony" on a separate line, attempts to draw attention to its meaning. In this use of enjambment, the poem creates an opportunity to look more closely at this terminology than might be enabled through prose, raising questions of

[9] Following is an abridged version of the endnote associated with this poem in the collection. The parts that are included here are those that are relevant to the current discussion. In *The Translator's Task*, Walter Benjamin (1997) writes, "no poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener" (p. 89), frames translation as standing "midway between poetry and doctrine" (p. 94), and states that "the poet's intention is spontaneous, primary, concrete, whereas the translator's is derivative, final, ideal" (94). Arundhati Roy (2016), in *Come September*, explains the "with us" frame, writing, "we are being asked to believe that the U.S. marines are actually on a feminist mission". Brand (2017b, audio recording), in her talk *Writing Against Tyranny and Toward Liberation*, says, "Canada is no less imperialist or oppressive [than the United States] but I fool myself into parsing the difference, this [the US] being the center the imperialism and where I live [Canada] a kind of subdivision".

what the symphony is, who is creating the contemporary symphony, and what its role is in the current moment.

In bringing together the thinking of Benjamin, Arundhati Roy, Brand, and others, the poem attempts to explore what happens when these thinkers' ideas exist in proximity to one another – how together they create a specific lens through which we might gain access to a deeper understanding. This poem attempts to show how poetry, as a form, creates rich opportunity for such overlaying of different ideas, and the work of different thinkers, to show how their ideas and words might exist in relationship to one another. In this way, the poetic form can be an opportunity to witness the co-existence of different ideas as they build on each other and collectively contribute to understandings. This ongoing movement away from linearity and towards making a different sense and meaning is attempted in the collection of poetry as the "you" awakens to Empire and engages the "I" in translating the city by giving both their details to this machine "I", alongside other language and texts that assist the translation process. In this way, and as discussed above, other thinkers contributed to the translation, as did I, the poet.

The following poem, which is the first in the second episode, introduces the concept of the machine ("the neural machine") translating life in the city into something more comprehensible through being fed current events, the texts of critical thinkers, and details of life of the "you" of the poems.

Introductions[10]

to I: Amidst cranes, copper stripped, coiled
vibrations of your voice, amidst highways,
you inject your dry knowing of zeros,
of ones, of heaving catastrophes, small

plywood shelters the city demolishes
in pandemic winters, the violence of daily
minutia, then also di Prima, Césaire, Lorde,
Maracle, Glissant, Gramsci, Simone, Fanon

and more into me, a neural machine,
to rotate an atlas of language, angle the spectacle
of the city to your eye, utter and even
undo a renovated grammar, but only this

misses the immediacy of today's asymmetric

[10] This poem follows the film *Seven Prisoners* (2021), specifically regarding the reference to copper for use in the city's transmitters, and Catherine Porter's (2021) *New York Times* article titled *The Carpenter Who Built Tiny Homes for Toronto's Homeless*.

> mimicry, so into me you embed: your life.

This poem attempts to explore the ways that poetry, differently from journalism, can navigate the nuances of current events (and so the ways it contributes a specific insight into the process of translating Empire). Specifically, the lines "heaving catastrophes, / small // plywood shelters the city demolishes / in pandemic winters, the violence of daily / minutia" attempt to focus attention on the event of plywood structures being torn down by the City of Toronto during the winter of 2021 (as outlined in the *New York Times* article cited in the footnote) and also bring awareness to the ways this plays out as a part of the everyday lived violence of Empire (Fanon 1961) in the city. The juxtaposition of these two components – the reporting of the current event alongside the understanding of the daily violence of life in the city – allows for a specific documentation of the current moment. This follows professor of contemporary writing at Northumbria University Katy Shaw's understanding, as quoted by freelance journalist Donna Ferguson (2019), of current attempts to repurpose poetry

> as this really dynamic and vital form that can capture, in a very condensed way, the turbulent nature of contemporary society – and give us the space to struggle with our desire to understand and negotiate a lot of what is going on at the moment. (Ferguson 2019, no pagination)

Ferguson further quotes Shaw as saying:

> Poetry as a form can capture the immediate responses of people to divisive and controversial current events. Writing poetry and sharing it in this context is a radical event, an act of resistance to encourage other people to come round to your perspective. (Ferguson 2019, no pagination)

The poems attempt to explore the outcome of this relationship of the "you" with the machine translator and the information that the machine conveys about these current events – communicated differently than would be possible through journalism, as explained above. As these relationships develop, so too does the experience of the "you". This occurs against the backdrop of both Gramsci's uncovering of, as Femia (1981, p. 35) writes, the "process of internalization of bourgeois relations and the consequent diminution of revolutionary possibilities" and Brand's focus on the work of poetry as it is "reflecting, intuiting, making sense of, and undoing the times we live in" (2017b, audio recording), mentioned earlier. The collection shows curiosity about that experience of the "you", which shifts from internalized hegemony towards an engagement with an undoing of the times, as well as the tension between this engagement and the ongoing interest of Empire preventing those living within its borders from seeing its imagination.

While the above poem, *To the City in Translation*, uses line breaks to

draw attention to a specific set of words (i.e., "to the symphony") and the poem directly above (*Introductions*) juxtaposes words from different sources (news reporting and theory) to contribute to a depth of understanding, the following poem uses enjambment[11] to provide multiple meanings and even experiences.

The City's Geography of Eyelids

Behind your stalactite eyelids, the city burns
your vitreous humour then warns you to calm
your colic, your children, each midnight,
your cochlear fluid is the city's wide vowels:

I'm so glad you can repay the sleep we gave you
with the details of your body, your inertia goes
so well with the colour of your eyes, the city floods
its devotion to ceremony, barbs its benches

again tonight, drills in you a toothless
critique, you reach into your antiseptic
sockets for the city's fluent backlog
of pendulous concern, the city says:

I'm so glad we know what you love, what you
love, we see, we remember, we remember, we know.

Here, I want to focus on the lines "your inertia goes / so well with the colour of your eyes". The poem, by using a break between the word "goes" and the word "so well", creates an opportunity for multiple readings, and in doing so attempts to draw attention to both the promises and the reality made by "the city". The line "your inertia goes" could be understood as a promise by the city that the inertia experienced by the "you" in the poems will leave, creating a sense of possibility and activity beyond the confines of the apathy that comes with inertia. When the poem is read further, it reveals the fuller meaning of what the city is communicating: "Your inertia goes / so well with the colour of your eyes". As shown in this reading, the city makes no such promise to lift the inertia. Instead, the inertia, the apathy, and lack of resistance by the "you" in the poem is important to the city – and its ability to maintain the daily violence explored in the previous poem – and, as such, the city seeks to convince the "you" that the presence of that inertia is in harmony with their very being, their very way of seeing the world, their eyes.

[11] Enjambment is "the running-over of a sentence or phrase from one poetic line to the next, without terminal punctuation" (Poetry Foundation 2023, no pagination).

This project, in its relationship to the city, but also in its approach more broadly, follows Brand's approach to engaging with the city. Brand (2018a, audio recording) explains: "I've felt in my work, my poems and novels, the odd sensation of writing the city into being, though that city that I imagine, and that city that is possible, is yet unfinished". I suggest that projects such as this one can be attempts to understand "the imagination of empire" (Said 1993, p. 12) with the goal of being able to resist it, subvert it, and even engage in a liberatory process when faced with its violence, the violence of the everyday of Empire. As articulated above, I would suggest that translatory activism through poetry is a critical component of this resistance, subversion, and liberation.

The following poem, through its use of a volta,[12] explores one attempt to understand "the imagination of empire":

On the Fumes of the City

Of course, as days begin, a rage follows
you into a vacant circulation, within
each sieved ambiguity of evenings,
you could have betrayed and have not

yet, these tools, clear of fumes,
resist static, stagnation, here on the edge
of mechanical needs, you are barely
scratching yourself to the fullest:

the city palliates its sea-lanes in this
uniquely bleak time to come of age,
you say: *I watched the city gather its discarded*
teeth, its intestines, the city congeals around

your mourning, you understand its arms,
its armature, its accidents, as never before.

This volta, which in the above poem occurs between the twelfth and thirteenth lines, follows the explanation provided by poets.org (2023, no pagination): "The volta marks a shift from the main narrative or idea of the poem and awakens readers to a different meaning or to a reveal in the conclusion of the poem". While the focus on the first twelve lines of this poem is on what is being done to and by the "you" of the poem, the final couplet directs attention to the understanding the "you" is experiencing. As the final poem in the episode (and the penultimate poem in the collection),

[12] "In a sonnet, the volta is the turn of thought or argument" (Poetry Foundation. *Volta*, 2023, no pagination).

this shift towards greater understanding – which is the critical interest of the collection – attempts to focus the reader's eye on the undercurrent of meaning of the poems and even their possible conclusion. In this way, this project attempts to understand the dystopian elements of current everyday through the degree to which they are, even we are, unknown to ourselves. It does this with the goal of drawing closer to an understanding of what is possible within the everyday. I would suggest that this volta provides a unique opportunity for this shift in main ideas, the juxtaposition of which creates opportunity for insight and revelation.

The possibilities I see in projects such as these, in translation processes such as that offered by the "I" in these poems, and perhaps in poetry more generally, are the ways that "reflecting, intuiting, making sense of, and undoing" (Brand, 2017b, audio recording) Empire might push us towards a collective – or towards Hardt and Negri's framing of the multitude as an "active social subject, which acts on the basis of what the singularities share in common" (Hardt, Negri 2004, p. 100). This article also leans into a curiosity about the ways that Empire might "offer new possibilities to the forces of liberation" (Hardt, Negri 2000, p. xv). At the same time, the project follows Gramsci's thinking, as articulated by Femia (1981, p. 52), that "the march of industry […] leads not to certain revolution but to the integration of the masses into the capitalist system, as the agencies of socialization become more and more sophisticated and ubiquitous". Femia, following Gramsci, continues:

> What is needed in such circumstances is a 'war of position' on the cultural front. This strategy requires steady penetration and subversion of the complex and multiple mechanisms of ideological diffusion. The point of the struggle is to conquer one after another all the agencies of civil society. […] In modern capitalist society a 'reversal of hegemony' is a precondition of successful revolution. But it is not simply a matter of substituting one hegemony for another. The principle of hegemony must itself be transformed – from a principle that mystifies the social situation to one that exposes exploitation and supersedes it. (Femia 1981, pp. 52-53)

These perceptions are in alignment with approaches to translation as a "collective praxis", which as Nagar *et al.* (2017, p. 132) explain, is "a translation process that hungers for ethical engagement through collective agitation [that] can be deeply satisfying precisely because it does not believe in easy resolutions or closures, or in transparent rendering of meanings". This also aligns with Butler's understanding of the practice of translation as "a way of producing – performatively – another kind of 'we,' [so as] to negotiate the right to speak […] to expose and resist its daily violence, and to find the language to which to lay claim to rights to which one is not yet entitled" (Butler 2009, p. x). I posit that this understanding of Empire, this

understanding of translation, and translations of Empire that draw from the possibilities of poetry, are critical components of moving towards collective action. A collective action that can be read, in the context of this collection of poetry, as a poem in three voices. A contrapuntal poem[13] that can be read in multiple ways.

The following poem, *A Final Episode*, also the final in the collection, draws from Said's understanding of contrapuntal analysis. Said explains that reading and understanding contrapuntally involves "a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominant discourse acts" (Said 1993, p. 51). Said continues: "Contrapuntal reading must take into account both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it" (p. 66). While Said's focus is on "extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly removed" (pp. 66-67), I would suggest the same can be said of contrapuntal writing, which happens explicitly, though not exclusively, within contrapuntal poems.

A Final Episode

Today they are
the shredded edges
of algorithms

tracking us.
Today they are
determining deliverables
our individual lives
they are
eye in us
compile solutions before
the question called
tomorrow
the fires burn,
a Great Grey Owl pivots
from extinction. Today
Teck is cutting
its own neck. Today
we outsize musculature
they pick up
we pick up
what we left off
what we are:
our bones
Today they are

[13] Contrapuntal is "a poetic form that interweaves two or more poems to create a single poem that can be read in multiple ways, depending on how the poem is designed on the page" (poets.org, *Contrapuntal*, 2023, no pagination).

looking in
our curtains
they shut off
unfinished as the city.

The above contrapuntal poem can be read vertically in three columns or horizontally across the page. Either way, the poem is written as though read in three voices, with one voice reading each column, either taking turns (as in the case of reading vertically down the page) or interspersing the reading (as in the case of reading horizontally across the page).

In following this technique of contrapuntal poetry, the poem attempts to explore the possibilities that lie within multiple readings. The first reading is articulated as the voice of imperialism, made explicit when the poem is read horizontally, with the concluding lines: "Today they are / looking in / our curtains / they shut off / unfinished as the city". This reading attempts to show how the "they", as imperial forces, retain control of their surveillance of individual lives and of shutting down the possibilities for liberation that exist in the city (articulated as "unfinished" in the poem). The second reading is articulated in the voice of resistance, made explicit when the poem is read vertically, with the concluding lines: "Today / we outside musculature / we pick up / what we are: / unfinished as the city". This reading, in contrast, attempts to explore the possibilities that exist in the city of extending beyond the confines of the city, to return to Brand's explanation of "writing the city into being […] a city that is possible, [a city that] is yet unfinished" (2018a, audio recording). In these multiple readings, most explicitly in *The Final Episode*, but throughout the collection, I attempt to explore these multiple voices of resistance that exist within Empire, the unfinished landscapes, and the possibilities therein. I would suggest poetry more broadly, through "reflecting, intuiting, making sense of, and undoing the times we live in" (Brand, 2017b, audio recording), creates unique and important opportunities to explore these possibilities – and has real liberatory potential.

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