The West as Paradigm: Occidentalism in Giorgio Agamben and the problems of historical denial and ressentiment

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In 2006, Naoki Sakai and I co-edited an issue of the multilingual series *Traces* titled “Translation, Biopolitics, Colonial Difference”\(^1\) in which we presented an argument for articulating the indeterminacy of translation as a mode of social practice to the contingent commodifications of labor-power and the nexus of knowledge that governs anthropological difference. The call for papers for that issue proposed to prospective authors the idea of bringing *translation* squarely into a politically-informed discussion about the production of both social relations and humanistic knowledge in the context of anthropological difference inherited from colonialism. We did not hide our ambition to push the idea of cultural translation beyond “strategic essentialism” to present a new vision of syncretic knowledge and social practice that would directly subvert the anthropo-technological status of “the West” as both exception and a form of immunity. Central to this discussion was the notion of a *biopolitics of translation*. In a series of lectures in the late 1970s, Michel Foucault introduced and elaborated the assorted concepts of “biopolitics” and “governmentality” as tools for thinking about the way in which the processes of

life—and the possibility of controlling and modifying them through the technical means—enter the sphere of power and become its chief concern.

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

In order to use tools from Foucault’s conceptual kit, however, we found it was not only possible but also necessary to subject the latent and pervasive Occidentalism in his work to a thorough critique while at the same time opening up possibilities for an understanding of biopolitics in a global context. The notion of a “biopolitics of translation” acquires conceptual validity and critical importance with a view to the specifically modern—which is to say, global—phenomenon of the linguistic standardization associated with nationalization and colonial land appropriation. Ever since the concomitant birth of philology and biology, modernity has been associated with the advent of a global cartographic imaginary that places peoples with no prior ‘memory’ of migratory contact, or only ‘deep memory’ such as etymology, into relation through the mediation of an imperial center. As the transition to a global form of

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2 Maurizio Lazzarato, tr. Ivan Ramirez, “From Biopower to Biopolitics” in Plit 13 (2002), 100-111.
spatial imaginary, *modernity* begins, linguistically speaking, when the project of standardization is extended across all manner of social differences to encompass diverse populations in the process of national homogenization (which occurs, as Jacques Bidet argues, on the level of world *system*) and domestic segmentation (which occurs on the level of “class” difference or *structure*). This process must be seen, in turn, in the context of contact with other *global* populations undergoing the same traumatic process of systemic definition and structural segmentation. The *biopolitics of translation* thus names that space of exchange and accumulation in which politics appears to have been preempted by the everyday occurrence of language. Our research shows that when “translation” is understood according to a representational scheme of the epistemtic subject, it names not the operation by which cultural difference is “bridged”, but rather the pre-emptive operation through which originary difference—what is encountered when translation is understood as an act of social practice—is segmented and organized according to the various classificatory schemes of biologico-sociological knowledge emerging out of the colonial encounter.

Seen from this perspective, the modern regime of translation is a concrete form of “systemic complicity” whose primary function is population management within the purview of imperial domination. In other words, it is a globally-applicable technique of segmentation aimed at managing social relationships by forcing them to pass through circuits on the “systemic” level. In Sakai’s research on the transnational discursive structure of both Japanese studies and the institution of the Japanese Emperor system, or again in the relation between imperial nationalism and the maintenance of ethnic

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minorities, we learn that the geography of national sovereignty and civilizational difference that constitutes the geocultural and geopolitical map of both the world and the Human Sciences indicates an important kind of subjective technology or governmental technique that has, until recently, been thoroughly naturalized by an anthropological discourse of “culture”. It is only today that we can begin to see how a multiplicity of disciplinary arrangements forming an economy of translation (in place since the colonial era but far outliving colonialism’s demise) actually produces differentially-coded subjects, typically national/racial ones, whose constitution is interdependent and, at specific intervals, actually complicit in a single, yet extremely hierarchical, state of domination. Our aim in the *Traces* volume was thus to trace a series of genealogies within which “translation” is no longer seen as simply an operation of transfer, relay, and equivalency, but rather assumes a vital historical role in the constitution of the social.

Sakai’s research into the position of the translator within the modern regime of co-figured, nationalized language, shows a precise parallel to the logic of sovereignty. Just as Giorgio Agamben has shown how sovereignty is based on the form of exception (embodied by the figure of the sovereign), the position of the translator in the modern era has been represented in a similarly exceptional fashion. Sakai’s work has turned this relationship inside out, demonstrating that the regularity of the “national language” as a formation in which the (hybrid) position of the translator has been deemed irrelevant is in fact produced in a representational manner only after the practical encounter of social difference in translation. By proposing to look at the formation of

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national language through the ostensibly exceptional case of translation, Sakai has been able to show that it is indeed a systemic, or international, technique of domination. This discovery parallels the growing awareness, largely advanced by Yann Moulier Boutang, of the crucial role in Capitalist expansion played by the various forms of irregular and slave labor, rather than the regularized forms of wage labor. Hence, at the back of the call for papers for that volume was a proposal to displace the state of domination managed by the dual normalizing technologies of wage labor and nationalized speaking subjects with the inventive subjectivities seen in the exodus from wage labor and national language. In effect, translation appears to us as the social relation from which the critique of communication and its corollary “culture” as the reigning ideology of Capital is most directly linked to a politics of life, or again, the politics in which life becomes invested by Capital.

In the various exceptions that alternately govern labor, life and language, we begin to grasp the way in which “the West” has established and maintained its ‘identity’ as a specter for the last few centuries as the leading, knowledgeable region of the globe that supposedly exports innovation and development to other regions. Yet the very concept of the global according to which regions as such are imagined is intrinsically indebted to the legacy of colonialism. Although the colonial encounter produced the first truly global relation, “the West” identified itself as a particular and unique region only by claiming exemptive subtraction from this relation while at the same time undertaking unprecedented accumulation through originary expropriation.

The contemporary configuration of the West and the Rest along an

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immunitarian model is but the most recent development in this remarkably durable history. As the contemporary West prepares to innoculate itself against a slew of viral threats ostensibly emanating from the Third World, it is well-worth remembering that for the indigenous, pre-Columbian populations of the "New World", the contact with Europeans brought far more death from disease than any other cause. It took nearly 400 years, we are told, for population levels in North and South America to reach pre-Columbian levels. This decimation of pre-Columbian populations by viral disease, often occurring, as Frédéric Neyrat points out in his contribution to this volume, in advance of actual contact with Conquistadors and European colonists, constitutes an emblematic event of modernity: here, we find the original form of immunitarian distance that disavows the destructive, expropriative relationship while subsequently preserving the account of that history in the codes of anthropological difference. The temporal inversion effected by the representation of this event is what authorizes the West to claim its “sane and civilizing” mission and repress its viral, barbaric history.

The presentation of a biopolitics of translation requires more elaboration than can be provided here, so in the remainder of this essay, I want to highlight the value of Sakai calls “heterolingual address” in relation to a critique of the West by referencing a decisive fault-line in the work of acclaimed philosopher Giorgio Agamben. While the two thinkers’ approach to language (and, indeed, sovereignty) emphasizes the epistemological and practical problems of exceptionalism, their fundamental divergence with regard to “the paradigm of the West” has crucial ramifications for politics and knowledge.
**Address vs. Communication**

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

According to Sakai, whereas “address” indicates a *social relation* (that between addresser and addressee) that is primarily practical and performative in nature, hence undetermined and open to the negotiation of meaning, “communication” names the imaginary representation of that relation in terms of a series of unities denoted by pronominal identities and informational content, i.e., who we are supposed to be and what we were supposed to mean. Theories of communication, normative by necessity, regularly obscure the fact of address in communication. They are derived from the extra-linguistic assumption that supposedly ‘we’ should be able to ‘communicate’ among ourselves if ‘we’ are a linguistic community. The institution of homolingual address is thus a form of homosociality based on a model of community abstracted from the notion of

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7 Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity* (hereafter abbreviated as TS), (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), 6.
8 Homosociality here refers to the mode of communal solidarity that is obtained by the boundary of distinction. The assumed homogeneity of the inside is no other than an effect of the erection or marking of distinction by which the outside is posited and excluded. Let us take the example of a xenophobic joke: this sort of joke isolates certain foreigners as an object of laughter, and against this object “we,” who are distinguished from “them” by virtue of the fact that “we” can laugh at “them,” are consolidated as a community. Laughter serves as the act of the marking of distinction, which gathers “us” together. This use of homosociality should not be confused with the well-known one by Eve K. Sedgwick.
communion or fusion, what Jean-Luc Nancy calls “immanentism,” among its members. The introduction of a distinction between address and communication has the signal merit of allowing us a way to conceive the radical exteriority of social relationships to the production of meaning. Sakai writes: “addressing does not guarantee the message’s arrival at the destination. Thus, ‘we’ as a pronominal invocation in address designates a relation, which is performative in nature, independent of whether or not ‘we’ actually communicate the same information.”

In itself, “address” does not communicate anything, except to indicate the presence of “communication” as a possibility to be actualized or not in the course of translation. Address is thus an initiation to potentiality: it indicates a relationship essential for signification to take place and order meaning, yet it does not signify anything in particular. Although this potentiality is inherent in any linguistic situation, the reason it is particularly evident in translational exchange is because the possibility of failure, of “not communicating”, is immediately apparent to all participants. What Sakai calls “the regime of homolingual address” is the model according to which this negativity is understood as a simple lack of signification, rather than as an unconditioned potentiality “to not be” in the context of a positive relation. In other words, if in translational exchange I do not understand you, it is only under the influence of the homolingual address that I can assume the reason for this incomprehension is due to sociological factors such as membership in representative communities. In fact, if we really were not to understand each other, there would be no way for us to check with each other to see if the problem in fact arises from any

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9 Jean-Luc Nancy, tr. Peter Conner, et. al., The Inoperative Community (Minneapolis: Minnesota, 1991), 3.

10 TS, 4-5.
factor (such as communal membership) in particular. To equate not being “in”
communication to the notion that addressee and addressee are not “in” the same
social group is to confuse potentiality with representation. Being “out” of a
social group concerns a question of status that can only be verified through
protocols of representation (the “membership card” being only the most
obvious). The potentiality to be “out” of communication, however, is the force
of address that inheres in every instance of communication regardless of
representative social status. Any instance of communication indicates a
potentiality (the moment of address) as well as signifies a determinate meaning.
As such, it includes two sides: one side is the actuality of the event, the fact that
there is language. It both indicates a social relationship (language is always
initially a relation between two or more people) as well as signifies a certain
meaning. The other side is the fact that this actuality (the failure to communicate)
does not present itself as the result of a power that has not been realized, but
rather as the effect of a power not-to-realize. Needless to say, if it is possible to
choose to communicate, it is always equally possible to try not to communicate.
Can one be certain that the attribution of non-communication to “objective”
factors such as communal membership is not in itself replete with unexamined
institutionalized choices (such as the standardization of language into national
forms) that would make trying not to communicate into a form of
communication? Such certainty can only be achieved at the unacceptable price
of rejecting the notion of social construction. Evidently, the effectivity of this
power “to not be” does not occur simply because of presumed gaps between
linguistic communities, but also because to try to communicate is to expose
oneself to exteriority, to a certain exteriority that cannot be reduced to the
externality of a referent to a signification.\textsuperscript{11} The social praxis denoted in our age by the word “translation” is the linguistic situation that makes this feature—assumed to be common to all types of linguistic exchange—most evident precisely because it contrasts with the representation of exchange between discrete spheres of \textit{a priori} communal difference.

\textbf{Invoking the West}

This brief introduction to the distinction between address and communication leads us—let us leave the determination of that “us” to the end of this essay where we consider the role of “specific intellectuals”—to become “attentive to…uses of the pronominal ‘we’ and other markers of collective invocation”\textsuperscript{12}. Once our attention has been drawn to the link between pronominal invocation and homosocial relationships, we can easily find many occurrences in academic discourse as well as everyday cultural productions. One very interesting example is found in the work of Giorgio Agamben—interesting precisely because his work has gone further than perhaps any other philosopher in the poststructuralist idiom to explore from a philosophical angle the problem of pronouns and linguistic referentiality to which Sakai’s notion of heterolingual address draws our attention.

Agamben’s writings on sovereignty and metaphysics since the 1990s have attracted considerable critical acclaim because of the theoretical and historical perspective they bring to contemporary issues related to the so-called “War on Terror” like indefinite detention and the suspension of \textit{habeas corpus}. For Agamben, the camp or detention center is the modern paradigm of the political

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{TS}, 7.
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{TS}, 4.
inasmuch as it reveals an essential crisis, or displacement, thrusting “life” into the heart of the exceptional logic upon which secular sovereignty is founded. However, as the “war on terror” and its corollary, the supposed “clash of civilizations,” suggests, the stakes of this conjuncture could never be attributed to a single nation or group of nations (even though it might be largely promoted by them), but always returns to the problems inherited from colonialism that beset social relationships.

Curiously, even as Agamben notes that the camp as a political form of population control has its roots in the context of colonial governmentality (the Spanish in Cuba, 1896; the English in South Africa at the start of the 20th century\(^\text{13}\)), the historical experience of the non-West is noticeably absent from his work\(^\text{14}\). Elided from the main narrative on the development of biopolitics, the “non-West” returns to make a second appearance in Section III of *Homo Sacer*, the “Camp as paradigm,” at the end of the crucial, penultimate chapter, titled “The Camp as Nomos.” “[T]oday’s democratio-capitalist project of eliminating the poor classes through development,” writes Agamben, “not only reproduces within itself the people that is excluded but also transforms the


\(^\text{14}\) An important corrective to this debilitating ‘oversight’ in Agamben’s account of the historical development of the logic of the exception can be found in Olivier Le Cour-Grandmaison’s work on the French colonial experience in Algeria, which demonstrates how exceptional juridical and military techniques developed in the colonies were later used to suppress class insurrection in the metropolitan country. Any attempt to understand the “hidden matrix of the political” (Agamben) through the “logic of the exception” codified by sovereignty necessarily needs to account for the “state of exception” seen in colonial—and postcolonial—violence. Cf. Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, *Coloniser, Exterminer: sur la guerre et l’état colonial* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).

With all the attention given to Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* in Agamben’s *Homo Sacer*, it is significant that Agamben draws scant consequence from the implicit significance of Arendt’s essential insight in that work: The argument, convincingly laid out by Arendt, that twentieth-century European fascism must be seen as an importation of imperialist methods into the metropolitan countries of Europe, implicitly suggests that the only way to really understand the “logic of the exception” in its biopolitical and historical dimensions is to privilege the historical experience of colonial violence.
entire population of the Third World into bare life.” Significantly, the fundamental paradigm of modernity—the camp, was first practiced in a colonial situation; decades later, the progression of this history threatens to overwhelm subsequently decolonized populations in a new biopolitical trap. The implicit teleology within which Agamben situates the Third World does not, however, include consideration of subjective agency. Like the return of the repressed, the “Third World” is cited in a way that amounts to little more than capitalizing upon the moral authority of its role, well-described by Gayatri Spivak in her landmark essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” as silent witness.

Although the absence of the non-West in Agamben’s historical account is remarkable, it might seem unwarranted to call into question this absence in view of the parameters delineating the object of study. After all, Agamben apparently does not mean to talk about anything other than the West (apart from those two instances we just cited, the non-West is otherwise never mentioned in Homo Sacer). His narrative begins, in the fashion proper to civilizational history, with the Greeks, developing a genealogical focus on “the tradition” specified by the proper noun, “the West” (a series of constantly-repeated specifications that run the gamut from “Western metaphysics” and the “Western tradition” to “the Western State” and “Western politics,” etc.). This same basic narrative structure is common, in fact, to all of his writings, including the early seminal work, Language and Death: the Place of Negativity (1982)17, which attracts our special attention in the following sections for its exhaustive treatment of the

15 Homo Sacer, 180.
problems of pronouns and linguistic referentiality.

Doubt is unquestionably warranted, however, when a presumably spatial category, the West, gives way to a temporal one—the modern, or what Agamben also calls in *Homo Sacer* (1995), “the 24 centuries that have gone by since [the foundation of Western politics]”\(^\text{18}\)—that enables the transformation of a proper noun into a universal history and a universal grammar. When we read Agamben’s seminal early work, we learn that the oscillation from the empirical to the transcendental is an integral feature of the way pronouns have historically been conceived. In a following section, we will use the word *shift* to denote the oscillation or transformation enabled by “the West” in order to highlight its connection to Agamben’s discussion of Roman Jakobson’s notion of the crucial linguistic role played by “shifters”. If indeed Agamben could have confined his narrative to a single region that could be tangibly indicated without any further oscillation between North America and Western Europe (to name but one example), the empirical and the transcendental, the particular and the universal, indication and signification, our objections to his work would be left to consider nothing more than a series of technical questions concerning historical archives whose meaning would be socially-irrelevant today. Yet the introduction of a universal element forces us to consider the problem in its metaphysical, as well as political, dimensions. As countless authors in the context of postcolonial studies have shown, the constitution of “the West” itself cannot be accomplished without reference to a specific history (economic, territorial, political) and a certain hierarchically-organized representation of what constitutes the relation between binary pairs such as outside and inside that typify the social—precisely the essential problem of what Agamben calls “the logic of sovereignty.”

\(^{18}\) *Homo Sacer*, 11.
Needless to say, this form of reference, like any other form, cannot be separated on the one hand from the problems of referentiality that were at the heart of poststructuralism since Derrida (and to which both Agamben and Sakai lay claim with certain reservations), nor can they be separated on the other hand from a certain discipline of translation—a key theme in Sakai’s understanding of the social—that binds various different levels of externality into a single, coherent referent.

**Pronominal Invocation and Shifters**

In *Language and Death*, Agamben shows how the problem of pronominal usage constitutes a hidden matrix, running from thinkers as deeply opposed as Hegel and Heidegger, for the philosophical negativity that determines the metaphysical effects of linguistic referentiality. The attempt to find an alternative to the philosophical experience of language that rests on negativity is pursued, to no avail, through the historical experience of poetry. Thomas Carl Wall adroitly summarizes Agamben’s conclusion: “neither philosophy nor poetry is able to grasp the taking-place of language.”

The aporia opened by this inconclusive conclusion, and possible solutions suggested by recent developments in contemporary philosophy, exceeds the boundaries of our discussion. Instead, we want to focus on the way such negativity invites Occidentalism into the very attempt to think “the fate and destiny of a community (human being) that does not have its origin in

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Language and Death begins by noting a curious parallel between Hegel and Heidegger, two philosophers who otherwise exhibit considerable mutual dissonance. Although we take sense-certainty for granted as the most concrete manifestation of the real, Hegel shows how the demonstrative pronoun (this), in its universal applicability, actually introduces an element of negation into what was thought to be most positive and certain. The introduction of this negativity—the universality of signification introduced into the particularity of tangible indication—serves as the point of departure for the crux of Hegel’s philosophical system and dialectical teleology in general. In Heidegger, whose philosophical writings devoted considerable effort to disqualifying Hegelian dialectic without recourse to the reductive ‘leap of faith’ required by positivism (thus setting the stage for “deconstruction”), negativity enters through the demonstrative pronoun “there” (or Da in German) which forms an integral part of his non-dialectical replacement for subjectivity—Dasein. The demonstrative pronoun (there or this), occupying a crucial place in the systems of philosophers as deeply opposed as Hegel and Heidegger, sits at the crucial fault line between signification and indication.

Going back to Aristotle and Greek philosophy, Agamben asserts that the problem of indication “constitutes the original theme of philosophy”\(^\text{23}\). This retrospective look initiates an historical narrative that traces the mutual imbrication between grammatical studies and metaphysical reflection on being and essence running from Antiquity through the Middles Ages up to the Modern, leading Agamben to conclude that the pronoun—particularly the demonstrative

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\(^{22}\) ibid., 129-130.

\(^{23}\) LD 16.
pronom—has occupied “a privileged status…the history of medieval and modern thought”\textsuperscript{24}. Agamben describes three “crucial” or “decisive” moments in this history: the first comes with the Aristotelian determination of first substance (\textit{prote ousia}) through reference to demonstrative pronouns. The Aristotelian formation, however, was only implicit in the formula, stated by Aristotle, that “every [first] essence signifies a this that”\textsuperscript{25}. A further “decisive step” was taken by Alexandrian and then Latin grammarians in the 2-5\textsuperscript{th} centuries A.D. explicitly thematizing the connection between the pronoun and the sphere of the first substance\textsuperscript{26}. This history, binding grammar to metaphysics, culminates in the “decisive step” taken by modern linguistics to understand the distinction between “signifying” and “showing”\textsuperscript{27} operated by a grammatical class of words that Emile Benveniste first described as “indicators of the utterance” and which Roman Jakobson subsequently called \textit{shifters}. Crucial to our argument, a lengthy citation is necessary:

\begin{quote}
In an essay published a year after Benveniste’s study, Jakobson, taking up the French linguist’s definition in part, classified pronouns among the “shifters”: that is, among those special grammatical units that are contained in every \textit{code} and that cannot be defined outside of a relation to the \textit{message}…[H]e defines shifter as a special class of signs reuniting the two functions: the \textit{symbol-indices}…As symbol-indices, they are capable of replenishing their significance in the code only through the deictic reference to a concrete instance of discourse…The proper meaning of pronouns—as shifters and \textit{indicators of the utterance}—is inseparable
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{LD}, 20.  
\textsuperscript{25} \textit{LD}, 16.  
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{LD}, 20.  
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{LD}, 23.
from a reference to the instance of discourse. The articulation—the shifting—that they effect is not from the nonlinguistic (tangible indication) to the linguistic, but from langue to parole. Pronouns and the other indicators of the utterance, before they designate real objects, indicate precisely that language takes place. In this way, they permit the reference to the very event of language, the only context in which something can be signified…metaphysics is that experience of language that, in every speech act, grasps the disclosure of that dimension, and in all speech, experiences above all the “marvel” that language exists. Only because language permits a reference to its own instance through shifters, something like being and the world are open to speculation.\(^{28}\)

Agamben asks what it means to indicate the instance of discourse? Modern linguistics leaves this question unanswered, or else implicitly resolves it, according to Agamben, in the metaphysical recuperation of immediacy—what Jakobson calls an “existential relation” between the “I of discourse” and the “I of existence”\(^{29}\). Presumably the I-of-existence is the one that actually is born, breathes, and dies. It is impossible, however, to reconcile this notion of existential-I distinct from linguistic-I with Benveniste’s demonstration that time is merely an effect of discourse. The temporality of the “I of existence” would therefore have to be thought in conjunction with the temporality of the “I of discourse”\(^{30}\). Of course, the existential-I should be the one that we can most readily point to without the aid of language. Hence, modern linguistics continues to rely upon an essential distinction between indication and signification that represents, in Agamben’s argument, a primary metaphysical

\(^{28}\) LD, 24-26.
\(^{29}\) LD, 31-32.
\(^{30}\) Cf. LD, 35-37.
decision. Agamben attempts to capture the stakes of this primary decision through the conceptual category of voice.

Since antiquity, voice came to be understood, Agamben argues after excavation, as “a pure intention to signify”\(^{31}\). In modern linguistics, the voice, the animal voice, is presupposed by the shifters that indicate the instance of discourse\(^{32}\). Yet it must be removed, says Agamben, in order for meaningful discourse to occur\(^{33}\). This removal or elision of that indicative moment without determinate meaning is what Agamben names Voice (with capital V). This is “the voice as a pure indication—within the structure of shifters—of the instance of discourse”\(^{34}\). Voice (with a capital V) is no longer voice and not yet meaning, and yet without it meaning and nonsense would be indistinguishable. Agamben calls Voice the “supreme shifter” that marks the essential negativity that opens up the various foundational binary splits of metaphysics to which both philosophy and poetry—ostensibly opposing forms of expression—fall prey, albeit in conflicting ways.

This amounts to a strong presentation of the metaphysical presupposition, common to all the modern political philosophies of representation, of speaking subjects as the foundation of social ontology. A recent trend in European studies of migration and capitalist development demonstrating that the importance of “exit” or “exodus” often surpasses that of voice in the determination of the

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\(^{31}\) _LD_, 33.  
\(^{32}\) _LD_, 35.  
\(^{33}\) Is it so much “removed”, we might ask, or is it rather that we hear this particular kind of voice less and less as we devise more ways to artificially close our ears? Ears, unlike eyes and mouth, cannot be voluntarily closed, yet a certain technologically-assisted effect that we have elsewhere called “the proactive echo” intervenes. Cf. in Chinese Su Zhe’an, “Xiaofazhiren de huasheng” in _Tamkang Studies of Foreign Languages and Literatures_ March 2007 (Taipei: Tamkang University, 2007). A revised version in English is scheduled to appear as Jon Solomon, “The Proactive Echo: Ernst Cassirer’s ‘Myth of the States’ and the biopolitics of global English” in Brett de Bary, Jonanthon Monroe and Jan Parker., eds., _Transforming Translation_ (Ithaca: Cornell University, 2008).  
\(^{34}\) _LD_, 32.
political suggests the importance of rethinking the privilege granted the latter categorization. Agamben attracts our attention precisely because he is one of the few contemporary philosophers overtly committed to the importance of rethinking the metaphysical basis for the determination of human being exclusively as speaking subject.

**Paradigm Shift**

It should be obvious by now that an affinity exists between Voice (Agamben) and address (Sakai). Just as address precedes communication but bears in itself nothing more than an indicative function naming a relation and a potentiality (Sakai), so Voice only marks the event of language (Agamben) through which all other metaphysical systems of binary opposition are initiated. The major difference between the two conceptual categories concerns not so much their conceptual content as their mode of representation, as in the sense of staging, or, indeed, signification (akin to the difference in dialectical philosophy between the Concept and its *Darstellung*).

Between Agamben’s discovery of the “supreme shifter” and the historical narrative deployed to facilitate this discovery, an irreconcilable gap appears. The pragmatic function attributed to the proper noun “the West”, which enables all manner of diverse texts in different languages and different historical contexts to be assembled into a unitary frame of pronominal reference, is nowhere placed in proximity to the theoretical attempt to wrest originary difference from the metaphysical oscillation introduced by the shifters. In the absence of any attempt to explain, question, or problematize the unity and/or construction of

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“the Western metaphysical tradition”, such pronominal references insert a form of distance that enables the deictic function: they point to what they refer to, as though “the West” were simply “there”. Lacking an explicit definition of the term, the reader would be very tempted to assume that the definition of the West is fundamentally spatial, and in that sense constitutes a form of tangible indication. If the signification of any particular word does not have to be defined and yet still has meaning, it is because usage permits us to use it to indicate a tangible reality at hand. Demonstrative pronouns like “there” perform this linguistic function. Of course, words like the West indicate directional sense only in relation to other points of reference. If we are looking in the direction of the West and hope to keep our view on a specific series of objects, it will be necessary to remain stationary. Otherwise, as soon as we turn, not only would the objects in view be different, but so would the orientation of the viewer. Likewise, it is entirely possible to imagine that what we today refer to as “the West” might not be what is referred to by that term tomorrow (nor yesterday)—not to mention the fact that even today what “we” mean by the term can vary widely depending on the point of enunciation. Hence, it should be obvious that “the West” is not simply a spatial entity but also a reference to social relations. As Sakai writes,

“Though it is generally believed to designate a place, the West is a name whose indexing function is evoked in order to represent spatially the events of the past, the present and possibly the future in chronological order….Thanks to this spatial mapping of a chronological order onto a cartographic plane, it used to be possible to say meaningfully that the West was ahead of the rest of the world. But, it is important that what obtains in this cartographic mapping of the chronological order is the corroboration of a particular social relationship which
exists—say, between the rich merchant and the peasants form the countryside, the colonizer and the native, the educated upper-class colonial official and the poor displaced ‘mixed-blood’ from the countryside, and the wealthy local landowner and the impoverished labouring immigrant—in the guise of spatial direction at the very site where reference to or distinction regarding either the West or the Rest is enunciated. … The putative unity of the West is nothing but one result of this operation by which to generate an apparent taxonomic coherence where real coherence is impossible. Here, it is important to keep in mind that it is equally possible to conceive of this social dynamics temporally, without spatial representation.”36

In the context of a discussion about Language and Death, the question to be posed is not whether there are archives of texts bearing within them all manner of material differences as well as a high-degree of intertextual referentiality organized around shared themes and conceptual concerns. The question is rather the relation between those archives and social formation. From this perspective, which is fundamentally that of the subject of knowledge, archival texts engage and sustain a multiplicity of readings—or mutual, heteronomous translations and temporalities—open to interpellation by whatever social formation. When those readings are uniformly funneled into an adverb-turned-proper noun, as in the case of “the West”, the function of shifters becomes supremely evident. In the final analysis, “the West” in Agamben’s text performs an indexical function even as it creates its own signification. The metaphysical oscillation between indication and signification, time and space, initiated

by the institutionalization of the West is, in other words, much like a demonstrative pronoun masquerading as a proper one.

In his discussions of the relation between translation and philosophy, Derrida shows how the oscillation between metaphysical oppositions is generally accomplished by the deployment of metaphor. Derrida radically proposes an understanding of metaphor as nothing other than the metaphor of translation: the inevitable gain and loss of meaning that occurs in every linguistic exchange, even those deemed to occur “within” the same language. Derrida’s explicit rejection—which Sakai sides with—of Roman Jakobson’s exclusion of certain forms of address from “translation proper” reveals an operation essential to the use of shifters. Apparently, the brilliance of Jakobson’s discovery of the shifter blinded him to its relation to translation. Yet once we abandon the exclusions in his categorization of translational practice as secondary and derivative, it becomes impossible to deny that when I say “here” and you say “there”, the shifter operates in the mode of translation. Even when both words refer to exactly the same place, the difference in our respective orientations, which inevitably produces different views, suggests the gain and loss of meaning typical of any translational exchange.

Hence, it is no surprise to find that translation plays a crucial, yet wholly unthematized, role in *Language and Death*. As we have seen, the salient attribute of “the West” in that text is defined by a series of citations assembled from a very diverse range of texts that form a chronology of questions about grammar and metaphysics. Most, if not all, of these texts would remain unreadable for contemporary non-specialist readers—not to mention their own authors—without the aid of translation. Indeed, in numerous passages from

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37 *TS*, 10.
Greek, Latin and Provençal texts among others, Agamben displays considerable interest in etymology and a talent for translation. Is it thus a coincidence that Agamben’s illustration of the discovery of the Voice following Aristotle occurs in the translational situation, when Augustine “presents, perhaps for the first time in Western culture, the now-familiar idea of a ‘dead language’”? The scene of “Western culture” actively staged by the text, which enables the apprehension of first-time events, cannot be comprehended without deploying the apparatus of translation. Beyond the thematic concerns that bind the diverse texts cited by the historical narrative, the one common thread amongst them all (including many of the modern texts) is translation. This commonality reveals, once again, an intention to signify apart from any determinate meaning. All the texts, regardless of what they contain, have to be translated for the living. What is “the West”, thus, if not precisely one of the results—and productive sites—of translation? Once the effects of such translation are projected onto the image of a direction, the shift that occurs in moving from the West as an index of orientation to the significance of a proper noun and a subject of history is engaged.

Now we can sum up two conclusions: 1) the paradigm of “the West” deployed by *Language and Death* is nothing other than that of the shifter in its metaphysical aspect; and 2) translation is the operation that enables this shift.

Although there is not a significant conceptual difference between Voice and address, the manner of *presentation* is decidedly different. While both Voice and address ultimately require that we become attentive to metaphysical oscillations between signification and indication, address uniquely calls on us to bear in mind the practical aspect of translation as a social relation. From this

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38 *LD*, 33.
perspective, address now names the thematization of the Voice in the context of translation-as-social praxis. Although the crucial inclusion of translation does not change the fundamental conceptual account of Voice, the mode of presentation itself ushers in what Derrida would call a “general economy”\textsuperscript{39} of Jakobsonian shifters. Within this general economy, the tandem exclusions effected by “translation proper” in one context and “the I of existence” in another are inoperative. Indeed, we are always reminded that there are innumerable ways to say “Voice”, these ways must be subjected to the concrete instance of translation, and the lack of capital letters in certain systems of writing cannot be taken as the sign of either translatability or untranslatability. Within this general economy, the metaphysical function of mega-shifters like the West is more evident than ever.

Needless to say, the liberation in social and political terms from this mega-shifter—and not just the power to control its various institutionalized forms—is not going to be accomplished simply by endless metaphysical deconstruction. Yet Perry Anderson’s pronouncement that “In the hollow of the pronoun lies the aporia of the programme” covers up, as Spivak deftly points out, the possibilities for new types of social relations beyond those prescribed by the desire for recognition according to the neo-colonial terms of the West and the Rest binary. “For those of us who feel,” writes Spivak, “that the ‘subject’ has a history and that the task of the first-world subject of knowledge in our

\textsuperscript{39}“Bataille distinguishes between the concepts of restricted and general economy, where a restricted economy is limited to commercial values while a general economy extends to the political realm. Derrida applies this distinction to the theory of language and writing and redefines a restricted economy of language as the attempt or conviction that all meaning can be accounted for, that all signs hit their targets, to speak with Saussure, whereas a general economy refers to the loss, the expenditure, the expropriation of meaning, the production of excess of meaning. This excess, in part signified by the word differance, is an “unheard of,” but visible double-entendre, and stands as one of the ways in which Derrida has attempted to map both the loss and excess of meaning.” Marion Grau, \textit{Cross Currents} (Fall 2002), accessed on line at http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2096/is_3_52/ai_94983821.
historical moment is to resist and critique ‘recognition’ of the Third World through ‘assimilation’, this specificity is crucial.” What we are beginning to see, from the perspective of configuration in translation, is that the problem of assimilation described by Spivak cannot be seen simply in terms of identity, but must rather include the organization of difference, as well. Otherwise, as Spivak was well aware, the deconstruction of the West would only serve to mask the effects of an actual scheme of exploitation and destruction.

Sakai’s focus on the moment of address in translation, rather than simply the discovery of Voice through the historic travails of a metaphysical tradition, ushers in a veritable paradigm shift, enabling the poststructuralist concern with the metaphysical effects of pronominal usage to be placed in the context of social praxis. Undoubtedly, as Spivak vigorously argues, this is not a replacement for a tool kit that includes economic, political and historical analysis, but rather a complement to the two. The nature of this tool in its subjective dimensions remains, however, to be determined.

Specific intellectuals and the social movement of knowledgeable bodies: surviving the transition to a world society

Previous critiques of Occidentalism have focused on themes such as colonial ambivalency and the reversal of established hierarchies, yet tend to leave the basic structure of anthropological difference intact inasmuch as it is linguistically-encoded in the complex and mobile relations between major and minor languages; by contrast, a project in the biopolitics of translation brings to the critique of the West both an epistemological critique of the anthropological basis of knowledge and a practical engagement with the contemporary social

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40 Spivak, op. cit., 292.
formation at the level of expression. Just as the Marxian critique of the commodity fetish proposed to remind us that the fruits of labor, now reified, actually bear within them the trace of a social relation (and hence the possibility of creative transformation), we advance the thesis that translation can also be understood as a form of social relation requiring similar critique of elements assumed to be extraneous to the production of meaning and bearing similar creative potential. From the genealogical perspective of a biopolitics of translation, the emphasis is on, as Negri and Hardt propose of the multitude, not what we are but rather what we can become\textsuperscript{41} at the same time we rethink the consequences of historical responsibility vis-à-vis the colonial encounter that produced a global society.

Crucial to that potentiality in the post-Fordist era is what Foucault would call the role of the “specific intellectual”. Needless to say, not every-body is laboring and living under conditions that would permit intervention—to consider only one kind of many interventions necessary—into highly abstract structures such as “shifters” and their metaphysical presuppositions. This sort of critique must face up to its own inscription in a system of professional competency that is part of the production of social distinctions such as class. Sakai’s critique of translation as a form of social production forces us to reconsider the institutional role of intellectuals and the possibilities for specific intervention. Seen from this perspective, universities of the 19th and 20th centuries are nothing but institutions of paradigmatic “national translation”. The normalized form of “national culture”—which Sakai maps through the relations among Japan, the West, and the Rest, as well as minorities within each—emerges through globally-codified relations of domination, or cultural

translation, typically carried out in universities. Professional (that is, “organic”) intellectuals are the translators, in a sense that goes far beyond the rendering of specific texts: they are the ones who fashion the forms of expression. They not only make them fit over the functional requirements of international exchange, they also substantially embody or “wear” those forms, becoming institutionalized forms of “knowledgeable bodies” essential to concrete social production. The subtle negotiations of that fit and fashion—what constitute a certain plasticity of social bodies in general—are then called “culture”. Typically national formations of culture repress differences such as the indeterminacy of the translator and the historical repression of local ethnic, class and gender difference. By the same token, professional intellectuals are also the ones who take the operational knowledges of the international exchange society and render them into the terms of a national class system, where any resistance can again be called—but this time in a derogatory sense—“culture” (i.e., cultural burdens, cultural idiosyncracies, cultural atavisms, etc.).

The attitude of *ressentiment* everywhere in evidence today on the part of intellectual-translators reveals an obvious contradiction. Imprisoned within the particular international rank-order achieved by the economic performance of their national class-system, they would naturally resent that which helped cement the overall order, both at home and abroad—namely, their own, usually unacknowledged and even unnamed, activity as cultural translators. If anthropological difference coded as cultural translation is the reigning ideology of the postfordist imperative to communicate, one must pay particular attention to the way the subject of knowledge, formed in the crucible of disciplinary and linguistic codifications still indebted to the legacy of colonial difference, is particularly prone to communicate according to a restricted economy of
ressentiment. This is not so much a problem of colonial psychology in the Fanonian sense, but rather a restricted economy of return that characterizes any number of disparate practices from language to economy that establish exceptions in order to exclude certain forms of difference. According to the trajectory of return, one is always either a recipient or a supplier in relations of exchange. What is excluded are what contemporary economists refer to as “externalities”, what historical economists refer to as slave, migrant and other “irregular” labor, or what Sakai shows is the essential hybridity of the translator.

Undoubtedly, the struggle for control over the exceptions of anthropological difference as it plays out within and between disciplines as well as within and between nationalized populations favors today the production of subjects bound by the expression of ressentiment. Control over the codification of this representational scheme invariably involves preemptively identifying with an exceptional position that is subsequently disavowed even while actively promoting its reproduction through disciplinary institutions. This is the contradiction we saw in Agamben, whose attentiveness to the logic of the exception does not prevent a Western exceptionalism from creeping into his work.

It is within this context that we can fruitfully expand upon Lazzarato and Negri’s seminal observation that the role of the intellectual today “cannot thus be reduced to either a critical and epistemological function or to an engagement with and witness to liberation: it is on the level of collective agency itself that he intervenes.” Within the biopolitics of translation, the construction of

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collective agency occurs each time anew in what Sakai’s research has called the mode of the heterolingual address: in this mode, “you are always confronted, so to speak, with foreigners in your enunciation when your attitude is that of the heterolingual address. Precisely because you wish to communicate with her, him, or them, so the first, and perhaps most fundamental, determination of your addressee, is that of the one who might not comprehend your language, that is, of the foreigner.”

Guided by Sakai’s ethics of heterolingual address, several preliminary conclusions could be obtained: 1) the prevalence of homolingual address is not based on which position one adopts, but is rather based on the operation of bilateral shifters such as “the West”; 2) the plurality of languages in a given situation does not in itself guarantee access to the heterolingual mode of address, which still requires the commitment to heterogeneity in all situations, even those normally thought to be “monolingual” (hence the rejection of Jakobson’s notion of “translation proper”); 3) the ethics of heterolingual address call for something like what Wall identifies, in reading Levinas, “as an infinite responsibility, or even an uncontrollable compulsion to be for-the-other, which can never be satisfied or used up”; and 4) this infinite responsibility is a response to the infinite oscillation permitted by mega-shifters such as “the West”.

What Sakai suggests is that there is a both a constraining discipline and an emancipating politics of translation for those placed between the national class-structures and the global exchange-systems organized around what is called “the West”. In terms of a constraining discipline, intellectuals are called

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44 Naoki Sakai, Translation and Subjectivity (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), 9.
45 Wall, op. cit., 77.
upon to translate not just content specific to other cultures but, most important, the general rules of international exchange. Even as we, in our role as translators, adapt concepts and images to the needs of the local class structure, we are also contributing to the solidification of a segmented structure analogous to class in the emerging global-State. We can resent this role as translators, and then resent the whole “verbiage” of intellectuality which we have made into our trade; this sort of posture regularly leads intellectuals to privilege either a site of “real struggle” in “the outside world” while abandoning “theory” as a site of struggle altogether, or else to retreat into esoteric, aestheticized representations incomprehensible outside of a professional caste. Rather than adopting either of these approaches, which seem to me to preserve, in spite of great differences, the exceptional role of intellectuals as mediators and distributors of the heterogeneity between world and knowledge (a role that ultimately institutionalizes the role of elites, regardless of which side one is on, by denying the relative autonomy of specific social practices), we can instead set about using the tools of the trade to work against its normalized effects. But how to go about that?

As we have seen, Naoki Sakai presents a very interesting answer, which concerns a kind of translocal, translinguistic practice, a practice which is both contextual and respectful of the “foreigner” in all of us. In the face of sophisticated discourses embedded in Western institutions, such as Agamben (and Sakai, provided we include the essential caveat that accounts for his considerable engagement with Asian institutions and languages), what could be asked each time is how could this material be used to overcome the causes and effects of capitalist imperialism? And if it is potentially useful, then how can it be translated against the grain of whatever class structure one is in, with its
particular hierarchy of inclusions and exclusions, signified and covered up by its particular culture? And if those counter-translations have been done, then how could they in turn be exposed to heteronomous translations from elsewhere?

These questions would require us to reconsider how we typically translate and naturalize certain discourses, particularly, as we have seen in Agamben’s case, by fetishizing a proper name or mega-shifter, the better to forget the real situations and processes from which they were subtracted. But instead of just leading back to infinite deconstruction, white guilt or subordinated ressentiment, the same questions also point toward a possible development of cultural dreams, organizational forms and productive techniques that could help people everywhere to survive the transition to a world society. Intellectuals are not required to perform the heroic role of architects and social engineers who provide blueprints for the whole of society—in fact, such a role amounts to little more than a self-aggrandizing hallucination; but, like every other kind of laborer, they can respond to the specific situations of their trade (which includes both the temporality of embodied social relations and the abstractions of knowledge about social objects), develop corresponding autonomous responses, and then translate them into other situations.

Hence, as a reader of Sakai, I have become intensely interested in the modest kind of social movement—similar, I would like to think, to what Spivak calls the “circumscribed task” of intellectuals46—that would correspond specifically to the professional (i.e., university-based) intellectual laborer producing humanistic knowledge in specific languages: this kind of social movement and the ways it gains access to the Common would have to address, minimally, not just social relations within the work place and the relation of the

46 Spivak, op. cit., 308.
university to other sectors of society but also the problems of knowledge and
expression in which intellectuals specialize. In other words, it would combine
the traditional roles of the critical intellectual (epistemological critique and
witness to liberation) with the new role of creative invention and new forms of
collective expression. Or again, it would account for both bodies and languages
as the focus of our attention turns from creating new objects of study to creating
new forms of subjectivity.

For specific intellectuals such as myself in danger of being “naturally”
sutured to the West and yet still concerned about the way we communicate, the
minimal ethical requirements of the era would be: 1) to go and learn other,
preferably non-Western, languages and use them both as tools for professional
expression (critique and witness) and as forms of social praxis (new
subjectivities); 2) to address all listeners/readers as foreigners. I will leave it to
intellectuals from the “periphery” and diasporic intellectuals “in-between” (in
which group I might be included, provided I account for the specificity of a
Western point of departure) to tell us both how this relates to their specific
situations, in which multilingualism is initially not an ethical choice but an
institutional necessity for recognition, and what additional requirements may be
necessary. Undoubtedly, the account of these situations can be expected to call
for modifications in the expression of ideas presented above. Yet whatever
one’s actual position, Sakai’s work on heterolingual address suggests at least
that the essential hyrbidity emphasized in point 2) may be even more important
than point 1) for all types of intellectuals concerned.

These requirements and their multiple expressions can then become the
basis for a vast reorganization of disciplinary divisions and subjectivities in the
human sciences carried out in multiple sites across the globe. As Foucault noted,
it is not because there are objects demanding study that the disciplines arise; on the contrary, it is rather only once the disciplines are in place that their corresponding objects, methods and theses arise. To achieve that transformation, we will need a social movement within the “edu-factory” that militates for specific institutional changes. Otherwise, we can be sure that the coming reorganization of the Humanities will proceed solely according to the ideological parameters of neoliberalism.

I see, in closing, in the biopolitics of translation the nascent form of social movement that corresponds most specifically to the globalized intellectual laborer of today—a practice of knowledge, in other words, as a social movement of “permanent translation” (to use Rada Ivekovic’s brilliantly succinct formulation47) devoted to surviving and thriving in the transition to a world society—the multitude of foreigners we are becoming.

47 Rada Ivekovic, “La traduction permanente” in Transeuropéennes no. 22, 121-145.