

Introduction: Only Disconnect?: The Flickering Circuits of Modernist Translation

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As E. M. Forster implied, connection often creates more problems than it solves. Indeed, one of the many lessons of the 2016 election cycle and the current political climate in the United States is that few things drive people farther apart than being connected to one another. The utopian dreams of the 1990s in which the World Wide Web would foster a harmonious global village have splintered into immeasurably vast fields of divergent realities, unknowable terrains of digital echo chambers and of silos filled with conspiracy theories; here, self-sufficient “facts” are constructed and rarely questioned. From yellow journalism to “fake news,” only the names and technologies that simultaneously inspire phantasms of social cohesion and create indelible fractures are new. As Virginia Woolf put it in 1927 when assessing the global empires of her moment, “the streets of any large town . . . [are] cut up into boxes, each of which is inhabited by a different human being who has put locks on his doors and bolts on his windows to ensure some privacy, yet is linked to his fellows by wires which pass overhead, by waves of sound which pour through the roof and speak aloud to him of battles and murders and strikes and revolutions all over the world.”¹ To understand connection itself as a mediated potentiality and a problem—as a double-edged condition—is to recover some of the lived dangers, silences, and fissures of this era and of our own.

Modernist studies, particularly the subfields of global and comparative modernisms, has relied heavily on the practices of rediscovering connections in the past, of unearthing archives that animate multiple circuits, and of interpreting texts as deeply entwined with others in overlooked,

surprising ways. Scholars have also pursued synchronic parallels and analogies among cultural projects across national borders. Here, connectivity has been the catalyst that revitalized sizable quadrants of the field. We are scholars who, in our own work, have explored modes of interconnection across a number of sites, texts, and figures. But like many others before us, we also acknowledge the pitfalls of connectivity, and in a moment when the map of global modernisms seems increasingly networked, it seems timely to pause and consider the kinds of work connectivity does and *doesn't* do—and about connection's unintended effects.

Furthermore, we want to consider how intertextual and linguistic *disconnection* formed both the modernisms that feel familiar (national, regional, and global) and those we have yet to recognize or have possibly misconstrued. If we set aside our predisposition to celebrate connection and to mourn disconnection, and instead view them as integral to one another's functions, the field before us can look refreshingly unfamiliar.

Take, for example, one of the prevailing motifs for charting global modernisms: the network.² Networks of periodicals, of migration routes, of coteries and collectives, and of references and allusions composed the crucial structures that fomented modernism beyond the singular, monumentalized geniuses of the Men of 1914 that once defined the field. (Think here of Bonnie Kime Scott's famous image, "A Tangled Mesh of Modernists.") The existence of these circuits should hardly be surprising; one of the fundamental aspirations of the Euro-American empires at the turn of the twentieth century was to reduce the distances between sites by using technology to truncate geography and by using translation—often en masse—to accelerate the dissemination of texts, knowledge, and information. They succeeded in many ways: they laid transatlantic cables, established faster trade routes, and implemented regimes of education and translation in

academies and in book publishing that largely enforced their empires' aims.³ That is to say, the geopolitical world that produced global modernisms—a world that those modernisms themselves shaped reciprocally—was a highly integrated network of rapid connectivity that famously reordered the time-space continuum.

At the same time, Patrick Jagoda's *Network Aesthetics* (2016) reminds us that twenty-first century connection is "less an imperative than it is the infrastructural basis of everyday life" and argues that we should be wary of interconnectivity and networking as organizing concepts, for reasons that go beyond the exclusions and expulsions that critics like C. L. R. James and James Clifford studied decades ago.⁴ ("Networking" even doubles as a byword for often-illusory mobility in the corporate world.) Networks and connectivity can consolidate power, create solidarity movements, and spawn terrorist cells in endlessly proliferating feedback loops. In a now-infamous memo, Facebook executive Andrew Bosworth wrote that the company's mission was to "connect people," and while he acknowledged that "maybe it costs a life by exposing someone to bullies...[, m]aybe someone dies in a terrorist attack coordinated on our tools," he averred steadfastly that "the ugly truth is that we believe in connecting people so deeply that anything that allows us to connect more people more often is *de facto* good."⁵ Networks made multiple modernisms, but networks also excluded, suppressed, blunted, killed off, and disconnected other movements or potential affiliations. As Eric Bulson has recently argued, the international avant-garde and modernist periodicals that did invaluable work to connect modernist movements were also defined substantively by their *inabilities* to circulate to readers beyond their immediate environs.⁶ Revising Conrad's iconic scene in *Heart of Darkness*, perhaps

the map of global modernisms perhaps should contain equal parts color, blank space, and blockage—along with large rips and tears.

Translational Compression and Distortion

Nowhere are the limits and risks of connectivity and networks clearer than in the fields and practices of translation—perhaps the quintessential act of connecting, while differentiating, two literary texts, figures, spheres, or media. Translation was the binding agent for many global modernisms and many multilingual modernist authors were translators themselves. And in any context, words themselves act within, create, and bisect social and political networks, as indicated by the “cross-border transpositions” of the global keywords delineated in Carol Gluck and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s *Words In Motion* (e.g., *hijab* in France, *secularism* in Morocco, or *terrorism* in India).⁷ As many critics have acknowledged, modernist translations both connected readers to disparate cultures and disconnected those cultures from the present, leaving them buried in exoticized pasts or distant realms. In all of these complex interactions, translators were the decisive intermediaries of global modernisms, yet their interventions have been repeatedly overlooked. Their roles as textual mediators, sometimes anonymous, were easy to ignore, though they were responsible for crafting both the boundary-hopping literature of modernism and many of its key conceptualizations, whether in Viktor Shklovsky’s “defamiliarization”/“enstrangement” or Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Task of the Translator,” both of which saw their influence largely transmitted through multiple translations.⁸

Ironically, the modernist-era translators who established connections across languages were frequently disconnected and erased from literary histories as they wrote themselves into

background invisibility or the secondhand prominence of virtuoso translators, such as Constance Garnett and her over seventy early-twentieth-century translations of Russian literature into English. Consequently, one payoff of problematizing translation's networks is to render more precisely these sites of cross-linguistic innovation and the effect of cultural works' circulation. To that end, we might consider the translations of some of the more prominent works of experimental modernists and their predecessors. The range of languages and authors is astounding: Valery Larbaud's French translations of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Walt Whitman, Samuel Butler, and James Joyce, not to mention Auguste Morel's of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Yvan Goll, well-known in his day, translated contemporary works into both German and French (by Walt Whitman, T. S. Eliot, Bertolt Brecht, Aimé Césaire, Nicolás Guillén, James Joyce, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Edna St. Vincent Millay, among many others). At the other end of the spectrum of visibility sits the prolific, forgotten Isaac Goldberg: biographer of H. L. Mencken and George Gershwin, essayist, music and drama critic, editor, and translator.⁹ He wrote extensively on Latin American literature composed in Spanish and Portuguese, and his early volume *The Drama of Transition* (1922) is a work of comparative modernist drama from Europe, Latin America, and the U.S. His translations into English from Yiddish, Spanish, French, and Russian mediate and link the work of such otherwise unconnected authors as Sholem Asch, Vicente Blasco Ibáñez, Remy de Gourmont, Maxim Gorki, and Anton Chekov, among many others. And yet, even a contemporary account of Goldberg's career devotes chapters to his biography, literary and musical criticism, fiction, philosophy, and editorial work, with only passing mentions of his translations.¹⁰ Nor can histories of reception and circulation provide anything approximating a full account of which texts were read in translation, where, why, and

how. The value-laden selection processes of translators, editors, publishers, and reviewers would all have to be factored in, along with a healthy dose of chance and luck.

The necessary consequence here is that literary translation also produced and created compelling disruptions, internal contradictions, and illustrative gaps that we must consider when recovering or revisiting translational work. Langston Hughes, for instance, was an important translator of Hispano- and Francophone-authors such as Federico García Lorca, Gabriela Mistral, Nicolás Guillén, and Jacques Roumain. His translations certainly expanded and interconnected the racial and political circuits in which Hughes himself was also a celebrated figure and, as Vera M. Kutzinski and others have shown. But when Hughes found himself in Spain during the country's civil war (1936–1939), his plans to translate the Republican poetry of leftist, loyalist writers ran into a disconcerting reality: a number of these poems featured baldly racist, anti-African language drawn from a longstanding, fracturing, and ugly demonology of Berber North Africans (“Moors”) as a distinctly inferior black people—a people who had no claims to the very kinds of diasporic solidarity that Hughes was urging for Spaniards and Africans alike. Thus, Hughes suppressed and never published his own translations of poems like Emilio Prados's “El moro engañado” [The Moor Betrayed], which contains the refrain, “Go back to Africa, Moor,” and wishes a cold, cruel death upon its titular figure.¹¹ The familiar alliances and networks that translation creates break apart brutally in Hughes's unpublished work.

Even when it connects, translation still radically compresses and distorts literary history. A flood of Western texts from across many centuries and sites all appeared in translation over the course of several decades in Japan, many times via France and/or China, in the late 1800s and early

1900s. In what look like versions of the Eliotic and Poundian projects of literary historiography, Shakespeare, Balzac, and Tagore appeared all at once, alongside classical and modernist texts from many countries. In mid-century colonial spaces in Africa, the same writers familiar to English readers as rebels who sought to overthrow the norms of their national literary pasts were awkwardly inscribed into a Great Tradition canonized in imported schoolbooks. The time-spaces and chronotopes of these texts were reconfigured to make new histories and genealogies in the present, far removed from their original contexts and often with the source-texts further obscured or buried. Moving forward, we might consider the 2015 English version of novelist Minae Mizumura's *The Fall of Language in the Age of English*, which considers the inherent power inequality of global cultural markets, the effect of national languages treated as "universal" or global (i.e. translational) languages, and the internal impact of Anglophone hegemony on non-dominant languages. Claims regarding the politics of translation have been lodged by many, particularly by translators such as Gayatri Spivak ("Translating Into English"), but Mizumura considers writers' dilemmas, such as being a product of the Global Program Era ("Under the Blue Sky of Iowa"), digital environments, and nationally particular modernities.¹² This genealogical concern regarding twentieth, and now twenty-first century literary translation's relation to linguistically particular modernisms offers suggestive insights into a translational modernism that resists localization and continues translation's longstanding, ambivalent relationship with non-global languages.¹³

A comprehensive account of modernist literary translation and its absences and disjunctures would necessarily alter current perspectives on global cultures, and it would require tracking some difficult questions: Who were the most frequently translated modernists, and why were

they so widely valued? Which works circulated least in translation, and where? Were particular national or linguistic boundaries especially impermeable?¹⁴ Which translations thwarted their own aims or an author's aims, or undermined those of states, writers, or collectivities? What if we enlarged, dilated upon, and searched out *disconnection* in translation, considering it as something more than pure opacity or missed/lost potentiality? What about cases in which disconnection, blockage, and the suppression of an original was actually the *very purpose* of translation? Digital humanists, among others, will likely contribute insights that are presently unknown, but such interventions are beyond the ken of this cluster. The essays that follow do, however, interrogate some long-held assumptions about the roles and valuation of translation in the modernist era. To understand translation as disabling, destabilizing, and fragmenting as much as it was grounded in utopian dreams of trans- and inter-linguistic harmony is to begin thinking anew about translation as a switch that turns *off* or short-circuits the many electrified grids of global modernisms.

Reversioning Modernism

We proposed this forum for *Modernism/modernity's* Print Plus platform in part because governments, administrative bodies, and publishing entities have begun to be held accountable for their roles in disconnecting and unmaking the emergent, still fluid world of global modernisms, but translation mostly has not. Indeed, even when translation was doing questionable work at best, Pound's famous mistranslations of Chinese poetry were influentially valorized in Lawrence Venuti's concept of "foreignization."¹⁵ And still, Venuti--arguably the foremost American advocate of translation studies--acknowledged the fraught nature of such a term. As Carrie Preston's essay in this cluster demonstrates, another conception of translation

undergirds the temporal disruptions that structure Pound's translational (and perhaps willfully uninformed) mode of global modernism. Preston reads it as not merely an exoticizing appropriation, but also as an interpretive performance joining ancient and modern texts and authors. In other words, Pound's *noh* works are not (only) bad translations, but also new spaces for modernist Japanese translation theory and translinguistic artistic collaborations that produced uneven results.

Similarly, this cluster moves beyond the old laments about the ineluctable essences that are lost in translation or the Italian play on words, *traduttore, traditore*: those are notions of translation's inadequacy, and they imply an ideal model of linguistic, formal, and aesthetic transfer. Likewise, the poet Kenneth Goldsmith's recent attempt to recast translation (*Against Translation* [2016]) as an aggressive act of anti-humanist alterity and "displacement" ends up doing little more than redescribing Pound's assertions, but now given a hyped-up sense of affront and offense that Goldsmith, rather bewilderingly, believes is missing from contemporary cultural politics.¹⁶ Both of those sentiments—lament and aggression—do little to open up new analytic windows for modernist studies.

The essays in this cluster vary widely in the languages, geographies, and forms they treat, but they share conceptual claims in prioritizing disconnection in modernist translation to prompt nuanced engagements with terms that have, at times, been treated polemically. In *The Translation Zone* (2006), Emily Apter catalogues many of these putative binaries (e.g. "Nothing is Translatable" and "Everything is Translatable"), thus challenging static or merely descriptive notions of literary translation.¹⁷ This cluster similarly poses questions of agency and value. If we

no longer venerate the original and shudder at translations, we still need critical terms for identifying the more dynamic, unpredictable, asymmetric relations between sources and targets. Perhaps a more dialogic or collaborative set of textual reversioning describes the process and product of textual translation. Reversion, for instance, refers both to a forward-looking new version as well as a process of back-formation in which reverting to an earlier text is a (disavowed) component of innovation. Reversion is as much about disconnecting (from the present as well as the past) as about connecting texts. Neither imitation, nor a Poundian “new,” but inevitably on the margins of both.

From this perspective, modernist translators as diverse as Goll, Goldberg, and Hughes exemplify the kinds of textual-linguistic networks and disruptions that created cross-linguistic, collectively authored texts and concepts. We see this in Laurel Recker’s treatment of the literal and figurative translations of the *zombi* / “zombie” that both suppress the American occupation of Haiti and throw into relief the ghastly, palimpsestic layers of the zombie-figure’s history in the Afro-Caribbean imaginary. Or in how, through a consideration of “indirect translation” in which the later versions outweigh their source texts, Carles Prado-Fonts reveals two competing phenomena. One is the intense desire among interwar Spaniards to identify with China and to compare and connect the two countries; the other is the foiled means by which second-hand translations (often retranslations of already-flawed French translations) only further obscured and buried a body of knowledge about China that never proved illuminating in the ways Spaniards hoped.

Modes of global modernist cultural production that have hitherto not had the prominence in scholarly or public conversations are those found on what Lital Levy calls a “translation continuum,” which situates conventionally understood text-to-text translation in a wide range of interlingual practices across and within works. Newly versioned adaptations and interpretations might find broader readerships as modernized or progressive updates to existing works. Such a span of reversioned, disconnecting practices would also include multilingual and auto-translated texts, such as the remarkable author B. Traven’s *The Death Ship*, which Harris Feinsod identifies as a key narrative of “maritime globalization” as well as a vital novel of mid-century statelessness.

Considering translation as disconnection also makes visible certain grids that could otherwise go undiscussed. As John Alba Cutler’s essay shows, translation *can* make visible a Latinx modernism and its connections to its better-known Anglophone American counterpart, but at the same time, the archive of Latinx modernism itself often resists, defies, and argues against such interconnections. Similarly, nonwestern modernisms—synchronic cultural trends that both engage and sidestep Euro-American innovations—find new import, such as those Matt Eatough finds in B. Walel Vilakazi’s “New African” Zulu poetry, which is experimentalist, but also deeply informed by a philological knowledge that is more frequently associated with Romanticism. Rather than reifying a modernist/nonmodernist binary, Eatough argues that georegionalist cultural specificities demonstrate that “modernism was—first and foremost—a translational aesthetic.”

If twenty-first-century cultural and technology studies have anything to tell us about modernist networks of translation, perhaps it is that perceiving and appreciating the complexities of disconnection may be more difficult, yet beneficial, than the layered connections that are more frequently discussed. The essays in this cluster push translation studies to consider the productively broken and failed links of global cultures, which illuminate patterns of cultural activity that—by design and by accident—already shape our understandings of modernisms.

Notes

¹ Virginia Woolf, “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” *Collected Essays, Volume 2* (London: Hogarth Press, 1967), 218-229.

² For a recent account of how network theory offers opportunities to reconsider both translation and comparative literary analysis, see Rita Felski, “Comparison and Translation: A Perspective from Actor-Network Theory,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 53, no. 4 (2016): 747–65.

³ See Tung-Hui Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

⁴ Patrick Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 1.

⁵ Bosworth, Memo published by *Buzzfeed News*, March 29, 2018:

https://www.buzzfeed.com/ryanmac/growth-at-any-cost-top-facebook-executive-defended-data?utm_term=.uhXgWa80gz#rx5o9l3qom.

⁶ See Eric Bulson, *Little Magazine, World Form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

See also Nicole Rizzuto, “Somali Soundscapes: Signal and Noise in Nuruddin

Farah’s *Crossbones*,” Forthcoming, *Contemporary Literature*.

⁷ Carol Gluck, “Words in Motion,” in *Words in Motion: Toward a Global Lexicon*, ed. Carol Gluck and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 3–10, 5.

⁸ On the problems of translating Shklovsky, see Alexandra Berlina’s discussion in Viktor Shklovsky, “Art, as Device,” *Poetics Today* 36.3 (Sept. 2015), 151-74. For competing versions, see Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*. Trans. Benjamin Sher, intro. Gerald L. Bruns (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 1990), 1-14 and *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*. ed., trans., intro. Alexandra Berlina (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, 293-344). Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” was initially an introduction to a Baudelaire translation and appeared in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn; ed. & intro. Hannah Arendt (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), 69-82; and again in *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*. Ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). 253-63.

⁹ For more on Goldberg, see Josh Lambert, “Isaac Goldberg and the Idea of Obscene Yiddish,” in *Choosing Yiddish: New Frontiers of Language and Culture*, ed. Lara Rabinovitch, Shiri Goren, and Hannah S. Pressman (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 145–62.

¹⁰ See Allen Crandall, *Isaac Goldberg: An Appreciation* (self-published: Sterling, CO, 1934).

¹¹ See Evelyn Scaramella, “Translating the Spanish Civil War: Langston Hughes’s Transnational Poetics,” *Massachusetts Review* 55, no. 2 (2014): 177–88; and Gayle Rogers, *Incomparable Empires: Modernism and the Translation of Spanish and American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 167–98. Hughes himself was also the subject of a famous missed connection with Federico García Lorca, whom he translated. See Harris Feinsod, “Vehicular Networks and the Modernist Seaways: Crane, Lorca, Novo, Hughes,” *American Literary History* 27, no. 4 (2015): 683–716.

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- ¹² Minae Mizumura, *The Fall of Language in the Age of English* trans. Mari Yoshihara and Juliet Winters Carpenter (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2015), 11-46 and Gayatri Spivak, “Translating into English,” in *Nation, Language and the Ethics of Translation*. Ed. Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 93-110.
- ¹³ See Joshua L. Miller, *Accented America: The Cultural Politics of Multilingual Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).
- ¹⁴ See Vicente Rafael, *Motherless Tongues: The Insurgency of Language Amid Wars of Translation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
- ¹⁵ See Venuti, *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 164-236.
- ¹⁶ See Kenneth Goldsmith, *Against Translation: Displacement is the New Translation* (Paris: Jean Boîte Éditions, 2016).
- ¹⁷ See Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).