THE CHANGING PROFESSION

Translating Gaia: Translation and the More-Than-Human

MICHAEL CRONIN

Writing about the climate emergency, Andri Snaer Magnason, the Icelandic author and activist, is blunt: "Anyone who understands what's at stake would not prioritise anything else" (42). Bruno Latour, for his part, in *Facing Gaia*, notes that the designation of a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, marks climate change not just as a transitory event, a "passing crisis," but rather as "a profound mutation in our relation to the world" (8, 9). Given the urgency, how do we begin to think about translation in such radically changed circumstances? And what can translation tell us about the "profound mutation in our relation to the world"?

In advocating for "more-than-human" histories, Emily O'Gorman and Andrea Gaynor claim that the more-than-human is "not a synonym for 'nature' or the 'nonhuman' but, rather, a term that highlights the primacy of relations over entities (including the 'human')" (717). The basic principle here is "co-constitution—that organisms, elements and forces cannot be considered in isolation but must always be considered in relation" (717). There is no external "nature" or "environment" with which humans interact. They are always, already, involved in the "more-than-human." It is not a question of demonstrating that "the 'natural' is really 'cultural' or to reassert a biophysical reality" but of recognizing the full range of participants in the more-than-human world of multispecies coexistence and nonhuman entanglements (724). If we conceive of the notion of subjectivity to include the nonhuman, then the task for critical thinking is, as Rosi Braidotti admits, "momentous." This involves visualizing the subject as "a transversal entity encompassing the human, our genetic neighbours the animals and the earth as a whole, and to do so within an understandable language" (82). The emphasis on relationality begs the question of how this relationality

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is to be established or understood. How is a notion of transversal subjectivity to function in a more-than-human world populated by radically different forms of ontological and epistemic expression?

Translation throughout its history has been preoccupied with the question of communication across difference, of how to make the mutually unintelligible intelligible (Delisle and Wordsworth). However, this notion of difference has often been construed in the context of translation as a specifically human and interlingual exercise. Kobus Marais, in his *A (Bio)Semiotic Theory of Translation*, details the theoretical origins of this narrowness of definition, a narrowness he attributes to a misreading. The misreader, so to speak, is the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson, and the misread is the American semiotician Charles S. Peirce. Jakobson, in his famous 1959 essay on translation, draws on the work of Peirce to argue that "the meaning of any lingual sign is its translation into some further, alternative sign, especially a sign 'in which it is more fully developed'" (139). However, as Marais underscores, what Peirce actually wrote was the following: "Conception of a 'meaning,' which is, in its primary acceptation, the translation of a sign into another system of signs" (Peirce 127). In other words, the "lingual" was Jakobson's addition. Hardly surprising coming from a linguist, but the baleful outcome has been an almost exclusive concentration on interlingual translation in subsequent understandings of what is meant by "translation." The generous inclusivity of Peirce's original definition of translation—which was a semiotic theory that would account for all signs, not just lingual ones—was lost. Is it possible to conceive of the more-than-human world as a "tradosphere," by which I mean the sum of all translation systems on the planet, all the ways in which information circulates between living and nonliving organisms and is translated into a language or a code that can be processed or understood by the receiving entity (Cronin 70–72)?

A fundamental contention of more-than-human histories is the need to understand human and more-than-human connectedness, which prompts a series of questions. Does this connectedness not imply, always and everywhere, a practice of translation? We humans claim to understand our world or to have access to it and to the beings that inhabit and constitute it through our ability to be able to translate the information they transmit into a language that we purport to understand, whether that be the language of mathematics, cosmic physics, molecular chemistry, or marine biology. Does this mean that anthropocentrism is unavoidable? Can there be nonanthropocentric forms of translation in a more-than-human world? Or should we cherish the "untranslatable" over the translatable (Apter), in favor of ahumanist demands such as that we let animals be instead of subjecting them to any form of communicative relationship with the human that is invariably reductive and exploitative (MacCormack 33)? If the tradosphere, like the biosphere, is in a constant state of evolution, is the climate emergency a sign of the imminent collapse of the tradosphere? Are climate change, biotic impoverishment, biodiversity reduction, and renewable resource depletion evidence of the collapse of translation systems that allow humans to interact in a viable and sustainable way with other sentient and nonsentient beings on the planet? What does translation tell us about the genealogy of the current environmental crisis?

The term "Columbian Exchange," coined by the environmental historian Alfred W. Cosby, is an example of how translation might be used to describe this crisis. The appellation has enjoyed considerable currency, as if the relationship between Europe and the Americas in the colonial period were somehow symmetrical, with foodstuffs and commodities flowing for mutually reciprocal benefit (see Earle). Central to this profoundly asymmetrical form of exchange is the effect that this ecologically disruptive translation of flora and fauna had on the languages and environments of the different groups who engaged, or were forced to engage, with new food cultures on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean (Cronin 40–66). However, it is possible and indeed relevant to argue that the importance of translation lies beyond the names that were given to new foodstuffs or how they were assimilated into different cultures.

The convergence of indigenous mass deaths, slavery, and commodity extraction in the context of the physical, cultural, and linguistic displacement

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surrounding the Columbian Exchange makes it appropriate to speak of "translational rift." By this I mean the mechanism by which humans undergo a dramatic alteration in the material and symbolic relationship they maintain with the living systems that sustain them. In the case of the colonization of the Americas and the systemic deployment of slaves, the translational rift assumed three forms:

lithic translation: the transformation of the physical or mineral landscape for the purposes of large-scale food production;
biotranslation: the movement of people, plants, animals, and microbes; and
isotranslation: the establishment, through the plantation system, of various crop monocultures, such as sugar, coffee, and bananas.

All three forms of translation would result in a decisive shift in the nature of the metabolic relationship between the human inhabitants of these regions and the biosphere of which they were a constituent part.

I am drawing on the notion of metabolic rift, in the spirit of the political scientist Jason W. Moore, who warns against replicating artificial nature/society binaries through the epistemic apartheid of Cartesian dualism. The drawing of clear distinctions between the "human" and the "natural"—for the sake of narrative or theoretical coherence—conceals crucial relations in each entity. This symbolic divorce of nature and society was, Moore argues, strengthened in early modern capitalism by the sundering of the direct relationship between the producers and the means of production. It is important to think about "rift" not in the sense of an artificial and untenable separation between humans and their environment but in relation to a cataclysmic breakdown in the life-making process (76).

In the context of the translational rift, is there a sense in which indigenous forms of translation practice—which have been strikingly absent from mainstream translation studies research across the globe (as Yves Gambier and Ubaldo Stecconi note)—provide evidence of an ecotranslational approach, a desire to establish a communicative footing for relationality? Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro have argued that for Amerindian peoples, other animals and entities in the world are "entités politiques" ("political entities"; my trans.). What is commonly known in the West as the environment is for indigenous peoples "une société de sociétés, une arène internationale, une *cosmopoliteia*" ("a society of societies, an international arena, a *cosmopoliteia*"; 279). In their view, the ecological crisis calls for "une ample ouverture dialogique, une conversation *littéralement* diplomatique avec les peuples humains et non humains qui témoignent avec anxiété l'arrivée des conséquences de l'irresponsabilité des modernes" ("a broad openness to dialogue, a *literally* diplomatic conversation with human peoples and nonhumans who anxiously observe the beginning of the consequences of the irresponsibility of the moderns"; 335; my emphasis).

Translation, of course, has a long and difficult history in indigenous settings. Margaret A. Noodin, in her analysis of translations between English and Anishinaabemowin, speaks of the troubled legacy of translation for indigenous peoples and how contemporary Anishinaabe translators contest that legacy: "In the past, many translations of Native American, Aboriginal, and American Indian literatures have been the work of ethnographers and documentary linguists, and the function of these translations has been to reveal the maximum amount of information to the English reader" (127–28). The older translation paradigm described by Noodin is basically akin to resource extraction ("reveal the maximum amount of information"). Similar to the conversion strategies of missionary linguists, the aim has been to instrumentalize knowledge of indigenous languages for the benefit of interests external to the indigenous communities (Rafael).

In the Anishinaabe translation practice that defines the receiving culture as speakers and learners of Anishinaabemowin, the translators are primarily concerned with the intelligibilities and interests of the indigenous community and culture. One of the translators, Patricia Ningewance, explains that making stories and poetry available in the native language plays "a particularly important role in language revitalization, as they bring the language to life" (qtd. in Noodin 127). What might be termed

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an indigenous translation hermeneutics not only contests extractive, instrumentalist approaches to the translation of texts but also practices a form of restoration ecology defined as "assisting the recovery of an ecosystem that has been degraded, damaged, or destroyed" (Woodworth). In this view, "[t]he translators clearly state that the function of their translations is to focus on the future" (Noodin 127). Moving away from a deadening, ecocidal past of instrumentalist extraction and the sentimental pieties of salvage archaeology, an indigenous translation hermeneutics would be committed to restorative, ecogenerative projects, connecting or reconnecting places, peoples, and cultures.

Translation has always shadowed the activity of diplomacy, and the notion of an international or foreign policy in human affairs has implied the training, presence, and activity of translators and interpreters. It is precisely the need for the "diplomatic conversation with human peoples and non-humans" that Danowski and Castro speak about that is foreshadowed in contemporary debates on democratic governance. John S. Dryzek and Jonathan Pickering, in *The Politics of the Anthropocene*, have argued that liberal democracy is a "Holocene institution" that has developed "a pathological path dependency [that] decouples human institutions from the Earth system by embodying feedback mechanisms that systematically repress information about the condition of the Earth system, and systematically prioritize narrow economic concerns" (23).

Anthony Burke and Stefanie Fishel claim that a more inclusive form of democracy must involve the "recognition of the material presence and agency of ecosystems and non-human lives, and the resistant power of human/non-human assemblages" (35). Underlying this ontology of inclusion is an ecological ideal of political communication where the constituent groups, human and nonhuman, are intelligible to each other in ways that make deliberation possible. Burke and Fishel state, "The demand that the non-human must either speak our political language or remain mute was always cast in the wrong direction; it is we who must learn the Earth's language and reimagine the polity in its idioms" (47). The word that is not to be found in their declaration is *translation*. The pluralization of "idioms" is synonymous with difference, and translation must be called on to establish a meaningful interface between these idioms.

The necessity of translation becomes all the more evident in speculation on the forms of transnational governance that would embrace the inclusive ontology of ecological democracy. Burke and Fishel argue for the establishment of a United Nations Earth System Council and a Global Ecoregion Assembly. Both of these bodies would have "democratically elected representatives acting as proxies for human and non-human communities" (49). A basic requirement of these representative proxies would be the need to be versed in the idioms of the nonhuman constituencies they claim to represent. Translation would be central to their political efficacy; or, to put this another way, any theory of ecological democracy is going to need a viable theory of translation. If the advent of transnational institutions after the Second World War gave rise to the emergence of translation theory and education in Europe and elsewhere, the advent of transnational ecological governance would inevitably generate a new kind of translation demand.

Robert Macfarlane notes that for many indigenous peoples, "the jungle or woodland is figured as aware, conjoined and conversational" (104). Critiquing earlier Western representations of the more-than-human world in terms of the picturesque and the sublime, he asserts:

> Nature, too, seems increasingly better understood in fungal terms: not as a single, gleaming snow-peak or tumbling river in which we might find redemption, nor as a diorama that we deplore or adore from a distance—but rather as an assemblage of entanglements of which we are messily a part. (103)

These entanglements mean that we need to rethink notions of what we understand by "multiculturalism" or "interculturalism" in translation studies. Up until now, these notions have been understood in exclusively human terms, but we are bound up in a multiplicity of aerial, aquatic, and species cultures that constitute our world. How do we engage translationally with these cultures and on what

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terms? What forms of education do we provide for translators as new kinds of intercultural mediators, post-Holocene interpreters, or chroniclers of the multiple forms of translational rift in different societies at different moments and in different places? As a matter of urgency, we need to prioritize not only the climate emergency in terms of how we orient our thinking but also translation relative to the forms and practices that that thinking might take.

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