

# Taking Sides: Urban Wandering as Decolonial Translation and Critique of Settler Colonialism

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**Abstract:** Colonialism fragments meaning. This essay takes up colonial fragmentation of meaning as a question of translation. It offers a decolonial methodology to unpack the political stakes as one moves back and forth across the colonial line. The methodology is based on a conscious process of urban wandering or drifting, what the Situationists called the “*dérive*.” Two case studies of itinerant decolonial theorizing follow. The first is a sketch of the militarized border between the US and Mexico, and the second example has to do with Columbus Day/Indigenous Peoples’ Day. In the case studies, translating is treated as a question of “tuning in” as one tunes into a conversation, or, alternatively, as if into a radio frequency. The metaphor of translation-as-tuning-in allows us to address practical and concrete questions of translation in everyday settings, as well as contemporary theoretical debates in translation studies.

**Keywords:** translation; colonialism; decolonial methodology; border; *dérive*

**Résumé :** Le colonialisme fragmente le sens. Dans cet article, où la fragmentation coloniale du sens est une question de traduction, l’auteur recourt à une méthodologie décoloniale dans le but d’examiner les enjeux politiques rencontrés lorsque l’on évolue d’un côté puis de l’autre de la frontière du colonialisme. Le travail est fondé sur un processus conscient d’errance ou de flânerie urbaine, que les Situationnistes appellent *dérive*. Deux études de cas pour théoriser le décolonialisme itinérant sont ainsi proposées. La première est une esquisse de la frontière militarisée entre les États-Unis et le Mexique. Le second exemple concerne Colomb Day (jour férié aux États-Unis) et la journée des peuples autochtones. Dans cette étude de cas, la traduction est une question d’ajustement, tout comme quelqu’un qui s’ajuste à une conversation, ou tout comme on ajuste une fréquence radio. La métaphore d’une traduction qui mène à un ajustement nous permet de répondre à des questions concrètes et pratique de traduction dans nos contextes quotidiens, comme dans les débats théoriques contemporains en traductologie.

**Mots clés :** traduction; colonialisme; méthodologie décoloniale; frontière; *dérive*

**Resumen:** El colonialismo fragmenta el significado. Este ensayo aborda la fragmentación colonial del significado como una cuestión de traducción. Se propone plantear una metodología descolonial para desentrañar los intereses y las apuestas políticas que supone desplazarnos a lo largo de la línea colonial, con base en un proceso autoconsciente de divagación urbana, lo que los situacionistas denominan la “*deriva*.” Para este fin se presentan dos casos de lo que planteamos como una teorización descolonial itinerante. El primero es un bosquejo de la frontera militarizada entre Estados Unidos y México, y el segundo tiene que ver con la diferencia entre la designación del llamado Día de la Raza (en inglés “*día de Colón*”) / Día de los Pueblos Indígenas. En estos casos se aborda la traducción como una cuestión de “*sintonización*”, en el sentido de sintonizarnos a una conversación, o a una frecuencia radial. La metáfora de la traducción-como-sintonización nos permite analizar cuestiones prácticas y concretas de la traducción en entornos cotidianos, así como también comentar debates teóricos de la traductología contemporánea.

**Palabras clave:** traducción; colonialismo; metodología descolonial; frontera; *deriva*

**Resumo:** O colonialismo fragmenta o sentido. Este ensaio toma a fragmentação colonial do sentido como uma questão de tradução e oferece uma metodologia decolonial para desvendar suas implicações políticas na medida em que nos movemos de uma lado para o outro da linha colonial. A metodologia baseia-se no

processo autoconsciente de errância, de um estar à deriva no espaço urbano, o que os Situacionistas chamavam de “*dérive*”. Dois estudos de caso baseados na perspectiva teórica decolonial itinerante são apresentados. O primeiro é um esboço da fronteira militar entre os EUA e o México, o segundo está relacionado ao Dia de Colombo e ao Dia do Índio. Nos estudos de caso, traduzir é tratado como uma questão de sintonizar-se, como em uma conversa ou estação de rádio. A metáfora da tradução com o ato de sintonizar nos permite endereçar as questões práticas e concretas da tradução em situações cotidianas, bem como nos debates contemporâneos dos estudos da tradução.

**Palavras-chave:** tradução; colonialismo; metodologia decolonial; fronteira, *dérive*

## Introduction

Colonialism fragments meaning. Colonizers set up lines of difference in power between the colonizer and the colonized. Through practices of symbolic, epistemic, material and sexual violence, the colonizers fractured reality, such that signs and signifiers splintered, and came to take on multiple, conflicting valences across the colonial line between colonizer and colonized (see Guha). Put differently, in a society divided by a colonial history, the same acts, the same symbols, the same texts, translate or refract across colonial lines to take on contrasting, even opposed meanings (see Buzelin; Price).

A contemporary example of the colonial fragmentation of meaning centres on the significance of the border wall being constructed by the United States along the US-Mexican border. From the standpoint of the United States government, the wall is a symbol of control over the border, and thus bolsters claims of national sovereignty. Since 1854, this national border has crossed through the land of the Tohono O’odham people, such that some of them live in what is now Mexico and others in what is now Arizona. Despite their objections, the federal government blasted sites sacred to the Tohono O’odham in 2019-2020 to level land for future portions of the border wall. For Ned Norris Jr., chairman of the Tohono O’odham Nation, the use of these explosives will “irrevocably harm cultural sites, sacred sites and the environment” (qtd. in Hauser). “To state it clearly, we are enduring crimes against humanity,” said Verlon José, governor of the Tohono O’odham on the Mexican side and a former vice chairman of the tribal nation on the US side of the border (qtd. in Romero).

On one side, the integrity of the US border is a quintessential element of white settler colonialism. Translated across the line, “[t]his wall is already putting a scar across our heart” as Verlon José put it. How can the meaning of the sacred sites be translated into the English of Anglo-America? Marie Battiste and James (Sa’ke’j) Youngblood Henderson describe how difficult such a translation can be and how it can distort indigenous concepts and values:

How can governments and scholars assume that differently constructed worldviews, such as those available with Indigenous languages, are not only translatable into English or French, but translatable without substantial

damage or distortion? (Battiste and Youngblood Henderson 80; qtd. in Chacaby 2)

Clearly, within the logic of the Tohono O’odham people, the border wall is an abomination. However, the precise nature of the violence cannot be easily translated to Western conceptual schema. How, then, can someone from the white settler community such as myself, who would like to stand in solidarity and stop the expansion of border walls on indigenous land, learn the meaning of the border for the Tohono O’odham or for others whose lives are scarred by the border? Understanding the violation depends on translating that does not assume facile solutions to translating to Western terms, what Battiste, Youngblood Harrison and Chacaby call the “illusion of benign translatability” (Battiste and Youngblood Henderson 79; Chacaby 1-3).

Just because it is not easy does not mean that translating the meaning of the wall should not be attempted, especially because the stakes are so high for the Tohono O’odham and other indigenous people. Verlon José uses an analogy: “Tell me where your grandparents are buried and let me dynamite their graves.” José is attempting to communicate the gravity and urgency of the situation by translating it into Western norms without necessarily giving in to the illusion of benign translatability.

This essay takes up colonial fragmentation of meaning as a question of translation, while trying not to surrender to the illusion of benign translatability since such an assumption, or a translation based on that illusion, would inevitably fail or simply be a means of consolidating domination.<sup>1</sup> Instead, I offer what I hope can serve as a decolonial methodology to unpack the political stakes in meaning as one moves back and forth across the colonial line. The decolonial methodology is peripatetic—it is based on a conscious process of urban wandering or drifting. I adapt the method from the Situationists’ practice of the “*dérive*” (Debord).<sup>2</sup> As one walks on a *dérive*, signs of the colonial order are all around, obvious, proximate to the observer or researcher. Up close, the participant-observer can also apprehend insurgent, anti-colonial meanings, even while noticing the oppressive, hegemonic meanings they oppose or invert. The translation one produces out of these encounters is contingent and context-dependent, even as the theory is similarly low-flying, specific to the set of signifiers and the observer’s relationship to those signifiers.

Two case studies of itinerant decolonial theorizing follow. Read them as meditations on colonial meanings that attempt to point the way to decolonial futures. One case study involves space, the other time. The first is a sketch of the militarized border between the US and Mexico, which cuts across and disfigures the area, and imaginary, of what Gloria Anzaldúa called the borderlands, or Borderlands (Anzaldúa). The second example has to do with Columbus Day, or, as it is increasingly termed in the United

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<sup>1</sup> For their conversation and comments on earlier versions, I wish to thank Elena Basile, Julia Schiavone Camacho, Şehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar and especially María Constanza Guzmán.

<sup>2</sup> The Situationists were an influential French avant-garde artistic and political group of the second half of the twentieth century. More on them below.

States, Indigenous Peoples' Day or *Día del Pueblo Indígena*.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, which term you use gets to the heart of the matter as you translate across the colonial line of difference.

### Which Side Are You On?

Colonialism involves not just racialization, material expropriation, dehumanization, land theft, and genocide. It involves a struggle over meaning. Danez Smith's despairing poem "It Doesn't Feel Like A Time To Write" illustrates this struggle. Written in the context of a spate of police killings of unarmed Black people and the Black Lives Matter movement that formed in response, Smith muses on the difficulties of communicating the value of Black Life within the logic of white supremacy. "We beg for peace but you hear *fire!*" Smith writes. The reverse is also true: "What you call country, we call the reaping." In this case, the colonial line marks a racial line. How do words translate across the colour line? "America, my sweet boy/your lips turn into a cleaver/when you kiss my neck." How do you choose which side to be on? What ethical criteria can be a guide? Where do you stand? Of course, not everyone chooses: some grow up within a Tohono O'odham worldview; some find themselves racially profiled by the police. Others do not. Identifying with those who are under the thumb of colonial depredations is nevertheless at least partially a question of decision-making, of will, of politics, of throwing one's lot in with one group or another. It is also a question of attention.

Focusing on translation as a question of attention provides a moral compass that is simultaneously a linguistic key. If translation is a question of attention, then for the purposes of this essay, taking sides is in part a question of "tuning in" as one tunes into a conversation, or, alternatively, into a radio frequency. The metaphor of translation-as-tuning-in allows us to address practical and concrete questions of translation in everyday settings, as well as contemporary theoretical debates in translation studies. Tuning in is a precursor to learning what ongoing colonization means to those subject to its predations. Translation-as-tuning-in provides a methodology to attend to the politics of translating in the context of colonialism. How one places oneself or analyzes a communicative situation can be analyzed in terms of the way participants dial in for clarity, but if one tunes in from too far away from the moment one desires to translate, the sound is fuzzy, blurry, unclear, or one misses it entirely.

### Experience-Near and Experience-Distant

Once you dial in to someone's experience, you can begin to learn the conceptual scheme by which they make sense of the world. Abstracting out to generalities leaves you with a different conceptual framework, one that may be alien to the subjective meanings the subaltern attach to the world; these generalizations may have analytical or explanatory value, and they may offer important structural analysis, but they also may lead one astray.

Dialling in, on the other hand, yields an intimate reading. If you try and reach for a person's own schema, then you are focused on what psychologist Heinz Kohut termed, "experience-near" concepts; if you go for the abstract, disciplinary categories, and

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<sup>3</sup> Also sometimes called Day of Indigenous Resistance, *Día de la resistencia indígena* (Venezuela), or *Día de la Resistencia Indígena, Negra y Popular* (Nicaragua).

concepts foreign to what a social agent would recognize, then you are using “experience-distant” concepts (Kohut 541). Anthropologist Clifford Geertz explains:

An experience-near concept is, roughly, one that someone—a patient, a subject, ... [or an ethnographic] informant—might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied by others. An experience-distant concept is one that specialists of one sort or another—an analyst, an experimenter, an ethnographer, even a priest or an ideologist—employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims. "Love" is an experience-near concept, "object cathexis" is an experience-distant one. (57)

“Clearly,” Geertz concludes, “the matter is one of degree.” Geertz’s own method of apprehending experience-near concepts is to look at how the concepts are externalized in words, images, institutions and behaviours. For Geertz, the goal is not empathy, but rather the best interpretation—to read signs, symbols and texts as a way to understand the frameworks that actors themselves use and in which they make sense of themselves and their worlds.

At the point of a colonial divide, the perils of analysis from too far a distance are illustrated by noted contemporary translation studies scholar Paul Bandia. Experience-distant concepts lead him to reproduce colonial categories that belittle African vernacular and literary production. Ironically, given the title of his book, *Translation as Reparation: Writing and Translation in Postcolonial Africa*, Bandia denigrates Creolized, hybrid, and what he calls the “broken” languages of the postcolony. In this book, Bandia frequently refers to the speakers of these languages as “illiterate,” “semi-literate,” and “uneducated” among Africans (he uses these terms at least twenty-six times in his book). He is particularly hard on non-Standard French and French patois. Discussing one variety of French, Bandia sees it as less deserving of study, less valid than pidgin English because

this variety has currency mainly within the illiterate population... Secondly, the grammar and structure of such hybrid French is highly idiolectal, idiosyncratic and generally unstable... Thirdly, the use of hybrid French is much more restricted than pidgin English. It is often used for verbal interaction between illiterate speakers from different ethnic groups, or between an educated Francophone and a non-educated interlocutor (133).

In other words, the speakers have less formal education and they use it as a lingua franca. He concludes that it is “‘broken French’ (rather than pidgin or creole)” (133). Oddly, he seems to confer marginally more legitimacy on “Pidgin English,” than on “broken French,” arguing that “[w]hile Pidgin English has evolved into a relatively stable language, ‘broken French’ has remained rather rudimentary and eclectic, assuming different forms in different social, historical and linguistic contexts” (156).

Paul Bandia’s expertise and knowledge of African literature far exceeds my own, yet from a strictly linguistic point of view, I must question his use of the term “broken French” as

lacking scientific rigour; it may reflect a bias against non-standard varieties of French, casting them as disorderly, unstable, and framing the people who speak them as uneducated and illiterate.<sup>4</sup> He places languages and their speakers into a relation of superior and inferior. This view is facilitated by using experience-distant categories.

Other examples in translation studies can be found of experience-distant concepts that lead to unclear or undiscerning criteria regarding imperialism, colonialism and other forms of domination. Edwin Gentzler has proposed a model of translation and borders that is “experience-distant.” He has suggested considering *all communication* translation. “What if we erase the border completely and rethink translation as an always ongoing process of every communication?” he asks (Gentzler). One risk of casting such a large net is that this would drain the word “translation” of any meaning, and hence of any critical value.<sup>5</sup> Gentzler also may be giving in to the “illusion of benign translatability” where indigenous knowledge can be assumed to be easily translatable, thus paving the way to what Battiste and Youngblood Harrison call “cognitive imperialism” (80). Gentzler exposes some of the liabilities of seeing borders as permeable, or of simply wishing them away, as Rita Kothari has pointed out (Kothari, “Translation” 3; Kothari “Grierson’s”). Borders, alas, have not ceased to exist. While many people pass frequently between linguistic borders, nation-state borders have become more militarized, and more people die in the desert, or in the ocean. The pain of displacement, and of selectively enforced borders, is borne asymmetrically. Kothari, in contrast, draws on what I would consider experience-near concepts in researching and writing on Wadha communities that live in the Banni region along the border between Pakistan and India. In her research, Kothari explicitly rejects Gentzler’s formulation. She bases her work

on people whose identity is much too fluid for a selfhood and social esteem in a world that needs borders to be closed, and identities defined through classifications. Gentzler gestures towards an erasure of borders in a group in exile and immigration, displaced or away from home. For those who have no ‘source’ to speak of, borders unfortunately need to be drawn in order to

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<sup>4</sup> Even the terms “Creole” and “pidgin,” widely used by linguists, seem to imply or presuppose that these languages are different from others. But what language is not hybrid? Has not every contemporary European language been transformed—if not creolized—through the crucible of colonization? In a series of articles on “Creole exceptionalism,” the linguist and Haitian speaker Michel Degraff has argued against treating Creole languages any differently from European languages. “What if ‘prejudices,’ ‘illusions,’ and ‘fantasies’ underlie some of the foundations of Creole studies?” he asks. “Many creolists throughout the history of Creole languages have relied on a variety of dualist assumptions whereby Creole languages constitute a special class of languages apart from ‘normal’/‘regular’ languages. Some of these assumptions were implicitly handed down to us from (neo)colonial history without any break in transmission” (“Against” 391). The examples could be multiplied: Acadian French, Papiamentu, Jamaican Patois, Gullah, other varieties of African-American English (or Ebonics), as well as the many forms of code-switching the world over. These languages are often not institutionalized or formally recognized. In the eyes of outsiders, they are often depicted as the languages of the lower class, a despised minority, or a racialized other. They are besmirched, spoiled languages, and they bear the stench of the colonized.

<sup>5</sup> There is an ambiguity in what Gentzler is proposing. Given its broadest possible definition, “translating” can mean *decoding any message*—that is, translating could be treated as synonymous with interpreting language, or reading a sign. Or he could mean something more sociologically limited: given the way in which people of different languages interact, it is increasingly common for people to translate *grosso modo*—from one language to another.

acquire a home and source. It is important to keep this in mind.... (Kothari, "Translation" 3)

Translation is the most intimate act of reading, Gayatri Spivak has suggested (257). Rita Kothari provides an intimate portrait of how people from the Wadha communities need to draw a border in order to develop a sense of home. If one is theorizing from an abstract sphere, one risks evacuating the particular ways in which translation, colonialism, borders, and other forms of power wend their way through particular identities and the specific contexts where translation is at stake.

Permit me an example from my own experience. In Chicago, in the early 1990s, as part of a popular education collective, I co-facilitated a series of anti-racism workshops in Pilsen, the largely Mexican and Mexican-American neighbourhood on the South Side of Chicago. In the workshops, many people were Spanish-speaking monolingual and others, who grew up in Chicago, were English-dominant, while some were fully bilingual code-switchers. It was a spectrum, in fact, and involved many varieties of English and Spanish, especially as educational attainment differed—some had only gone to primary school while others had a doctorate, with some educated in the United States, others in Mexico, many had migrated back and forth throughout their formative years, and so on. Language use encoded class, power, and resistance to Anglo hegemony. Who has access to power through language? Who must overcome fear to speak? How is language used to send coded meanings to some audiences? It is impossible to analyze the dynamics of power in the discussion (or the decision-making) if one "erases borders" and assumes that translation is an "always ongoing process of every communication" as Gentzler proposes. All nuance is gone. If everything is translation, one has scant basis to see how these differences manifest themselves, or how speakers maneuver linguistically. Cooperation, communication, and collaboration are also difficult to analyze.

Translation-as-tuning-in allows the translation scholar to chart how the meanings associated with each side translate across colonial lines of difference. Tuning in means moving from the macro-level to the micro-level. It is at the micro-level that the nuances of meaning are apprehended.

Tuning in implies attention to what Adrienne Rich once termed the politics of location (Rich 31). In order to tune in, it matters who you are, and how you are identified, which, in turn, holds consequences for how you can move, "the places my body has taken me and the places it has not let me go" (Rich 32). How has a researcher's embodied experience prepared them to perceive signs in one way and not another? What interpretive predispositions do I have, based on the life I have led, my education, my social world, and all the other ingredients of my socialization that have engendered how I am injected into a social semiosis? We respond differentially to the signs and signals around us (see Massumi). As we apprentice ourselves, we can reconfigure that location with respect to other locations: my location is not my fate, but rather an opening to new understandings of the world.

### **The Dérive & Translating Colonial Signification**

*El Paso-Ciudad Juárez.* In 2000, I collaborated with historian Julia Schiavone Camacho to chart the psychogeographic space of the US-Mexican border and the role of language,

race, gender, and law enforcement in marking this shadowy, liminal zone that is at the same time a symbol of US power and dominion.

At the time, Julia was teaching at the University of Texas at El Paso, on the United States-side of the border. El Paso is a medium-sized city. Many of her students commuted from the sprawling megalopolis Ciudad Juárez on the Mexican side. In fact, the two cities were, and are, integrated in all sorts of ways, though they are cut by an international border fence and the Rio Grande. Besides doing her doctoral work on the border, Julia had spent months preparing for our *dérives* by reading oral histories compiled by her predecessors, oral historians of generations past, who documented the lives of people who crossed the border daily throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

One thing Julia pointed out to me is that people interviewed for the oral histories did not, in the main, use words like “crossing over” or “*cruzar la frontera*.” Instead, the United States was “over there”: people passed through a contiguous geopolitical space without marking the border in their speech. Experience-near. Here colonization imposes a border as one draws a map or a blueprint on the space, an abstract schema from an imagined bird’s eye view, and one with real consequences, including dividing indigenous land and indigenous communities as we saw above. Without minimizing the violence of the border, then, I note that the border is lived in a way irreducible to that experience-distant view of the borderlands. Here in the borderlands, many people did not often draw a national boundary in their speech or describe one in their phenomenological experience of going back and forth between Mexico and the United States.

In order to delve more into this, I collaborated with Julia in conducting a series of “*dérives*” at the El Paso-Ciudad Juárez border between the United States and Mexico. Our political and intellectual inspiration was Abdelhafid Khatib’s 1958 *dérive* of Les Halles in Paris. Khatib belonged to the Situationists, a small arts movement of the mid- twentieth century that has influenced generations of activists, artists, radical urban planners, and anarchists.

Khatib used the *dérive* as a method to take stock of what the Situationists termed the “psychogeography” of an urban space. The *dérive* involves walking—roaming, really—in order to chart the energies, tensions, and eddies of the urban landscape. As one drifts along, one consciously takes stock of the ambiances. “Cities have a psychogeographical relief,” wrote Guy Debord, “with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes which strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones” (Debord 50). Meandering, one discovers a city’s spaces of relative freedom, as well as its spaces of confinement, barriers, and restrictions.

The *dérive* thus involves performing a special, technical kind of conscious itinerancy to learn, and to challenge, the layout of a city as a populated place. This roving amounts not merely to a means of acquiring information but is also a subversive practice. One can use a *dérive* to experiment with rewriting a map.

Khatib turned the *dérive* into a decolonial tool. In 1958, he went out at night to conduct a *dérive* of the marketplace of Les Halles in Paris and published his findings as “Notes on a Psychogeography of Les Halles”. We learn in an Afterword that police arrested him twice during his nocturnal *dérives*, since he was violating the curfew Paris imposed on North Africans, and he spent two nights in jail. Khatib’s article forces us to acknowledge that the quality of the *dérive* experience is racially inflected, exposing people racialized as colonial subjects to spatial violence as the Paris police and the French state



enforce spatial restrictions on some populations through the autocratic rule of the clock. The authorities maintained a tight colonial grip on Paris itself. Khatib's essay illustrates that social location and how you are identified matters in how you move, where you move, with what safety or danger, and that, in turn, has consequences for what you see and perceive.

Navigating the worlds of white supremacy as a white subject, while engaging in a *dérive* with a Chicana colleague, I acquired a sense of shifting selves as we were each perceived differently as we cross spaces. Narrating our *dérive* points to the fragmentation of memory and identity, and the different ways we attune to and respond to multilingual spaces. How do people understand the same spaces in incommensurate ways? How do they attune to others, or fail to?

Julia and I began our project by walking from El Paso, Texas, to Ciudad Juárez in Mexico several times during the day, across one of the international bridges that span the Rio Grande. Mid-morning, we conducted *dérives* of downtown El Paso, and then again after eight p.m. Finally, we ventured out several times to El Paso and across the border to Juárez at two, three, four, in the morning. It was pitch black out. I had brought with me from New York a push scooter that I gave to Julia for her birthday, and she was becoming proficient. Occasionally, Julia would speed up and slalom along the dark roads and boulevards, ponytails flying in the wind. As we walked the deserted streets of El Paso, we would occasionally see a tired worker journeying home. Julia would call out in Spanish and scoot over. The person usually seemed to be a bit surprised by Julia's bright tone at such a desolate hour and place. But they usually warmed quickly to the conversation. We would interview them on where they were going and where they were coming from, flowing back and forth fluidly between Spanish and English. Julia and I debriefed after every interaction and then at the end of the night.

El Paso seemed to close after 6 p.m. The stores were shut, and people must have gone inside (if they had a home to go to), leaving the streets largely deserted and dark. Even the rows of shotgun shacks did not seem to have lights on. Recalling the experience twenty years later, Julia reflects with me now on the difference between street life in Mexico and the United States, and how that contrast may have been experienced by generations of her family:

I remembered my nana [grandmother] being happier in Mexico where public spaces were livelier into the night, where people tended to sit on their porches. The barrio in Tucson must have reminded her of her home in Mexico which I feel she always missed. (Schivone Camacho)

Indeed, the differences in public space between El Paso, Texas, and just across the border in Ciudad Juárez could not have been clearer. In Juárez, life was bustling at 3 a.m., 4 a.m. In the main strip that ran from one of the border bridges, one could get *paletas* of sweet mango, green mango, avocado, raspberry, and coconut. Taquerias bustled with business, ranchera music issuing out as sonic advertisements that they were open for business, drawing us in, even as crowds spilled out onto the streets. Some people standing in the streets craned their necks and leaned forward to eat their tacos al pastor, in the universal posture of biting into street food while keeping one's body far enough away so the juices do not get on you. Near the border, but still on the Juárez side, we

encountered a white woman squatting in the gutter. She told us in English that she was waiting for someone, but then she would break off mid-phrase, or repeat over and over the name of the person she was looking for. I found her a little unnerving. We walked on.

Towards the centre of Juárez, Julia recalls “an elderly lady we met in a plaza.” It was now nearly four in the morning. The woman was sitting on a park bench, surrounded by feeding pigeons. In elegant Spanish, she told us of a film festival that was playing in town. She met her friends at odd hours in the plaza, and sometimes they walked together. “I do not remember if she said something about how lonely it is at night on the US side,” Julia recalls, “or if I was drawing these connections.” We met a solemn, austere Central American man, nattily dressed in pressed jeans and a white t-shirt, who was waiting for a *coyote* to chaperone him across. For him more than anyone else we talked to, the other side seemed to be the most tantalizing even as it was also idealized, distant. His formality and sobriety made for a discordant note with the carousing, busy life all around us, a young couple laughingly enjoying an assignation, commuters walking on their way to work, or working. Some of the man’s Spanish expressions I did not understand, especially when he referred to an illness he had suffered recently, and the herbs a *curandera* gave him to cure the problem.

Is my mind playing tricks on me? Memory, nostalgia, desire mix together. I remember Juárez as lively, safe for old ladies and entire families eating a late dinner: vibrant street life provided an open zone for all. As I moved back and forth between the United States and Mexico, I began to conclude that the biggest shift from Juárez to El Paso was going from a public space of sociality and interaction—in all its painful, agonizing and pleasurable colourations—to the solitude of private property and the death of public space in El Paso.

Yet this is partial. I know that this was a period of intense femicide: women disappeared and found later, in the desert, sometimes stripped, sometimes wearing other women’s clothing, unsolved murders and sex crimes in addition to the dozens, even hundreds of cases of women murdered by husbands, boyfriends or other intimates. The social conditions—the armed gangs, the cartels, the ruthless exploitation of workers in the border maquiladoras, as well as the legions of women forced by economic circumstances to travel at night or in the early morning to work, or across the border—contribute to make Ciudad Juárez unsafe for women. The border insecurity was a result of economic and social organization, in other words. These accounts of what the border represents are important to gather and understand, and to fill in the picture of what the border *means* for women in Mexico.

It would have been too easy for me to come away with a reductive, monolithic understanding of the meaning of the border for people who live in the borderlands. Without the company and feedback of Julia and other Mexican women and women of colour, I might have missed the perils of the borderland for women, especially women racialized as non-white. To put the same point differently, one version of the illusion of benign translatability is that meaning is unitary. Acknowledging the structures of gender violence entails wrestling with the difficulties of translating the language women use when they face disparate forms of danger as they move across public and private spaces. (As the number of femicides has spun increasingly out of control in the succeeding decades, they have been joined by mounting thousands, and by now tens of thousands of men and gender-non-confirming people who have gone missing—*desaparecidos*, in that most

fearsome of participles that Latin America has given us—or simply murdered and put out on display. What is that particular strip of Juárez like today? I return to this below.)

On one of the dérives, we set out on the campus of the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). I followed Julia over to the main research library. The campus library was one of the most bizarrely situated buildings I have ever been in. With its imposingly high walls and turrets, it evoked a nineteenth-century penitentiary. It reminded me of New York's Attica prison. I could not stop gaping at it.

Ultimately, however, it was not really the architecture that I found so spellbinding and so appalling; it was the perspective one gained *from* the UTEP Library. Peering out from the third-floor reading room through a small arrow slit, one could spy straight down and see the border fence. Someone had fitted dozens and dozens of needle-like nails all around the windows in the library, doubtless to ward off pigeons or other birds, but one had an experience of looking out of Fortress America, in the form of this neo-Gothic early twenty-first-century castle. The perspective was the outcome of, and also engendered, a walled-citadel mentality.

As I looked down, I could see that the border fence was topped with concertina wire. Evenly spaced border patrol SUVs train-tracked the fence into the horizon in both directions, each SUV with men in the signature brown shirts of the Border Patrol surveying the Rio Grande with binoculars. The river, that mighty symbol of the border, ran just beyond the fence, with several bridges spanning it from the Mexican side. Weakened by the heat, the pitiless sunlight and the substantial water drained off for agricultural irrigation upstream, and tamed into a canal within the city limits of El Paso-Juárez, the Rio Grande dribbled sadly along. And then beyond it unfolded the raucous urbanization of Ciudad Juárez with its pink adobe hue, mottled with the concrete solidity of its metallic industrial core, and dotted with the blues and yellows of painted houses. Beyond that, I could see the sandy-coloured expanse of Chihuahua. Viewed from my perch inside the library, I could not get over that sight, that expanse. I have never forgotten it. A citadel mentality is the opposite of attuning oneself to another's message.

Twenty years later, I am haunted by a memory of a militarized border that is now even more militarized. The border has been reinforced, backed by more machinery of state violence and state surveillance, and supported by astounding public displays of populist white supremacy in the United States. After conducting these border dérives in 2000, I felt as if the US side of the border was marked most of all by the death of public space. However, as of 2020, the US side of the border region has become much more sinister and terrifying. In the American popular imagination, the US border has become identified with disappearing migrant people coming over the border into the labyrinths of federal custody, separating families, or simply turning them back to places of manifest danger. "The Border" is impressed ever more forcefully onto people's lives. The language of separation, epitomized in the notion of a border wall, at once exemplifies experience-distant categories, while at the same time demonstrating the horror that experience-distant concepts can visit on phenomenological experiences of the borderlands and on people's lives. The violence of the gap between experience-near and experience-distant concepts of the border, the violence of the translation, has perhaps never been more marked.

*Chicago October 12, 1992.* I am attending an anti-Columbus Day protest march in downtown Chicago. 1992 marks the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the initiation of European

colonization of the Americas, a day of infamy. However, for most Chicagoans—for most Americans—Columbus Day is worth celebrating. The holiday also serves as a surrogate Italian-American Pride Day, and so the downtown is festooned with Italian flags, and the assembled spectators line the parade route three and four deep. Children with balloons, some of them on parents' shoulders, cheer and wave as the marching bands and motorcades float by.

We are soon going to be the rain on the parade. Our small group of several hundred assembled at Daley Plaza, near the Picasso sculpture, a half block from the main strip of the parade. Native American activists, students, movement Chicanxs, members of the Anarchist Black Cross with their signature black balaclavas, all of us huddle together in the crisp Chicago fall. Some of us have drums. Many have had the forethought to paint signs: "Five hundred years of genocide"; "Columbus: First Terrorist in North America"; "Stop the Lies, Stop Celebrating the Conquest"; "Columbus=Kidnapper, Rapist, Thief." As the signs indicate, we are here to protest the celebration of Columbus as a symbol of settler colonialism. "Columbus Day" is a settler-colonial naming practice.

We march in circles around the otherwise empty, antiseptic city plaza, changing the chant every once in a while. The thunderous applause and cheering along the nearby parade route echo off the skyscrapers that surround us, engulfing us in waves of joyous sound. At times their celebratory roar peaks so that it becomes difficult to hear even our own slogans, as close as we are to each other.

I find this depressing. Our protest feels like an exercise in futility. I gripe to my friend Charles that I am playing a meaningless part in an exercise as I have done so many times before, and to what end? Why am I here? To keep warm, we sip coffee from our paper cups and continue marching. I stamp my feet to keep them from going numb. Maybe I am also impatient. At some point, a spontaneous discussion develops on whether we need to do something more to make an impact. We make up our minds to march out along the main parade route where people are celebrating Columbus, but we resolve that we will keep scrupulously to the sidewalk, off the street but parallel to the parade to avoid breaking the law, since we're marching without a permit. We snake our way into the Columbus Day crowd and start to march along the sidewalks behind the spectators, who are all facing the passing street parade. The sidewalks are wide enough to accommodate us easily. We begin our chants again.

The response from the mass of people at the festival is immediate—and vicious. For a few seconds, people just stop, turn, and stare. Then, almost in unison, they begin to scream at us, gesture angrily, and even physically menace us. A wall of sound from shouting, heckling human beings washes over us from all sides. I am able even now, over twenty-five years later, to distinguish a few people among our reluctant spectators. I remember an octogenarian, her hair tinted a senior-citizen blue and done up in a tremendous beehive, dressed in a neat 1950s cardigan. As I pass near her she spits on me, her face scrunched up in rage. I do not quite catch what she mutters. A few minutes later, a middle-aged man with a small child on his shoulders and a pair of twins leaning against him lets loose a torrent of shamefully foul epithets. As weathered as I am to salty language, I feel my back stiffen. He seems riled enough to be capable of doing grave bodily harm to anyone he might grab. Although I did not expect to be welcomed, I am a bit surprised by his display in front of his own children.

If I had felt merely impotent before, now I feel the collective hatred of the large crowd bearing down on us. The emotion is so powerful, so toxically angry, and so life-denying that it is almost palpable, a concentrated vector of ill feeling focused on us, on our skinny bodies and pathetic, homemade signs. I muse on how a milling “crowd” can quickly become a “mob” and how permeable the distinction can be. After a few blocks we circle around and make it to a side street, just as the parade formally ends and the huge crowd starts to break apart and melt away, to cars, to the El train, or off into the maze of downtown streets. But if I thought we had respite, I was mistaken, for police lines materialize on either side of us and begin to move in immediately, without warning and without issuing any orders to us to disperse. On one side a line of about fifteen mounted policeman approach with their horses at a fast walk. They catch me unprepared. The police had lost their patience with us apparently, even if we would have probably just dispersed by ourselves in a few minutes if left alone. Though we had not anticipated the police lines at this juncture, we hold our own lines with discipline. As the police move in on us, a large police horse overtakes one of the marchers. The tall horse tramples the young man and he falls to the street. I remember his body curling upward on the ground unnaturally, as if he were simultaneously trying to fight off the horse’s stamping hoofs with his arms and legs even as he tried to coil himself into a tighter fetal position to protect his head and chest. I can see him even now, entangled in the high-footed staccato steps of those impossibly long, impossibly muscular horse legs.

## **Conclusion**

Colonial domination has always entailed a struggle over interpretation. “Struggle” is not metaphorical, as the examples above illustrate. Colonizers establish whose version of reality will be codified and become the dominant one, whose history will be celebrated and whose suppressed. Breaking with the dominant, authorized account implies competing for hegemony.

Translation practices have played a crucial role in the many ongoing battles for hegemonic control. Translation scholars have documented many of the ways in which translators and translation practices have participated in or resisted colonization (see, for example, Niranjana, Rafael, “Contracting”; “Motherless,” Simon and St. Pierre, Wolf, Pratt, Bandia). Theorizing translation practices from that point of colonial conjunction or contact, this essay has outlined a methodology to study translation and power that can shed light on translation practices central in the construction—or destruction—of the Americas. The Columbus Day protests in 1992 serve as an exemplary case of anti-colonial intralingual translation. We provided a counter-hegemonic translation: Christopher Columbus, a swashbuckling, intrepid hero in the Anglo-American imagination, we rendered as a mass-murderer, a highway robber. This “translation,” and its bid to counter the dominant image of him as a hero was precisely what was so threatening.

My gloomy pessimism about the demonstration was premature. Though they continue to be days of pride and festivity within the dominant mainstream, by now many Americans refuse to celebrate American Thanksgiving or Columbus Day. Within the decolonial counter-logic that emerged from critiques by Native Americans and First

Nations peoples, these holidays stand as symbols of colonial-settler hypocrisy and rapaciousness.

The temporality of colonialism is not linear. A growing consciousness of Columbus Day as a celebration of colonialism, and the invention of alternatives, including the celebration of indigenous peoples and their perseverance, point to decolonial futures. This marks, among other things, the resurgence and reassertion of indigeneity throughout the continent.

On the other hand, as of this writing (2020), the split at the border between El Paso and Ciudad Juárez has become more deadly. In 1987, Gloria Anzaldúa could write of the border as a “1,950 mile-long open wound/dividing a *pueblo*, a culture/running down the length of my body/staking fence rods in my flesh/splits me splits me/*me raja me raja*/This is my home/this thin edge of/ barbwire” (Anzaldúa 24-25). Those fence rods have become doubly reinforced with steel and concertina wire and are now observed by myriad drones. If the border was flesh-piercing in 1987, it would be much more so now. It would be difficult to drift back and forth across the border as we did in 2000. But then, I do not know—I have not been back.

And learning when one is close by, after all, is the point of the approach. Grasping the nuances of these shifting spaces and temporalities is the fruit of the decolonial *dérives* that form the basis of this essay. Border *dérives* can be used not just to explore the meanings that those on the underside of history attribute to the border. They can be used to start to erode the border and expose the openness of the future. That the future remains to be written is a truism; but translation, as an activity in time, can be about writing and rewriting that future, even as it is about grappling with the past, as if each *dérive* or political demonstration were a translation that left a barely visible new inscription on the city and its many meanings. Each of these pathways created an opening, a potential for an undiscovered hope.

The argument has turned on the intralingual translation of Columbus Day/Indigenous People’s Day and the meaning of the militarized geopolitical entity known as the border, or what Chicanxs call the Borderlands. These *dérives* show that how and whether one dials in is not only an analytical question, and not only an ideological one and a political one, but also one of methodology, where the singular meanings and irreducible distances between colonial and decolonial meanings can be best apprehended up close.

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