2022-04-22

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

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in Craig Santos Perez's *from Unincorporated Territory*

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Craig Santos Perez's poetic series *from Unincorporated Territory* describes and decries the U.S. militarization, colonization, and environmental degradation of Guam in the Western Pacific through multilingual, excerpted, and series-long poems. Perez's writing style requires slow, careful reading with translations sometimes appearing on the same page, various pages later, or not at all. I describe this kind of elongated translation as slow translation, recalling translation theorist Michael Cronin's "Slow Language" movement. This thesis invites readers, especially multispecies ethnographers, to slow down the translation of nonhuman species and their stories by paying attention to moments of untranslatability in multispecies literature and interactions. In modeling how to think-with untranslatability, I call upon translation scholars Barbara Cassin and Cronin, who describe untranslatability in temporal and agentic terms, and environmental humanist Donna Haraway, whose tentacular thinking model and multispecies approaches have slowed our tendencies towards linear and assumptive modes of thinking. In conjunction with these thinkers, my multispecies reading of *from Unincorporated Territory* proposes slow translation as a model for resisting easy or colonizing translations that homogenize the Other. Perez's multilingual, fractured poems create moments of untranslatability, especially when describing nonhuman species or environments, that are difficult to immediately understand due to nontranslations or delayed translations. This thesis pays special attention to such moments as opportunities for slowing down and staying with difference. Thus, moments of untranslatability offer an ethnographic and interactive mode for engaging with difference through slow translation, valuing the process and experience of translation, the agency of the subjects in translation, and the incomprehensibility or unknown nature of the nonhuman and Othered world.

Keywords: untranslatability, multispecies ethnography, slow translation

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Introduction

> "// 70,000 chamorros still live on guam \\ 150,000 now live off-island // is migration our 'species survival plan'
>
> 'kshh-skshh-skshh-kroo-ee, kroo-ee, kroo-ee'
>
> ~
>
> […] 'let go, let go, let go,' said the last marianas crow, 'humankind can't bear very much diversity'
>
> 'kaaa-ah'"
>
> -Craig Santos Perez in "*ginen* island of no birthsong" (*[lukao]* 54-55)

What happens when we cannot translate? When no translation feels good enough, when there are too many unknowns, or when human language fails—what happens?

Perhaps extinction. Forced migration and assimilation. Like the last Marianas crow's lament in Craig Santos Perez's *[lukao]*, "humankind can't bear very much diversity, / 'kaaa-ah,'" and so that which is different, incomprehensible, or untranslatable dies, erased or absorbed (55). In this moment of tired despair in Perez's poem, untranslatability means death. To survive, Chamorros must "live off-island," physically and culturally translating themselves into American spaces (54). But the Micronesian kingfisher and Marianas crow are not migratory bird species. Their untranslatable "kshh-skshh-skshh-kroo-ee, kroo-ee, kroo-ee" and "kaaa-ah" calls are nearly impossible to find in the wild. For now, their calls are untranslatable because of ignorance in human-avian translation, but soon their calls will be untranslatable because of extinction.

Craig Santos Perez's *from Unincorporated Territory* series, consisting of four books of poetry, depicts an island immersed in translation, but such translation is a complicated resource.[1] A resource for colonization, a last resource for survival, and sometimes a way to finally be heard, translation appears throughout the series as a multifaceted and amoral tool. As an ecocritical, decolonial, Indigenous and CHamoru poet, Perez writes about the militarization and colonization of Guam, a U.S. territory in the Western Pacific, advocating for the island's rights and needs

amidst environmental and cultural erasure. His *from Unincorporated Territory* series describes Guam's plight through fractured poems that appear in excerpt form. On an individual level, each book contains various long poems that weave together, appearing as excerpts across the book. As a series, some of the same long poems reappear from book to book, intertwining the separate books as carriers of the same poems and producing a complex and disconcerting reading process. Throughout the series, Perez writes in translation, switching between languages, mostly Chamorro, Guam's native language, and English (with some Japanese and Spanish words that recollect Guam's previous colonizers). Occasionally, Perez avoids or delays translation, producing moments of untranslatability that emphasize difference and encourage slow, close reading. While the postcolonial and environmental plights of Guam are unique to the island, Perez's portrayal of the complex relationships between nations, cultures, languages, and environments reflects larger political and environmental issues affecting the world. As the need for productive translation becomes greater in a globally connected world undergoing a climate crisis, Perez's unique treatment of translation in his series provides relevant models of how thinking-with untranslatability can check the potentially colonizing and anthropomorphizing powers of translation.

Translation studies has poststructurally described untranslatability in a similar fashion, as a check against what Lawrence Venuti calls the "incommensurability of cultures" and the "inherent indeterminacy of language" (188). For postcolonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha, such incommensurability plays out in migrant and minority cultures, repurposing untranslatability from the linguistic world to a bodied and cultural world.[2] The social and political implications of translatability have prompted modern translation scholars to look at untranslatability as a counterbalance to translatability, like Emily Apter's depiction of "the Untranslatable" as a check

against "a translatability assumption" that has been built into conceptions of World Literature (3). Sherry Simon's ethnographic analysis of literary translations in Montreal and Vicente L. Rafael's postcolonial and poststructural take on translation's role in war both portray untranslatability as a check against homogenizing globalization. And recently, translation theorist Michael Cronin has cited untranslatability as a tool of "resilience" that resists globalization by attending to singularity and place (17). His "Eco-translation" seriously considers "what translation might mean or could do" in a post-human or more-than-human world (5).[3] Cronin, like Apter, Simon, and Rafael, cites untranslatability in his call for a reevaluation of the function, role, and future of translation in a postcolonial, global context.

Within the environmental humanities, multispecies ethnographers and biosemioticians are pushing for similar evolutions with regards to communication, translation, and relations between humans and nonhumans.[4] Scholars like Jean M. Langford attempt biosemiotic interactions with nonhuman species, like parrots, paying attention to "interspecies communications [which] include body language, gesture, nonverbal vocalizations, and human-language phrases." Biosemiotics' scientific and organic approach to sign-making tests the boundaries of translation as a human activity, like Kalevi Kull and Peeter Torop's "biotranslation" (1). Such boundary testing recalls Eduardo Kohn's push for ideations of language (and by extension, translation) that go beyond the human, or Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley's broadening of postcolonial ecocriticism to include a "more nuanced discourse about the representation of alterity" with nature as a historical witness (9). However, DeLoughrey and Handley are wary of translation's colonizing history, asking "who can 'speak for nature' or speak for the subaltern subject in a narrative mode that does not privilege dualist thought or naturalizes the hierarchies between the human and nonhuman?" (25). As translation

discourse and practices gain traction in multispecies and biosemiotics work, untranslatability can become a valuable counterbalance, like it has become for some translation theorists, in checking the colonizing or globalizing potentials of translation in the nonhuman world.

Thinking-with untranslatability can check translation's negative potentials by slowing down translation. Slow translation requires careful thinking and revisiting, and we see this slowness in Perez's poetic series. Perez slows down his series by writing in translation and cycling between poems. By building upon poems throughout the series, Perez invites readers to go back and forth between individual poems as well as the books of poetry, recalling Elizabeth DeLoughrey's "cyclical model [which] invok[es] the continual movement and rhythm of the ocean," a model based on Kamau Brathwaite's "tidalectics" (2). Like the literatures included in DeLoughrey's *Routes and Roots*, Perez's *from Unincorporated Territory* is an island literature that "problematizes national frameworks," complicating borders, migration, and movement in an island context (4). I pull from all four books in the series to map the tidal movements between poems, focusing on the varying "tidelands" poems in *[hacha]*, *[saina]*, and *[guma']* as well as the extinction narrative of the kingfisher and other species throughout all four books, culminating in *[lukao]*'s "*ginen* island of no birdsong" poems. As Perez goes between translation and nontranslation, he invites the reader to slow down and attend to moments of untranslatability in the ongoing story of Guam. To identify a moment of untranslatability in a work of environmental literature or in a multispecies interaction is not to declare translation of that text or interaction impossible. Instead, a moment of untranslatability points to a text/event/word/behavior/etc. that has no easy or ready translation and might appear untranslatable. In my use of the phrase, moment of untranslatability, I lean most heavily on Barbara Cassin's definition of untranslatability: "the indeterminability of translating: the idea that one can never have done with

translation" (vii). Untranslatability, according to Cassin, gives room for translation rather than replication and affords more agency to translators: "the untranslatable as a construct makes a place for the private anguish that we as translators experience when confronted with material that we don't *want* to translate or see translated" (xiv). In this sense, untranslatability recalls what happens when translators grapple with language in an indeterminate cycle. Cassin's temporal and agentic characterizations of untranslatability inform my own specification of the phrase "*moment* of untranslatability" which I use to acknowledge particularly complex, culturally specific, or nonhuman translation opportunities that resist easy translation. I argue that by paying attention to these moments, or thinking-with untranslatability, multispecies ethnographers can resist easy translation of the nonhuman or Othered world in favor of a slow translation that values the process and experience of translation, the agency of the subjects in translation, and the incomprehensibility or unknown nature of the nonhuman and Othered world.

In a multispecies context, slow translation requires time, attention, and immersion with nonhuman organisms and ecologies. To think-with untranslatability means to slow down translation and to sometimes decide against translation. As multispecies ethnographers think-with untranslatability, they avoid anthropomorphizing translations of the nonhuman world by valuing the different or incomprehensible aspects of nonhuman ecologies. My first section discusses how untranslatability redirects attention to the means of translation, shifting the value of translation from its products to it processes. Especially in ethnographic storying, the conditions of translation matter. Section two analyzes the selective and agentic powers of translators and translation's subjects during the translation process. In postcolonial and multispecies contexts, thinking-with untranslatability can encourage reappropriation of translation practices for mutually beneficial, hybrid relationships. Such reappropriation can look

like limiting or refusing translation, as I discuss in section three. Staying with moments of untranslatability, especially in multispecies settings, can slow presumptions about nonhuman communications by delaying or foregoing translation.[5] By paying attention to moments of untranslatability in environmental literature and in multispecies ethnographic encounters, multispecies ethnographers can witness the resistive and regenerative powers of slow translation for nonhumans, humans, and their environments.

Slowing Down with Untranslatability: Process Over Product in Translation

Multispecies thinking favors process over product, hence the host of gerund terms like "co-becoming," "becoming-with," "worlding," "thinking-with," and "attending-to."[6] To attend to the nonhuman world is an ongoing process—a mode of existing and entangling. Yet to call untranslatability a process or ongoing seems paradoxical when untranslatability lexically signifies an inability to move. But untranslatability, according to Rafael, has more to do with "the persistence of difference" by which translation becomes a "constant labor" with a constant remainder of the untranslatable (462). Rafael describes a spiral of mistranslations: "It is as if in translating your Arabic into my Texan, and my Texan into your Arabic, we find ourselves mutually mistranslating, then trying again, only to add to our earlier mistranslations" (462). This spiral elongates translation, like Cassin's indeterminate translation through untranslatability, marking translation as more of a "becoming-with" process than a clean and guaranteed product of equivalence. Paying attention to moments of untranslatability, as part of the translation process, slows down simple renderings of languages or cultures, as Cronin models with the Slow Food movement and food translation.[7] Cronin cites the untranslatable qualities of culturally specific foods, commenting that "food translation demands the deceleration of attention, the slowdown of immersive understanding" (62). His proposition for a "'slow language'

movement," or slow translation, depends on privileging the translation process as much as the product (60, 63). Though Cronin does not explicitly link untranslatability with his "slow language movement," slow translation can happen by thinking-with untranslatability, paying attention to questionable or complicated translations or subjects of translation. For a multispecies scholar, slowing down with untranslatability means slowing down the translation of the nonhuman world, recognizing there are differences that cannot be assimilated and staying with those differences.

Perez writes in tidalectic translation, flitting between translation and untranslatability, slowing down the reading process. The "tidelands" in Perez's poems operate like Tiffany Lebatho King's "black shoals," which "interrupt and slow the momentum of long-standing and contemporary modes and itineraries for theorizing New World violence, social relations, Indigeneity, and Blackness in the Western Hemisphere" (2). Like the ebbing and flowing of tides, Perez brings in his readers with vivid descriptions in Chamorro and English, translating them in his poems, and then leaving particular phrases untranslated or delayed in translation.[8] His "tidelands" poem surfaces throughout the series, playing between translation and nontranslation and forcing the reader to scuttle back and forth as the poems contain translations for one another, albeit imperfect/partial translations. Perez alters the placement of these "tidelands" poems, sometimes placing the Chamorro version before and sometimes after the corresponding English poem. This alternating placement indicates a two-way translation that prioritizes neither language and instead, according to Katherine Baxter and Lytton Smith, creates "a writing in translation, recognizing place through displacements voluntary and forced" (279). This new space, in which neither Chamorro nor English are prioritized as the original, recognizes "still-emerging geopolitical spaces" (281). Baxter and Smith focus on the in-process creation and

emergence of spaces via a continuous translation, but they fail to acknowledge the necessity of untranslatability for maintaining such a state. Moments of untranslatability elongate translation, enacting Baxter and Smith's "writing in translation" and permitting Perez to situate his readers in the ongoing and devastating environmental issues of Guam.

Perez's "*ginen* tidelands" poem in his third book, *[guma']*, features moments of untranslatability that draw attention to the environmental violence taking place in Guam's surrounding waters. He bemoans the current space of the Guam tidelands, "an artificial reef / with concrete / debris and plastic / pipes and call it / mitigation" (*[guma']* 41). He uses untranslated names of local island sea life, all struck-through, to signify their death via pollution, invasion, and Guam's inability to return to its former state:

> ~~toninos~~
> ~~tanguison~~
>
> ~~atuhong~~
> ~~halu'u~~
>
> ~~haggan bed'di~~
> ~~haggan karai~~
>
> permanent
> loss— (*[guma']* 41)

The strikethroughs give the poems a manuscript feel, as if the poems are still in production, but the underlying content reveals a grim finality—the names of extinct fish and turtle species. In an interview with Robert Briggs, Perez envisions "more loss: loss of land, loss of healthy environments, loss of species, loss of indigenous population" (69). But he also envisions new spaces and voices emerging. The untranslated names with a strikethrough serve as a final and tragic reminder of the "permanent loss" due to ecoinjustice, but the untranslated names on their own also remind the reader of Guam's unique and vital ecosystem (*[guma']* 42). By leaving the

names untranslated, Perez places the responsibility in the reader's hands, slowing down their comprehension and conclusion of the poem and the book of poems as a whole, suggesting Guam's story is not over. Matt Hooley looks to indigenous poetry as an example of "*slowing* or abrading the disciplinary inclination toward easier or bigger conceptualizations of climate change" (133). Perez enacts Hooley's "still thinking" in this moment of untranslatability, painting an image of climate change that is, at first glance, incomprehensible. The reader must sit in-between translation and nontranslation, immersing themselves in the Chamorro language and the native sea life of Guam to understand the poem and to understand the current crisis of Guam.

As untranslated text slows down the reading, the translation of and within the poems becomes an ongoing and irresolvable process. Baxter and Smith make sure to emphasize that Perez's books are not fully untranslatable— "even their lacuna invite attempts at translation"— but Baxter and Smith's description of "writing in translation" as "an activity with no termini" (281) closely resembles Cassin's indeterminacy (vii) or Rafael's "Babel of ongoing translation," which operates on untranslatability (462). Rafael describes Babel as "the state of unregulated linguistic difference. To dwell in this state requires the constant labor of translation," much like the ongoing process of Baxter and Smith's "writing in translation." However, Rafael declares untranslatability to play a key role in such "ongoing translation" because constant translation leads us to "understand that there is something that resists our understanding" (462). In Perez's poems, even though most of the Chamorro words in "*ginen* tidelands[9]" correspond to the English words in "*ginen* tidelands[10]," the latter poem loses the proverbial structure and prepositions of the former poem's Chamorro language, leaving the translations feeling unresolved and structurally different (*[saina]* 114, 127).[9] Instead of reading like a proverb, the English version feels hollow, marked with more empty space, adding distance and emptiness to Perez's storying.

The Chamorro version, visually centered and structured after the stone structures used to build ancestral homes on Guam, feels full and vibrant, and the visual differences between the poems suggest something has been lost in translation. At the bottom of these two poems (like in other "tidelands" excerpts in *[saina]*), Perez includes excerpts from his speech to the U.N., describing the colonial invasion of Guam by the US military and by brown tree snakes.[10] Visually, Perez marks these footnote excerpts with a strikethrough, a metaphor for the erasure that the plight of Guam receives. The strikethroughs and delayed/partial translations in the "*ginen* tidelands" excerpts point to a critical and dangerous gap between the Guam's survival and American politics. And the footnotes reveal that the nonhuman lives of Guam are just as much at stake as the Chamorro humans, with "the last totot (Marianas fruit dove) being slowly swallowed by the brown tree snake" (114). The dual colonization and slow death of humans and nonhumans on Guam reveal the ecoinjustice at play on the island, but Perez and the island still resist.[11]

In the untranslated names, the weaving translations and nontranslations, and in the strikethroughs, Perez resists erasure and assimilation, pushing on in translation. The "tidelands" poems paint the island as an ecosystem that resists easy translation, characterized by "illegible/ borders," "tidal palimpsests," a "forced tongue," and a betraying coastline, unmappable and unreadable to its colonizers (*[hacha]* 25, 61, 98). Their attempts to make the island legible have resulted in brown tree snake invasions and plastic reefs, revealing colonial translation to be a destructive and deadly poison. Perez's reclaiming of translation through nontranslation and untranslatability focuses less on making the island legible and more on staying with the different and inscrutable. Hooley analyzes this kind of move in Sherwin Bitsui's contemporary Indigenous poem "Dissolve":

> the insight these lines offer students and scholars in the environmental humanities has to do with how the text's unruly kinetics slow down or still thinking, which is to say that they restrain customary explanations about what environmental violence is, who and what it affects, and what it leaves behind. .....The poem is unwilling to express that violence through simplistic and specious ontological binaries, and so it makes language itself the medium through which its complexity is registered. (137)

By remaining complex and untranslated, Perez's "tidelands" poems resist the simple rendering of the ecoinjustice occurring on Guam, layering colonial oppression and the island's death with centuries of different violators and languages. The descriptive language of the poems, so rooted in Guam's tidelands, complicates understanding by relying on indigenous names, plants, creatures, and ideologies, requiring readers to stay in the process of translation and recognize the colonial and environmental cost of such translation. Multispecies ethnographers can model this slow translation by paying attention to the local and native names/renderings of flora and fauna that resist easy translation. As ethnographers attempt to tell the stories of nonhumans, what happens when they encounter the seemingly untranslatable? How is that unknown organism/environment/behavior rendered in human tongue? Perez relies on his indigenous heritage and language to translate, although the island remains complex and indeterminable. But other multispecies ethnographers might also rely on Rafael's spiral of mistranslations, viewing multispecies ethnographic writings as a spiral of mistranslations that invite more translations and more interactions. Identifying the untranslatable or incomprehensible in multispecies entanglements should not discourage but rather encourage entanglement. Like with Perez's untranslated sea life names, understanding requires research, time, effort, and a desire to

understand. Paying attention to moments of untranslatability in ethnographic writing might encourage such slow efforts on the part of the reader, producing an ongoing state of translation.

Selective Untranslatability in Hybrid Environments

Inside an ongoing state of translation, paying attention to moments of untranslatability makes the choices behind translation visible. Moments of untranslatability point to actors and subjects of translation that require further interrogation or thought. In Perez's poetic series, moments of untranslatability draw attention to the Chamorro people and the nonhuman species of the island, compelling the reader to question how such subjects can be translated and what such translation misses. As with the struck-through names of extinct species in the "*ginen* tidelands" poem referenced earlier, moments of untranslatability draw attention to the choices within translation—Perez's choice to leave the names untranslated, the reader's choice to research the translation or just move on, and the U.S. military's choices to pollute and destroy the ocean life around Guam. While Cassin's definition of translatability points to the agency of translators in choosing when *not* to translate, thinking-with moments of untranslatability expands Cassin's list of actors and creates an active, ongoing translation with agentic translation subjects and readers in addition to translators. I call this agentic aspect of thinking-with untranslatability *selective untranslatability*. By selecting to leave words, phrases, and poems untranslated or ambiguously translated on later pages, Perez suggests that untranslatability is not an absolute state but a liminal or hybrid space that can sometimes result in translation and sometimes not. Selective translatability might then refer to the general choices that translators must consider in translation. Contrastingly, selective untranslatability refers to the choices that readers and subjects of translation, in addition to translators, must consider when confronting situations or tasks that resist easy translation or feel untranslatable, to a degree. And like Perez models,

choosing to not translate, without giving even a footnote or parenthetical explanation, can become a choice when thinking-with selective untranslatability.

Selective untranslatability becomes especially visible in hybrid spaces and texts. Because hybrid spaces do not offer clear or conclusive equivalences, they lend themselves to thinking-with selective untranslatability and suggest that the subjects and/or readers of translation have more say in what can, cannot, should, or should not be translated. Untranslatability, as a liminal or hybrid state instead of absolute reality, acts as a relative of translation rather than translation's antithesis. Melek Chekili makes this distinction by "extending the definition of untranslatability to refer, not to the impossibility of translation or the unavoidable mistranslation, but rather to a redefined translation" (26). Chekili situates this "redefined translation" in borderlands, positing that "untranslatability, by favouring hybridity, doesn't reflect closed borders and a refusal to fathom the Other's world, but rather an *openness* through the recognition of the untranslatability of each particular situation" (26; emphasis added). Untranslatability works as a "redefined translation" in borderlands and hybrid spaces by enacting an openness or a zone of exchange that respects individuality and the Other. While Chekili describes such openness and exchange in borderlands, Brian Robert's usage of "borderwaters" seems a more appropriate characterization of the border zones that surround Guam: "watery borders and their attendant borderwaters have become places where humans interact with other humans on terms set by nonhuman and non-Euclidean spatial models" (40). In Perez's series, the barrier reef surrounding Guam acts as a "watery border" that "interlaps" land and sea, the U.S. and Guam, and the host of other islands and their waters near Guam (Roberts 31). Though Chekili characterizes the "openness" of untranslatability as "recognition of [..] individuality indicating an honouring of oneself and the others," the U.S. military's treatment of the tidal borderwaters of Guam reflect no honor (26).

Instead, "~~military dumping and nuclear testing has contaminated the pacific with peb's and radiation. in addition, peb's and other military toxic waste have choked the breath out of the largest barrier reef system of guam, poisoning fish and fishing grounds~~" (*[saina]* 60). The U.S. military's treatment of Guam's natural spaces and its language reflects a colonial translation process that not only assumes the openness of borders but is entitled to crossing even with great environmental cost. In this case, the U.S. military did not think-with untranslatability about respecting the Other but instead used translation as a colonial resource and disregarded borderwaters as a zone of exchange or interconnectedness, treating the waters as a dumpsite and military testing zone rather than a hybrid or shared space.

For multispecies scholars, thinking-with selective untranslatability requires intensive consideration of all parties in the translation process and cannot afford one-sided translations. Identifying moments of untranslatability means really thinking about the Other, theorizing how or if translation can happen in that moment. Translation theorist Pnina Werbner theorizes cultural hybridity in colonized spaces as a two-way exchange: "In the colonial encounter, then, it is not just the colonized who are subjected to Western ways; the colonizers too are transformed" (136). However, Perez's description of such a two-way exchange between the U.S. military and Guam is bleak. The U.S. military's colonial translation enacts a one-sided exchange that does not treat the Chamorro people or the nonhuman species and spaces as agentic actors in the translation process. Toxic waste, exoticism, and military enlistment reveal the U.S. military's disregard for the Other as the military treats Guam spaces and inhabitants as objects (see *[saina]* 60; *[guma']* 23). As a counterbalance to one-sided exchanges, untranslatability promotes an "openness" of borders, like Chekili says, that extends both ways and maintains the autonomy and agency of all in the translation process. While the traditional model of translation can also represent an

openness of borders and facilitate respectful exchange, colonial translation practices reveal translation's potential to enact one-sided translations. John DuVal and Kathleen DuVal describe how translation can take different forms or directions that prioritize different parties and languages in translation: "horizontal translation involves similar and relatively equal languages, while vertical translation privileges the original (usually ancient and perhaps sacred) source language over the language being translated into" (155). Vertical translations can enforce a linguistic hierarchy and one-sided translation, where moments of untranslatability are obstacles to be overcome. Horizontal translation might alternatively value moments of untranslatability, constantly negotiating the terms of translation between two languages like Perez's "tidelands" poems that alternate between Chamorro and English with no particular priority. To be selective with untranslatability could look like resisting translation circumstances that heavily favor just one party or environment.

Selective untranslatability can resist assimilative translation to promote new or alternative modes of thinking and living. In *from Unincorporated Territory*, Perez uses willful and purposeful nontranslations as a means of resisting the Americanization of Guam, characterizing the Chamorro culture and the island itself as resisting full translation. Just like multispecies ethnographers can be mindful of genre in communicating or translating nonhuman stories, Perez is mindful of the ethnographic lenses that inform his own storying. Perez describes an "oceanic" frame in contrast to the traditional "ethnographic frame of the 'field'," pointing out that "the concept of the "field" doesn't entirely translate into my own cultural experience" in which "field" becomes ocean and open sky (*[saina]* 63). By realizing that "field" does not fully translate into the Chamorro cultural experience, Perez demonstrates how initial untranslatability allows new, hybrid spaces to emerge. For multispecies ethnographers, this reframing of the

"field" offers a new mode of engaging environmental spaces, which can replace "field" with ocean, island, volcano, amazon, etc. As Anna Tsing notes, "biological and social diversity huddle defensively in neglected margins," showing that marginal and hybrid spaces, while previously overlooked or underrepresented, offer new insights and collaborations that traditional "field" spaces might not afford. Untranslatability relies on what Anthony Pym refers to as "the indeterminacy of the hybrid," pushing the translator to "traverse previously established borders and thereby question them" (141-42). As border spaces, margins, and territories become (and already are) sites for ecological destruction and warfare, it is more important than ever to interrogate those borders and pay attention to the native species that inhabit those spaces. Selective untranslatability helps define those spaces by attending to what has not mixed or translated, that which is on the edge due to incomplete translation or assimilation, and by evaluating whether translation will encourage flourishing or destruction. To think-with untranslatability is, in some sense, to stay in an unresolved state, but the liminality of untranslatability offers unique insight into respecting difference and encouraging diverse forms of living.

Moments of untranslatability allow individuality and hybridity to coexist, modeling how a healthy relationship of becoming-with and maintaining-self allows specific organisms or ecologies to flourish within larger networks or environments. But this coexistence can be difficult to achieve, like Bhabha's migrant figure who struggles to survive in-between cultures. Donna Haraway might suggest a more positive example: the human body as a hybrid space in addition to hybrid figure, full of different cultures (the bacterial kind) that similarly cannot be reduced to one but instead thrive on multiplicity.[12] Perez characterizes his own body as a hybrid figure marked by translation and untranslatability: "'No, I'm not American, but I am a U.S.

citizen.' Then I explain what a 'Guam' is" (79). In a form of intralingual translation, Perez reveals that "American" does not translate to "U.S. citizen"; in fact, the two mean very different things for Perez. His hybrid status is visible "not at the celebratory level of diversity but always at the point of conflict or crisis," meaning that to recognize Perez's hybrid status is to always be conscious of the colonizing relationship between the U.S. and Guam ("Art" 82). This moment of untranslatability, where "Guam," "American," and "U.S. citizen" resist easy translation, reveals how thinking-with selective untranslatability draws attention to the choices and situational fluxes of translation. Perez demonstrates how "American" and "U.S. citizen" afford different agencies to different persons, sometimes synonymous and sometimes not. Paying attention to this intralingual translation distinction requires an interrogation of assumptions about what it means to be an American citizen. These kinds of interrogations are valuable for multispecies scholars, modeling how thinking-with untranslatability encourages situational translations that depend on careful consideration of the nonhuman Other.

By thinking-with selective untranslatability, multispecies ethnographers can bring attention to climate issues left untranslated into human concern. Selective untranslatability draws attention to the choices and actors within translation, including choices to leave climate consequences or unwanted nonhuman rights untranslated or mistranslated. Thinking-with selective untranslatability about climate accountability paints a more urgent picture of willful ignorance and abuse on the part of human powers like the U.S. military. As multispecies thinkers pay attention to hybrid spaces and think-with untranslatability, they can focus on the multispecies flourishing that comes with and *without* translation.

In Praise of the Incomprehensible

Paying attention to moments of untranslatability shifts the goals of multispecies entanglement from comprehension to engagement, experiencing the "kshh-skshh-skshh-kroo-ee, kroo-ee, kroo-ee" rather than understanding it. Perez's attention to the extinction of native Guam species, like "guam's seabirds, 10 of 13 endemic species of forest birds, 2 of 3 native mammals, and 6 of 10 native species of lizards," points the reader towards appreciating and valuing the unique life of local ecosystems in juxtaposition with his attention to the unique Chamorro language and culture (*[saina]* 38). While Perez's untranslated poetry allows for some level of comprehension if the reader devotes time and research, not all untranslatable artifacts or organisms allow the same privilege. But many Western philosophers and scientists still push for understanding (and then consuming) everything as part of "a dark bewitched commitment to the lure of Progress" (Haraway 50). Admittedly, pushing for increased understanding of the nonhuman world is a noble and necessary goal for our modern world; however, such understanding and progress typically happens on human terms. Human priorities dictate that the nonhuman world must become legible to the human world to become important, but such legibility risks the very dangers that Handley and DeLoughrey cite. To become legible to humans, the nonhuman world must function according to human modes of logic, behavior, and communication. Such thinking homogenizes the sentience and liveliness of nonhuman agents, suggesting that the human mode of experience and existence is the only acceptable mode. Thus, staying with moments of untranslatability or incomprehensibility can prioritize nonhuman experiences and communications that operate outside the known bounds of human experience.

Moments of untranslatability in environmental literature can draw attention to nonhuman communications. In "*from* preterrain," Perez describes an untranslatability that comes by way of linguistic extinction, a fearful reality that "I don't know if I can say our language / will survive

here," but Perez suggests that such an event will only point towards something beyond, "to another myth another terrain here / where the visible / / rends" (*[saina]* 36). The poem suggests that the land or terrain holds something deeper than just the language or history of Guam, that "further excavations reveal / / 'voice'" (36). This excavated voice recalls Angela Rawlings' "Asemia" in which she immerses herself in an ecosystem of barnacles, sand bubbler crabs, seeds, shells, and more, listening to and reading a landscape that is "actively composing." After photographing the ecological "text," Rawlings "did not know what it communicated to [her], except that [she] had a notion a communication was being proffered." Perez describes such communicative processes in his poems, like the excavated voice or the records and inheritance "passed from / contours the lines / of the sakman," floating in the "saltwind" so that "even without the names of the stars in chamorro— / even when we lost / contact—it will never be too dark / for us to see" (*[saina]* 105). Even as language becomes untranslatable or incomprehensible, the natural world carries on remembering and communicating, weaving its patterns into the winds, the "waterlines," even the "lines of our palms" (*[saina]* 105). Moments of untranslatability point to communication beyond the human, communication which requires reverence, connection, and attention to the nonhuman world.

Just as Rawlings pays attention to form over meaning in her analysis of nonhuman forms, moments of untranslatability can redirect value to nonhuman forms and modes of expression from meaning in environmental literary translation and multispecies interactions. For Stuart Cooke, engaging with the untranslatable means not asking why but *what* is happening when animals like the lyrebird compose music. Instead of trying to understand why the bird is composing and what the song translates as, Cooke redirects attention to the "affect of lyrebird poetics," embracing "unsettlement" (315). Similarly, Perez engages with the birdsong of the

Micronesian kingfisher and Marianas crow in his poems "*ginen* island of no birdsong." Like Cooke, Perez does not pay attention to the meaning of the bird calls but to the forms and territories of the calls. He embraces "unsettlement" by scripting out the bird call in human lettering, an awkward but direct transversal of "species barriers" (Cooke 315). By focusing on the present conditions and environments of the endangered birds, Perez contrasts the rendering of the bird calls with his first time seeing a living Micronesian kingfisher: "it didn't make a sound" (*[lukao]* 54). The affect of the kingfisher's birdsong, or "avian silence," stresses the serious nature of the bird's endangered status and the complications of having to raise animals in zoos or conservations for the survival of the species (*[lukao]* 38). By all means, the kingfisher is untranslatable in its silence and in its song, but the rendered "kroo-ees" still convey a sacredness and singularity of life.

Multispecies entanglement rather than meaning making is the goal of multispecies ethnographers; therefore, systematic translation of nonhuman "languages" or communications might miss the point. Like Perez's messy "writing in translation," moments of untranslatability or imperfect translations point more to the processes, environments, and figures of translation than actual translation (Baxter and Smith). However, ecotheorists like Bruno Latour have often focused on this kind of systematic translation relationship with nature. Latour characterizes scientists as the translators of a mute environment, capable of devising instruments that let nature speak (32). Contrastingly, thinking-with untranslatability offers multispecies scholars a different characterization of nature, recognizing nature as often incomprehensible rather than mute. Viewing nature or natural subjects in moments of untranslatability maintains their agentic and active status, suggesting that they do have an ability to communicate but that humans do not have the tools or ability to understand yet. Latour suggests that translation is possible, a hopeful

relationship with nature via science, but his translation is one-sided and frames nature as an object more than a subject.[13] Thinking-with untranslatability can contrastingly frame translation between human and nature as a two-sided exchange of lively subjects.

In contrast to systematic or one-sided translations, slow translations prioritize relationality rather than end products or accurate equivalence. Slow translation considers the relations between groups in translation, paying attention to the intangible connections that tentacularly thread all things together. Perez's poems make it difficult to discern who came first or who created what among the Chamorro natives and the island and its geology. In the "i guihan dangkolo" legend, the huge fish nibbling on the island's stone was reined in by "*the magic / of [your] hair*," the casting of a net made of hair (*[saina]* 122). The legend flits between Spanish, Chamorro, and English, casting a level of linguistic and cultural untranslatability on Guam's history; but even more significant, the mystical interactions between species and environments convey more in their feeling than their meaning. The literal significance of the legend matters less than its mythic, rooted affect that ties together all existence on the island. Incomprehensibility and mystery can paradoxically elucidate feeling by drawing attention away from the visible and known to the felt and experienced.

Incomprehensibility and mystery can also be means of protection, allowing multispecies ethnographers to include moments of untranslatability in their writing as a protective measure for nonhuman spaces and species. As Paula Rubel and Abraham Rosman warn, some things and languages remain untranslated and incomprehensible as a protective measure: "There are things which are 'dangerous' to translate, since they are considered 'untranslatable' locally. .....Often sacred rituals and spells must be kept secret, and untranslated" (18). I like to imagine Gaia as careful with her translations. The nonhuman world might appear untranslatable because humans

do not yet have the capacity, knowledge, or technology to translate the nonhuman; alternatively, it could be nonhuman subjects who do not let themselves be translated or who elect to communicate or behave in ways illegible to the human species. Like Perez writes, "because who can stand on the reef/ and name that below water and sky" (*[hacha]* 16). The universe is mysterious, and moments of untranslatability might be evidence of the universe's power more than a measuring stick for humans.

Conclusion

I do not mean to suggest that we abandon all efforts to translate languages or translate between the human and nonhuman world to preserve diversity and resist assimilation. In fact, thinking-with untranslatability should lead to more and better translations: "One of the paradoxes of untranslatability, of course, is that you need more translation not less. You have to try harder to understand what the other is saying, devote more resources to the effort and value successful translation all the more when it is achieved, precisely because it is so difficult" (Cronin 17). In context of the nonhuman world and multispecies relations, we need more and better translations that gradually build understanding between humans and nonhumans instead of translations that perpetuate human hierarchies. Moments of untranslatability are just moments, and what comes next is just as likely to be a comprehensive translation as a respectful nontranslation. Perez does not abandon translation in his series; he uses translation as "an attempt to begin re-territorializing the Chamorro language in relation to my own body, by way of page" (*[hacha]* 12). Paul Lai claims that Perez's "'re-territorialization' signifies the radical transformation of circuits that link bodies, lands, and words to create new forms of embodiment" (2). "New forms of embodiment," new links, new relations—this is the goal of multispecies studies. As we think-with

untranslatability and repurpose powers like translation, we can design more collaborative modes of communication and interchange with the Other.

Thinking-with untranslatability can help us check our human privilege and modes of knowing/understanding/entangling. Moments of untranslatability can be helpful slowing points in a multispecies interaction, pushing multispecies ethnographers to interrogate the reasoning by which humans interpret and respond to the actions of other species. Such an interrogation could include questions such as: can I really translate this behavior into something knowable to humans, or am I just assuming based on my human experience? Will translating this nonhuman behavior and/or experience into human language be useful to that nonhuman subject and species? Or am I imposing human attention and restrictions on this species that will ultimately obstruct productive and healthy entanglement? Paying attention to moments of untranslatability can also be helpful as multispecies ethnographers record their multispecies experiences. During the writing process, multispecies ethnographers can consider questions like the following: how can I accurately or usefully translate this nonhuman name? How can I balance the understanding of nonnative readers with respecting and maintaining the specificity of a local species or environment? Does my ethnographic rendering ask readers to slow down and stay with moments or species that resist easy translation? Multispecies ethnographers can even include moments of untranslatability or descriptions of their personal encounters with untranslatability in their storying. Slowing down entanglements and slowing down our storying of entanglements will hopefully produce thoughtful, empathetic considerations of multispecies relations as we take the time to stay with moments of untranslatability. By mindfully considering moments of untranslatability in multispecies interactions, we can curb the potential dangers of speaking *for*

nature, perhaps even resulting in a speaking *with* nature as translation takes a more prominent role in collaborative ecology.

I also leave the door open to future exploration of how translation theory, and especially untranslatability, might benefit environmental and multispecies studies. Like Cronin urges, translation studies must seriously consider what translation looks like in a more-than-human world. Biosemiotics and multispecies ethnography already are providing essential examples of interspecies communication and reexamination of language. And the discourse of translation studies has been and will continue to be relevant to the transnational, multilingual, multicultural, and multispecies work of the environmental humanities. In particular, the figure of the translator and the hybrid figure of the migrant both beg more scrutiny as new modes of entanglement and attention (alongside relations like van Dooren and Rose's "ambassadors," Haraway's "storytellers," and Rob Nixon's "portes-paroles"). And David Huddart's analysis of cultural hybridity and migrants discusses how aid and citizenship status are not accessible to hybrid figures due to their "in-betweenness," an interesting dilemma shared by migrant species or border ecologies who have no decided conservator. In short, the work of translation scholars is increasingly relevant to the in-between and tentacular thinking of the environmental humanities.

To think-with untranslatability is to remember that the human does not understand all. As uncomfortable as it may seem, untranslatability points us to different modes of engagement that prioritize being present and experiencing over understanding. Understanding may come with time, but we must learn to value the life and existence of nonhumans without completely understanding them. If we only respect and co-exist with that which we understand, the world would have very little peace. Valuing untranslatability, illegibility, and incomprehensibility means a shift in values. The uncertainty paradigm in translation studies teaches that "you can

never be entirely sure of the meanings you translate, and yet you translate nevertheless" (Pym 86).[14] By staying with uncertainty, we become slower and more careful in our decisions, and perhaps even braver. To face the unknown is scary, but it is also a challenge. Attending to moments of untranslatability does not mean giving up on understanding—it means doing more translation. And right now, some of the most seemingly untranslatable but most worthwhile subjects are our nonhuman cohabitants. May we keep trying to understand, to entangle, to translate. And may we keep returning to those entanglements and translations with the understanding that we probably missed something and there is always more to translate.

Notes

[1] Perez published *[hacha]* first in 2008, followed by *[saina]* in 2010, *[guma']* in 2014, and *[lukao]* in 2017.

[2] Bhabha is famous for his theorizations on cultural translation and cultural hybridity, popularizing the borrowing of translation discourse in social and postcolonial critiques. For another critical perspective of cultural translation, see Asad, *The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology*. For a more expansive and contemporary take on cultural translation, see Maitland, *What is Cultural Translation?*.

[3] For more intersections like Cronin's "Eco-translation," see Garces, "Introduction: Translating Environmental Humanities"; Hu and Tao, "Eco-translatology: A New Paradigm of Eco-translation-a Comparative Study on Approaches to Translation Studies"; Kelly and Zetsche, *Found in Translation: How language shapes our lives and transforms the world*; Ostmo and Law, "Mis/translation, colonialism, and environmental conflict"; Simon, "Translating and Interlingual Creation in the Contact Zone: Border Writing in Quebec."

[4] Biosemiotics includes scientific and humanities approaches to organic sign-making. As examples of both approaches, see Beaver, "Interspecies Communication"; Whitehouse, "Listening to Birds in the Anthropocene: The Anxious Semiotics of Sound in a Human-Dominated World." Though multispecies ethnographers do not often reference biosemiotics in their writing, their attention to the communications of nonhuman species is similar to biosemiotics. See Aronowsky, "Of Astronauts and Algae"; Garcia, "Death of a Guinea Pig: Grief and the Limits of Multispecies Ethnography in Peru"; Kirksey, "Living with Parasites in Palo Verde National Park"; Rajagopalan, "A Research Question: Bees, Theories, and Whether Posthumanism Comes to Matter.

[5] "Staying with" is pulled from Donna Haraway's *Staying with Trouble*.

[6] See Haraway, *When Species Meet*; Dooren and Rose, "Lively Ethography: Storying Animist Worlds."

[7] See *Slow Food*.

[8] Valeria Woodward describes a technique called "delayed translation" for translations that appear several pages after the original terms.

[9] The superscripts 9 and 10 attached to "*ginen* tidelands" refer to footnotes included on the bottom of the "*ginen* tidelands" pages in the printed book *[saina]*. The numbers ascend in order of appearance in the book, going from 1 – 10. The numerical superscripts are not included on Perez's "Map of Contents," or Table of Contents. Perez's footnotes riff on Michael Lujan Bevacqua's poem "My Island is One Big American Footnote."

[10] Perez includes a longer excerpt from his speech to the United Nations in his poem "Poetry, Politics, & Why I am Not an Activist."

[11] See Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.

[12] Haraway describes other hybrid figures in works like *Cyborg Manifesto* and *Companion Species Manifesto*.

[13] Latour's work with actor-network theory (ANT) does admittedly characterize alternate translation dynamics between humans and nonhumans. For more sources on a scientific translator dynamic through ANT, see Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications, Plus More Than a Few Complications"; Best and Walters, "Translating the Sociology of Translation"; Callon, "Some Elements of a Sociology of Translation: Domestication of the Scallops and the Fishermen of St. Brieuc Bay."

[14] See Chapter 6 of Anthony Pym's *Exploring Translation Studies* for an overview of the uncertainty paradigm and its many contributors.

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