THE CHANGING PROFESSION

Collaborations at the University of Michigan: Decolonizing Translation Studies

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Ten years ago when Yopie Prins and I organized a college-wide theme semester at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, we were heartened to see how many of our colleagues across the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts (LSA) proposed courses relevant to translation.[1] We hoped to build on long-standing ties with units offering language study where many of us in the Department of Comparative Literature held joint appointments, and where many of our graduate students and undergraduates regularly took classes. Many of the proposals we received did indeed emphasize translation in the sense of interlingual transfer—a German course that helped students study for the professional American Translators Association certification exam, a Korean course that asked students to join fans in subtitling popular videos online, a history course where students worked together to publish translations of eighteenth-century political tracts from French—but we found our colleagues were also using translation to think critically and creatively about reinterpretation across cultures, disciplines, eras, and media too. This more capacious understanding helped broaden the appeal and deepen the resulting collective insights that we continue building on today.

Public events that semester featured a South Indian American dance performance, the innovative subtitling of a silent Japanese film, a discussion of Spanglish in popular TV shows, a student performance of a play in Latin, a storytelling session in Urdu by a visiting *dastangoi* (based on my own English translation of a Rajasthani storytelling cycle, quite serendipitously), a panel discussion on abolitionist movements across languages, and collections of interviews with elders who grew up speaking Anishinaabemowin. Many events, like

the exhibition on rare books and manuscripts in and translated from Ancient Greek, helped us further appreciate long-standing ties between the study of translation and literature: it was in preparation for this exhibition that our special collections librarian found a heartfelt letter from a Union soldier tucked into a copy of the *Iliad* left forgotten in the library stacks for decades in which the soldier thanked his classics professor for introducing him to a work that helped him come to terms with the devastation he witnessed. Others made us reconsider our priorities for future programming, like the behind-the-scenes look at Google Translate, whose lead developer Josh Estelle emphasized to the assembled group the importance of "gold standard human translators" against which they vetted their algorithms. This particular "gold standard" challenged the roomful of educators to consider how the courses we taught might help train students to become the next generation stepping into this role. In the aggregate, we began to see ourselves as a central node in an exciting network of colleagues on our campus who approached translation from a range of areas of specialization and vantage points, that led to discoveries we might not have happened upon any other way. As a faculty member jointly appointed in two departments, it was during the theme semester that I began thinking more specifically about ways I might collaborate more effectively with my colleagues in the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures (ALC)—especially those who, like me, specialized in South Asian languages and cultures—to make its vibrant multilingualism a source of excitement and inspiration in our curriculum.

Across the university a much broader range of students seemed to resonate with the topic of translation than expected—in discussions with student leaders leading up to the theme semester, with those who attended the many public events, with those taking courses designated as part of the ongoing translation initiative, and especially by those drawn to participate in the Language Bank or the Translate-a-Thon, programs organized by our colleagues in the indispensable Language Resource Center (LRC). Multilingual students in particular seemed to recognize themselves as "translated" in

exactly the way Salman Rushdie had written about in his 1982 essay "Imaginary Homelands." Over and over then and in the years since, students have confided that they appreciated the critical perspective translation has offered: suddenly it felt as if their language skills were considered a strength rather than a source of shame and added value to the degrees they were earning, whatever their majors and minors. These sentiments have been particularly gratifying to hear, given the challenges we have faced teaching against the backdrop of the entrenched monolingualism in our country, especially at an institution like ours where the four-semester language requirement has resulted in students drifting away just at the point where they might enroll in advanced courses, as they are poised to make the most exciting discoveries with their newly acquired skills. The success of the theme semester has made many of us increasingly interested in strategies for reconciling students' day-to-day lived experience with our interdisciplinary curriculum. Our goal was to work with colleagues across units to think of ways to engage that multilinguality more effectively and dynamically through translation.

A decade after the theme semester we now offer a broad range of translation courses at many levels, including an increasingly popular undergraduate course housed in the Department of Comparative Literature called Translating World Literature that can satisfy the university-wide upper-level writing requirement as well as the humanities track of the international studies degree. We have instituted an undergraduate minor in translation studies as well as a graduate student certificate, both of which can be added to a student's degree in programs across the university and require students to seek out courses across departments. The activities that the LRC continues to organize—like the annual Translate-a-Thon—have become increasingly popular and attract more and more students working in less commonly taught languages: students come together to transcribe and translate videotaped interviews in Punjabi and Tamil with survivors of Partition violence, brochures for parents of children struggling with mental illness from English into

Hindi or Gujarati, articles by a Mexican journalist seeking asylum, and captions for museum galleries from English into Japanese or Arabic. By many indicators we have succeeded in helping build dependable, mutually enhancing ties across units, with the intellectual and ethical vibrancy we envisioned a decade ago as students recognize the need for translation all around them and see the relevance of their language skills. And yet, ironically, in the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures, like many of the area studies units at the University of Michigan where language is taught, we still struggle to attract students to the advanced language courses where they might hone these necessary skills. Particularly worrisome is the fact that the adverse effects of these low enrollment figures have fallen disproportionately on adjunct faculty members, given that lecturers at Michigan are predominantly responsible for teaching language classes, and tenure-track faculty members for teaching cultural content.

My colleagues in comparative literature continue to work against this drift away from advanced language study, fueled in part by a determination to correct the misperception that the state of Michigan is unabashedly monolingual. In our recent Mellon Sawyer Seminar, for example, my collaborators and I have found diverse ways of celebrating "sites of translation in the multilingual Midwest" as our title puts it.[2] Silke-Maria Weineck's seminar sought out particularly plucky attempts to fight for linguistic justice of multilingual communities in nearby Hamtramck, and my seminar, Building Translation Networks in the Midwest with *HathiTrust*, focused on examples in the breathtakingly extensive digital library published in nonroman writing systems.[3] South Asian works like the 1855 edition of the storytelling cycle *Baital Pachisi* published in three languages forces us to consider how monolingually minded our own infrastructure continues to be today, especially when confronting the fact that it was used as a grammar for British colonial officials learning Hindustani in two scripts—or what would later come to be called the partitioned languages of Hindi and Urdu (see fig. 1).

To me, the edition of *The Baital Pachisi* on *HathiTrust* proves to students that even those with

rudimentary knowledge of the three writing systems can see the limitations of attempts to translate the storytelling cycle word for word. To my colleague Syed Ali, the fact that two of the languages—English and Hindi—read left to right, and the third from right to left, puts Urdu readers even more at a disadvantage when trying to access this text on *HathiTrust*. He pointed out in his lightning talk during the Sawyer Seminar that this 1855 edition not only disrupts any sense of syntactical flow for those who can read Urdu but also demonstrates the dangers of Anglocentrism. For that reason it has become one of the examples we look to as we collaborate with four other ALC colleagues—three language lecturers and one other tenured faculty member who teaches culture courses—along with instructional consultants from the LRC to begin decolonizing the South Asian curriculum.[4]

I began collaborating with Ali five years ago in his role as the head of the South Asian Language Program to devise group activities across language and culture courses that might dynamically engage the range of possibilities offered by students' multilinguality through a more diverse set of approaches to translation; we both agreed we wanted to use translation pedagogy to bridge the curricular gap between language and culture courses. He and I experimented with bringing together his advanced language students studying Hindi or Urdu with my upper-level undergraduate students who were able to read Saadat Hassan Manto's short story "Toba Tek Singh" only in one of the many English translations. In class students worked in groups comparing specific lines from the source text in Urdu with the translations of those lines into Hindi or English, playing with the divisions drawn between languages, cultures, countries, and peoples during Partition. This collaboration proved so successful that we have applied for, and received, two internal grants that would allow us to (as we specify in our proposal) "develop an interconnected series of units that [would] be offered in both Asian and Asian Language tracks . . . [to] attract and serve the needs of both undergraduate and graduate students with intermediate and advanced proficiency speaking and/or reading one or more of the South

BAITÁL PACHÍSÍ.

इसप कहानी का थिर ये.

Beginning of-the-story this is.

That Dháránagar by-name a city (was), of-that-place king

Gandharb-sen, of-him four queens there-were, from-them six sons

were one-than-one[1] learned and powerful was. By chance

after-some-days, that king died, and of-him in-place

(his)-eldest son Shank by-name king became. Again some of-days[2]

after of him younger brother Bikram, elder brother having-killed

self king became, and with-goodness government to-make began. Day

by-day of-him dominion so increased that (of)-the-whole of-India[3]

There was a city named Dháránagar, the king of which was Gandharb-sen, who had four queens, and by them six sons, each of whom was more learned and powerful than the other. It happened that, after some days, this king died, and his eldest son, who was named Shank, became king in his stead. Again, after some days, Bikram, his younger brother, having killed his elder brother (Shank), himself became king, and began to govern well. Day by day his

[1] 'Each than the other.' [2] *Kitne dinon-ke pichhe*, 'After some days.' *Kitne*, lit. 'how much.'
[3] *Jambú-dwíp*. One of the seven regions of the world (India).

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FIG. 1. Each line of the opening pages of the 1855 edition of *The Baital Pachisi* on *HathiTrust* in Hindi, Urdu, and English can be read left to right, right to left, and then right to left by human readers conversant in all three writing systems, but the text invariably confounds the software on *HathiTrust*.

Asian languages taught at U-M." We explain in our 2022 proposal that "[t]he primary reason for this proposed change to the curriculum is to make the advanced language classes in particular more enticing and responsive to student interests and needs, and to develop paths through the curriculum for

those students who do not fit neatly in the current language track." We had in mind students who could comfortably converse in the languages they spoke at home or could follow a Bollywood film but not necessarily read any nonroman scripts.

In our proposal we emphasized our goal of developing new digital infrastructures for teaching materials that prioritized connections between South Asian source languages and their translations, by piloting "multilingual, collaborative projects in and across South Asian languages and cultures courses" as part of "ongoing efforts to make sites of translation and other multilingual exchange accessible in Michigan and the broader Midwest." We went on to explain how this effort has explicitly attempted to decolonize our curriculum, and in the process "to understand DEI issues in a multilingual, transnational context and to find connections between academic expertise and the ethical commitments of lived experience." We explain that our project

> responds specifically to Edward Said's 1978 call to rethink the structures of Orientalism built into the study of Asia and the Middle East so that we might nuance and complicate reductive binaries. This mandate is particularly urgent now when the examples we teach in languages like Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi, Tamil, and Urdu circulate freely across national borders but our available institutional pathways and therefore technological tools reinforce epistemological models premised on and promoting the very nationalist divisions and hierarchies we seek to challenge.

An example like *The Baital Pachisi* helps us explain the historical reasons why a grandmother from Punjab might be able to understand the Hindustani version of the story when read out loud but not be able to read either script on the digitized page, or why an uncle might have learned enough Hindi or Urdu to read one or the other interlinear versions, and why in diaspora the second generation might have been sent to a language class as part of religious instruction as Muslims, Hindus, or Sikhs. We all agreed that it was critical that we do not separate the study of languages from the study of South

Asian cultures more broadly and that we needed to find a way to help students negotiate the specifics of these complexities from the start.

We also agreed that part of the issues at play was the students' relationship to the Asian languages we teach. Those very same students who in informal conversations might very well see themselves as being "translated," in the loose metaphoric sense Rushdie used the term, still don't identify as bilingual and therefore have trouble finding productive ways to engage the language skills they do have. In an intake survey at the start of the minicourse Exploring the Asian Archive through Online Gaming I taught in winter 2022, for example, the majority of students reported knowing no other languages besides English, but then on the first day of class several cried out in alarm as a Persian text flashed on the screen upside down, while another noted in passing that a catalog record we were looking at together in roman letters seemed to refer to an Armenian rather than a Turkish title, while a third speaking to me in virtual office hours recognized from the first page that the digital copy of Zhuiyuxuan's Chinese text *Mulan Cong Jun* on *HathiTrust Digital Library* has been rendered both upside down and backward (fig. 2), even before we reached the title page near the end with the heroine on her horse dangling precariously and unmistakably from the top of the page.

In that course I began making games out of finding the upside-down mistakes in these digitization efforts and tried finding other fun ways to show the value of having even rudimentary knowledge of nonroman writing systems, as a first step. After all, it was in that class I discovered that even a student who had never formally studied a South Asian language but who had a grandparent or two from India seemed to know stories of the mischievous corpse-possessing Baital (also pronounced "Vetala") and delighted at the challenge of finding the best word for this supernatural figure in English that a seemingly perplexed Richard F. Burton dubbed both a vampire and a devil in his English translation of *Vikram and the Vampire; or, Tales of Hindu Devilry*. In an exoticizing move familiar to those who know his translation of *A Thousand and One*

F<small>IG</small>. 2.   This title page from the 1922 edition of Zhuiyuxuan's *Mulan Cong Jun* on *HathiTrust Digital Library* was upside down when accessed on 22 Mar. 2022.

Nights, his frame story in the *HathiTrust* edition begins with Baital traveling with a trustworthy hero king named Vikram riding on a (right-side-up) horse, recounting riddling stories to his brave interlocutor (fig. 3). In my class Translating World Literature that same semester, I compared the illustration of "Vikram and the Vampire" in figure 3 with illustrations that accompanied Charles Jarvis's translation of *Don Quixote* on *HathiTrust* and asked students to compare the ways the publishers of the two different editions were selling the idea of these translations as examples of world literature. It helped them think in more creative ways about what parts of their own readings—including of the illustrations—they wanted to convey in the versions they were working on for the final project.

Even the otherwise intrepid students who register for Translating World Literature, offered through the Department of Comparative Literature, need help finding a new way to engage with translation. Each semester students registered for the course contact me with worries that their language skills are not quite up to the task, whether because the language they are translating into—which in this course by necessity has to be English—is not their first language, or because their fluency in the language they are translating from does not feel advanced enough to do the interpretive work required. My response in nearly every case has been to encourage them to take this course nonetheless: I reassure them that the course itself is designed to help them strengthen their ability to interpret texts with more nuance and insight and to learn to convey those interpretations to readers of the target language with more finesse. To do so they must learn to leverage the peer feedback they get during workshops throughout the semester with the training they have already received in language courses, so that they can begin to work at an advanced level. At this point in their careers, I tell them, very explicitly pointing to the example of Google Translate, they need to think about what they have to offer as human translators and to stop trying to compete against the machines, to stop trying to translate robotically. I do not say explicitly that we have designed a course like Translating World Literature to make the enterprise of gaining those skills more fun and to entice students to see what they might do if they would continue with language study at an advanced level, but in my way of thinking that certainly is the long-term goal. If we want to train our students to become "gold standard translators" someday, we need to provide opportunities for them to develop these skills in the gray zone where the rules are the most open to interpretation. This requires integrating the study of translation into the curriculum of area studies departments.

In subsequent planning meetings with my ALC collaborators, we have found ourselves focusing on collaborative translation exercises because they encourage students to move beyond simple, straightforward notions of correct and incorrect that students must begin to contend with in advanced language classes, and we find students are increasingly eager to engage with these notions at every
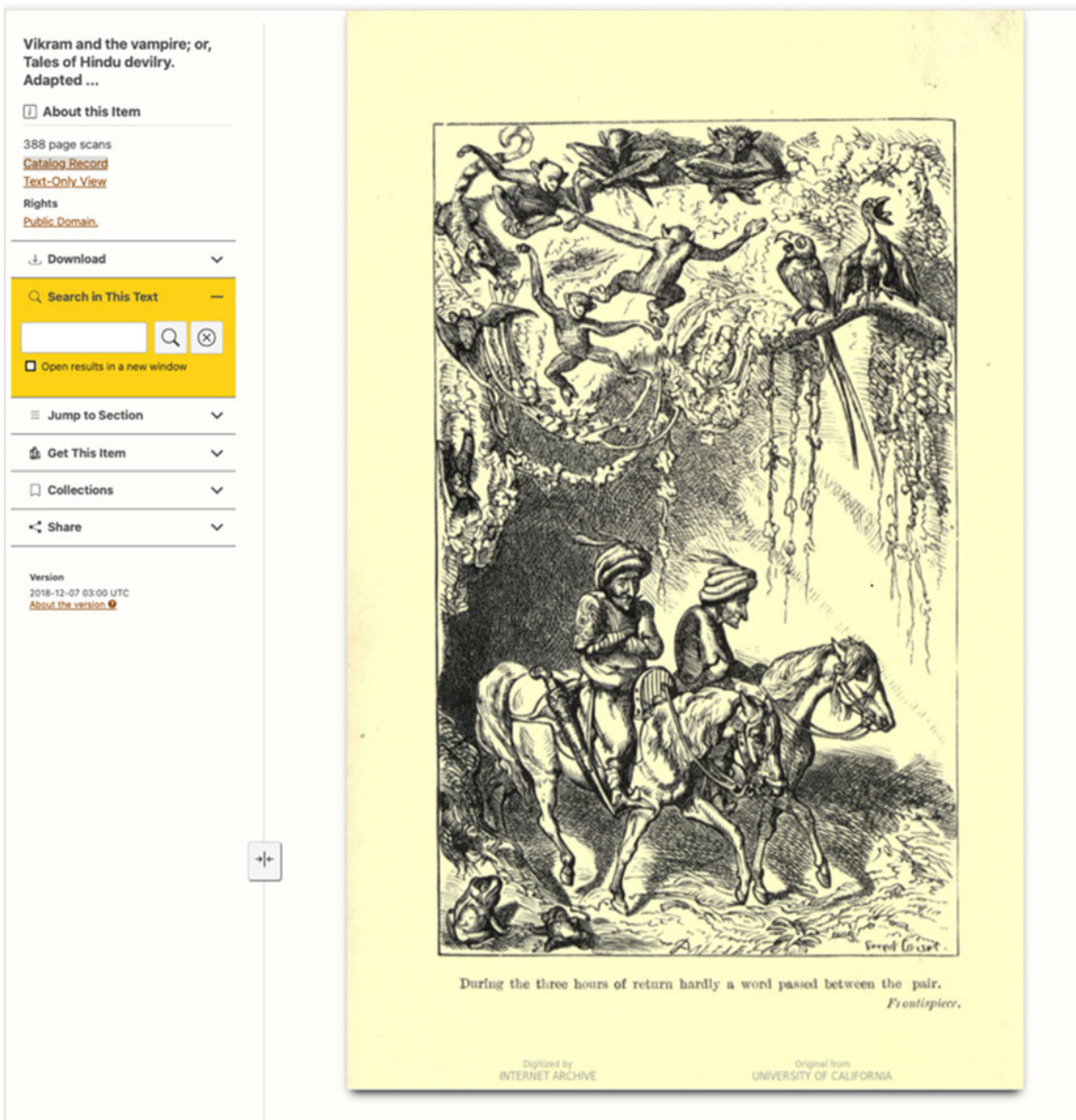
FIG. 3.   In Burton's translation of *Vikram and the Vampire; or, Tales of Hindu Devilry*, the storytelling cycle begins with an illustration by Ernest Griset depicting a corpse-possessing Baital traveling with Vikram the hero king, recounting riddling stories.

level. Among my colleagues translation has become shorthand for a complex nest of issues at work when a student translator might unwittingly offend unwritten codes that faculty members themselves are only vaguely aware of, including issues of misogyny, Orientalism, and other sets of privileges around class, caste, and ethnicity that language speakers are not always aware of. And yet, even a focus on translation forces us to confront the seemingly irreconcilable expectations between the ways translation is approached and appraised in my two different units: as a philological exercise versus a creative one. I see the same tension at work today as I did as a graduate student at the University of Iowa

tacking back and forth between MFA and PhD courses: translation was used in PhD area studies classrooms to ferret out misapprehension of grammatical rules and lexical usage in the name of linguistic mastery, while in my MFA program such insights into the source text were considered a bit pointless unless re-created in the target language through inventive turns of phrase and virtuosic expression. It was a bit of a revelation to learn that Rita Copeland traced a similar tension in the early history of European translation in *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages*, and I find myself introducing her arguments each semester in Translating World Literatures. She argues that the preoccupations of the grammarians were pitted against the priorities of the orators, and each group claimed to have the superior line on true fidelity. This tension assumes a particularly critical danger when working in South Asian literature, given Edward W. Said's critiques of Orientalism's deep ties to translation, and so we find that it is even more crucial to make translation part of the curriculum in a South Asian language program like ours in an area studies department at Michigan.

NOTES

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1. For more about the LSA theme semester on translation, see "Event Posters."

2. Our Mellon Sawyer Seminar was developed by Maya Barzilai, Kristen Dickinson, me, Benjamin Paloff, Yopie Prins, Marlon James Sales, and Silke-Maria Weineck. For a full list of our collaborators, see "Sites of Translation."

3. See "Building Translation Networks."

4. Our group Decolonizing the South Asian Curriculum, led by Ali and me with the support of the LRC, includes Pinderjeet Kaur Gill, Faijul Hoque, Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, and Vidya Mohan.

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