Volume 13, Number 3, 2025

Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Semiosis Research Center at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies

Signs and Society (2025), **13** (3), 311–325
doi:10.1017/sas.2025.10017

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
HANKUK UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN STUDIES

ARTICLE

The Translation Machine: Exploring the Infrastructures of Valorization under Semiocapitalism

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Abstract

In a contemporary global political economy marked by the increasing semiotization of economic production, the commodification of political communication, and the fusion between media and capital, this special issue turns to the notion of "translation" to further our understanding of the role of language and semiosis within contemporary capitalism. Contrary to its conventional definition as inter-linguistic transfer of semantic meaning, we propose to view translation as a metasemiotic infrastructure for speeding up and scaling up production and for crafting forms of sociality and subjectivity conducive to capitalist valorization. The articles in this collection ethnographically explore the working of translation across registers, channels, modalities, semiotic fields, and ontological orders (as well as linguistic codes). Our goal is to analyze how translation affords the global circulation of standardized discursive protocols and institutional policy bundles, and enables the formation of politico-juridical networks of corporate personhood and (neo-)liberal governmentality. Furthermore, we investigate how translation can be resisted, sabotaged, or made invisible, showing how its semiotic metamarks can be alternatively disguised or highlighted within the regimes of uniqueness and seriality underlying contemporary forms of commodity production. This Introduction provides the theoretical backdrop underlying these diverse contributions.

Keywords: capitalism; entextualization; neoliberalism; semiotic ideology; translation; valorization

Swimming in translation

Translation has long haunted anthropological theory and practice. Despite the often-flaunted representation of anthropological work as a form of cross-cultural translation, practitioners' attempts at producing systematic reflections on the topic have generally

resulted in a series of conceptual bottlenecks and dead-end debates.[1] As in "the fish in the water" parable made famous by David Foster Wallace (1996), anthropologists have been immersed in a sea of translation metaphors, translation practices, and translation theories for too long to be capable, until recently, to make translation an object of direct inquiry.[2]

Variously conceptualized as a core data-gathering method of the ethnographic craft (Conklin 1968, 12; Rubel and Rosman 2003, 1), an epistemological pillar of the discipline (Hanks and Severi 2015, 7–8), or a technology of colonial domination (Asad 1987; Rafael 1993), translation is both a central metaphor and an elusive object of the anthropological imagination.[3] At once impossible and unavoidable, translation has been either under- or overtheorized, remaining somehow suspended between a narrow understanding of cross-linguistic glossing and a simultaneously expansive and fuzzy notion of interpretative negotiation across social worlds. If for linguists and language-oriented scholars, translation has long been conceptualized as a "mere heuristic" (Hanks and Severi 2015, 2), remaining a (largely unproblematized) assemblage of methods (such as recording, transcribing, glossing, parsing, and so forth), for sociocultural anthropologists, translation has mainly constituted a hyper-metaphor of sorts. Driven by simplistic conflations between linguistic and cultural translation (Silverstein 2003, 94), sociocultural reflections have often revolved around highly speculative questions such as "is translation possible?" and "is translation ethical?" While the first question entails a cognitive and ontological examination of the relationship between words and world(s) and the relative (in)commensurability between different linguistic systems, the politico-moral debates foreground the power imbalances between languages.[4] In reminding us that translation has been often the terrain of "ethnocentric violence" (Venuti 1995, 20), this second line of enquiry has often resulted in the seemingly irreducible polarization between two main translation strategies (Rubel and Rosman 2003, 7). The first strategy, commonly called "domestication," seeks to minimize the exotic coefficient of the source text, assimilating it to the conventions of the target readers (Nida 1964). The second, instead, is termed "resistive" and aims

[1] For excellent recent anthropological discussions of translation conundra, see Rubel and Rosman (2003), Hanks (2015), Hanks and Severi (2015), Gal (2023). Silverstein (2003, 76) offered one the most uncompromising critiques of "millennia of wishful as well as wistful theorizing about 'translation' and its various (im)possibilities."

[2] The story, used as the kickoff of a legendary commencement speech delivered at Kenyon College in 2005, appears in a fictional conversational exchange in Foster Wallace's novel (1996, 445) *Infinite Jest*: "This wise old whiskery fish swims up to three young fish and goes, 'Morning, boys, how's the water?' and swims away; and the three young fish watch him swim away and look at each other and go, 'What the fuck is water?' and swim away."

[3] As Hanks and Severi (2015, 7–8) highlighted, "almost any ethnographer faces the task of translating words and concepts from one language to another, […] because to 'do ethnography' is to make descriptions, judgments, actions, and theories proper to a specific culture understood in the language of social anthropology."

[4] As Hanks (2015, 21) points out, the topic of (un)translatability has been recently revamped by the ontological turn in anthropology, becoming the focus of contemporary debates on comparative ontologies (Descola 2013 [2005]) and perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 2004). For an overview and critical appraisal of these ontoepistemological dilemmas, see Gal (2023, 179), Hanks and Severi (2015), and Silverstein (2003).

at foreignizing a text, by retaining something "of the foreignness of the original" (Shuttleworth and Cowie 2004, 59).

In this Special Issue, we take a different stance. Drawing on linguistic anthropology and allied fields of studies, the contributors to this collection focus on translation as an object of ethnographic investigation. They look at how translation is construed and how it works within specific political economies to unearth its material effects on people's social lives and imagination. Today's capitalism, as Anna Tsing (2015, 133) has shown in her ethnography of matsutake mushrooms supply chain, has increasingly become a "translation machine." Ensuing from the demise of industrial production and the crisis of the Fordist paradigm, the novel configuration of capitalist accumulation and valorization no longer revolves around factory work, as suggested, among others, by neo-workerist theorists (Marazzi 2008; Berardi 2009; Fumagalli 2015). Rather, contemporary capitalism relies on "acts of translation across varied social and political spaces" (Tsing 2015, 62).

This collection of articles is, thus, an invitation to examine more closely (and more literally) the specific acts and ideologies of translation underlying capitalist worldmaking. Our goal is to explore how equivalents are made or undone, how networks are forged or dismantled under contemporary forms of what Franco Berardi (2009), following Baudrillard (1999 [1970]), calls semiocapitalism. Namely, the progressive extension of the production process to activities that belong to the realm of social life, reproduction, and communication, and the increasing deployment of language and semiotic labor as primary tools for the production of value (see also Lazzarato 1996; Negri 1999, 83; Arvidsson 2006, 126; Agha 2011). Putting linguistic and economic anthropology in dialogue with a variety of different scholarly traditions (Science and Technology Studies, neo-workerist theory, continental semiotics, and Sociology of Translation), the articles contained herein embrace a novel approach to "translation" and propose to use it as a lockpick to examine the role of language and semiosis within contemporary forms of capitalist governmentality, value extraction, and global circulation.

Translation beyond denotation and across semiotic fields

During the last two-plus decades, linguistic anthropologists have developed highly innovative and productive approaches to translation by questioning the "ideological focus on denotational textuality" underlying traditional European construals [of language] (Silverstein 2003, 75–76). In so doing, they have contributed to disentangle the concept of translation from age-old debates over its (im)possibility, opening new perspectives on three interrelated aspects of translation: its embeddedness within culturally and socio-historically specific ideologies of languages and humanity (Keane 2007; Hanks 2012; Schieffelin 2014), its implication in the workings of political economy (Keane 2000; Nakassis 2013; Gal 2015, 2023; Agha 2017), its role as a semiotic infrastructure of circulation mediated by processes of entextualization and re-contextualization (Handman 2018; Gal 2023).

Jakobson's (1959) semiotic reformulation of translation along three different typologies has been key in backgrounding the narrow understanding of translation as a

cross-linguistic form of semantic transfer, highlighting translation's indexical and non-verbal dimensions.[5] Indeed, besides interlingual translation, or "*translation proper* [that is] the interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language," Jakobson's classic tripartition identified two additional typologies. The former, which he termed "intralingual translation" occurs in any instance of paraphrasis, circumlocution, reported speech, or dictionary definition, and entails "the *rewording* or interpretation of verbal signs by other signs of the same language." The latter (called "intersemiotic translation or *transmutation*") concerns "the interpretation of verbal signs by signs of a non-verbal sign system" (Jakobson 1959, 233, emphasis in the original). Seen in this perspective, translation is not a simple form of binary transcodification, but a complex and dynamic form of transformative action.[6]

Silverstein (2003, 83–84) aptly introduced the concept of "transduction" to simultaneously convey the creative potential and inevitable "slippage" underlying the indexical dimension of translation.[7] In the realm of physics, transducers are devices (such as hydroelectric generators; or dynamo hubs) that can be used to convert, not without some degree of dispersion, a kind of energy (e.g., mechanical) into another (e.g., electric). In a like fashion, processes of translation transcend the mere lexico-grammatical plane of interlinguistic denotational overlaps and entail transplanting complex systems of (linguistically and culturally bound) indexical signs into a different context of social indexicalities. While the denotational sense is translatable by means of finding an overlapping (albeit not identical) term, this is not the case for the "indexical penumbra" of words (Silverstein 2003, 89). Bluntly put, as does Gal (2023, 181): "How should an American Southerner, talking to Northerners in a Civil War movie sound in Turkish dubbing? The stereotyped American identities and the speech registers that signal them would have to be reproduced by a different set of signs indicating (somewhat) analogous relationships in Turkish language-culture." As we will see, in denial of the challenges of transductive mismatches and slippages, an important feature of the semiotic ideology of contemporary capitalism concerns the assumption of seamless translatability, complete interoperability of coding systems, and all-encompassing transduction to ensure maximally extensive circulation.

Since the millennium's turn, a similar concern for the metasemiotic processes of calibration and gradual transformation unleashed by translation has infused debates within continental semiotics (Dusi and Nergaard 2000). Driven, at least in part, by Juri Lotman's (2005) theory of the semiosphere, understood as a continuum of semiotic systems, a broadened notion of translation and a renewed interest in the relations between different signifying systems have emerged among European semioticians (Fabbri 2000; Eco 2003). Also stemming from Jakobson's (1959) triadic typology but proceeding

[5]Standard definitions frame translation as "the transfer of meaning between languages" (Steiner 1998, 287).

[6]And indeed, it is not by accident that Jakobson (1959) chose as a synonym of intersemiotic translation the alternative term of "transmutation" (Dusi 2015, 182).

[7]It should be noted that Silverstein's (2003) notion of transduction resonates with Hjelmslev's (1969 [1943]) – who also deployed the term to refer to a form of intersemiotic translation "between semiotic systems with different matters, substance and forms of expression" (Dusi 2015, 182) – and with Greimas' (Greimas 1966) concept of transposition, which indicates intertextual transformations from natural language to other "sensorial orders."

without nearly any interlocution with the North American linguistic anthropological tradition, this literature has focused on intersemiotic translations/transductions, seen as "a transferral of content from a source text to a target text by means of (local) structures of stylistic equivalence" (Calabrese 2000, 113–114).

Reflecting, with Jakobson (1959), on the conceptual boundaries of translation and its possible extension beyond the transfer of meaning across two allegedly independent natural languages, these scholars analyze transpositions between literary and audiovisual texts (Costa 1993; Marrone 2009), cinema and theater (Helbo 1997), painting and cinema (Costa 1991), thus exploring multifarious forms of translation across textual constructions. As Dusi (2015, 181) points out, this scholarly field has been primarily concerned with determining to what extent intersemiotic processes can be considered full-fledged forms of translation or whether they should be more properly (and metaphorically) understood as forms of "adaptation" (Eco 2000, 2003, 158), "transposition" (Greimas 1966, 14; Fabbri 2000), or "expressive equivalence" (Calabrese 2000, 113–114).

These sophisticated analyses of the transposition of novels into films, sculptures into poems, paintings into photographs, etc., display, however, little or no interest for embedding intersemiotic translation into political economy. Continental scholarship on intersemiotic translation has, indeed, focused almost exclusively on aesthetic texts. To gain a perspective on translation as a field for the enactment of "trials of strength" (Latour 1988, 201) and as an infrastructure for the extraction and circulation of value we need to turn to semiotically informed works in anthropology and sociology.

Translation as network and infrastructure of global circulation

In a memorable ethnographic study of a controversy about how to remedy the steep decline in the population of scallops (a highly valued delicatessen) in St. Brieuc Bay (Normandy coast), Michel Callon (1984) described the interactions between marine biologists, fishermen, and scallops as they negotiated different interpretations and definitions of the situation. In so doing, Callon (1984) outlined the basic principles of the Sociology of Translation, a novel paradigm which he defined as primarily concerned with the continuous making, remaking (and undoing) of networks of people, ideas, things, and resources around and through which translation processes are produced. Drawing on Michel Serres's (1974) earlier philosophical formulation of translation as the process of making connections between two domains, or simply as establishing communication, Callon (1980, 211) defined translation as a process which "creates convergences and homologies by relating things that were previously different." Together with Latour, Callon developed a vastly expanded notion of translation, which similarly to the forms of transduction and intersemiotic equivalence discussed earlier extends far beyond the interlingual transfer of denotational meaning.

Translation, according to Callon and Latour (1981, 279), thus includes "all the negotiations, intrigues, calculations, acts of persuasion and violence, thanks to which an actor or force takes, or causes to be conferred on itself, authority to speak or act on the behalf of another actor or force." Central to Callon and Latour's conceptualization of translation is the notion of "trials of strength" (Callon 1984; Latour 1988), whereby actants strive to gain speaking authority and enroll others in networks that

can be mobilized to impose their own interests and interpretation of reality. Since, as Latour (1988, 158) points out, "nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else," networks need to be established through equivalences forged through semiotic/material translations of entities aimed at enrolling allies.

In her ethnographic analysis of the matsutake mushroom trade, Anna Tsing (2015, 315) has drawn on Callon and Latour's insights on human and non-human networks emerged through semiotic and material processes of translation to foreground the role of translation as a main infrastructure for the rearticulation of contemporary capitalist modes of production based on control over inventory rather than labor.[8] If, as Latour (1988, 170) has claimed, in order to exist, markets require equivalents and equivalents are to be made through translation, "capitalism is a system of commensuration" (Tsing 2013, 39), which relies on translation for the extraction of value through chain-like sequences of product assessment aimed at purifying the commodity from the non-capitalist "gift-like social relations" (Tsing 2013, 23) that went into its production. While a longstanding tradition within anthropological theory has postulated a radical opposition between societies based on gifts and societies based on commodity exchange (see Arjun 1986, for a review and a critique of this literature), Tsing (2013) proposes to recast this distinction not as an ontological divide between two different modes of sociality and value-production, but rather as a heuristics approach to capitalism's modus operandi, for capitalism depends on transforming non-capitalist objects and social forms (i.e., natural resources, gifts, personal relations of obligation, affection, and reciprocity) into capitalist commodities and transactions.

As Gal (2015, 233) has noted, Latourian translation is imbued with power-laden dynamics of appropriation, incorporation, and subsumption (see Hull, this Special Issue). However, as Bauman and Briggs (2003, 4–10) have highlighted, Latour has paradoxically overlooked the role of language and its modern construction as an autonomous entity in the processes of translation he discussed. The articles in this special issue aim to supplement the Sociology of Translation with a closer examination of the role of specific acts and ideologies of translation within the production of forms of inequality, exclusion, and subsumption that underlie the capitalist production and circulation of value.

Translation and semiotic ideologies

Linguistic anthropology offers a fundamental contribution to further the understanding of the dynamics of power, authority, and legitimacy unfolding between source and target languages within colonial contexts and missionary settings (Duranti *et al.,* 1995; Keane 2007; Hanks 2012; Schieffelin 2014; Handman 2018). These studies have revealed how translation is not a straightforward procedure of transcoding,

[8]Unlike traditional forms of capitalist extraction of surplus-value pivoting on exerting control over labor (e.g., by extending working hours or optimizing the assembly line organization), contemporary capitalism requires new forms of subsumption. As Fumagalli (2015) points out, contemporary cognitive bio-capitalism operates through life subsumption, which conflates the distinction between formal and real subsumption of industrial capitalism, producing new forms of subjectivity based on debt (Lazzarato 1996), precarity, and the construction of an entrepreneurial self.

but a culture specific and historically variable construct, entangled within specific semiotic and linguistic ideologies. Indeed, ideas and practices of translation and of (un-)translatability are connected to metalinguistic and ontological concepts of denotation and related models of humanity (Williams 1977, 21).

Analyzing the encounter between Calvinist missionaries and ancestral ritualists in Sumba (eastern Indonesia), Webb Keane (2007) has showed how "semiotic ideology" (i.e., people's cultural assumptions about what signs are and how they function) mediate different conceptualizations of morality, discursive genres, forms of social conduct, and modes of production. Bambi Schieffelin (2014) has explored the encounter between Evangelical Protestant missionaries and Bosavi people dwelling in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, analyzing the moral and epistemological assumptions underlying the missionaries' efforts at translating the Bible into Bosavi and the ensuing linguistic and cultural transformations. A similar focus on translation as a device of cultural and linguistic shift imbues the work by William Hanks (2012, 2015) on the XVIth century missionization of Yucatec people. Departing from the conventional focus on interlingual transfer whereby "authoritative texts in a dominant language are translated into a subordinated language," Hanks (2015, 23) underscores the centrality of intralingual (and intracultural) translation, which, he argues, is always an underlying presupposition of any form of crosslinguistic translation.[9] According to Hanks (2015, 36), Franciscans' translation of Spanish and Latin texts into Maya did not simply revolve around "a binary relation" between the languages of the missionaries and the missionized, rather it entailed, in a way similar to the Bosavi case described by Schieffelin (2014), the production of Maya *reducido*, that is, a "neologistic register of Maya, purged and realigned to suit the needs of Christian practice, governance, and civility" (Hanks 2012, 450). Interestingly, Hanks (2015, 36) compares the neologized version of Maya with the semiotic function of money as a universal equivalent (Marx 1976 [1867]): Maya *reducido* "has elements of both languages, and serves as a medium of exchange between them […], [functioning in a way] similar to a currency system into which value from incommensurable domains (say, labor and cattle, or Christianity and Post-Classic Maya religion) can be converted and hence compared." The comparison between speech registers and currency systems points to a longstanding analogy between linguistic and economic exchange underlying the connection between translation and capitalism. According to Marx (1973 [1857-8], 93), "ideas […] have first to be translated out of their mother tongue into a foreign language in order to circulate, in order to become exchangeable." In a like fashion, continues Marx (1973 [1857–8], 93), money functions as an inter-language, which provides a "third, objective entity which can be re-exchanged for everything without distinction." Likewise, in a famous analogy, Saussure (2006 [1916], 79), argued that both linguistics and economics "are concerned with a system for equating things of different orders – labor

[9]Human languages are, according to Hanks (2015, 35), endowed with the universal capacity for self-translation: "in order to translate into a second language, that language must be self-interpreting."

and wages in one and a signified and signifier in the other."[10] The arbitrary connection between signifier and signified is thus compared with the notion of money as a universal equivalent, which depends on a socially established convention. In this perspective, translation is not only a technology of conversion entangled within specific ideologies of language and humanity, but also a key infrastructure for the circulation of texts (Handman 2018, 154–155) and values, which pivots on contextually negotiated forms of intersemiotic translation (Latour 1988; Keane 2000; Agha 2017).

In his semiotic analysis of currency as a form of "pecuniary media," Asif Agha (2017, 295) has showed how sociohistorical forms of money (such as coins and currency bills, but also cowries and woodpecker scalps) are tied to culture specific activity routines and "socially recognized registers of conduct" (Agha 2017, 293). In this way, we may better appreciate how the large-scale standardization of pecuniary media (Agha 2017, 297) combined with semiotic ideologies of seamless inter-translatability pivoting on a Saussurean conception of the arbitrariness of signs (Keane 2000, 2007) have been conducive to the regimes of value, market rationality, and pecuniary culture underlying contemporary global capitalism.[11]

Translation, entextualization, and capitalist scalability

Translation plays a key role within the projects of material and linguistic scalability of our present moment. Endowed with the potential to extract and reframe signs, utterances, speech genres, registers, and semiotic activities of various kind, translation is a form of recontextualization (Gal 2023, 179–80) or a citational practice (Nakassis 2013), which operates as a powerful infrastructure of scalability. A fundamental aspect of contemporary capitalism, scalability is the ability to expand without changing the business model (Mintz 1985, 47; Tsing 2015, 40). Epitomized by the colonial sugarcane plantation, scalability entails the dissemination of a standardized mode of production (and consumption) combined with the erasure of context-specific dynamics and interdependence relations (Donzelli this Special Issue). As Mintz (1985) pointed out, colonial monocultural agriculture relied on a sugarcane plant anthropogenically modified for large-scale mass production. This domesticated cultivar is artificially propagated through the planting of cuttings from a parent plant – a process akin to cloning – which results in highly replaceable and genetically identical plants. Recontextualization and serial (re-)production and are thus key to scalability, which is "oblivious to the indeterminacies of encounter [… and] banishes meaningful diversity, that is, diversity that might change things" (Tsing 2015, 38). Linguistic anthropological analyses of capitalism's translation machine inevitably require a close analysis of processes of entextualization and recontextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Kuipers 1990; Silverstein and Urban 1996). Indeed, the possibility of extracting discourse from

[10] On the analogy between economic and linguistic exchange, see also Irvine (1989) and Manning (2006, 273). For a linguistic-materialist critique of the Lausanne School marginalist value theory, underlying the Saussurean notion of linguistic and economic value, see Petrilli and Ponzio (2020).

[11] Agha (2017, 297) explicitly compares the pecuniary and linguistic processes of standardization.

its original context of production and recontextualize it in a discursive and chronotopic elsewhere through translation and similar procedures is a major technology of scalability.

This line of inquiry is connected to the recent interest in linguistic materialities and the notion of infrastructure along with the impulse to problematize entrenched distinctions between material and immaterial, tangible and intangible, and human and non-human (Cavanaugh and Shankar 2017; Handman 2018; Schneider and Heyd 2024; Keane 2025). In the increasingly digitally encoded backdrop of our late capitalist world systems, the longstanding distinction between (material technoeconomic) base and (intangible linguistic) superstructure has become untenable. Indeed, long before the so-called infrastructural turn (Larkin 2013), Maurice Godelier (1978, 763) called for a reformulation of the notion of infrastructure, which, he claimed, had to be expanded to include all aspects of relations of production – a point that closely resonates with linguistic anthropological analyses of semiotic activities as relations of production.

In this perspective, the articles in this collection aim to provide fine-grained analyses of the working of translation within capitalist production and reproduction. Our contemporary moment is imbued with a distinctive ideology of scale (Tsing 2000, 347) characterized by the aspiration to erase contextual differences and local systems of indexical practice, establish strategic equivalences between individuals and corporate persons (Hull, this Special Issue), enact the global circulation of apparently completely detachable bundles of texts and behaviors, and encode the world into numerical strings of 1s and 0s (Introna 2011). Since the 1990s, transnational lending agencies such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank began to divest in the building of major infrastructures (roads, dams, bridges) and adopted a novel model of infrastructure building aimed at developing procedural protocols to foster transparency and accountability (Tania Murray 2007; Donzelli 2019). In this light, the pragmatic standardization of discursive genres typical of contemporary audit cultures (Strathern 2000) is a core technology of scalability: it operates by translating centrifugal discursive practices into highly regimented protocols to enable the serial reproduction of replicable work templates that can be extended to greater scales, but also sabotaged, resisted, or simply missed or misunderstood (Donzelli 2019, 2023).

One of the defining features of contemporary capitalism is a specific form of pragmatic standardization and a specific metapragmatic attitude towards translation, one which seems to deny the existence of situated networks of indexical relations and aspires to establish regimes of perfect and seamless intertranslatability across codes, modalities, ontological orders to enact projects of extreme scalability, that is, the becoming bigger and bigger of a production unit. In this sense, we are increasingly confronted with institutional logics that operate through a "copycat paradigm" (Donzelli 2023), that is, the borrowing of best practices protocols, processes of assessment and quality assurance (QA), which are tout-court transferred from one context to another, with deliberate indifference to different administrative arrangements, politico-economic conditions, and cultural contexts, as if the original context were irrelevant (Gershon 2011). Of course, as Nielsen (this Special Issue) demonstrates, these dreams of radical entextualization are confronted with a series of local readaptations, failed uptakes, and misunderstandings (see also Donzelli 2019, 2023). Linguistic

and semiotic anthropologists are particularly well equipped to produce ethnographically nuanced critical analyses of the metastatic spread of neoliberal capitalism, of its successes and its failures or lack of grip.

Contributions to this special issue

The contributors to this Special Issue are linguistic and semiotic-oriented sociocultural anthropologists who have analyzed the making and unmaking of translation in disparate settings: rural practices in Central Italy (Donzelli), glass-making and fashion family firms in Venice and Mantua, Northern Italy (Perrino), New Delhi call centers (Nielsen), Paris city council and homelessness outreach programs (Del Percio and Vigouroux), the counterfactual elsewhere of Southeast Asian eco-cities (Luvaas and Chio), and the capitalist semiosphere (Hull). Despite the diversity of locales and phenomena analyzed, we share a commitment to embed translation into political economy. Going beyond the "prototypical case" of translation as the carrying over of meaning across self-contained codes (Gal 2015, 226), we view translation as a metasemiotic infrastructure of capitalist valorization.

Our goal is to explore how apparently disparate processes of assessment, soft-skills training, city branding, municipal censual efforts, digital encoding, and commodity enregisterment all operate through forms of intersemiotic and crossmodal translation, which, by turning quality into quantity, experiences into algorithmic models, individuals into numbers, affects into empathy statements, feelings into architectural renderings, homelessness into infographics, are driven by similar projects of valorization. In so doing, we suggest that there is great analytic promise in the study of the actual operations, whereby capitalism extract value through various forms of translation. Historically driven by profit maximization, capitalism is an ever-changing dynamic system characterized by the continuous search for new ways to generate value. Its current configuration entails the increasing dematerialization of capital and labor, the blurring of the distinction between production and consumption, and the use of signs and information as main infrastructures of valorization (Irvine 1989; LiPuma and Lee 2004; Arvidsson 2006; Manning 2006, 2010; Berardi 2009; Agha 2011; Duchêne and Heller 2012; Nakassis 2013). The papers collected herein suggest that far from being a trite topic or a conceptually fuzzy lens, translation is both an essential device for capitalist value projects and a productive analytic prism for understanding our contemporary moment.

Drawing on fieldwork with small farmers and zero-mile food activists in Central Italy, Aurora Donzelli shows how semiotic interactions around indigenous food production and distribution hinge on performances of (un-)translatability and generate metalinguistic commentaries on two parallel processes: the encompassment of regional linguistic varieties within a national standard and the pragmatic regimentation of rural labor and ways of life. The article discusses how supply chains entail the conversion of vernacular codes into global languages to optimize agribusiness production and look at how the sensuous materiality of regional products may obstruct denotational translatability during sampling and tasting events.

Matthew S. Hull focuses on the semiotics of corporate persons on which pivots the organization of contemporary capitalism. Etymologically derived from the Latin

verb *corporare* ("to form a body"), corporations rely on acts of translation that create unified legal actors and aim at erasing the differences between corporate and natural persons. Hull carefully dissects the juridico-political translations deployed in the making of corporate persons and in the production of strategic forms of incorporation and partitioning (into subsidiary companies) and shows how the semiotic production of equivalences between natural and corporate persons is never complete.

Analyzing the narrative production of regimes of uniqueness underlying the "Made in Italy" brand identity, Sabina Perrino entertains a different reflection on the semiotic production of equivalences between corporate persons and natural individuals. Her analysis shows how such equivalences are instrumental in associating a morally inflected sense of authenticity to the firms' identity and to the commodities they produce. Perrino highlights how practices of intersemiotic translation and ideologies of untranslatability produce regimes of singularity and uniqueness (epitomized by the "cultural DNA" biological metaphor), repurposing scalability toward the production of intimacy and relatedness and hinting at alternative projects of scale-making.

In her ethnographic exploration of the processes of entextualization underlying the global service industry, Kristina Nielsen discusses the translation slippages and the semiotic frictions occurring within outsourcing processes to India. Her analysis of the standardization of empathy statements in soft skill training in New Delhi call centers highlights how translation is at once always generative and incomplete. Brent Luvaas and Jenny Chio discuss a different way in which feelings are translated into commodifiable qualities through novel technologies of architectural renderings. Their article focuses on the visual presentation of eco-city projects spreading in Southeast Asia (Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia) to analyze how somatic experiences, produced through eco-cities renderings, are deployed as virtual translational technologies for the commodification of sustainability, whereby climate anxieties are combined with "globalized middle-class lifestyle aspirations" and directed to real estate speculative projects.

Alfonso Del Percio and Cécil Vigouroux deal with an outcome of the structural inequalities and sociospatial reconfigurations ensuing from speculative urban renewal projects: homelessness. They examine a different case of crossmodal translation: the homeless census activities undertaken by Paris city council in collaboration with volunteers and show how counting and the "spectacularization of numbers" are a flexible technology of governmentality. Their article discusses the recent implementation of a homeless outreach program in Paris to examine how quantitative and statistical data translate social facts into municipal policies or national political propaganda.

In our diverse ethnographic endeavors, we ask what is considered (un)translatable and when are the semiotic metamarks of translation disguised or highlighted to produce unique prototypes, faithful copies, fraudulent imitations, and strategic subsidiaries. Indeed, in providing fine-grained ethnographic accounts of the work of translation, we also explore situations in which attempts at translation generate frictions and misunderstandings (Nielsen), as well as strategic claims of alleged untranslatability (Donzelli and Perrino). At the same time, we analyze the semiotic procedures whereby translational encompassment or intersemiotic and crossmodal translations are made inconspicuous (Hull) and neutrally unproblematic as in the futuristic aesthetics of sustainable affluence discussed by Luvaas and Chio or in the

spectacularization of census described by Del Percio and Vigouroux. Our hope is that our analyses of the workings of the translation machine in which we are all caught may stimulate further explorations into the dreams and pitfalls of capitalist portability (Ong 2007).

Acknowledgements. This Special Issue stems from a panel originally presented at the American Anthropological Association meeting held in Toronto, CA, in 2023. We want to express our gratitude to the panel's discussant (Costas Nakassis) and chair (Webb Keane), to all the participants who offered their comments and insights on our earlier drafts, as well as to the Editor of Signs and Society (Asif Agha) for his help in bringing this volume to fruition.

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Cite this article: Donzelli, Aurora. 2025. "The Translation Machine: Exploring the Infrastructures of Valorization under Semiocapitalism." *Signs and Society* 13 (3): 311–325. https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2025.10017

Signs and Society (2025), **13** (3), 326–354
doi:10.1017/sas.2025.13

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
HANKUK UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN STUDIES

ARTICLE

Translations Interrupted: Italian Neorural Revivals and the Neodialect Poetics of Nonscalability

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Abstract
Translation is key to the political economy of neorural revival in contemporary Italy. Drawing on fieldwork with neorural farmers, I show how translations across semiotic domains and displays of linguistic and pragmatic untranslatability simultaneously produce capitalist value and temporary disruptions of the subsumption of life under capital. To understand this apparent paradox, I analyze the complex relationship between contemporary neorural revivalists and mid-twentieth-century neodialect poets. Driven by a reaction against the post-war encompassment of regional linguistic varieties within a national standard, the metapragmatics of untranslatability developed by the neodialect literary movement has indirectly provided contemporary neoruralists with semiotic resources to conjure profitable forms of agrolinguistic incommensurability. However, unlike the poets' nostalgic and anticapitalist sabotage of the collusion between centripetal linguistic standardization and intensive agribusiness scalability, the farmers' interactional disruptions of pragmatic regimentation and seamless intertranslatability are both a project of capitalist valorization and an exit strategy from unfulfilling wage-labor arrangements.

Keywords: (non)scalability; capitalism; central Italy; linguistic standardization; poetry; pragmatic regimentation

Introduction: on capitalist scalability and poetic interruptions

Epitomized by the plantation economy or by the franchising business model, capitalist scalability relies on the material and ideological erasure of context-specific dynamics and interdependence relations. Drawing on a notion originally introduced by Mintz (1985) in his work on the European colonial sugarcane plantations, Tsing (2012, 2013, 2015) defines scalability as a mode of organizing labor and resource management through the creation of highly replicable units that can be extended to greater scales, without changing the business model. In this article, I propose a linguistic approach to this mode of capitalist valorization. I explore the nexus between translation and

scalability and describe how projects of scalable expansion may be disbanded by poetic interruptions, that is, literary gestures and interactional practices whereby ideologies of untranslatability are mobilized as alternatives to intensive agriculture and as temporary disruptions of the hierarchical encompassment of regional parlance under a national linguistic standard.[1] I draw on fieldwork in central Italy (Le Marche region) among neorural farmers (i.e., people formerly employed in industrial and service jobs who choose to undertake agroecological ventures) and on literary analysis to discuss how my interlocutors perform displays of untranslatability to achieve nostalgic *and* economically viable reenactments of vanishing agrolinguistic worlds.

Driven by fantasies of unlimited copycat replication, scalability hinges on presuppositions of perfect commensurability, seamless interchangeability, and on the standardization (and ideological erasure) "of cultural and biological diversity" (Tsing 2012, 507).[2] In this sense, scalability, as a politicoeconomic process of valorization, underwrites a paradox: it is a specific "scale-making ideology" (Irvine 2016, 224) based on the operational denial of "scale" (Carr and Lempert 2016a, 2016b); put differently, it operates as if differences in size and context did not exist.[3] From a linguistic standpoint, scalability relies on three aspirations: (i) maximal translatability, which implies perfect equivalence and interchangeability between source text and target text; (ii) total portability, produced through pragmatic automation and massive circulation of decontextualized discursive protocols and textual artifacts; (iii) standardization, understood as the centripetal homogenization of linguistic variation, whereby the dissemination of an hegemonic linguistic variant (deemed as the "national standard") is combined with the ideological encompassment of divergent regional forms within such standard (Gal 2012, 29; Irvine 2016; Gal and Irvine 2019, 133–134).[4]

Like any project, "scalability is never complete" (Tsing 2012, 510) and always requires a "huge amount of work" (Tsing 2015, 294). Indeed, scalability demands constant organizational efforts aimed at standardizing the workflow through the

[1] At the risk of stating the obvious, I understand nonscalability and untranslatability not as ontological entities, but as acts of ideological representation.

[2] "If the world is still diverse and dynamic," claims Tsing (2012, 510), "it is because scalability never fulfills its own promises."

[3] With their edited volume, Carr and Lempert (2016a) inaugurated a linguistic anthropological reflection on "scale" and "scaling" (or "scale-making"), understood as semiotic processes whereby social actors produce connections between different mensual and spatiotemporal relations. As Carr and Lempert (2016b) point out, scale is a language-mediated "relational and comparative endeavor" aimed at "drawing distinctions" and establishing "analogies" between entities of different sizes positioned in different spatiotemporal frameworks (Carr and Lempert 2016a; Pritzker and Perrino 2021; Perrino 2024). In advocating for a perspectival approach to scale, Carr and Lempert's (2016b) intent is to deontologize "scalar perspectives" and show that scales and scalar distinctions are not given but always made through ideological and semiotic work. As is well apparent in their reference to Tsing (2012, 56, 2015, 15), Carr and Lempert (2016b) treat "scalarity" and "scalability" as interchangeable terms. I believe, instead, that the two notions should not be conflated.

[4] Standardization is both a set of homogenizing policies and an "ideological project […] of hierarchical ordering" (Gal 2012, 29). As Gal and Irvine (2019) suggest, semiotic processes of standardization pivot on a relation of encompassment and on an axis of differentiation whereby a variety identified as "the standard" is imagined as linguistically homogeneous, socially superior, and geographically placed above "dialects," which, in turn, are imagined as linguistically incorrect and inconsistent, socially inferior, regionally diverse, and at the same time encompassed within (and translatable into) the national standard.

regimentation of linguistic conduct and labor practices. Its goal is expansion through copycat replication variously achieved via varied processes, which range from discursive entextualization to botanical cloning.[5] While the former technology concerns the circulation of portable procedural templates and textual artifacts that can be easily detached from their original context and transplanted into a new institutional environment (Park and Bucholtz 2009; Donzelli 2023), the latter entails the creation of new plants from a single ancestor by means of replanting cuttings, as was the case for the sugarcane plantations discussed by Mintz (1985). Scalability also requires a series of semiotic operations, such as the erasure of scalar distinctions, the incorporation (through token-type regimentation) of specific elements into general categories, and the production of an "axis of differentiation," that is, a schema for the typification and contrastive organization of complementary qualities (Gal 2012, 22; Gal and Irvine 2019, 19). Scalability is, thus, always pitted against alternative projects and divergent centrifugal forces (Tsing 2012).

Drawing on fieldwork in central Italy, this article focuses on a specific language-based configuration of the interplay between scalable and nonscalable elements: namely, the processes of agrolinguistic scalability started after the Second World War and the contemporary spread of neorural livelihoods and niche agri-food markets, which rely on displays of nonscalability mediated by the deployment of regional linguistic variants. To do so, I focus on the complex relationship between two apparently unrelated phenomena: the contemporary back-to-the-land movement, whereby an increasing number of individuals from different social and professional backgrounds seek to reconnect with land-based livelihoods (Istat 2010, 2020; Coldiretti 2017; Coldiretti/Censis 2024) and neodialect poetry, a composite and multigenerational field of literary production—begun in the 1940s and continued through the new millennium—made of poets who elected regional languages (conventionally called "dialects") as their primary medium of poetic expression (Bonaffini and Serrao 2001; Brevini 1987, 1990; Dell'Arco and Pasolini 1952; Contini 1943, 1968; Mengaldo 1978; Pasolini 1955).[6]

Combining fieldwork among Marchesan neorural farmers with the analysis of poems and metalinguistic theories developed by neodialect poets since the half of the twentieth century, my aim is to highlight the connection between translation and scalability and describe how performances and ideologies of untranslatability may produce poetic and economic rearticulations of two parallel processes: the encompassment of regional parlance under a national linguistic standard and the subsumption of labor under capital.[7] I argue that the analytical juxtaposition of the metapragmatics

[5] As discussed more in detail in the introduction to this special issue, entextualization—understood as a semiotic process whereby speech can be extracted from its original context of production and made portable and text-like (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Kuipers 1990, 4; Silverstein and Urban 1996)—greatly enhances circulation and is a key device of scalability.

[6] The label "neodialect" (Brevini 1990) is convenient, but controversial. First, the term dialect is ideologically charged and inadequate to refer to linguistic variants that are often closer to fully-fledged languages. Second, neodialect poets rarely confine their poetic production within one single linguistic variant and generally shift back and forth from standard Italian to vernacular languages.

[7] There is a strong link between standardization and subsumption. Originally developed by logicians and law scholars, the notion of subsumption entails a process whereby a particular token becomes incorporated

of untranslatability enacted by neorural farmers and neodialect poets may shed light on the political economy of language in contemporary Italy and thus illuminate the centrality of language within capitalist transformations in Italy and beyond.

In a short treatise titled *Irreductions*, Latour ([1984] 1993, 158; 1.1.1 and 1.1.3) claims that "Nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else." Because, continues Latour ([1984] 1993, 62; 1.2.1), "nothing is, by itself, the same as or different from anything else.That is, there are no equivalents, only translations." Equivalents, thus, are not given but need to be produced and (according to Latour [1984] 1993, 170) without equivalences there is no market. Translation across languages and semiotic fields makes market possible and is a key dispositive of scalability and value production. In her study of supply chain capitalism, Tsing (2013, 2015) foregrounds the role of translation as a main infrastructure for the rearticulation of contemporary capitalist modes of production, which are based on control over inventory rather than labor. In line with this special issue's goal, this article is an invitation to take on Latour ([1984] 1993) and Tsing's (2013, 2015) insights and examine more closely (and more literally) the role of translation within capitalist worldmaking (Gal 2015). By looking at the minutiae of specific acts of translation and at situated performances of untranslatability, we may achieve an understanding of how subjects participate in successful forms of capitalist valorization and simultaneously devise exit strategies from conventional wage labor arrangements, perceived as exploitative and unfulfilling.

Methodology: charting neorural and neodialect intersections

As Gal (2012, 26), drawing on Agnew (1986), has masterfully outlined, that between poetry and market is a foundational opposition within Euro-American intellectual history. In what follows, I reflect on how the intersection between translatability and scalability (and their antonyms) produces specific articulations of this opposition. My methodology is somewhat unconventional: I combine traditional linguistic anthropological fieldwork among neorurals with an ethnographically informed reading of the neodialect poems and critical essays. I draw on conversations I had and on the audiovisual data I collected during six years (2018–2024) of intermittent fieldwork in central Italy and on the reading, performed jointly with my Marchesan interlocutors, of neodialect poems.

The analysis of linguistic interactions occurring during farming and marketing activities reveals how informal economic spaces are produced through displays of pragmatic unscriptedness and acts of semantic untranslatability whereby neorural farmers simultaneously produce capitalist value and temporary disruptions of the subsumption of life under capital. These outcomes are related to the literary efforts and ideological work of neodialect poets. I argue that poets such as Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975), Andrea Zanzotto (1921–2011), Raffaello Baldini (1924–2005), Franco Scataglini (1930–1994), Franco Loi (1930–2021), Emilio Rentocchini (b. 1949), and

within, or placed under, a general category,see Murray (2016) for a review. Unlike earlier philosophical formulations, Marx's (1992, 646, 944, 1019–1025) subsumption reveals the power dynamics underlying the process.

Gian Mario Villalta (b. 1959), to name only a few, foreshadowed an axis of differentiation around which a series of ontological, politicoeconomic, moral, and aesthetic contrasts have become organized (and fractally replicated) as qualitative schemata for the interpretation of contemporary forms of social and linguistic conduct and neorural value productions. Driven by a reaction against the post-war encompassment of regional linguistic varieties within a national standard and the parallel pragmatic automation of language (Pasolini 1964), the metapragmatics of untranslatability developed by the neodialect literary experiments has indirectly provided contemporary neoruralists with a "poetic capital" they can now draw on to craft profitable forms of agrolinguistic nonscalability and poetic incommensurability. During my fieldwork, I came across a series of semiotic and interactional practices, which conjure forms of effervescent intersubjectivity and informal "pericapitalist spaces," located "simultaneously inside and outside capitalism" (Tsing 2015, 63). These sites, I argue, are variously produced through creative intersemiotic translations, displays of untranslatability, and relatively unscripted exchanges whereby neorural farmers retrieve ways of inhabiting language and craft meaningful social relations, which are both alternative to oppressive centripetal forces and economically advantageous.

Neodialect poets and neorural farmers share a nostalgic and highly reflexive construal of the rural exodus and linguistic transformation that have characterized Italian agrarian peripheries since the late 1940s. The metapragmatics of untranslatability they have elaborated in response is simultaneously aimed at rematerializing the language and subverting the encompassment of regional linguistic variants within standard Italian. Their respective projects are at once related and divergent. Rejecting the modernist "dematerialization of language" (Manning 2006, 273) epitomized by the Saussurean separation of "the denotational sign […] from the material world" (Irvine 1989, 248), the neodialect experimentalists focused on asserting the inseparable connection between local referents and their dialect signifiers (Pasolini 1952; Scataglini 1988). To do so, they, somewhat paradoxically, relied on sophisticated forms of translation (across different linguistic varieties) to craft a novel poetic language imbued with highly local (phonological, lexical, and syntactic) features to underscore the polyphonic effervescence of linguistic peripheries and proclaim the untranslatability of regional variants into standard Italian. Neorural farmers show a similar metapragmatic stance vis-à-vis the parallel processes of economic scalability and translational encompassment. Not only they focus on heritage foods and regional agrological varieties, but they also market their hyper-local products using a highly local lexicon and refuse to provide linguistic glosses in standard Italian. My interlocutors opt instead for ostensive definitions and complex forms of intersemiotic translation, offering food samples, suggesting recipes, and engaging in elaborate forms of interaction with their customers. While the neodialect poets are primarily concerned with developing forms of linguistic differentiation to salvage the generative potential of the poetic word (imaginatively epitomized by regional variants) from the sweeping centripetal and homogenizing forces of the language of modernization (standard Italian and its capitalist automation), the neorural farmers are interested in marketing their local products. Unlike the poets' nostalgic and anticapitalist sabotage of the collusion between centripetal linguistic standardization and intensive agribusiness scalability, the farmers' reactions to seamless intertranslatability are both an exit strategy from

unfulfilling wage-labor arrangements and a project of capitalist valorization. These neorurals' goals are, however, strictly connected to poets' endeavors not only because they tap on the materialist semiotic ideology and axis of differentiation developed by poets but also because their pericapitalist experiments stem from the long-term effects of the rural exodus and linguistic hegemonic displacement discussed by the poets.

To illustrate these points, let me provide some ethnographic snapshots of the insurgent interactional and semiotic practices whereby my neorural interlocutors try to recalibrate to their advantage over the hegemonic orders of centripetal scalable standardization.

Cherries, sort of… On agrolinguistic (un-)translatabilities

They look at once familiar and strange, somewhat resembling cherries, yet different. They are smaller, and their iridescent and significantly thinner skin veers from bright vermillion to rich carmine and near-black (Figure 1). Their most distinctive qualities are the dark inner pulp and their tart flavor. For most speakers of standard Italian, the lexical term *visciola* (pl. *visciole*) is an empty signifier, a name lacking any specific *denotatum*. When, speaking with most of my Italian colleagues and acquaintances, I happen to mention that my current fieldwork involves working with neorural farmers specialized in cultivating *visciole*, I inevitably receive puzzled looks and blank stares. This is not the case, however, when I mention the term to people dwelling in central Italy, where the word *visciola* is commonly used to refer to what in Linnaean terminology is called *Prunus cerasus* (i.e., sour cherry), that is, a wild species of *Prunus* (genus) in the *Cerasus* (cherry) subgenus considered to be one of the ancestors of cultivated cherries.[8]

Visciole are one of the several local ingredients that are increasingly in vogue within gourmet-niche culinary circles in contemporary Italy. In the high-end local food stores proliferating in my current field site in the Ancona and Macerata provinces of Le Marche (a region located on the eastern side of central Italy), bottles of *visciola*-flavored wine and jars of *visciola* jam are juxtaposed to other indigenous food items and names: glass containers filled with pickled *paccasassi* (sea fennel, or *Crithmum maritimum*), bottles of *sapa* (a reduction of grape juice, akin to vinegar allegedly used in ancient Roman cuisine), jute bags containing *cicerchia* (*Lathyrus sativus*, an ancient legume once common in central and southern Italian peasant cuisine), and so forth (Figure 2).

While extensive literature (see Beriss 2019 for a recent review) has discussed the worldwide growing market for organic, traditional, and zero-mile foods,[9] this article

[8]Linneaus coined the name *Prunus cerasus* in 1753 (Faust and Suranyi 1998, 59). Interestingly, the name "visciola" is not local, but has Germanic or Slavic origins and derives from Proto-Germanic **wīhsilō*, Old High German *wīhsila*, and Proto-Slavic word **višьňa*. Despite its prominent role within the Italian niche market of regional delicatessens, the *visciolo* tree is probably native to the Carpathian Basin and is well known and used in Eastern Europe and Southwest Asia (Faust and Suranyi 1998).

[9]Despite the extensiveness of the literature on food activism and sustainable foodways, little attention has until recently been paid to the role of language within alternative agri-food movements, but see Karrebæk et al. (2018) for a review on the emerging literature in linguistic anthropology and food studies.

Figure 1. Freshly picked *visciole*. Courtesy of the author 2024.

focuses on a less explored dimension of this phenomenon: the role of language in shaping humans' agro-ecological imagination and the role of translation (across linguistic codes and semiotic domains) in crafting niche agri-food markets and regional "commodity registers" (Agha 2011), as well as in structuring the social lives of their producers and consumers.

As we were driving to inspect the company's fields during a hot summer morning, Claudia, who is in charge of social media managing for a sea fennel company, began to explain to me the challenges of marketing a product whose vernacular name—*paccasassi* (literary "rock breakers")—is completely obscure outside the region and whose edibility has been long forgotten by locals. Typical of coastal ecosystems,

Figure 2. Regional delicatessens on display in a high-end grocery store in Numana (Ancona province). Courtesy of the author 2023.

paccasassi (a.k.a. *C. maritimum* in Linnean terminology) is a wild edible plant found throughout the Mediterranean, Pacific, and Atlantic coasts (Figure 3).

Since its establishment in 2015, this small artisanal company's main brand concept has pivoted on using the local term (*paccasassi*) to launch its flagship product. Commenting on the company's commercial strategy to "bet it all" on the oil-pickled *paccasassi*, their most expensive product (selling for about 10 euros a jar), Claudia pointed out how *il vasetto*—a glass jar in which all the details of the small succulent leaves are clearly visible—works as their name card (*biglietto da visita*), especially when they deal with American importers who have never encountered the plant or its derived

Figure 3. Sea fennel. Courtesy of the author 2023.

products. The analogy between an object (*il vasetto*) and a textual artifact (*biglietto da visita*) is revealing of the labor of intersemiotic translations (across semiotic domains) performed by the neorural entrepreneurs I work with. A similar strategy is at play in the promotional flyer, which displays full color images of possible *paccasassi* culinary uses: on bruschetta, with focaccia, in a series of salads, etc. The crafting of what Agha (2011) calls a "commodity register," that is, the task of connecting an unfamiliar token (a jar of pickled *paccasassi*) with the company's brand type and with a forgotten social and culinary world, requires complex semiotic procedures and cannot simply rely on verbal language (Nakassis 2012). Claudia further articulated the challenges she faces in marketing a product whose name is unknown, forgotten, or even unintelligible:

> If one has to sell […] let's say *pasta*, you'd try to persuade [the customers] by explaining [them] why your pasta is better, that is, you'd tell them about the production process […] I [instead] still have to explain people what [*paccasassi*] actually are […]. Because these products are so utterly typical that there is not really a word to call them.

Despite these challenges, the neorural entrepreneurs who decided to quit their 9 to 5 jobs to start a new professional life as farmers of these highly local delicatessens firmly insist on using the regional terminology to refer to these hyper-local products. When I asked Giorgio, the cofounder of a family-run wild-cherry-based agricultural company, how does he market his products to customers who are not familiar with the term *visciola*, he explained to me how, in approaching novices, he mostly relies on nonverbal explanations and on ostensive definitions (i.e., showing the item instead of providing a metalinguistic gloss for it):

> [I always] bring along a jar of sour cherries in syrup. That is, the freshly picked sour cherries covered with sugar and exposed to the sun. In such a way, I can make [people] understand what we're talking about because if I say "wild cherry" people have a hard time understanding. Instead, I make you understand that it's much smaller and it's dark and thus in that way it is easier to understand.

A key role is played by the display of the company's limited production of glass jars filled with fermented sour cherries (Figure 4).

As he continues to discuss his marketing and translating techniques, Giorgio describes his two other main procedures: *sampling* and *pairing*. He explains how, after *showing* an emblematic product-token *visciole* in syrup, he proceeds to create (through *pairing*) syntagmatic relations with other nonverbal elements (i.e., other food items) and thus forge meaningful tasting connections capable of rendering (through *sampling*) the sensorial and social world of his signature product: *visciola* dessert wine:

> So, I first I show you the product. The second part is where to use it […] so well here we have sweet [cherry] wine, but how do I pair it, right? And so, I… we decided to make this second product which is the *ciambelline* [ring-shaped dry cookies] […] so I always bring them with me […] and so I tell you what it is… I tell you what the sour cherry is, I show it to you, and then I tell you how to pair it and the pairing is at the end of the meal with dry pastries and whatnot.

As I first-hand noticed while observing Giorgio interacting with customers at food festivals and farmers' markets, his first marketing move is at once a nonverbal attempt at translating the unfamiliar regional term and a food-offering act, in which the core ingredient of his niche production is connected to rural practices of domestic production and food-mediated hospitality, still vivid in the memory of all my Marchesan interlocutors in the 45–85 age range. It is through *showing, pairing*, and *sampling* that Giorgio establishes the semantic extension (i.e., referential range) of the term and crafts a (regional) commodity register (Agha 2011) wherein to inscribe his products. As revealed by their little gasps of surprise and delight, the natives of the region immediately recognize the social world evoked by the precious dark and viscous content of

Figure 4. *Visciole* fermenting in sugar. Cingoli (Macerata province). Courtesy of the author 2024.

the jar. "Haaah! Le visciole de nonna!" Exclaimed in awe (and in a distinctive regional accent) a visitor of Giorgio's stand at the farmers' market where I first met him. The comment signaled the visitor's uptake (Austin 1962) of the rural sharecropping imaginary that Giorgio sought to evoke through the display of the jar, that is, through a multimodal transductive act: from object, to memory, to utterance.

As was the case for most of central Italy, Marchesan agriculture pivoted on sharecropping (*mezzadria*). Every sharecropper's family owned at least one *visciolo* tree. In June, when the trees were harvested, the fruits would be generally placed in large glass jars and covered with sugar. The jars would be exposed to the sun for about two months and periodically stirred and shaken to facilitate the fermentation process, during which

the sugar would dissolve morphing into a dark red syrup. The process, which was generally a prerogative of the older women in the household, would result in a syrupy blend of whole unpitted *visciole* floating in sweet and tart juice. The product of this informal work of care by women would become a welcoming gift dispensed in parsimonious amounts to the household's visitors. Like *paccasassi* hand-picked by women and kids from the rocks along the coast where they spontaneously grow, *visciole* occupied a distinctive peripheral status in the political economy of sharecropping: the hobby product of a side job aimed at circulating as a gift and as a token of culinary (and picking!) talent. As Roberto, one of my elderly (79 years old) interlocutors, put it: "*Visciole* and *paccasassi* could not be bought, they were picked and they were given. But if you wanted to buy them… well they were not for sale." In a similar fashion, recalling her childhood summer memories of *paccassassi* picking, Margherita now in her early 60s, described how her great-uncle would give her and her cousins a boat ride to the most secluded and inaccessible beaches along the coast for them to pick from the rocks the thick, fleshy leaves needed to prepare the pickles (Figure 5).

As Tsing points out (Tsing 2013, 21), capitalism is incapable of producing most of what it needs to function, it "depends on converting stuff created in varied ways […] into capitalist commodities" and thus has to rely on translation. To turn *visciole* wine and *paccasassi* pickles into commodities, the people I work with deploy complex forms of intersemiotic translation across modalities and semiotic fields whereby gift/hobby products are turned into meaningful and intelligible desirable commodities. To be successful, however, these operations require preserving some of the informal semiotic activities and gift-like sociality that originally surrounded these products. An informal and gift-like quality strongly infuses social interactions around the production and distribution of these delicatessens and is key in turning them into regional commodities through crafting connections between a local food item and "fragments of sensorial experience, specific social activities, modes of conduct, fashions of speaking" (Agha 2011, 27). My interlocutors are often busy organizing *eventi* ("events"): afternoon hikes in the woods culminating with an al fresco dinner or aperitif at a panoramic location, participation (with food and wine sampling) in fundraising events for the most diverse causes, outdoor activities, and hands-on nature explorations to enhance children's botanical knowledge and environmental awareness, etc. Although the commercial gain is generally minimal, these social and linguistic activities are fundamental in producing both regional commodity formulations and pericapitalist linguistic spaces, which both farmers and their customers seem to greatly appreciate.

The several small-sized companies currently burgeoning across the Marchesan countryside aim at revitalizing old culinary practices that had consistently remained outside of the commercial sphere by turning them into niche gastronomic commodities. To do so, they forge a regional commodity register whereby their activities are made at once financially profitable and existentially meaningful. Key in this process is the production of a representational economy of qualitative incommensuration centered on acts of semiotic labor, which combine proclaims of linguistic untranslatability and material gestures of sensuous translation. To understand how these practices and ideologies of (un-)translatability inform the nexus between language, ecological imagination, and neorural revivals, we should turn to the interplay between linguistic standardization and agricultural scalability within Italy's social and economic life since the aftermath of WWII.

Figure 5. Margherita and her cousins picking *paccasassi* along the Conero Coast, early seventies. Courtesy of Margherita Guarnerio.

Linguistic standardization, rural exodus, and neodialect poetry

Renowned for its great linguistic diversity and fragmented for centuries into a multiplicity of city-states and regional polities, Italy became a unified state (under the Savoy Dynasty) only in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is estimated that when the newly unified kingdom of Italy was proclaimed in 1861, only less than 10% of the population mastered the national language, while the rest of the country spoke linguistic varieties, commonly referred to as "dialects" (Maiden and Parry 1997; Tosi 2001). For almost a century, most of the population only spoke local languages and had limited

knowledge of Italian. The situation changed dramatically after the end of World War II, due to a series of factors, such as compulsory schooling and military service, the rise of broadcast media (television and radio), as well as the unprecedented language contact prompted by the massive rural exodus and the migration from northeastern and southern Italy to the industrial North (De Mauro 1970).

Within a few decades, Italy shifted from a context in which "dialects" were the most common form of everyday spoken communication to a situation in which they became relegated to informal and in-group situations and stigmatized as the parlance of lower classes and elderly people (Cavanaugh 2004; Berruto 2018). Interestingly, it was precisely during the 1940s and 1950s, that a new generation of prominent Italian writers and poets, stimulated by the fast-paced industrialization and the erosion of entrenched sociolinguistic ecologies, began to turn to local linguistic varieties as the main source of literary expression. Starting in the 1940s, various poets began to express a renewed interest in regional codes and colloquial registers, giving form to the heterogenous and long-lasting (till the present day) field of "neodialect" poetry (Brevini 1990). Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–1975), one of the most renowned Italian writers and public intellectuals, played a key role in spearheading the post-war neodialect trend. Spread over three-plus decades, Pasolini's efforts to revitalize local languages and poetic traditions include his own poetic production in Friulan (Pasolini 1942), a series of critical essays in Italian (Pasolini 1999), curatorial works—see the two major poetic anthologies he edited in 1952 (with Mario Dell'Arco) and in 1955, as well as a nearly ethnological enquiry, published in three different issues of the journal *Il Belli* (AA.VV 1952-1953) with the title "Our Referendum." Here, 12 prominent poets writing in different regional languages were invited to respond to three questions on their literary and social choices.[10]

As several literary critics and poets have highlighted, this dialect revival was all but a naïve return to an original mother tongue (Benvegnù 2017; Brevini 1990; Pasolini [1951] 1999, 375; Villalta 1995a; Zanzotto 2011, 510). Rather, it was the outcome of a highly deliberate and reflexive metalinguistic meditation on the socioeconomic frictions and linguistic tensions triggered by the parallel standardization of the Italian language (De Mauro 1970) and the mechanization of rural labor aimed at scaling up production (Ginsborg 1990).

In several of his critical essays, Pasolini (1999) framed his neodialect call as a deliberate 'regression' (*regresso*) along the "degrees of being […] toward a language closer to the world (*una lingua più vicina al mondo*)" (Pasolini 1952, CXVIII–CXIX). Pasolini's (1942) groundbreaking literary debut was, indeed, a collection of poems in Friulan, a language he did not speak natively nor fluently (Pasolini 1952, CXVIII). Imbued with political and psychoanalytic overtones, Pasolini's ([1951] 1999, 375) "regression" from standard Italian to Friulan mediated a different mode of experiencing the world and inhabiting language, which may be understood as a process of identification with the linguistic and phenomenological experience of rural speakers to advance the poet's awareness of reality and the peasant's political consciousness.[11] Another more contemporary Northeastern poet, Gian Mario Villalta (born in 1959), often declared his lack

[10] Each poet provided radically different answers to the three questions, confirming Brevini's (1994, 15) description of neodialect poetry as "a punctiform field of unrelated experiences."

[11] As such, the neodialect literary endeavor is different from other nostalgic attempts to revitalize local dialects, which focus more on the nexus between local dialects and identity politics (Cavanaugh 2004).

of fluency in the local parlance (Benvegnù 2017). The Ancona native Franco Scataglini drew on the language of Dante, and other prominent Vulgar and troubadour poets of the Middle Ages (e.g., Guido Cavalcanti, Jacopo da Lentini, and Jacopone da Todi) and the Renaissance (Olimpo da Sassoferrato) to distill a linguistic alternative to standard Italian, which he deemed unfit for poetic expression (Scataglini 1988; Tandello 2010; Mengaldo 2022).

Despite their many differences, neodialect poets share a common interest in a poetic medium capable of expressing a linguistic and sociopolitical resistance against the centripetal homogenization and loss of agrolinguistic diversity of post-war Italy. Theirs is a quest for a primal and originative word whereby to convey the increasingly evanescent experience of a direct connection between reality and language. The central theme of the disappearing socioeconomic and agrolinguistic worlds thus becomes a meditation on the (un-)translatability between linguistic codes and a reflection on the incommensurability between poetic language and the utilitarian techno-automatized idioms of scalable production.[12]

Two decades after his 1942 poetic debut, Pasolini (1964) published, in the Communist periodical *Rinascita*, a passionate metalinguistic appraisal of Italy's sociolinguistic context and a resolute accusation of what he defined as *Italiano medio* ('average Italian'): a service lingua franca that lacked a community of native speakers and was reduced to the mere referential function (Jakobson 1960) of exchanging information as if it were currency. Pasolini's (1964) dread for the average Italian was not simply motivated by his critical political stance toward the increasing marginalization of the spoken word and the social world of subaltern classes, but it also derived from a poetic concern for the centripetal pull of linguistic automatization. "Average Italian," in Pasolini's (1964: 35) view, was not a real national language but a "technical sub-language," based on a metapragmatics of translational encompassment, whereby regional linguistic varieties could be subsumed within a maximally instrumental and minimally expressive national *koiné*.

Crafting nonscalability through acts of poetic untranslatability

Inspired by Pasolini's poetic production and metalinguistic reflections, other post-war neodialect poets have developed a variety of literary responses to standard Italian's linguistic scalability and translational encompassment. The widespread neodialect practice of autotranslation, for example, entails the juxtaposition of two or three versions of the same poem and is aimed at providing a display (at the same time material and linguistic) of the incommensurable and nonunilinear relationship between Italian and "dialect." An example is Gian Mario Villalta's (1995b) collection of poems, *Vose de vose/Voci di Voci* ('Voices of Voices'), composed in a Venetian–Friulan linguistic variant spoken in his village (Visinale). By providing almost every poem with a critical

[12] Whereas Pasolini's vernacular poetic production is characterized by the practice of autotranslation and by the juxtaposition of Italian versions of the Friulan poems, in his metalinguistic and critical reflections, Pasolini often emphasized the untranslatability of the vernacular poetic word, which he described as systematically lacking lexical and sonic equivalents in standard Italian (Pasolini [1947] 1999, 255). Pasolini's ambiguous, or even contradictory, stance with respect to (un)translatability should be interpreted as a strong refusal of forms of metalinguistic encompassment, that is, as an assertion of the radically autonomous status of the regional languages, which cannot be incorporated into standard Italian.

gloss and a translation, Villalta confronts his readers with juxtapositions of texts and lexicons meant to produce interruptions and frictions between the different linguistic variants. In so doing, Villalta foregrounds the irreducible and nonscalable existence of the local parlance and of its related ecological imagination, reasserting Pasolini's conception of language as a vibrant core of political and social existence (Benvegnù 2017, 441).

In a similar yet different way, Franco Scataglini, one of the most renowned poets operating between the 1960s and the 1990s in the very region where I currently work with neorural farmers, articulated his own poetics of nonscalability by combining precarious forms of interlinguistic calibration with the deployments of poetic analogies framed through tight quatrains of septenarian verses. Deeply and explicitly influenced by Pasolini, to whom he dedicated a section of his poem *Carta Laniena* (Scataglini [1982] 2022, 223), Scataglini (1988) aimed at restoring a meaningful connection with locality, understood as the linguistic consciousness of the material existence of things in the world, or, in his own words: "the profound sense of saying in which the naming of things is *tout court* their essence" (*il senso profondo del dire in cui la nominazione delle cose e' tout court la loro sostanza*).

Scataglini's poetic oeuvre is characterized by the systematic insertion, in a central Italian substratum, of regional voices and expressions derived from Anconitan lexical, morphosyntactic, and phonological features. Namely, the degemination of consonant sounds (*sepia* instead of the standard Italian *seppia*, "cuttlefish"), the elision of final syllables (apocope), the inversion of sounds in a word (metathesis): *drento* instead of *dentro* ('inside'), the lack of morphological agreement between plural noun phrases and singular third-person verbs.[13] Although he departed from more radical forms of neodialect linguistic alterity and bilingualism (such as the practice of auto-translation), Scataglini preserved a sense of linguistic and ontological otherness through the insertion, in his generally brief compositions made of one or two four-line stanzas, of one or two highly regional (and largely unintelligible) lexical items, to which he would assign a pivotal role in the text. A case in point is *Vita e scritura* ([1977] 2022, 70), which Scataglini (1988) considered to be his poetic manifesto, as well as an account of his formation as a poet through his own struggle with the bilingual environment of his youth.

Vita e scritura	*Life and writing*
Per me vita e scritura ène compagni, el sai, tuta scancelatura dopo dulor de sbai.	For me life and writing They go hand in hand, you know, it's all erasures after the pain of mistakes.
Se cerca'n sòno lindo drento de sé e se trova el biatolà d'un dindo spèrsose'nte la piova.	You are on a quest for a pure sound but what you find within yourself [is] the lament of a turkey lost in the rain.

[13] See also Canettieri (2022) and Scataglini's (1988) explicit discussion of linguistic operations he used to restore a sense of the Anconitan soundscape.

In comparing himself to a humble bird (a clumsy turkey lost in the rain), the poet exposes different gradients of dialectal otherness: from the most foreign-sounding *dindo* ('turkey') and *biatolar* ('lament'), to the near-Italian *sbai* ('error'), and *scancelature* ('erasures'). This work of interlinguistic tuning and calibrated translation is at once a display of "vernacular specificity" (Tandello 2010, 233) and a metalinguistic approximation, through errors and deletions, to an ultimate poetic language. As Scataglini (1988) pointed out in an extensive reflection on the relation between Italian and Anconitan, the poem also offers an account of the literary and linguistic travails of his youth, when, as he initially tried to write in his regional language, he was confronted with his teachers' reprimands, which led him to suppress the language of his daily existence and simultaneously erase the painful mistakes of his failed poetic production in standard Italian:

> I began to repress [Anconitan] inside of me since the first year of school, when I learned to write my first words and thoughts. […] Thus, when many years later I began to compose verses in Italian, and as I continued to write, I always had the perception of a fracture within me that could not be healed. This is why I kept on writing and destroying [what I was writing]. I did it for twenty years. I only saved a few notes written in very minute and almost untranslatable handwriting: they were the dialect verses that I had begun to write at the beginning of the 1960s.

This process of self-censorship, continued Scataglini (1988), finally came to an end when he realized that his path to poetic expression required learning how to inhabit, through processes of interlinguistic calibration, the liminal and precarious space produced by the difference between Italian and his own interpretation of the vernacular. Furthermore, by anchoring the existential meaning of his poems to hyper-local terms and/or referents, posited as untranslatable into standard Italian, Scataglini used the vernacular as a tool of analogic expression, whereby subjective affective states and intensities are objectified as elements of a specific physical and linguistic ecology. Rather than being mediated by elaborate adjectival structures, the description of subjective qualitative experiences is consigned to vernacular noun phrases. This procedure is exemplified in the poem below (Scataglini [1977] 2022, 107), in which, by means of a simile (i.e., a direct comparison between two unlike things), the poet explicitly compares his lovelorn self to the fishbone of a *mugellina* (a local fish).

So'rimaso la spina	*A fishbone is left of me*
Est'amore m'ha coto	This love cooked me
Come'na mugelina	Like a little mullet
Spolpato sopra e soto	Stripped above and below
So'rimaso la spina	A fishbone is left of me

In another poem titled *Insetto de Passió* ('insect of passion'), Scataglini ([1977] 2022, 140) compares himself to a June bug (*ziza*, in Anconitan), likening his dependence from a tenderly sadistic lover to that of June bugs local kids used to play with by tying a fine thread around the insects' bodies. Understanding these fragments of lived experience and translating the regional lexicon that intersperses these poems

require not a process of semantic decodification, but an existential proximity with the vernacular and nearly onomatopoeic linguistic environment, made of "small snails perched on purple grass" (*C'è i bumbardeli apesi/in cima a l'erba viola*; Scataglini [1977] 2022, 84), "flocks of seagulls fishing large sardines" (*sta suspeso un affolo/de cocali che spiga/sardoncini*; Scataglini [1982] 2022, 162), "dolphins-decapitated cuttlefish" (*la sepia delfinata*; Scataglini [1982] 2022, 223), "half-dead shrimp mantises with their legs scampering" (*nochie che meze morte/sgrícula co'le zampe*; Scataglini [1977] 2022, 74), etc. In this sense, the combination of self-enclosed quatrain stanzas with the analogical procedure variously realized through vernacular metaphors and onomatopoeic similes at once seeks to rematerialize language and conjure a sense of vernacular linguistic incommensurability and nonscalable life forms.

I argue that these poetic assertions of linguistic and ontological irreduction foreshadow the neorural displays of untranslatability discussed earlier. By hindering the encompassment of local (agro-)linguistic varieties and practices within higher-level national orders, these poetic procedures have, somewhat paradoxically, charted out "frameworks of semiotic engagement" (Agha 2011, 25) wherein contemporary neorural farmers may craft economically profitable and existentially meaningful alternatives to intensive farming. Let us now return to them.

Free thinkers … On exit strategies and unscripted interactions around words and things

On a hot summer afternoon, I was picking *visciole* near Osimo with a rather heterogenous group of full-time and part-time farmers. As we were laboring over the same tree, Giancarlo (now in his early sixties) began to tell me the story of how, once he turned 50, he quit his job as a "commercial accountant" (*revisiore contabile*) to become a "free thinker" (*libero pensatore*). Despite their differences (in age, gender, social and educational background, etc.), the Marchesan farmers I work with share similar professional and existential trajectories: after inheriting a small plot of land from their family, they abandoned their jobs (or prospective employment opportunities) in the secondary or tertiary sector to start a new career as independent small farmers.[14] In every single conversation I had with my interlocutors about their professional trajectories, farming (be it full-time or part-time) was contrasted with wage labor and presented as a realm of personal independence and autonomous decision-making. Giancarlo's account (from which the excerpt below is drawn) well conveys this existential posture.[15] Through an impressive historical parable, he compared his back-to-the-land trajectory with that of Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus (c. 519–c. 430 BC), a Roman patrician and military

[14]From a politico-economic standpoint, it should be noted that these neorural entrepreneurial adventures are never solitary endeavors, but always entail a partnership with other proximate consanguineal or affinal relatives and some substantial economic backup either in the form of family assets (e.g., house and land) and/or occasional unpaid labor (e. g., a mother-in-law who offers to bake cakes or pick cherries in her spare time), or capital (e.g., severance pay, retirement funds, and pension income).

[15]In the transcripts, the lines follow intonation units, *italics* mark lexical or morphosyntactic regional variants or colloquial expressions, […] indicates omitted lines, (??) inaudible speech, CAPITAL letters reflect emphasis realized either through higher volume or slower pace.

leader who lived during the early Roman Republic and became an emblem of civic virtue.

"I did like Cincinnatus." Osimo, June 18, 2024.

1. Nella tarda età mi sono dato all'agricoltura […]	1. When I got older, I took up farming […]
2. I miei genitori *c'avevano la tera*	2. My parents *had land*
3. ho fatto come Cincinnato	3. I did like Cincinnatus
4. siccome ero un libero pensatore	4. since I was a free thinker
5. mi è sempre piaciuto fare come *me pare*	5. I always liked to do *as I like*
6. se c'era qualcosa che non me andava	6. if there was something that I did not like
7. me ne andavo	7. I would leave
8. e non *c'era problemi*	8. and *there was no problem*
9. e me ne sono andato	9. and [so] I left
10. e mi sono dedicato all'agricoltura […]	10. and dedicated myself to farming […]
17. Come Cincinnato […]	17. Like Cincinnatus […]

Portrayed as a "temporary dictator" who alternated serving as a valiant military commander to withdrawing to his cherished life as a small farmer, Cincinnatus epitomizes the ideals of independence, understatement, and autonomy that my interlocutors associate with farming.

19. Siamo all'inizio della Repubblica Romana. […]	19. We are at the beginning of the Roman Republic […]
20. A un certo punto contro gli Etruschi,	20. At one point, against the Etruscans
21. c'era da combattere contro gli Etruschi.	21. [the Romans] had to fight against the Etruscans.
22. L'unico generale un po' in gamba era Cincinnato,	22. The only general who was a bit smart was Cincinnatus
23. era un po' strano	23. he was a little strange
24. perché diceva sempre pane al pane e vino al vino, hai capito?	24. because he would always call a spade a spade, you know?
25. non era di quelli	25. he wasn't like those
26. i politici, no? che cercano sempre la mediazione	26. the politicians, right? who always seek mediation
27. Allora cosa succedeva?	27. So how did it work back then?
28. Quando c'era *da fa'*	28. When there was something *to do*
29. allora *chiamava a lui*. […]	29. then *they would call him*. […]
33. e per meno di un anno, comandava lui […]	33. and for less than a year he would be in charge […]
35. sconfiggeva	35. and would defeat (the enemy's troops)
36. e ritornava nel suo orto,	36. and go back to his garden,
37. nel suo *campeto* […]	37. to his *little field* […]
38. lui era un piccolo coltivatore.	38. he was a small farmer.
39. E tornava lì,	39. And he would go back there,
40. poi […] lo richiamavano,	40. then […] they would call him back
41. poi l'anno dopo…	41. then after a year …
42. se ne era andato di nuovo. […]	42. then he would go back [to farming] again. […]
44. Gli piaceva fare	44. He enjoyed being
45. Fare il servitor della patria	45. Being a servant of the country
46. Senza avere incari particolari duraturi	46. without having any long-lasting mandate

Giancarlo's narrative is evocative of how most of my interlocutors see their existential choice as a way of avoiding (dependent) labor, or, even more radically, enacting a "strategy of refusal," a theme that has long been discussed by (neo-)workerist theorists (Tronti [1965] 1980; Fumagalli 2015). Several of my interlocutors (in their mid-twenties to early-thirties) are at the beginning of their professional lives; others (in their early to mid-forties) have turned to full-time farming after a first part of their lives spent in different professions, while others are retirees who, after several decades spent as factory workers, are finally able to devote more time to what used to be their side job/hobby: farming. As revealed by the local term *metalmezzadro*—roughly translatable as 'metalsharecropper', a portmanteau of *metalmeccanico* ('metalworker') and *mezzadro* ('sharecropper')—a mixed pattern of livelihood has been widespread in the region: many of my middle-aged and elderly interlocutors used to combine a regular factory job (as metal factory workers) with more informal types of agricultural engagement, suggesting a longstanding connection between farming and personal autonomy (Wolf 1969) and between informality and rural revenues.[16]

Regardless of explicit pronouncements, the ambiguous blurring of the boundary between work and nonwork, which imbues the lives of the neorural farmers I study, is produced through situated moments of interaction, characterized by a marked degree of discursive unscriptedness and regional parlance. Whether recorded in the fields or in local farmers' markets, the interactions in my corpus (approximately 150 hours of recordings) reveal strong parallels between the informal quality of (relatively) unregimented agricultural labor and the interactional effervescence in people's modes of talk. While they manually pick *visciole* or *paccasassi* without the aid of noisy mechanical tools, the friends and acquaintances, who generally gather as a casual work team during the harvesting season, chat and joke, exchange farming tips and intimate narratives, gossip about common acquaintances, and recall the old times of sharecropping (*mezzadria*) social life, in an unpredictable succession of topics and affective intensities. Without any predetermined work plan, people choose a tree or a plant to harvest and talk as they steadily and somewhat distractedly pick cherries, their attention's focus effortlessly shifting from manual to conversational labor (Figures 6 and 7). All this interactional activity is characterized by the deployment of markedly regional linguistic variants and is performed in a colloquial mode.

In the fragment of rural conversational activity and labor reproduced in the excerpt below ("Sugo del batte"), Gino begins to recollect a local recipe, for the benefit of three other local pickers and myself (an outsider). Interspersing the narrative with regional lexical terms and syntactic constructs, the participants recollect cooking and commensal practices of their youth, when major events in the farming cycle were marked by special communal meals. Back in the days, farmers would make the best of food scraps and turn them into fancy meals, a case in point was the "sugo del batte," a special sauce made with chicken or duck entrails and used as a special dressing for the pasta-based meal communally consumed to celebrate the end of threshing (*batte* in the local language), which at that time was done manually.

[16] As Eric Wolf (1969, xiv–xv) points out, peasants are typically self-employed and subsistence-oriented, which, unlike the wageworkers' condition, entails a remarkable degree of autonomy in making "decisions regarding the processes of cultivation" (Wolf 1969, xiv).

Figure 6. Harvesting *visciole* in Osimo (Ancona Province). Courtesy of the author 2024.

"Sugo del batte." Osimo, June 18, 2024.

1. Gino: No no no TUTTO!	1. Gino: No no no EVERYTHING!
2. del pollo non *se* buttava via niente […]	2. Of the chicken, nothing *was thrown* away […]
3. *i ragagli* del pollo non *se* buttava via niente	3. chicken *entrails*, nothing *was thrown* away
4. dallo *zampo*	4. (you would eat everything) from the *leg*
5. alle budella	5. to the guts
6. all'interiora	6. to the entrails
7. TUtto *se magnava*	7. EVERYthing *was eaten*

Figure 7. Harvesting *visciole* in Osimo (Ancona Province). Courtesy of the author 2024.

8. e *se* faceva il sugo *se* faceva	8. And the sauce *was made. It was made*
9. e il sugo *veneva bono* Eh	9. and the sauce *came out good* Eh
10. ma per pulire le budella del pollo	10. But to clean the guts of the chicken
11. si lavavano *ben fatto*	11. they were rinsed *well done*
12. poi si mettevano sotto aceto	12. they were soaked in vinegar

In the interaction, the hiatus between the here-and-now and the there-and-then of a seemingly lost rural world is simultaneously emphasized and blurred. On the one hand, the imperfective tense and the ditransitive impersonal constructions (the so-called Italian impersonal-passive SI, which is here replaced by the regional variant SE)

foreground the habitual and iterative character of the actions described and the semantic prominence of the recipe's referents (the ingredients expressed by regional terms) over the human agents, conjuring an idyllic elsewhere located in a nonspecific past (Bakhtin 1981, 225). On the other hand, by being embedded within an activity (picking *visciole*) associated with traditional rurality and by deploying a series of regional terms (*ragai, zampo, ruspe, scorticavano, magnava, coceva, arosto, ciccetto*) indexical of the participants' membership in the local community of speech and practice, the narrative operates a "transduction" (Silverstein 2003) into the present of embodied dispositions, cultural values, and social structures of the sharecropping lifeworld, which is, thus, not translated into present-day conceptual frameworks, but actualized through material and linguistic practices.[17] As was the case for the neodialect poetic procedures and the neorurals' *showing, sampling*, and *pairing* practices discussed earlier.

This is particularly apparent at line 13, when Gino seeks confirmation (of the correctness of the recipe) from Maria (a fellow female picker) by addressing her with the exquisitely local title of *vergara* ('landlady'), thus momentarily eliding the distinction between the here-and-now and the there-and-then and superimposing the sharecropping social structures onto the contemporary moment.

13. Gino: dico bene *vergara* là?	13. Gino: Hey there *landlady*, am I right?
14. Maria: sì a bagno con l'aceto	14. Maria: yes soaked in vinegar
15. Gino: a bagno con l'aceto	15. Gino: soaked in vinegar
16. poi *se se* facevano bollire	16. then they *were boiled*
17. e poi *se risciacquavano* di nuovo	17. and then *they were rinsed* again
18. e poi *se* mettevano nel sugo	18. and *were put* in the sauce
19. lo stesso i piedi	19. the same with the feet
20. i *zampi* […]	20. *the zampi* […]
22. Maria: anche le *ruspe*	22. Maria: also the *gizzard* (part of a bird's stomach)
23. Gino.: Come? Ah *sci* perché *sci* i cos	23.Gino.: what? Ah *yeah* because *yeah* the…
24. Maria: le *ruspe* del pollo	24. Maria: the *gizzard* of the chicken
25. Gino: eeeh *se* puliva *ben fatto*	25. Gino: eeeh they *were rinsed well done*
26. *Se faceva* bollire	26. *they were boiled*
27. *Se scorticavano* (???)	27. *they were scraped* (??)
28. poi *se metteva* lì e	28. *they were put* there and
29. non *se* poteva *di'* niente	29. and *there was* no *question* [about it]
30. faceva un sugo di quello (???) […]	30. the sauce was marvelous (???) […]
31. e la domenica *se magnava* a pranzo la pasta	31. and on Sundays for lunch *they would eat* pasta
32. coi *ragai*	32. with *the entrails*
33. e alla sera *se coceva* il pollo *arosto*	33. and in the evening *they would roast* a chicken
34. dico bene Silvano?	34. Am I right Silvano?
35. Silv.: alla domenica	35. Silv.: on Sundays
36. Gino.: ALLA domenica	36. Gino.: ON Sundays
37. la domenica la domenica	37. on Sundays on Sundays

[17] Silverstein's (2003) notion of transduction aims at overcoming Saussurean/denotational notions of interlingual translation and emphasizes the importance of finding "transductional equivalents" capable of capturing the "indexical penumbra" of words (Silverstein 2003, 89).

38. un pezzo per uno […]	38. Everyone (would get) a piece […]
41. Un *ciccetto* per uno	41. a *little piece of meat* each

The capacity of regional and relatively obsolete linguistic expressions to materialize, once embedded within relevant farming practices, agrolinguistic social worlds nostalgically perceived as vanishing is even more apparent in the next excerpt. Here, Sandro draws an imaginary ("as if") comparison (at line 3) between the leftovers from the cherries we were picking that day and the political economy of scarcity of the old times, when some people would survive by gleaning the grains dropped by harvesters. The combination of proximal deictics (*adesso* 'now' and *questi qui* 'these here') with a hypothetical conditional clause (introduced by the "as if" conjunction) evokes a comparative horizon of both continuity and discontinuity with former rural practices.

"Le purette da Monsano." Osimo, June 18, 2024.

1. Sandro.: dopo la trebbiatura	1. Sandro: after threshing
2. *se andava a raccoglie* le spighe	2. *you would go to pick* the ears of wheat.
3. come se adesso uno volesse raccoglie questi qui	3. As if now one wanted to get these here (referring to the cherries that are left on the ground)
4. fra qualche giorno	4. in a few days (once we have finished harvesting)
5. *se contenta*, capito?	5. (*you would) be content* (with what is left), you know?
6. Pensa *passava le purette* da Monsano	6. Imagine, the *poor women* from Monsano *would come* by
7. quando hai *cavato* le patate	7. when you *have dug* the potatoes
8. *che* noi *cavavam*o le patate q*uand'era 'nverno*	8. *'cause* we would *dig* potatoes *when it was winter*.
9. Allora *passava dopo de noi*	9. Then *they would come by after we* (had finished)
10. *Ruspava* ancora un po'	10. *They would rake* a little further
11. Per trovarne qualcuna	11. To find some

The use of regional terms and morphosyntactic constructions, such as the lack of agreement between (third person) plural subject and verb (inflected in the third person singular, see lines 6, 10, 11, and 15), is key for recuperating a lived sense of yesterday's moral economy, of the social relations that underlay it, and even of its protagonists' voices, as in the direct reported speech at line 14.

[…]	[…]
12. campavano racimolando qualcosa, capito?	12. they would survive by gleaning something, you know?
13. queste qua	13. these here
14. *Diceva: "posso anda' vede se c'è qualcosa?"* […]	14. *they would say:* "*can I go to see* if there's *anything*?" […]
15. Ma *nesciuno glie diceva no*	15. But *no one would tell them no*

My interlocutors share a strong commitment to forms of agricultural labor (such as picking *visciole* by hand) that are not scalable and are targeted at "hyper-niche production," as Francesco (one of the cofounders of a local artisanal company for the cultivation and transformation of sea fennel), once put it. They enjoy this approach

to farming and most of them do not seem interested in scaling up and transitioning toward intensive forms of agribusiness. This commitment can be explained, at least in part, by their affective and ideological attachment to regional language, which, once combined with old-school farming practices, has the transductive capacity of actualizing seemingly vanishing social worlds and their related "attentional practices," that is, embodied dispositions and "activity-specific ways of paying attention" (Duranti 2009, 212; see also Goodwin 1994; La Mattina 2023). The production of nonscalability, through acts and ideologies of (un-)translatability, is, however, also an effective form of capitalist valorization, as revealed by my previous analysis of marketing and commodity formulation practices.

Conclusion

After the fast-paced rural exodus that followed the end of World War II, Italy is now experiencing a reverse trend. Many people across the peninsula are participating in various forms of rural revival, ranging from "hobby-farming," to "back-to-the-land" experiences, to forms of collaboration with small local farmers (Grasseni 2014; Siniscalchi 2019; Koensler 2023). In this article, I proposed to explore this phenomenon by analyzing the relation between language and (non)scalability.

To understand the intersection between capitalism and the political economy of translation in contemporary Italy, I proposed an audacious connection between two apparently unrelated fields of cultural production: neodialect poetry and neorural farming. My own audacity resonates with that of my research interlocutors. By choosing "to bet it all" (as one of them put it) on dialect name-branding, neorural farmers opt for a costly and time-intensive approach to crafting a commodity register that might result unintelligible for a larger market of consumers. In a like manner, by centering their poems on vernacular terms and highly local referents, neodialect experimentalists are constantly exposed to the risk of remaining municipal poets, incapable of reaching a national public of critics and readers. Despite these risks, neodialect poets and neorural farmers have consistently pursued a politics of nonscalability through acts of incommensuration and displays of untranslatability.

To fully capture the lived experience, structures of practice, and modes of attention embedded in the poems discussed above, knowledge of the Anconitan is not enough. For example, whereas for individuals who grew up in Ancona and its surroundings in the 1940s and 1950s, the vernacular terms and the images (June bugs kept in hole-filled small cardboard boxes) of *Insetto de Passió* (Scataglini [1977] 2022, 140) are immediately evocative of a common springtime children's game, the poem remains mostly unintelligible for people who are not familiar with its lexicon and with the practices it describes. Aside from the poetic production of nonscalable lifeworlds through various enactments of semantic untranslatability and ontological incommensuration, neodialect poets have also developed, based on the initial opposition between vernacular and national language, a series of "fractal replications" of contrastive sets of qualities (Gal and Irvine 2019, 49), such as periphery vs. center, concreteness vs. abstraction, uniqueness vs. seriality, linguistic purity vs. linguistic crisis, rural world vs. industrial capitalism, germinal language vs. techno-automatism, low vs. high, quotidian vs. lyrical-elegiac, heteroglossic vs. monolingual, standardized vs. spontaneously

unpredictable, thus generating fractal (i.e., endlessly replicable) orders of nonscalability (Gal and Irvine 2019).

Originally formulated by prominent poets and critics such as Pasolini (1942) and Contini (1943), these "axes of differentiation" (Gal 2012; Gal and Irvine 2019) spread across the Italian cultural and literary landscape in the aftermath of WWII and circulated through more peripheral environments such as the Anconitan province, which provided the backdrop for Scataglini's (2022) literary experimentations, and were locally disseminated through a series of poetry festivals, radio programs, and cultural events devoted to the promotion and revitalization of vernacular poetry and folk literatures.

For example, *Residenza* (Residence),[18] a weekly "radio journal" devoted to poetry readings, that Scataglini founded in 1980 together with other local poets and intellectuals constituted an important device for the dissemination of these qualitative contrasts. In 1994, the year of his death, Scataglini also founded in Ancona a poetry festival entitled *Poesia in Giardino* (Canettieri 2022: XXX). More recent incarnations of these initiatives are *Marchestorie*, a multisited festival devoted to the promotion of Marchesan gastronomic traditions and folk literature and the poetry festival, held across several Marchesan locations, *La Punta della Lingua.*

The neodialect poets' literary and ideological work has delineated how centripetal forces may be creatively disbanded, recalibrated, and disrupted by alternative modes of using language, providing, albeit indirectly, a semiotic framework for the neorural farmers' production of a niche-market pivoting on profitable forms of nonscalability.

Contrary to existing hegemonic regimes of translational encompassment, according to which regional languages can be completely subsumed within standard Italian, without leaving residues, my neorural interlocutors engage in sophisticated displays of untranslatability and interlinguistic calibrations, suggesting how certain things cannot be "reduced" to standard Italian verbiage or to plain and straight commodities. Further, contrary to the relentless production of highly scripted and generic interactional templates prescribing how language should be used to maximize scalable productivity, my interlocutors are committed to a significant degree of discursive unscriptedness as they interact both in the fields and in farmers' markets. Through the practice of showing, pairing, and sampling, they produce sophisticated sensorial dictionaries whereby they provide ostensive definitions of their typical products, without having to rely on the use of standard Italian to translate the names and flavors of the local delicatessens they produce and sell, in so doing they incorporate, within the commodity registers they craft, traces of the gift-like sociality that originally surrounded these products. The forms of nonscalable incommensuration resulting from neorural practice are clearly (and somewhat paradoxically) scalable and connected to the literary experiments with (un-)translatability formerly undertaken by neodialect poets. Ironically and perhaps unknowingly, the former manufactured poetic processes the latter may now draw on to develop a "strategy of refusal" (Tronti [1965] 1980) to disengage from the alienation of agribusiness scalable production and, at the same time, craft profitable niche markets from where to extract capitalist value.

[18] *Residenza* (Residence) was broadcast by the local branch of Italian national radio (Radio Rai Marche): https://www.raiplaysound.it/audio/2023/07/Wikiradio-del-25072023-3f9119ef-cfb0-468b-a75e-8674f5fb5976.html accessed on July 18, 2025.

How do incommensurate worlds emerge, and how are they sustained in their incommensurability?" Asks Povinelli (2001, 320) in a discussion on the possibility of alternative ethical or epistemological horizons and the emergence of radical social worlds against "the complicated space and time of global capital." Neorural and neo-dialect projects (through their history of reciprocal collisions and overlaps) may offer an interesting perspective to attend to Povinelli's (2001) question.

Acknowledgements. Special thanks to Rosellina Massi Scataglini for granting me permission to reproduce Franco Scataglini's poems. I am also grateful to all the people who, during different stages of my fieldwork, offered their time and insights and agreed to be video- and audio-recorded for this project, which was reviewed and approved by Sarah Lawrence College IRB (Institutional Review Board). Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 2023 AAA/CASCA in Toronto and at the "Monday Seminar" of the Department of Anthropology, the University of Chicago. I thank all the participants for their comments, and I am particularly grateful to Sue Gal, John Kelly, William Mazzarella, Costas Nakassis, Kaushik Sunder Rajan, and Kamala Russell for their invaluable feedback. I also thank two anonymous reviewers for their comments, along with *Signs and Society* Editor-in-Chief, Asif Agha, for his helpful comments and guidance throughout the review process. I am responsible for any remaining mistakes or shortcomings.

Funding statement. Fieldwork for this article was supported by research funds from Sarah Lawrence College (Ziesing Fund for Research in the Social Sciences and the Ellen Schloss Flamm and Family Endowed Fund for Faculty Research, in 2018–2021) and by a Post-PhD Research Grant (#8450927052) from the Wenner-Gren Foundation (2022–2024).

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Cite this article: Donzelli, Aurora. 2025. "Translations Interrupted: Italian Neorural Revivals and the Neodialect Poetics of Nonscalability." *Signs and Society* 13 (3): 326–354. https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2025.13

Signs and Society (2025), **13** (3), 355–376
doi:10.1017/sas.2025.10015

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
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ARTICLE

Capitalism and the Semiotics of Corporate Personhood in a Law of Human Persons

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Abstract

The semiotic construction of corporate persons in law is key to the contemporary organization of global capitalism. The economic capacities enjoyed by corporations stem significantly from how the semiotics of corporate personhood work within domestic and international legal orders fundamentally designed for human persons. Signs (especially in documents—laws, incorporation papers, tax filings, etc.) construct corporations as legal persons—entities modeled on human persons yet differently bound to human embodiment. Corporations multiply themselves through the creation of legally independent corporate persons ("subsidiaries"), while unifying themselves through their control over these persons. Unlike human offspring, corporations' corporate offspring are easily created, may take up residence in almost any jurisdiction, and always obey their parents. The paper will discuss the implications of these features of corporations with respect to tort liability, international trade, property, taxation, and private militaries.

Keywords: capitalism; corporations; liability; performativity; personhood; taxation

Introduction

The semiotic construction of corporate persons in law is key to the contemporary organization of global capitalism. The economic capacities enjoyed by corporations stem substantially from how the semiotics of corporate personhood work within domestic and international legal orders fundamentally designed for human persons. By semiotics of corporate personhood, I mean the way signs (especially in documents—laws, incorporation papers, tax filings, etc.) construct corporations as legal persons—entities modeled on human subjects yet differently bound to human embodiment. Corporations are commonly conceptualized as economic actors, property holders, and even as property themselves. Of course, corporations wield immense influence through their control and utilization of vast resources. However, like humans, corporations are born without property. The legal formation of a corporation is not the making of a property holder, but the semiotic constitution of a person, a formally autonomous legal

actor. Attention has focused on advantages stemming from the resources corporations have, but this article will concentrate on how the fundamental features of corporations advantage them, especially how they differ from those of human legal persons. Specifically, the article will show how the fundamentally semiotic character of corporate persons advantages them in the application of a variety of laws made for "natural persons," what Anglo-American law calls individual humans as legal subjects.

We can distinguish two sources of advantages corporations enjoy under laws applied similarly to humans and corporations: (1) the *vast resources* that corporations often possess; (2) the *semiotic features* of the creation, sociopolitical identity, and political relations of corporate persons.

The first source of advantage, *vast resources*, has been the focus of recent concern about corporate personhood in the US. The vast resources corporations amass give them greater capacity to exercise rights that were once possessed only by human persons as citizens. Adam Winkler has shown how corporations brought this about. From soon after the ratification of the US Constitution, corporations have successfully striven to gain the same Constitutional rights as individuals. The Supreme Court cases of *Citizens United*, which granted corporations a limited First Amendment right to participation in US elections, and *Hobby Lobby*, which extended religious liberty to corporations, are simply the most recent in a long series of decisions extending Constitutional rights to corporations. As Winkler observes, "Today corporations have nearly all the same rights as individuals: freedom of speech, freedom of the press, religious liberty, due process, equal protection, freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures, the right to counsel, the right against double jeopardy, and the right to trial by jury, among others" (2018, 8). The power of corporations to use their vast resources to exercise these rights is of great concern. However, these concerns also apply to American oligarchs as human individuals as much as to their corporate embodiments—Jeff Bezos as much as Amazon.com Inc. For example, although it is difficult to track the sources of independent expenditures in US election campaigns, ultra-wealthy individuals appear to contribute as much or more than corporations (Committee for Economic Development 2017).

This article will focus on the second source of advantages, the *semiotic features* of corporate persons that distinguish them from human persons. As I'll show below, even the least resourced corporation has capacities that Jeff Bezos as a human person does not. Corporations are empowered not only by what they have but what they are, specifically, how they differ from human persons in the ways they are created, how they are socially-politically identified, and how they relate to one another. Although both human and corporate persons are semiotic entities, corporate persons are more predominantly so (Urban and Kyung-Nan 2015). Corporate persons are the effects of performative speech acts such as a charters or articles of incorporation that are written, registered, copied, and filed; they endure through the circulation of names and seals in documents of many kinds. Especially important is that a corporate person has a different relation to human bodies than a "natural" person. From the 1890s, critics of the large corporations erupting into American life argued that corporations acted amorally because the corporation has no "soul" (Marchand 1998, 7). However, more salient to how corporations operate in the global economy is that they have no *body*. To be more precise, corporations, unlike "natural persons," do not depend on a stable

index to a single, rigidly designated (Kripke 1980), living, embodied, and emplaced human being, with all biological, physical, social, and legal limitations. Both natural and corporate persons are constructed through semiotic processes. As I'll argue, the key difference lies in the way humans are involved in these semiotic processes. Since at least the early sixteenth century, the challenges of fitting corporations into laws regulating human persons have been diagnostic of the degree to which laws assume legal persons have a body and a soul or mind. *Habeas corpus*, literally, "you shall have the body," functionally a command from a court to bring a detained person before it, has been considered the foundation of due process since the Magna Carta (Garrett 2012). Semiotically liberated from any particular body, corporate persons can act in ways no human person can.

This article will not assess whether corporations should be persons in law (Greenfield 2006) or social analysis (Welker 2014). Rather, it will analyze the semiotic dimensions of corporate persons within the Anglo-American legal tradition and how their semiotic characteristics empower corporate activities in contemporary global capitalism. This article first discusses the semiotic processes of (1) corporation creation, (2) domicile and identifications, and (3) political relations. In a human idiom, we might call these, respectively, their birth, their sociopolitical identity, and their kinship relations. The article then turns to political and economic effects of these semiotic dimensions of corporate personhood on corporate liability, taxation, and other forms of regulation.

Before we get to these issues, however, I will discuss how corporate persons were modeled on or iconized as human legal persons within sixteenth-century English royal and judicial courts. The signs and contexts of corporate personhood have shifted since this period, but the formulations of these courts were recruited as authoritative for the legal treatment of corporations through the end of the nineteenth century, when modern corporation law was established. Throughout this article, I will draw on the ways that Anglo-American law figured corporations from the sixteenth century to the late-nineteenth century in order to defamiliarize the aspects of contemporary corporations which have become rather taken for granted in a world organized by corporations.

Semiotics of early corporate persons

Much of the popular debate on political status of corporations in the US has focused on "corporate personhood," seeing personhood as a legal status that inevitably extends the rights of human individuals to corporations. Following the *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision, voters in Missoula, Montana, and other cities passed resolutions declaring that "corporations are not human beings" (Szpaller 2011). The economist and former US labor secretary, Robert Reich, wrote, "Corporations aren't people. They can't know right from wrong. They're incapable of criminal intent. They have no brains. They're legal fictions – pieces of paper filed away in a vault in some bank" (2012). Nowadays protest signs, bumper stickers, and blog posts skeptically declare, "I'll believe corporations are people when Texas executes one."

However, personhood has been *the* fundamental feature of corporations since at least their late-sixteenth-century forms. The late-nineteenth-century legal scholars Maitland and Pollock observed that every legal system

> seems compelled by the ever-increasing complexity of human affairs to add to the number of persons provided for it by the natural works to create persons who are not men. Or, rather, to speak with less generality and more historical accuracy, a time came when every system of law in Western Europe adopted and turned to its own use an idea of non-human persons… (1895, 469)[1]

The original goal of corporate personhood was to create a juridical person semiotically unconnected with a particular, living, human body. The word *corporation* comes from the Latin term *corporatio*, derived from *corporare*, which means "to form into a body" or "to embody." The centrality of a substitute bodiliness is clear when we recognize that the concept was a secular extension of canon law from the twelfth century. Kantorowicz (1957) described the late-medieval theological concept of *dignity*, a kind of spiritual presence that continued despite the passing of an incumbent bishop. In the late-fifteenth century, this concept of dignity was recast in a secular idiom as a "corporation sole." At issue was the sixteenth-century difference between office and person. An office was understood as status or role conferred upon a human person, who acted with the authority of the office but had personal responsibility. An office had to be inhabited and animated by a human actor. When bishops were conceptualized as office holders, the bishopric property, held by the bishop, would fall into legal limbo until a new person was ordained as bishop, which could sometimes take years. To solve this problem, canon law constructed bishops, abbots, and other ecclesiastical officeholders as "corporations sole" to transmute the office into a legal actor, a person distinct from the biological human who held it. Properties were held by the corporation sole rather than the "natural person" who occupied the office. This legal arrangement allowed the Church to maintain continuity of property control through the deaths and succession of officeholders.

In the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, Edward Coke, the English jurist and legal theorist whose foundational writings guided English common law for several centuries, laid out the key features of corporate persons within common law. As Coke put it, "Persons… are of two sorts, *persons natural* created of God…and *persons incorporate or politique* created by the policy of man (and therefore they are called bodies politique)" (Coke [1628] 1823 L.1. C. 1 Sect. 1. 2.a, my emphasis). "Persons incorporate" were of two sorts, "sole" or "aggregate," such as guilds, towns, and universities. However, both kinds were constructed as a body created by human government ("policy") as a substitute for the single "natural" body they lacked. A corporation sole, via rituals of consecration that indexically linked the corporation to a single person, could appear in court. By contrast, "a Corporation aggregate of many is invisible, immortal, & resteth only in intendment and consideration of the Law" (Coke [1611] 1738, 32b). This invisibility prevented their participation in courts: "a corporation aggregate of many cannot appeare in person; for albeit the bodies naturall, whereupon the bodie politique consists, may be seene, yet the bodie politique or corporate itselfe cannot be seene, nor doe any act but by atturney" (Coke [1628] 1823 L. 2. C. 1 Sect. 90.

[1] Gordon (2018) analyzes contemporary examples of personhood extended to rivers, mountains, forests, and even nature as a whole. Gershon (2014) shows how contemporary US jobs seekers attempt to mimic the branding of corporations by adopting their own brand identities.

66b). Using their corporate names "they are persons able to purchase, and to implead and to be impleaded, to sue and to be sued" (Coke [1628] 1823, L.2.C.11. Sect. 200 132.b).

Early corporations were "created by the policy of man" through the production and publication of performative documents known as "letters patent." The work of such documents, like other performative speech acts, as Michael Silverstein (1979, 2022) has shown, depends not only on the formal linguistic features of the discourse itself—such as grammatical structure or explicit performative markers—but also on a complex array of contextual conditions that enable the act to be recognized and take effect. These conditions include the social identities of the participants, the institutional frameworks authorizing the act, material characteristics of the speech "event," and the broader circulation and uptake of the discourse within specific fields of power and value.

As Coke declared, citing a precedent from 1375, "none but the King alone can create or make a Corporation" ([1611] 1738, 33b). The authorized medium of this creation were called "letters patent," which Coke often referred to as an "Act," something the king does. Monarchs typically created a corporation in response to a petition from those who hoped to be part of one, all of whom would be named individually as petitioners in letters patent. However, petitioners were always referred to in the third person ("they"). The addressees of letters patent were referenced by a greeting to an open field of interlocutors defined by any kind of encounter with the document itself (cf. Warner 2002). Elizabeth opened the letters patent creating what we now call the English East India Company (EIC) as follows:

> ELIZABETH, by the Grace of God, Queen of England, France, and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, &c. To all our Officers, Ministers and Subjects, and to all other People, as well within this our Real of *England* as elsewhere, under our Obedience and Jurisdiction, or otherwise, unto whom these our Letters Patents shall be seen, shewed, or read, greeting.

"Letters" in this context refers to a formal written document. Unlike the modern understanding of letters as personal correspondence, in this legal and historical context, "letters" referred to official documents. "Patent" derives from the Latin word *patens*, meaning "open" or "exposed." This refers to the physical format of these documents, which were delivered "open" with the seal visible, rather than closed or sealed shut. This open format signified that the document was meant to be read by all, not just the recipient.

Letters patent were graphic artifacts (Hull 2012, 259) combining discourse genre (Briggs and Bauman 1992) and typical material qualities. Letters Patent were written on parchment, a material far more expensive and durable than paper. Parchment was primarily made from the skins of sheep or goats. However, significant royal documents used calfskin, whose smoother, white, and more uniform surface and greater cost indexed the prestige of the crown and the matter of the document. The process of creating letters patent began when the petitioners submitted a formal petition to the monarch through the Privy Council. If the king or queen approved, instructions were given to draft a charter. Crown lawyers prepared the text, after which clerks of chancery drafted, "engrossed" (produced the final formal version), and certified the document.

The draft was then reviewed and approved by the Privy Council. Once finalized, the charter was "passed under the Great Seal," meaning the Lord Chancellor affixed the monarch's Great Seal to officially authorize it. The Great Seal, which embodied royal authority and was unique to each monarch, hung below the document as a pendant seal, attached by cords or parchment strips. For major royal grants like corporate charters, the seal was typically made with green wax and suspended by silk cords to signify the high status of the grant. The monarch's personal signature was not required; the Great Seal served as the Crown's legal approval.

In a variety of ways, the language of letters patent creatively indexed the enactment of the corporation and the sovereign's active role in bringing it into being. Royal charters frequently began with a triad of formulaic phrases: "especial Grace, certain Knowledge, and mere Motion," each phrase specifying the fulfillment of a different contextual condition of an authoritative and valid incorporation. "Especial Grace" signaled the monarch's discretionary favor, indicating that the grant was an act of sovereign generosity rather than obligation. "Certain Knowledge" declared that the monarch was acting on full and accurate understanding, thereby shielding the grant from claims that the Crown was misinformed. "Mere Motion," from the Latin term *mero motu*, emphasized that the act originated entirely from the sovereign's will, not from any acquiescence to a petition or any kind of coercion.

Letters patent were dense with explicitly performative terms (Austin 1975; Silverstein 1979). The monarch's actions were expressed in the simple present tense—not descriptively, as in "we are giving" or "we are granting," but performatively, as in "we do give and grant." This use of the present tense did not report an ongoing action but rather enacted it, aligning the monarch's expressions with an order of law, what Silverstein (1993, 52) calls *nomic calibration*. In this context, the present tense served to frame the monarch's speech as creating a durable legal reality: the very act of writing made it so. The utterance did not merely communicate a decision already made, but *was itself* the instrument by which the corporation came into being. In examining the key features of the charter in the case of *Sutton's Hospital*, Coke himself noted this feature, observing that many provisions in the charter of incorporation referred to future conditions (e.g., succession, property, governance), but that "when he [the king] cometh to the clause of incorporation, he doth it *per verba de praesenti tempore* [by words in the present time]. 'And the said persons and their Successors by the name, &c. We do by these presents for ever hereafter really and fully Incorporate, &c.'"

Queen Elizabeth I listed the names and titles of each of the 218 petitioners then brought the East India Company into existence with the following text:

> [We] do give and grant unto our said loving Subjects, before in these Presents expressly named, that they and every of them from henceforth be, and shall be one Body Corporate and Politick, in Deed and in Name, by the Name of *The Governour and Company of Merchants of London, Trading into the East-Indies* …

A similar use of the explicitly performative language is evident elsewhere in the charter such as when the Queen declares,

> we do order, make, ordain, constitute, establish and declare, by these Presents, and that by the same Name of *Governor and Company of Merchants of London, Trading into the East-Indies*, they shall have Succession …

In this passage, the explicit performatives ("order," "make," "ordain," "constitute," "establish," and "declare") align an actual speech event with the enduring order of law. Here the phrase "by these Presents" is crucial—it signals that the legal transformation is effected not just by the monarch's will but through the very document itself, which stands in as agent and evidence of sovereign action.

Lastly, a witnessing formula at the end of letters patent underscored the monarch's presence and authority in enacting the corporation, for example, "In witness whereof we have caused these our letters to be made patent. Witness Ourself at Westminster, the Thirty-first Day of December, in the Three and Fortieth Year of our Reign." This conclusion affirmed the charter's authenticity through a reaffirmation of an essential condition of its effectiveness, that it expresses the will of the sovereign.

Coke, commenting on such incorporative acts, drew an analogy between incorporation and baptism, emphasizing the performative force of corporate naming. Coke metapragmatically characterized the royal naming of incorporation as like a baptism with the King as the officiant: "The name of incorporation is as a proper name or name of baptism: In this case Sutton [the petitioner] as God-father giveth the name, and by the same name the King doth baptize the incorporation." Here Coke positioned the monarch not merely as a grantor but as a kind of spiritual officiant, consecrating the corporation into legal personhood through naming.

The form of corporate names during this period reflected a desire to tether these invisible legal persons to living human persons. Like the *The Governour and Company of Merchants of London, Trading into the East-Indies*, corporations were often named by combining terms for the paramount officer and general membership: *dean* and *chapter* (a group of clergy) for church corporations; *master* or *president* and *fellows* for academic colleges; *mayor* and *comunalty* [commonality] for municipal corporations.[2] Additionally, corporate charters would always designate the first human person to occupy the paramount office (his successors would be officially chosen by the corporation), as in the EIC charter: "we do assign, nominate, constitute and make, the said *Thomas Smith*, Alderman of *London*, to be the First and present Governor of the said Company." Via office-holding a corporation would always be indexically tethered to a human person, even though the actual human persons holding the offices would change. As corporations developed more robust forms of personhood over the eighteenth century, reference to a paramount officer was increasingly dropped from names of corporations as the need for an individual, human-like supplement waned.

[2]For legal purposes, most of the oldest UK and US colleges have retained their original names in this form: *The Chancellor, Masters and Scholars of the University of Oxford; The Chancellor, Masters and Scholars of the University of Cambridge; The President and Masters or Professors of the College of William and Mary in Virginia; The President and Fellows of Harvard College; The President and Fellows of Yale College.* US Colleges formed in the mid-eighteenth century tended to drop the reference to the paramount officer: *The Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York; The Trustees of the University of Pennsylvania.* Formed in 1804, Brown University dropped direct reference to the membership: *The Corporation of Brown University.*

Another feature of early incorporation documents is that they empowered corporations only for certain activities that were seen to serve the public interest. As in the EIC, this purpose was often included in the very name of the corporation, but the text of the letters patent included a number of specific restrictions, for example, on the amount of silver they could export and shipping arrangements. Charters required corporations to follow these provisions in addition to the common law applying to all subjects and activities.

As I will discuss below, sorting out the place of corporate persons in a law fundamentally designed for human persons has been a problem since the earliest corporations. However, early charters, declaring corporations "able and capable in law," laid out a series of speech acts within the established order of English courts that a company could and must be the speaker and addressee of. The EIC charter declared,

> … they and their Successors, by the *Name of The Governour and Company of Merchants of London, Trading into the East-Indies*, may plead and be impleaded, answer and be answered, defend and be defended, in whatsoever Courts and Places … in such Manner and Form, as any other, our liege People of this our Realm of England …

The phrases "in such Manner and Form, as any other, our liege People of this our Realm" construct the company like a human person within legal affairs.

The final factor in a performative act is what Silverstein calls the "uptake," how the addressees or audience interprets and responds to the act. In the case of letters patent, this took three forms. First, after a royal charter was issued, an official copy was "enrolled" to create a permanent royal record. Enrollment involved making a formal, official copy of the letters patent and entering it into a public ledger, "Patent Rolls," consisting of many individual letters patent sewn end to end chronologically to form a long scroll.[3] The Crown kept a certified copy for legal reference in case the original was lost or disputed. This process was a crucial state act of memory, ensuring the transaction was preserved for future legal use. Enrollment was essential for the document's legitimacy; without it, the grant might be seen as informal or legally defective. Second, the original document would be delivered to the grantees, like the EIC petitioners, who would publicize it through meetings and by having copies printed and circulated in commercial circles—and they would begin to take the actions authorized by the grant. Third, significant royal grants, such as those for trading companies or peerage titles, were often publicized through royal proclamations issued by the monarch or Privy Council. These proclamations were typically posted in public places like town halls, market squares, or church doors, making them known to society at large. Major privileges like the creation of a corporation might also be formally announced by heralds or posted on public noticeboards.

[3]The term "enrollment" comes from the Old French *enroller*, meaning "to put on a roll," referring to the long rolls of parchment used for records in medieval and early modern England.

Creation, domicile and identifications, political relations

Despite significant changes, there are strong continuities in the fundamental semiotic characteristics of corporations from the sixteenth century to the present. What is common from the earliest incorporations until the present is the disjunction between the attributes of individuals constituting the corporation (members, shareholders) and the attributes ascribed to the corporate person. The legal limitations that are, at base, dependent on the characteristics of a single, embodied human being have mostly never applied to corporate persons. However, changes in political-economic arrangements have reshaped the consequences of this corporate characteristic. There are three key features of corporate personhood that contrast with modern human personhood in ways that are consequential for the global structuring of capitalism today: the creation of a corporate person; their domicile and identifications; and the political relations among corporations.

Creation of a corporate person

We can cast the history of incorporation as series of changes in the performative actions and the contextual conditions required for them to bring corporations into existence. As I will show, in the early sixteenth century, forming a corporate person was, along many dimensions, considerably more difficult than forming a human person. Since then, incorporation has become faster, cheaper, more routinized, less public, less exclusive, less emplaced, and requiring less human participation and political negotiation.

In the early era of business corporations, considerable work was involved in persuading a political authority to produce a declaration of incorporation. Queen Elizabeth issued her Letters Patent for the EIC after more than eighteen months of planning and energetic advocacy at her Court by a group of London Merchants. In the US, from the post-Revolutionary era through the mid-nineteenth century, incorporation was performed by state legislatures, with "private acts" replacing royal letters patent as the instrument. Forming a corporation remained a similarly arduous political process and incorporation was still considered a privilege not a right. Incorporators had to politic to get US state governments to pass a law to create each new corporation, a so-called "private act" that applied only to a specific individual, group, or entity, rather than to the public at large. Those who wanted a corporation had to persuade lawmakers and sometimes navigate opposition from competing interests. Charters could be vetoed, delayed, or modified based on political, economic, or even moral considerations. Like royal charters, legislative corporate charters declared a narrow purpose, often imposed strict limits on corporate activity. Charters also often fixed the duration of the corporation, for example, at twenty or thirty years, and included state oversight and revocation clauses.

Charters were private acts, but they required corporations to serve a clearly defined public purpose. The private acts that chartered corporations were more varied in form than English royal charters, but the private act establishing the *The Milford Rail Road and Canal Company* in Delaware in 1833 was typical. The handwritten act began by declaring that both houses of Delaware had approved the creation of a company for particular stretches of railroad and canal.

> Sect 1 Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the State of Delaware in General Assembly met, two thirds of each branch of the Legislature concurring therein, That a company shall be established for making a railroad and cutting a canal … from the town of Milford to …
>
> Sect 3 And be it enacted That the subscribers to the capital stock of such aforesaid, their successors and assigns shall be and they are hereby created a Corporation by the name "The Milford Rail Road and Canal Company" and by that name shall have power and capacity to sue and be sued … to purchase, take, enjoy, sell and alien, lands, tenements and hereditaments, goods, chattels, rights, credits and effects … to have have a common seal …

Such private acts were not required to be signed by the governor and this one came into force when the clerk for the senate noted how it had been passed (Senate, "by paragraphs,"—each paragraph was voted on; House of Representaives, "viva voce"—members said "aye" or "nay" and the presiding officer determined the result).

By the mid-nineteenth century, most states enacted what was known as "free incorporation" under general laws of incorporation that simplified and democratized the incorporation process, and abandoned the requirement that a corporation serve any specified public interest. Incorporation became a registration procedure administered by secretaries of state that did not require individual approval by the state legislature. This much less public registration procedure, centered on filing rather than publicity, remains in place today. For example, under Delaware's corporation law, the certificate of incorporation for Wal-Mart Inc. was submitted to the Delaware Secretary of State on Halloween in 1969. The certificate, authored by the incorporators themselves, was nine pages long, in Courier type, with page numbers added by hand at the bottom. The official document that performatively created the corporation, with the seal of the Secretary of State and the signatures of the secretary and assistant secretary, made no mention of the State of Delaware or the Secretary of State as an agent of the incorporation, in alignment with the view that corporations are not wholly created by the state but merely recognized by them (Horwitz 1977). The text reflexively characterizes itself as a certification that the certificate of incorporation had been "filed," a certification that itself performs the "filing" and creates the corporation. The entire text said simply,

> I, Eugene Bunting, Secretary of State of the State of Delaware do herby certify that the above and foregoing pages numbered from 1 to 9, both numbers inclusive, is a true and correct copy of Certificate of Incorporation of the WAL-MART. INC.", as received and filed in this office the thirty-first day of October, A.D. 1969 at 10 o'clock A.M.

Today, under US laws of general incorporation, there are two roles for human persons in the incorporation from the would-be corporation side. The first are the incorporators, usually attorneys, identified by name and office address, who prepare, sign, and file the corporation's Certificate of Incorporation. The second are the initial directors, also identified by name and office address. The incorporators typically have a metaphysically ephemeral role in the new corporation. The certificate of incorporation for Walmart, for example, ushered the incorporators out of the corporation at the

instant the corporation is formed, ceding all power to the individuals specified as the initial board of directors: "The powers of the incorporators … shall cease upon filing of this Certificate of Incorporation and the business of the corporation shall be carried out by its initial Board of Directors." One of the advantages of incorporating in Delaware is that unlike others states that require several directors, Delaware requires only one director.

Nowadays, incorporation application forms can be completed online in 15 minutes, with on-line incorporation services like Stripe Atlas offering packages for as little as $250. Stripe Atlas promotes its incorporation service as "Fast, trusted, automated," inviting potential customers, "Tell Atlas about your company and co-founders in a simple, guided workflow, then generate and sign legal documents in a few minutes" and "no phone calls, faxes, or trips to the post office needed" (https://stripe.com/atlas). Stripe submits the certificate of incorporation to Delaware, which typically files it in 4–6 days.

The Stripe Atlas incorporation site asks no questions about public purpose – this legal requirement was mostly eliminated with general corporation laws. Delaware General Corporation Law §122(12) empowers corporations to "transact any lawful business which the corporation's board of directors shall find to be in aid of governmental authority." However, acting "in aid of governmental authority" is a capacity not a mandate and certificates of incorporation, like Walmart's, usually declare that the corporation may "engage in any lawful act or activity."

Domicile and identifications

Another difference between human persons and corporate persons is that it is very easy for parent corporations to choose the polity to which their corporate offspring will belong, their "domicile" in corporation law. Within the US, some corporations, without physical bodies, have even avoided some of the ethnic and racial identifications of the human individuals who form them, and thereby sidestepped some of the discrimination faced by their human incorporators.

Around 33 countries, mostly in the colonized Americas, have unrestricted *jus soli* ("right of the soil") or birthright citizenship guaranteed by constitutions or statutes (World Atlas 2024). With some restictions, a child born within these country's borders or territory is granted citizenship in that country—even if their parents are not citizens. Under the Fourteenth Amendment of the US Constitution, the US grants citizenship to any human person born on US soil, allowing citizens of other countries who are present in the US to give birth US citizens. Of course, the US, like many of these countries, restricts entry of foreign persons to the point of severely limiting the practical impact of this provision.

A growing number of countries will grant citizenship to wealthy individuals willing to invest in exchange for a controversial "golden passport" (Surak 2023). Most of these countries are micro-states, like St. Kitts & Nevis, Antigua, Malta, and Vanuatu, though larger states like Turkey, Egypt, and Cambodia have recently expanded what are known as "citizen by investment" programs. St. Kitts and Nevis calls itself the "Pioneer of the Global Investor Immigration Industry since 1984" and grants citizenship in exchange for contributions, as little as a $250,000, to the treasury or real estate or other business investments. However, worldwide only around 50,000 individuals naturalize through

such programs each year (Surak 2023, 18). Estimates vary, but annually perhaps as many as two million people globally are naturalized in countries after highly restrictive, arduous, years-long processes. But by and large, the state citizenship of human persons is based on that of their parents, especially their fathers, or spouses.

In contrast, we might say that most countries have something like birthright citizenship for corporate persons, and parent corporations need not travel to birth their offspring in other countries. Some countries place restrictions on foreign corporations in some business areas, like uranium mining (Canada), broadcasting (Hong Kong), and a variety of security-related industries (China). Some countries also require that some number of board members be citizens, for example India, which requires at least one director on the board be Indian. The US government passed a law in 2024 that banned TikTok Inc.—incorporated in Delaware as a subsidiary of ByteDance headquartered in China but incorporated in the Cayman Islands—out of concerns that its identity as a Chinese corporation makes it a privacy and security risk.

For the most part, however, corporate persons are uncontroversially created in most countries with few capital requirements and little concern for which polity their parent corporation belongs to. Even China has allowed "Wholly Foreign-Owned Enterprises" with loosening restrictions since 1986. Delaware, a leader in incorporation services for more than a century, invites incorporators from anywhere:

> Any person, partnership, association or corporation, singly or jointly with others, and without regard to such person's or entity's residence, domicile or state of incorporation, may incorporate or organize a corporation. (Delaware Corporation Law Title 8, Ch. 1 Subchapter, § 101a)

In addition to elective nationality, corporations throughout the Anglo-American world have been found to lack racial and ethnic identities, though this lack could be seen to make them de facto white. Richard Brooks (2006) gives us a rich account of the Virginia case that established what came to be the US legal consensus that a corporation, as a purely legal person, cannot have a race, and that characteristics of the members/shareholders of a corporation are independent from the corporation's. The case, *People's Pleasure Park Company v. Rohleder*, began in 1906 when Major Joseph B. Johnson, a former slave, purchased land with a racial covenant that restricted its transfer to "colored persons." To circumvent this restriction, he bought the land under the name of a corporation he established, the People's Pleasure Park Company. The shareholders of the corporation were all Black and it was chartered to develop a pleasure park for Black people. The land for the amusement park had originally been plotted for a white-only development that never attracted many house buyers. Florence Rohleder, one of the few residents, sued to stop the sale to People's Pleasure Park Co. on the grounds that it would violate the racial covenant in the deeds. The Virginia Supreme court was asked to determine whether the corporation itself could be considered a "colored person" under the terms of the covenant, raising significant legal and racial questions about the application of such discriminatory clauses to corporate entities.

The Virginia Supreme Court ruled that a corporation "is a person which exists in contemplation of law only, and not physically" and "[I]n law, there can be no such thing as a colored corporation" (cited in Brooks 2006, 2025, 2047). Brooks argues that

the explicit reasoning given by the court, that only a physical human body can have racial characteristics, was only part of its thinking. He observes "Southern courts at this time imbued race into things and persons with great facility," like cemeteries, books, churches (2006, 2026). In all such cases, indexical relations were sufficient to construct anything as racially Black. In this case, the indexical relation of the corporation to its Black shareholders would have sufficed to characterize the corporation Black. However, the court was more concerned to preserve the independence of a corporate person from its human persons, since this was the foundation of limited liability.

Political relations among corporations

Finally, corporate persons nowadays can relate to one another legally in ways that human persons cannot: one corporation can completely dominate another and deprive it of its capacity for fully independent decision-making and action. The legal ability of corporations to dominate other corporations arose in the US at the end of the nineteenth century and became a global norm over the course of the twentieth century.

In the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, however, this was not the case. Then, corporations often joined as "members" of new corporations, which only gradually transformed from membership-based to shareholder corporations. Nearly 55 London companies were original members of the Virginia Company of London under its second 1609 charter, including the Company of Haberdashers, Company of Fishmongers, and Company of Grocers, to name a few. These companies "adventured" (invested) in the Virginia Company's enterprise and a representative of each company was given a single vote, like all the other members—aristocrats, knights and other gentry, and commoners. The one-member-one-vote governance structure precluded any member, no matter how politically powerful or wealthy, from gaining legal control. And the charter of each company defined and limited its purposes. Therefore, the question of one company controlling another could never arise, even as corporations transformed into joint-stock corporations and one-member-one-vote gave way to share-based voting (Dunlavy 2004).

In the US, even after the introduction of general incorporation laws around the country in the mid-nineteenth century, there were no laws explicitly prohibiting corporations from buying shares in other corporations. Incorporations under general incorporation laws greatly weakened the old charter-based limitations on the activities a corporation was allowed to engage in. However, it wasn't until the 1880s that railroad and banking holding corporations began tentative experiments in stock buying in a regulatory gray zone. The more common method of combining corporations, used by Rockefeller's Standard Oil and others, was to place them under the control of a single board of a trust.

"Combination," as it was called in the period, raised concerns about the concentration of power, the obscurity of responsibility for actions, and the reduction in local control of business. Beyond these political concerns, one could also see a corporation's control of another corporation as anathema to the core principle of corporate personhood. As Mark puts it, the personification of the corporation "defines, encourages and legitimates the corporation as an autonomous, creative, self-directed economic being" (Mark 1987, 1443). From another perspective, it is precisely the semiotic framing of

subsidiary corporations as independent persons that permits their de facto domination by their parent corporations.

The Thirteenth Amendment, ratified in 1865, declared that "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude … shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." The Thirteenth Amendment, unlike the Fourteenth Amendment, does not use the disputed term "person"—and corporations would be disinclined to argue it applies to their relations with subsidiaries.

However, some thirty years after the Thirteenth Amendment declared that no natural person could be owned by another natural person, New Jersey in 1889 and Delaware a decade later explicitly granted the ability of corporations to hold shares in any other corporation anywhere. As semiotic creatures lacking a physical body or soul, one corporation could own or control another without violating moral sanctions against human ownership. Delaware law declared,

> Every corporation created under the provisions of this Act shall have power to purchase, hold, sell, assign, transfer, mortgage, pledge or otherwise dispose of the shares of the capital stock of, or any bonds, securities, or evidences of indebtedness created by, any other corporation or corporations of this State, or any other State, and while the owner of such stock to exercise all the rights, powers, and privileges of ownership, including the right to vote thereon. (Delaware General Corporation Law Section 133, 1899)

Since then, corporations have been allowed to acquire controlling stakes in other corporations and reproduce through the creation of new subsidiaries, corporations of which they hold a controlling share position. The 1899 Delaware corporation law became a blueprint for corporation law throughout the US, and this principle underpins much of the global corporate landscape. Despite the gradual acceptance of the domination of corporate parents over their children, the US and the European Union severely limit what we might think of as marriages, namely circular shareholding or cross-shareholding arrangements in which independent corporations own significant portions of each other stocks.

Although parent corporations usually allow their subsidiaries some degree of autonomy, they strive to create an organizational unity dominated by the parent corporation through a variety of socio-semiotic means: meetings and reporting, board membership, ethics and compliance policies, standardized processes, cultural formatting, and much more. Registered corporation documents semiotically translate the hierarchical organizational unity constructed by these efforts into two formally autonomous, self-directed economic agents. A 2022 analysis showed that some 370,320 corporations globally are subordinated to 6,186 major corporations (Barklie 2022). The corporation is born free, and everywhere it is in chains.

Corporate persons in global capitalism

Making and assembling the vast array of elements to construct a large multinational corporation—offices, factories, employees, trademarks, debt, shares, shareholders, documents, technology infrastructure—is a slow process. However, I have argued that corporate legal persons, unlike human legal persons, can be formed quickly,

cheaply, and with little effort through a predominantly semiotic process. And, freed from the restrictions placed on embodied persons, corporations can reproduce themselves in almost any sovereign country or jurisdiction with legally independent offspring, which they nevertheless control absolutely. Let me now turn to sketch some of the ways the semiotics of corporate personhood structure contemporary global capitalism.

Limitation of liability

The limitation of liability for shareholders of corporations, often considered to be a fundamental feature of corporations, is a direct outgrowth of the construction of corporations as persons. It's common to talk about corporations having limited liability, but it would be more accurate to say that corporations have *separate* liability, because they are persons independent from the persons who make them up (an incumbent, freemen, fellows, or shareholders). The limitation of liability of stockholders is explicitly granted in most corporation law. For example, Delaware General Corporation Law states that "the stockholders of a corporation shall not be personally liable for the payment of the corporation's debts" (DGCL Section 102(b)(6)). However, more fundamentally, shareholders' limitation of liability can be seen as outgrowth of the semiotic framing of corporations as independent persons within an individualistic moral framework in which the fundamental assumption is that one person is not responsible for the actions of another person.

We could say the corporate person itself, unlike a human person under US laws, has almost *no limitation of liability* at all. By contrast, liability is limited for human persons in a variety of Anglo-American legal contexts. Personal bankruptcy law limits the liability of a debtor, allowing, for example, individuals to keep a primary residence up to a certain value and other personal property. Medical malpractice laws often cap the damages a patient can recover from health-care providers. So-called Good Samaritan laws protect individuals who voluntarily provide assistance in emergency situations.

In all these cases, the law balances the responsibility of the actor against some moral or social good: the dignity and welfare of the individual (personal bankruptcy); ensuring the availability and manageable cost of medical care; and encouraging bystanders to help in emergency situations. Some legal scholars have similarly argued that limited liability developed to serve a range of advantageous functions such as facilitating investment, managerial freedom, and a market for shares (e.g. Easterbrook and Fischel 1985). However, while large seventeenth- and eighteenth-century corporations, participating in vibrant stock markets, exercised limited liability in practice, it was not granted by charter or law.

Today, when a corporation (1) commits outrageous misconduct, like fraud or another violation of the law, and (2) is clearly controlled by another corporation, lawsuits sometime successfully hold the controlling parent corporation liable, but this act, known as "piercing the corporate veil," is extremely rare. We can compare these to cases in which one human person is held liable for the actions of another despite not being directly involved (such as parents for the acts of minor children or an accomplice in a crime). Such liability is difficult to show since the presumption is strong that liability must be personal.

Corporations large and small use subsidiaries to shield themselves from responsibility. Small construction corporations often set up a separate corporation for each job, so if something goes wrong, the client can only sue a shell corporation with no assets.[4] This is used even more effectively by large multinational corporations. Sawyer (2006) follows the legal dispute about the relationship between Ecuadoran subsidiaries and their parent, Texaco, itself a subsidiary of Chevron. Similarly, in a case brought in The Hague Civil Court by Nigerian farmers and fisherman against Royal Dutch Shell, the parent corporation escaped most of its liability for the pollution and the human rights violations connected with its oil extraction operations by arguing that it was its Nigerian subsidiary that was responsible (Roorda 2021). The effort to hold the parent Shell corporation liable, piercing the corporate veil, turned on the semiotic matter of whether it was directing its subsidiary to take actions that led to the harms, a construction of the case that treats each corporation as independent and then examines the influence of the parent.

Suits against pharmaceutical corporations in the US show even more clearly the consequences of fitting corporations into laws made for human persons. First, in developing pharmaceuticals, a corporation (or group of them) is responsible for R&D and every phase of clinical testing—so a subsidiary would provide no liability protection. Further, to simplify greatly, misdeeds of pharmaceutical corporations are prosecuted under malpractice law designed to sanction individual doctors: the remedy is not only to compensate those harmed but to prevent future harm by revoking a doctor's license to practice medicine. In this legal framework, pharmaceutical corporations found liable for harms would not only have to compensate victims but would be prohibited from selling drugs. But this would be a death sentence for corporations doing valuable work. So the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has devised a workaround, also dependent on the concept of corporate personhood. The parent company continues conducting business with the government while a subsidiary with no offices or employees is semiotically conjured for the purpose of pleading guilty to the malpractice (Evans 2009)—it is then sanctioned and driven out of business. For example, in 2008 Pfizer was found guilty of fraudulently promoting a drug, Bextra, an anti-inflammatory, off-label use that was not approved by the FDA. Instead of charging Pfizer, prosecutors charged Pharmacia & Upjohn Co. Inc.—a newly-created Pfizer shell company subsidiary whose only function was to act as a corporate scapegoat and plead guilty. This circumventing of liability is analogous to "being charged with a crime" but having "an imaginary friend [take] the rap" (Griffin and Segal 2010).

Tax avoidance

The ability of corporations to translate integrated organizational operations into transactions between formally autonomous corporations is key to avoiding taxes and increasing the profits that parent corporations earn. The US Securities and Exchange Commission and the Internal Revenue Service allow corporations to differently enact themselves in their statements. In their statements of financial gains, corporations frame disparate activities as components of an operationally unified parent-subsidiary

[4] I thank Greg Urban for this observation.

firm. In annual reports for investors and Security and Exchange Commission filings, corporations report what are called "book" profits, the profits earned worldwide, including from their subsidiaries. However, for purposes of tax filing, corporations translate the *sharing* between parts of their organizations (Widlock 2013) into *transactions* (Strathern 1988) between formally autonomous corporate persons in different jurisdictions—as if semiotically recategorizing their left and rights hands as belonging to different persons, in different locations. This allows a corporation to take earnings from high-tax countries and accumulate them in the accounts of its subsidiaries in low-tax countries. According to one estimate, US corporations had accumulated $2.4 trillion in low-tax jurisdictions by 2017 (Clemente, Blair, and Trokel 2017). Based on 2009 customs data, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development reported that 48 percent of US goods imports and around 30 percent of goods exports were conducted through intra-firm trades (Ylönen and Teivainen 2018) that help corporations avoid taxation. Contemporary "free trade" trade arrangements roll back state regulation and allow it to be regulated by corporations.

There are two basic arrangements that achieve this. Both involve the semiotic framing of corporate organizations and actions, for different addressees, as either one entity or several entities. The first involves sourcing commodities through corporate subsidiaries in low-tax countries. The subsidiary pays market rates for a commodity but sells it to the US parent at a high so-called "transfer price," above-market rate. A "transfer price" is the price of a good or service that is exchanged between companies under common control. The US corporation sells its product in the US but, since it has paid so much for the commodity, it shows little profit taxable in US. Profits accumulate in the accounts of the virtually untaxed subsidiary (Figure 1). Starbucks, for example, sources its beans through a its own Swiss subsidiary, Starbucks Coffee Trading Company Sàrl, which buys beans at market rates and sells them to the US parent, Starbucks Corporation, at a mark-up of 15–18 percent (CICTAR 2025), and keeps profits earned from US coffee sales. (Beans themselves, of course are never shipped through Switzerland.) The US parent corporation claims the profits of the subsidiary in its investor reports but not in its US tax filings.

A similar arrangement uses the transfer or licensing of intellectual property to a subsidiary in a low-tax country. Intellectual property is a very broad category, including trademarks, service marks, copyrights, patents, domain names, trade dress, trade secrets, and proprietary technologies. In addition to its trademarks, Starbucks, for example, holds patents for its lids, shelves, card stands, methods of brewing, and workflow software. To use the IP that it developed, the US parent corporation must now pay IP royalty payments to its subsidiary (Figure 2) to license the software for sales in the in the US, often at very high transfer prices.

Microsoft transferred much of its IP to one of its subsidiaries in Puerto Rico after negotiating a virtually 0 percent tax rate with the government of the US territory. The sales producing Microsoft revenues are coming from mainland US customers but US Microsoft earns little after paying licensing fees to its Puerto Rican subsidiary. This arrangement minimizes taxable income in the US mainland by accumulating profits in the accounts of the subsidiary (Figure 3), which has enabled it to avoid as much as $29.8 billion in US taxes (Davalos 2023; Ehrenfreund 2017). There are more inventive versions of these schemes. One,

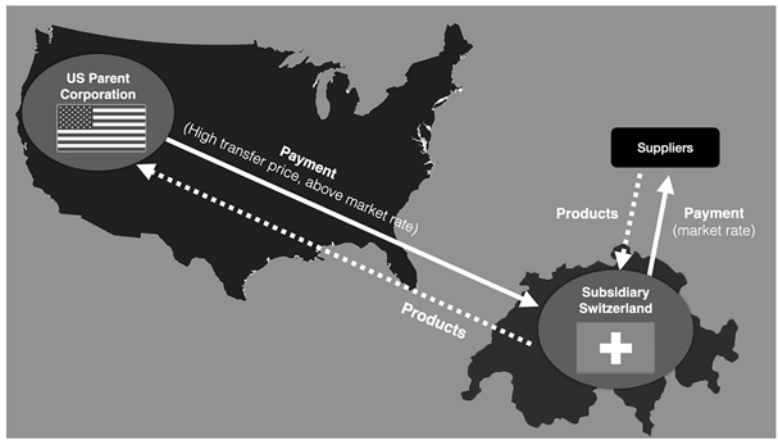

Figure 1. Sourcing: US parent corporation overpays for products sourced through its own subsidiary in a low-tax jurisdiction.

Figure 2. Intellectual property (IP) transfer: US parent corporations transfers IP to subsidiary in low tax jurisdiction and then overpays for license to use it.

known as the Double Irish because it involved the formation of two Irish corporations, was pioneered by Apple in the late 1980s and quickly adopted across the tech industry until it was finally barred by the European Union in 2020. The scheme took advantage of the fact that most countries, including the US, consider the "domicile" of a corporation to be the one it was registered in; but Ireland determined the domicile (and tax liability) of a corporation to be the country it was managed from. If you incorporated a company in Ireland but managed it from Cupertino, for tax purposes your corporation was blissfully stateless. A refinement on the Double Irish rid corporations of a minor Irish tax by adding a Netherlands corporation to the arrangement and was known as the "Double Irish with a Dutch Sandwich." Most tech corporations including

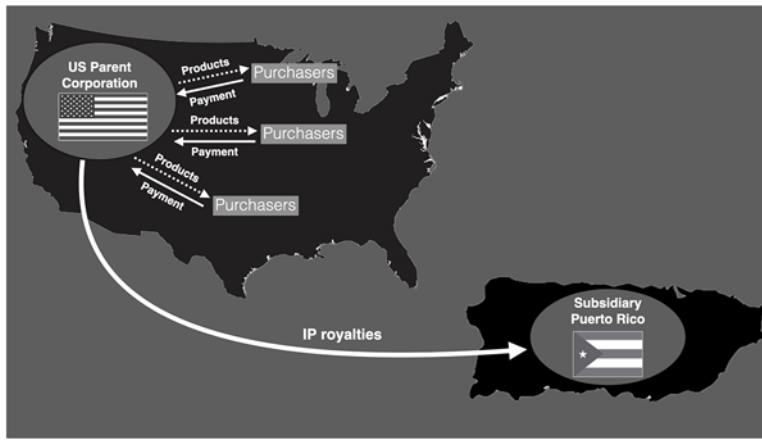

Figure 3. Intellectual property (IP) transfer: US parent corporation pays revenues from US sales as royalties to subsidiary for use of the IP.

all the FAANGs, Facebook (Meta), Apple, Amazon, Netflix, and Google (Alphabet), and many other corporations whose profits can be attributed to intellectual property used such arrangements to minimize taxes.

Avoidance of regulation and other political problems

My last example shows how these same characteristics of corporate personhood allowed the military corporation Executive Outcomes (EO) and its cloud of partner corporations to evade regulation and disguise its activities from political scrutiny—as well as limit its liability and avoid taxation. EO was a UK registered private military corporation operating in Africa in the 1990s, the central corporation of a what we could call a "corporate collective" comprised of more than 20 corporations incorporated in the UK, South Africa, Canada, Isle of Man, Gibraltar, Channel Islands, and British Virgin Islands.

These corporations served a variety of functions: military attack aircraft, air transport, mining, ground forces, telecom, and logistics (Singer 2003). Corporations in this collective (1) shared most of their board members, and/or (2) were owned by EO, and (3) coordinated business arrangements and military activities. Many of them shared the same UK office address (despite incorporations in other countries). Occasionally replies to communications to one corporation would accidentally be sent out on the letterhead of another. The business model and operations of this corporate collective depended on the semiotic separation of all its member corporations, via legal, documentary, and sartorial means.

EO would contract for military services with African governments under threat from insurgencies such as Uganda and Sierra Leone; the governments would pay the mineral extraction corporation in this group through concessions; the mining corporation in turn paid EO and its many partner corporations for extensive military operations involving heavy weaponry like large-scale Soviet attack helicopters (Singer

2003). Although its business and military activities were highly coordinated, no one country could regulate the range of its activities. EO also avoided the political problems that a continued presence in a country would present. EO would deploy for the active combat (defeat counterinsurgents, take back mining facilities), settle things quickly, then announce it was leaving. Soldiers would then take off uniforms with EO insignias and put on the uniforms of another corporation (LifeGuard). This process would repeat, as one corporation succeeded another with unchanged staff, so leaders of countries could say that they had not invited in a long-term foreign military presence.

Conclusion

If corporations have long been conceptualized as persons, their lack of a grounding on a single, rigidly designated, embodied, and emplaced human being has always been recognized as a problem for their participation in economic and legal processes designed for human persons. In the early 1600s, Coke worried not about liability, taxation, and jurisdictions but about a central mode of regulation at the time: *homage*. In sixteenth-century England, homage was a formal, semiotic act through which a vassal publicly acknowledged loyalty and subordination to a lord, often involving ritual gestures such as kneeling and a spoken oath. Though increasingly legalistic by this time, especially in matters of land tenure or ecclesiastical office, it remained a performative action for securing rights or titles—particularly for those holding land directly from the Crown. Coke argued that corporations could not perform homage, because "homage must be done in person, and a corporation aggregate of many cannot appeare in person … the bodie politique or corporate itselfe cannot be seene" ([1628] 1823, L.2. C.1, Sect. 90, 67a).

Like Coke much of the analysis today focuses on how the fundamental features of corporations limit (or should limit) what they do. Much less attention has been paid how these same features enable corporations. Let me end with two observations. First, we often see that actors are disadvantaged when subject to laws written for another type of actor. By contrast, the semiotic features of corporate personhood allow corporations to thrive within legal orders designed for human legal persons. Second, the activities of corporations show the degree to which the working of our laws—well beyond obvious things like writs of habeas corpus and incarceration—are designed for legal persons with a fixed index to a single, rigidly designated physical human body, with all its biological, social, and legal limitations. The semiotic character of corporate persons, which allows them to multiply and coordinate themselves, generates both centralization and unaccountability in our current political economic order.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to colleagues at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, where much of writing of this article was done. Earlier versions of this paper benefited greatly from exchanges with audiences at the University of Chicago and Stanford University. Thanks to Aurora Donatelli for her provocative vision and dedication in organizing this collection. Asif Agha, Luke Fleming, Thomas Blom Hansen, Nicholas Harkness, Michael Lempert, Constantine Nakassis, and Elizabeth Roberts offered valuable insights. Special thanks to Ilana Gershon, Miyako Inoue, Krisztina Fehérváry, and an anonymous reviewer for their vigorous engagement with earlier drafts. Finally, I am grateful to the staff at *Signs and Society* and Cambridge University Press for their excellent editorial and production work.

Funding statement. I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

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Cite this article: Hull, Matthew S.. 2025. "Capitalism and the Semiotics of Corporate Personhood in a Law of Human Persons." *Signs and Society* 13 (3): 355–376. https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2025.10015

Signs and Society (2025), **13** (3), 377–394
doi:10.1017/sas.2025.14

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
HANKUK UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN STUDIES

ARTICLE

Translating Made-in-Italy Across Time and Space

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Abstract

Through a linguistic anthropological analysis of a corpus of storytelling practices that have emerged from interviews that I conducted with Northern Italian executives (2011–2023), I examine how collective, Made-in-Italy branding identities are (co)constructed and *translated* through the scalar chronotopic stances that these managers take vis-à-vis both the historicity and the contemporary, artistic *uniqueness* of their companies. More specifically, I describe how the executives in small Northern Italian family-owned firms use their corporations' histories to associate moral discourses of cultural values, responsibility, and *authenticity* with the Made-in-Italy brand. Executives' narrative shifts translate Made in Italy from a national brand that allegedly represents all goods produced in Italy to more localized, town-based branding identities. To do so, I am inspired by an *inter-semiotic* approach to translation, one that allows me to study these identification processes from a more fluid and dynamic perspective.

Keywords: chronotope; Made-in-Italy; narrative; northern Italy; scales; translation

Introduction

> *Translation stretches words, bridges times, mingles personal identities, and unsettles national languages. As it does so, it creates a distinctive medium in which connections between different places, times and people can be imagined, thought over, and felt through.* (Reynolds 2011, 11)

As the opening quote emphasizes, translating practices, as imprecise as they can be, have the potential to create, or imagine, new spatiotemporal realities that can be experienced and embodied in different ways and sociocultural contexts. Through translation, languages can be "unsettled," while the translated message travels, gets transformed, and recontextualized. Through these spatiotemporal movements, the translated message undergoes continuous, dynamic alterations. As Gal (2023, 179) has argued, "[i]n the social study of language, it has become a truism that any utterance, indeed any piece of ongoing real-time, discursive practice, whether written or oral, may be endlessly quoted, cited, recited, imitated, parodied and otherwise reported or repeated in whole

or in part." Furthermore, continues Gal (2023, 180), "[w]e do not translate between languages, but rather among registers or genres of speech, writing, and other expressive practices," thus liberating this practice from its classic, rigid Lockean conceptualization. For Locke, as for many of his followers, translation was (and has been) conceived more abstractly with translators who have been imagined as capable of *perfectly* rendering the structures and the meanings from the original language to the translated one. Within this rigid framework, ungraspable concepts and brand names, such as the Made-in-Italy one, would not be appreciated for their multiplicity of meanings and "intersemiotic" alterations (Jakobson 1959).

In this article, I am inspired by a more heterogenous and scalar approach to translating practices through which scholars can examine multiple, emerging patterns as they are created, disseminated, and solidified. More specifically, I study how branding identities (Nakassis 2012, 2013, 2016a: 68; Kohler and Perrino 2017) are enacted, and translated, through various spatiotemporal frameworks. I especially focus on the Made-in-Italy branding identity as it discursively emerges in storytelling practices. In this vein, Michael Silverstein's (2003) notion of *transduction*, as referred to translating practices, is pertinent. In his 2003 chapter entitled "Translation, Transduction, Transformation: Skating 'Glossando' on Thin Semiotic Ice," he wrote:

> More than really translating material (in my narrowed sense), then, transducing material moves us between a source cultural system and a target one. In each system words and expressions are indexically anchored within entextualizations in-context, and we attempt to move across these. But this leads us to consider that in transduction, operating as we do in the realm of culture more frankly, there is always the possibility of **transformation** of the [en]textual[ized] source material contextualized in specific ways into configurations of cultural semiosis of a sort substantially or completely different from those one has started with. (Silverstein 2003, 91, emphasis in original)

Thanks to this non-Saussurean, and more semiotic, model to approach (un)translationability in context, I have been able to examine the scalar movements, together with their various cultural translations, of branded-identifiers such as the *Made-in-Italy*[1] brand. Moreover, in his research on translation, linguist Roman Jakobson (1959) was intrigued by a more semiotic stance on this practice. For him, there were three types of translation: the intralingual translation, the interlingual translation, and the *intersemiotic translation*, with the latter being understudied across disciplines. Intersemiotic translation, which well espouses recent linguistic anthropological research on this topic (see, for example, Pritzker 2014), offers more flexibility in practicing and experiencing translation as a semiotic resource. As Campbell and Vidal (2024) write on "experiential translation," for example, which they consider as an extension of intersemiotic translation:

> Experiential translation embraces the visibility of the translator and eschews semiotic erasures imposed by the norms and expectations of source and target

[1] Made-in-Italy, besides being a well-known brand, is a globally circulating English phrase.

> cultures. As such, it aims to undo acquired knowledge and give voice not only to the sensory and affective, but to endow the natural world with the status of 'text' […]. Experiential translation views translation as a holistic, co-creative process of discovery and renewal in a dynamic ecological context where Western anthropocentric discourse is displaced by a pluriverse of local and global, analogue and digital, (dis)embodied voices. (Campbell and Vidal 2024, 3)

Thus, *intersemiotic*, or *experiential*, translation enables researchers to study the various movements of translated messages as they travel across different modalities. In this light, an *inter-scalar translation*, inspired by the Jakobsonian notion (Jakobson 1959), allows more flexibility in the study of identities and their frequent adjustments across scales. To trace the spatiotemporal movements and transformations of the Made-in-Italy brand, for example, I have used the Bakhtinian notion of *chronotope* (Bakhtin 1981) to study participants' interactional moves and their multimodal reverberations in their storytelling practices. Given the heterogenous nature of chronotopic frameworks, which are scalar in nature (Koven 2024; Perrino 2024; Woolard 2012), translating practices can emerge more clearly if considered through spatiotemporal lenses. In these cases, these transformations, or translations, are *inter-scalar*. Reflecting on translation as related to Chinese medicine, moreover, Pritzker emphasizes the interactional and changing nature of these practices. As she writes, "[t]he view of living translation as interactive is grounded in a sociolinguistic and anthropological understanding of interaction and co-construction as the social process by which meaning is jointly formulated" (Pritzker 2014, 118). For Pritzker, translation is, indeed, *living*, always in the process of changing and adapting to new sociocultural and linguistic environments. In this way, translation often goes beyond language and can thus be applied to broader semiotic phenomena, as in the cases examined in this article.

In my research, I examine how executives in Northern Italian family-owned companies use their past and present narratives to (co)construct, (re)configure, or transduce, and solidify their individual and collective *branding* identities through their association with discourses of cultural values, shared responsibility, and various senses of *authenticity*. I do so by analyzing their spatiotemporal, or *chronotopic*, alignments in which their past and present family histories become flattened at times, by merging, and thus being transduced, into one another, while they remain separate in other instances. In the process, these executives re-contextualize (Bauman and Briggs 1990) and re-scale their branding identities to the various contexts in which they land. In this way, their identities are transformed, or translated, into more or less localized ones. After describing my theoretical framework on translating the Made-in-Italy branding identity across time and space, and after offering a brief historical background on Italian history and art, and on how ideologies of *authenticity* rely upon it, I turn to the analysis of three narrative examples extracted from the interviews that I conducted with two Northern Italian executives of two well-known companies in the sector of fashion, in the small town of Mantua (Mantova), and of glassmaking, in the small Venetian island of Murano (which is part of the small town of Venice [Venezia]).

Inter-scalar translation(s) in narrative practices

In my work, I conceive of translating practices as fluid and scalar phenomena and as being part of our everyday life. Within this perspective, translation involves much more than the rendition of syntactic and morphological structures from one language to another language. Translating practices frequently navigate through various levels, or scales, which are not always obvious. Following Gal's insights (2023, 180), which posit that translation transcends language-to-language boundaries and instead includes shifts between registers and other practices, I study how these *intersemiotic* alterations (Jakobson 1959), or, as I name them, *inter-scalar translations*, happen across spatiotemporal frameworks, such as chronotopes, and scales more generally. While translating practices are *scalar* in nature, given the recurrent upscaling and downscaling shifts (Flowers 2021) that naturally happen when moving across different meanings and semiotic tokens, a scalar approach has rarely been applied in translation studies. In this article, I show how chronotopic configurations and scales are intrinsically part of these practices as they are enacted by Northern Italian executives in the three narrative examples that I analyze.

Scales, or perspectival processes (Carr and Lempert 2016a; Gal 2016), are always present in storytelling practices across narrating and narrated events (Jakobson 1957). When they tell their stories, narrators (and intervening audience members) take perspectives, or stances, not only as related to the plot of the story, or the *narrated event* (Jakobson 1957), but also on the various interactional moves of the here-and-now of the storytelling event, or the *narrating event* (Jakobson 1957). Though speakers are usually not aware of their scaling shifts, these discursive alterations play powerful roles in indexing individuals' identities, ideologies, and stances. As Gal (2016, 91) argues, "scaling implies positioning and, hence, point of view: a perspective from which scales (modes of comparison) are constructed and from which aspects of the world are evaluated with respect to them." In this light, when speech participants engage in scaling practices—for example, by narrowing the imaginary boundaries of a community through the use of inclusive pronouns (*we*) instead of non-inclusive ones (*they*)—they also take certain positions, or stances, vis-a-vis the unfolding discourse such as the narrated content (the narrated event) and/or the narrating interview interaction (the narrating event). As I show in my three narrative examples, Northern Italian executives engage in significant scalar moves across spatiotemporal frameworks. Through so doing, they *translate*, or transform, not only the content of their stories but also their interactional stances. In their narrated event, for example, they navigate through stories about the past, present, and future, as they are related to their business and the Made-in-Italy brand more generally. In the process, however, these executives might also take stances on who can fully appreciate their products and who cannot, or is not entitled to (such as migrants or Italian citizens from migrant descent). In the narrating event, these executives often enact various degrees of intimacy while performing scalar senses of belonging to a collective identity in which the exclusiveness of the Made-in-Italy brand keeps Italians intimately connected to each other (Perrino 2020; Perrino and Kohler 2020). Individuals can thus *feel* more intimate with their co-present or imaginary speech participants through their scalar moves, and this often emerges in their storytelling practices (Perrino 2024). An inclusive attitude can thus be translated, *inter-scalarly*, into an exclusionary one. As Carr and Fisher (2016) write:

> scaling is a practice that can—among other things—spawn a sense of intimacy and an ethic of interrelatedness at the same time it serves projects that discriminate, individuate, and alienate […]. This is so because there is more than one pragmatics of scale: different sorts of sign activities amount to distinctive modes of scaling, each enjoying its own productive potentials. (Carr and Fisher 2016, 136)

To be able to study these inter-scalar and spatiotemporal movements in narrative practices, I have been inspired by a narratives-as-practices approach (De Fina 2013; Ochs and Capps 1996) which considers narratives as *performances*. Through this pragmatic approach to narratives, it is possible to examine how participants scale their perspectives, and thus change, or transform, their stances or positionings, during their storytelling events, in relation to their narrated content. As it has been widely demonstrated, moreover, *narrated* and *narrating events* (Jakobson 1957), or *denotational* and *interactional texts* (Silverstein 1998), are in a continuous, dialogic relationship (Koven 2015; Wortham 2000, 2001). Furthermore, narrators often enact various stances while they tell their stories. This is conceivable thanks to the intrinsic, scalar nature of narratives: narrators and audience members (co)construct their stories by shifting their positionalities across time and space. Through so doing, participants engage in scalar moves by offering or imposing similar or contrasting perspectives related not only to the content of the story (the narrated event), but also to the ongoing interaction (the narrating event) (Perrino 2024).

As my three narrative excerpts show, through these inter-scalar transformative acts, Northern Italian executives (co)constructed an overall sense of intimacy and connectedness with their co-nationals with whom they assumed to share a historical and artistic background. In their narratives, as I show, Northern Italian executives frequently shift back and forth between past and present, often anchoring those temporal distinctions within spatial dimensions. They resort to multiple temporalities in the past by re-invoking historical facts that are key to the construction of what they sense is *authentic*, and thus unchangeable and irreplicable, about their company. In this way, these executives invoke *chronotopes of authenticity*. While the Bakhtinian notion of *chronotope*, literally "time-space" (Bakhtin 1981), has been developed creatively and extensively across many disciplines, still today it remains a resourceful analytic tool to study the spatiotemporal dimensions of human interactional dynamics, including their storytelling practices. Since the early 2000s, linguistic anthropologists have applied the malleable concept of the chronotope widely and creatively, studying how space and time interweave in interactions (Agha 2007, 2015; Dick 2010; Divita 2014; Harkness 2015; Koven 2013, 2023; Perrino 2007, 2011, 2015, 2022; Perrino and Kohler 2020; Wirtz 2016; Woolard 2012, 2016, to mention just a few). For example, Agha (2015) has applied this concept to the construction of intimacy in kinship relations. As he writes:

> "[P]articipants in social practices around the world routinely invoke the idiom of kinship to perform or construe interpersonal behaviors, whether their own or of those they meet or try to imagine. In doing so, they inhabit kin-like relationships with persons or groups that are sometimes nearby in time and place (such as their interlocutors), and sometimes quite far (such as the dead or the

> unborn). The social-semiotic practices through which people inhabit these relations are kinship behaviors whose participants rely on chronotopic formulations of place, time, and personhood (Agha 2007) in order to become recognizable to each other as social beings of specific kinds, whether as persons already belonging to, or as persons hoping to avoid, group-specific historical trajectories in relation to others." (Agha 2015, 402)

Place, time, and personhood are key elements in my data, as family ties and relationships strongly emerged in my interviews with Northern Italian executives. Chronotopes, moreover, have been recently analyzed as perspectival, or *scalar*, spatiotemporal frameworks (Koven 2024; Perrino 2024; Woolard 2012, 2016). Woolard (2012, 2) for example, writes that the "[c]hronotope is thus a particular version of the general notion of 'scale'" in the sense that chronotopic configurations always have a scalar dimension which can be more or less nuanced. Indeed, chronotopes can have more or less resonance; they can be more or less evident; they can entail more or less interactional moves. A cross-chronotope alignment (Perrino 2007), as I have demonstrated, usually incorporates two main chronotopes which are aligned, interactionally and/or denotationally in the interactional framework. These particular alignments are also possible thanks to various shifts in perspectives, or scalar moves. This is why, as Woolard (2012) contended, chronotopes and scales overlap most of the times. Put it simply, *chronotopes are scalar* (Perrino 2024).

Translating branding identities

Often referred to as the crib of the Renaissance, Italy promotes art and history as centerpieces of Italian culture and identity. The numerous medieval churches, Renaissance palaces, and ancient Roman ruins in the Italian landscape often create an "aura" that infuses a high regard for Italy's rich artistic history. This aura is believed to emerge from other aspects of Italian sociocultural life, thus becoming—as many of my interviewees emphasized—part of Italy's "cultural DNA" (Perrino 2020). These artistic and historical values have been also transduced (Silverstein 2003) into Italy's business sector, often through ideological associations with the "Made in Italy" brand. In my narrative analysis, I demonstrate how some northern Italian executives[2] inter-scalarly translated the Made-in-Italy brand, which they often attached to their businesses, through several spatiotemporal shifts. Furthermore, my analysis shows how these individuals significantly enacted senses of *authenticity* with respect to their companies. In so doing, they moved across time and space and thus inhabited chronotopic stances while building a collective sense of connection with their co-citizens. This is how collective, intimate identities are (co)constructed, solidified, and *transformed* in Northern Italy.

I study how executives in northern Italian family-owned companies use their past and present narratives to (co)construct, (re)configure, and solidify their individual and collective *branding* identities through their association with discourses of cultural values, shared responsibility, and their invocation of *chronotopes of authenticity*. I do

[2]For this project, which was approved by the IRB, I assigned pseudonyms to all my research participants to protect their identity and privacy.

so by analyzing their spatiotemporal, or *chronotopic*, alignments in which their past and present family histories become flattened at times, by merging into one another, while they remain separate in other instances. In the process, these executives re-contextualize, and thus translate and transform, their branding identities by adapting them to the various contexts in which they land. As many of these northern Italian executives have emphasized, Italy's history and art permeate many aspects of Italian sociocultural life, including the business world, and are even presented as becoming part of Italy's "cultural DNA" (Kohler and Perrino 2017).

Furthermore, as Nakassis (2012, 2013, 2016a: 68) argues: "[t]here is a tension and gap between any brand token (or instance) and the type (or identity) to which it belongs and hence between both token and type and the very ontology that such types stand under." It is precisely this tension that I study in the (co)construction, circulation, and transduction of northern Italian executives' branding identities into more localized brand-tokens. In this vein, a well-known brand such as Made-in-Italy, which is recognized across the globe, can be *scaled*, and *translated*, into a more localized, and thus solidified, "Made-in-Town" or even "Made-in-a-small-island" branding identity, such as "Made-in-Venice" or even "Made-in-Murano" for specialized glassmaking companies. In the process, however, these executives emphasize the uniqueness of their company whose products can be fully appreciated only by their co-citizens (of Italian descent) who share the same history, artistic patrimony, language(s), and aspirations.

These fluid branding identities, moreover, are part of a scalar process that Donzelli (2023, 436 my emphasis) has recently named "*place-branding*; namely, the application to nations, regions, cities, or even neighborhoods of marketing strategies of product differentiation aimed at enhancing the value, reputation, desirability, and competitiveness of a specific locale." Besides telling stories about their companies, the Northern Italian executives that I interviewed translated their stories about their own historical and traditional backgrounds, their extended families, their friends, and their locations through the many scalar shifts that they enacted. These executives thus align their corporate narratives, family histories, and *branding identities* with circulating ideologies on the significance of Made-in-Italy across scalar chronotopic configurations. They not only blended time and space by making family histories and traditions part of their here-and-now interactions through various discourse strategies (Gumperz 1982), but they also navigated through different temporal and spatial scales as they transduced and enacted both their individual and collective identities while their stories unfolded.

Besides the performance of their individual and collective branding identities, my analysis also unveiled how northern Italian executives' ideologies are reinforced, re-entextualized (Bauman 1977, 2004), shared, and (re)circulated not only across the Italian business world but in Italian society, and across the globe, more generally. The scalarity of these processes thus becomes very significant also thanks to the malleability, or *transformability*, of the Made-in-Italy branding identity, which navigates across more or less globalized and localizes scales. Speech participants' emerging branding identities are thus intimately connected with an imagined Made-in-Italy trademark as a form of national branding that serves to boost the nation's position in the global marketplace. As my three examples show, through their efforts to link a historical, artistic

and cultural patrimony to the present identities and families of their companies, Italian executives index, and thus reinforce, the "schema of cultural knowledge," in Silverstein's (2013) terms, that surrounds the Made-in-Italy brand. In this way, Italian companies enroll Italy's art history going back to the Renaissance as a basis for the perceived creativity and authenticity of the Made in Italy brand today, especially as related to small businesses and their relationship to Italian capitalism (Kohler and Perrino 2017). Clusters of small-scale family firms in Central and Northern Italy have always elevated and maintained this vision of Made in Italy (Blim 1990; Yanagisako 2002). Italian executives have shown their commitment in (co)constructing, defending, and maintaining Made-in-Italy as their national brand (Del Percio 2016) as if it were a treasure to be passed through generations. In this respect, the Made in Italy brand functions as a type of national branding, which Del Percio (2016, 86) defines as "a governmental strategy transforming the nation into a commodity that can be branded to successfully position the nation internationally."

Translating Made-in-Italy

In the following section, I analyze three narrative excerpts from two interviews drawn from a pool of 150 interviews that I have conducted with Northern Italian executives since 2011. I interviewed two executives of two well-known Northern Italian companies specializing in fashion and glassmaking respectively. These participants' enactment of a collective "Italian culture" of art, design, and imagination rooted in a supposedly Italian DNA has been a recurrent pattern in most of my interviews and conversations with them. As I show in my analysis, speech participants' collective branding identities emerge through the performance of some discursive strategies, such as the use of specific past tenses (the historical past [*passato remoto*] and the imperfect tense [*imperfetto*]), deictics (personal subject and object pronouns); discourse markers (Schiffrin 1987), and parallelism (Wilce 2001, 191). These executives often shifted in and out of certain identities and aligned or disaligned with their conceptualization of Made in Italy, including authenticity, responsibility, and family values. In the process, they (co)constructed and translated their individual and collective branding identities in significant ways and across spatiotemporal scales.

The first excerpt is extracted from an interview that I conducted with Moreno, who was the grandchild of the founder of a well-known fashion company in Northern Italy. As it is the case in many Italian companies, Moreno was involved in this family business and was in charge of the marketing department. Moreover, his company prides itself in producing all its products in Italy, and their brochures and website prominently display local landmarks from their town Mantua. This town itself is an important cultural center in Italy, as its historical downtown is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. On the day of the interview, I arrived in Mantua by train early in the morning and then took a bus to Mantua's *zona industriale* ("industrial park") located in the countryside. This fashion company is located right outside the town. As is common amongst many executives in Italy, Moreno wore his dress shirt with the cuff buttons undone and his watch over his dress shirt. This style was first popularized by one of Italy's most prominent industrialists, Gianni Agnelli, while he was the CEO of the FIAT car company. The interview

with Moreno lasted one and a half hours. The first question centered on the history of the company, to which Moreno narrated that he had been involved in his company for a long time:

Example 1 (M: Moreno)

Original Italian version

1 **M**: [..] il papa Carl-Carlalberto e lo zio maggiore Claudio **ripartirono**
2 praticamente **ricominciarono** da zero con trenta sei dipendenti
3 e **fondarono** quella che è la […] S.p.A.
4 quindi in realtà se guardiamo le- le- la storia senza nessun tipo d'interruzione
5 diciamo la storia data dal' 58 ad oggi quindi 54 anni- anni
6 però se prendiamo invece anche la parte precedente
7 quindi diciamo il DNA le origini del nonno
8 allora ne fa molti di più con circa intorno a cento anni
9 perché è iniziata all'inizio degli anni degli anni venti- ven- col nonno [..]

English translation

1 **M**: [..] *our dad Carl-Carlalberto and our older uncle Claudio* ***started again***
2 *basically [they]* ***started again*** *from scratch with thirty-six workers*
3 *and [they]* ***founded*** *what is […] S.p.A. [i.e., public company]*
4 *so in reality if [we] look at the- the- the history without any kind of interruption*
5 *let's say the history starting from 1958 until today so 54 years-years*
6 *but if [we] also take the previous part instead*
7 *so let's say the DNA, our grandfather's origins*
8 *then there are many more [years of history] about one hundred years*
9 *because [it] started at the beginning of the 1920s twent- with [our] grandfather* [..]

Moreno started his narrative with a classic Labovian orientation (Labov and Waletzky 1967), in which he situated his company temporally and spatially to provide some historical context to his interlocutors. At the very outset of the interview, Moreno recounted the history of his company by merging it with the history of his family. In line 1, he explained that his father and his older uncle were the founders of the company. The two histories then became one, as if the two chronotopes that he invoked were *aligned* and transformed into only one. The boundaries between the family and the company are indeed often blurred in small Italian businesses (Yanagisako 2002). This is even more evident in line 9 when he claimed that his company established its roots well before the official foundation year. He grounded the company's origins in the 1920s when his grandfather was already active in the fashion sector. In this way, Moreno extended the historical background of his firm even further back in history: From the '50s, when his company was legally founded, to the '20s, when the family began working in the fashion industry. By going back and forth through these historical facts, spatiotemporally, Moreno enacted his family's identity together with his company's identity. He did so by chronotopically combining the two histories and by traveling fluidly across spatiotemporal scales. *Kinship chronotopes*

(Agha 2015) thus consistently emerged in Moreno's storytelling event. This is even more obvious in line 7 when he formally linked the two histories, by adding that the DNA of his grandfather was connected to their company. By unequivocally invoking his family's biological DNA in his narrative, Moreno infused an intimate element in the identity of his family business. In this way, he translates his identity through his many discursive scalar movements. This is possible if considered through an inter-semiotic, inter-scalar, framework, which considers translation in a continuous, fluid dynamics (Pritzker 2014). Besides the kinship chronotopes, moreover, through these spatiotemporal movements, a *chronotope of authenticity* surfaces in Moreno's first lines as well.

Moreno's chronotopic stances become more evident intertextually when he used the Italian remote past tense, the *passato remoto*. This remote tense was used in the past across Italy, and it has been replaced by the more common past tense, *passato prossimo*. However, *passato remoto* is still found in literary works, but is less frequent, and thus is *marked*, in everyday conversation (Renzi and Cardinaletti 1988; Rohlfs 1968). Even though in some areas, especially in Tuscany and in some southern regions, the *passato remoto* is still used on a daily basis, in Northern Italy, where this interview was conducted, this remote tense is rarely used. Some speakers use this remote tense, however, as status marker: showing that one knows how and when to use it shows a good competence in standard Italian in certain social environments. Formal interviews are sites where individuals, such as executives of well-known companies, need to display their linguistic proficiency as well. Right at the outset of the his narrative, Moreno used three instances of this remote past tense, "ripartirono," "ricominciarono" ("started again") and "fondarono" ("founded") in lines 1–3 (bolded in the above transcript excerpt). By using these three tokens of *passato remoto* in the very beginning of the interview (and several other times later), Moreno emphasized how the histories of his company and family were rooted in the area around Mantua, in its arts and cultural traditions. In the process, he also transforms his identity from the one of the *business* man interested in selling products to the one of a very knowledgeable person whose grammar use is impeccable and very exclusive. History and art had been, indeed, part of the family's identity and part of their DNA, as Moreno claimed in line 7, since his grandfather's time. He continued the translation process of his identity by emphasizing the key role of Italian history and DNA further in my second example when he also used some parallelistic structures.

Example 2 (M: Moreno; I: interviewer)

Original Italian version

10 **M**: [..] e::hh sicuramente un altro punto di forza diciamo di successo
11 viene un po' dal nostro **DNA** il fatto che Mantova
12 cioè sia di essere nati in Italia prima di tutto
13 che ovviamente ha un **DNA** di cultura **rinascimentale** il gusto del bello
14 ehh quindi l'arte un po' il gusto di vivere bene
15 di saper realizzare dei prodotti che abbiano un grande appeal
16 quindi il fatto del **DNA** italiano e in particolare Mantova
17 che ha rappresentato per la cultura dell'abbigliamento

18 **I**: mmhmm
19 M: Isabella d'Este cultura rinascimentale [clears throat] è sicuramente un punto di forza
20 quindi direi la tradizione no?
21 la tradizione italiana e la tradizione la **mantovanità** [..]

English translation

10 **M**: [..] *e::hh [it is] certainly another advantage let's say of success*
11 *[it] comes a bit from our **DNA** the fact that Mantua*
12 *that is to say being born in Italy first of all*
13 *which obviously has a **DNA from the Renaissance** culture the taste for beauty*
14 *ehh so art a little bit [like] the taste for living well*
15 *for being able to create products which have a great appeal*[3]
16 *so the fact of the Italian **DNA** and in particular Mantua*
17 *which represented for the clothing culture*
18 **I**: *mmhmm*
19 **M**: *Isabella D'Este Renaissance culture [clears throat] [it] is certainly an advantage*
20 *so [I] would say tradition [is an advantage], right?*
21 *Italian tradition and the tradition of **being from Mantua*** [..]

In this narrative excerpt, Moreno recounted that his company's success was rooted not only in its prestigious historical background, but also in the local DNA of his town, Mantova (Mantua—lines 11, 13). Moreno indeed scalarly extended, and thus translated, his local DNA background to the national, Italian DNA in lines 16-21, and thus reinforced the circulating ideology of a national *Made in Italy brand*, and of its historical, artistic and cultural authenticity. Mantua's DNA was "rinascimentale" ("from the Renaissance," line 13), thus contributing to an authentic historical and artistic aura (Benjamin 1936; Hansen 2008) that pervades his birth town Mantua, its museums, antique churches, buildings, and companies, including his. In Moreno's perspective, Mantua's history, art, and tradition are thus part of a shared DNA, of something that is connected to the idea of being produced in Mantua. In his words, its "mantovanità" ("being from Mantua," line 21). Moreno then, again, rescaled the local DNA background to the national, Italian DNA in lines 16-21, and thus reinforced the circulating ideology of a national Made in Italy, and of its historical, artistic and cultural authenticity even more. At the same time, Moreno also enacted both his individual and collective identities, which are fluidly shifting from a more local, Mantua-based identity, to a more national, Italian one. In terms of scales, he thus shifts from a small, local scale, represented by his birth town, to a larger, national scale. Since scales are never neutral (Carr and Lempert 2016b), these scalar shifts carry significant meanings and instantiate Moreno's subsequent narrative moves. The very fact of being born in Italy constitutes an important part of these chronotopic stances and collective identities in which history, art, and culture are shared and need to be cherished, as many of my

[3]The English term "appeal" has become part of the Italian vocabulary among managers in companies and ordinary speakers as well.

interviewees emphasized. Biologized metaphors and embodied senses of authenticity are thus encapsulated in the rescaled *Made-in-Italy* branding identity. These senses of identity are indeed translated from a more global pattern, which includes all relevant products that are made in Italy, to a more local one, which highly values the localized, town-made quality of these products.

My third example is extracted from an interview that I conducted with Bernardo, the president of a well-known glassmaking company in the small island of Murano, which is part of the town of Venice (Venezia). The interview, which lasted one hour and fifteen minutes, took place in a Venetian palace in Murano where the company is headquartered. The room where the interview took place was quite large and displayed several glass objects such as large vases, lamps, chandeliers, and glass sculptures. There was one window on the far side of the room overlooking one of Murano's many canals. In the middle of the room, there was a large circular wooden table with a large round translucent glass over it. The president and his assistant asked me to sit around that table. Bernardo wore a navy-blue suit, a dark red tie, and small circular bright red glasses. To a question on the history of the company, he responded as follows:

Example 3 (B: Bernardo)

Original Italian version

1 **B**: Quindi uhm fino a 150 anni fa le aziende erano delle- delle botteghe artigiane
2 dei- dei luoghi dove un gruppo di persone guidate dal- da un proprietario illuminato ehh più bravo degli altri
3 e riuscivano a produrre delle cose
4 quindi ehh **NON** è la nostra azienda che esiste dal 1295
5 è la nostra **FAMIGLIA** che si occupa di vetro dal 1295
6 quindi c'è un- una notevole differenza
7 non è che nel 1295 ci fossero le S.p.A.[4] o le S.r.l.[5]
8 ehh col consiglio di amministrazione
9 e i revisori della KPMG che venivano a lavorare
10 erano:: botteghe artigiane come- come in-in tutta l'Italia dell'epoca::::
11 era così per qualsiasi tipo di manufatto
12 e comunque è vero nel 1295 la mia famiglia si occupa di vetro

English translation

1 **B**: *So uhm until 150 years ago companies were just artisanal shops*
2 *locations where a group of people managed by the- by an enlightened owner uhm more skilled than the others*
3 *and were able to produce things*
4 *so uhm it is **NOT** our company that has been in existence since 1295*
5 *it is our **FAMILY** that has worked in glassmaking since 1295*

[4] S.p.A. stands for "Società per Azioni" ("Joint-Stock Companies").

[5] This abbreviation stands for "Società a Responsabilità Limitata" ("Limited Liability Company"), and it is usually appended to the end of company names when relevant.

6 *so there is a remarkable difference*
7 *[it] is not that there were joint-stock or limited liability companies in 1295*
8 *uhm with a Board of Directors*
9 *and KPMG auditors who come to do their work*
10 *[there] were artisanal shops as- as everywhere in Italy at that ti::::me*
11 *[it] was this way for any kind of product*
12 *and [it] is therefore true that in 1295 my family started to work in glassmaking*

As Bernardo described in line 1, how people think about Venetian glassmaking companies today is a rather new concept: only 150 years ago, they were just family-run artisanal shops. In line 4, however, he jumped back seven centuries, up to 1295 when his family started to work in glassmaking. Traveling through spatiotemporal scales, Bernardo, similarly to Moreno in the previous two narrative excerpts, merged his company's identity with his family's in lines 4 and 5 when he asserted that it is not his company that had existed since 1295, but it is their family that had been consistently working in this sector across long spans of time and space. Thus, Bernardo translates his company's identity into one that makes sense because of the strong family ties that keeps it together. Kinship chronotopes (Agha 2015) thus consistently emerged in Bernardo's narratives as well. By increasing his voice volume (Gumperz 1982), in line 5, for example, Bernardo seems to emphasize the fact that his family had been very influential on his business. His family *had been* his business for more than seven centuries, he highlighted. The connection between his company and the DNA of his family becomes clear in this case as well. He reiterated this in line 12 and in many other moments of this initial part of the interview.

Right at the outset of the interview, this executive clarified that art and history had been part of his family and company since early times. The prestige of glassmaking as a quintessential form of art thus surfaced at various points during the interview. As his narrative unfolded, Bernardo indeed clarified his position vis-à-vis the concept of art as it had been understood by his family and company's members. In the process, while Bernardo flattened time and space in the storytelling event, he also created an opposition between a *chronotope of modernity* (Divita 2014; Koven 2013) and a *chronotope of tradition*. Through these two layered, although hypothetically opposing, chronotopes, Bernardo's family and brand identities had been translated across time and space. Thus, Bernardo, like Moreno, constructed, through significant scalar shifts, his localized branding identity while keeping it connected to the Made-in-Italy one. These collective identities were thus *translated* through several, fluid chronotopic configurations such as *kinship chronotopes*, but also scalar, and at times conflicting, *chronotopes of authenticity, chronotopes of modernity*, and *chronotopes of tradition*. As a result, these individuals' identities are not stable, nor are they fixed; rather, they are often fluid and heterogeneous (Nichols and Wortham 2018; Perrino and Wortham 2022), given speech participants' scaling shifts in their storytelling practices.

Conclusion

Translating branding identities across spatiotemporal scales has been recurrent in the Northern Italian executives' narratives that I have collected. As I have demonstrated

in the analysis of my three examples, these executives transduce (Silverstein 2003) their Made in Italy brand, by inhabiting various spatiotemporal configurations at different scales. While they narrate their companies' past and present vicissitudes, which are intimately connected with their families' histories, these executives shift scales and thus position themselves from different perspectives. In the process, as I have argued, these executives transform, and translate, the supposed prestige of a national Made in Italy brand into a more localized, regional, or even town- or small island-based branding identity. To do so, they resort to an imaginary shared biological DNA together with a historical and artistic patrimony which index the *uniqueness* of everything that is Italian. In this respect, these executives' moves are scalar (by continuously upscaling, *middle-scaling*, and downscaling): history and art are transposed into their storytelling events to possibly emphasize the assumed authenticity of Italian culture, language, and people. Time and space interweave in fluid alignments, and thus reinforce the overall sense of a national identity: a collective identity (Van De Mieroop 2015) of people of Italian descent who share the same *prestigious* historical past and who can appreciate the artistic heritage and patrimony with which they have lived for generations (Perrino 2020, 2024; Perrino and Kohler 2020).

As the three examples that I analyzed in this article show, Moreno and Bernardo started recounting the history of their companies immediately by linking them to their families' past. Their companies histories thus solidly merged with their families' past by invoking exclusive *kinship chronotopes* (Agha 2015) throughout their narratives. Both companies rest on respected pasts as they are related to the founders of their companies and to the towns where their businesses started. Moreno and Bernardo praised their ancestors for their ability to successfully start their companies that have lasted throughout time and space. Their commitment to their historical, regional, and artistic patrimony therefore helps solidify a collective, Made-in-Italy branding identity which is held together by an imaginary, although embodied, shared DNA. While appealing to a biologized metaphor such as the DNA might be common in some brand marketing discourse, such as the American fashion industry, as Nakassis (2016b) convincingly shows, the emphasis that Northern Italian executives have put on the connection between their family and their businesses pushes this metaphor further. Some executives have reinforced racialized ideologies and anti-immigrant politics, for example, by resorting to similar biologized tropes and by enacting *intimacies of exclusion* vis-à-vis migrants or Italian citizens of migrant decent who have been active in similar industries or sectors such as historical cafés (Perrino 2020, 2024), or by simply venting their frustrations about the new demographics in Italy (Allievi 2014). In closing, throughout their scalar moves, these executives inhabit chronotopes of authenticity by emphasizing that their businesses are unique and exclusive. The way their Made-in-Italy branding identity shifts, and gets translated, across these scales, thus enables them to reinforce exclusionary and xenophobic ideologies while they reinstate their illusion to keep their history, culture, art, and businesses untouched.

Acknowledgements. I presented an earlier version of this article at a panel entitled "The Translation Machine: Exploring the Linguistic Infrastructures of Valorization under Semiocapitalism," organized by

Aurora Donzelli for the 2023 American Anthropological Association Conference in Toronto, CA. I wish to thank the panel organizer, who is also the guest editor of this edited collection of articles, and the panel presenters with whom I engaged in fruitful conversations. Special thanks go to the panel discussant, Constantine Nakassis, who offered acute comments and suggestions. Many thanks to two anonymous reviewers whose astute critical comments were very helpful. I wish to thank the Editors of *Signs and Society*, Asif Agha and Kyung-Nan Koh, for their guidance and feedback throughout the publication process. Last, but not least, this article would have never been written without the participation of many Northern Italian executives and ordinary speakers who agreed to be interviewed and with whom I have had long formal and informal conversations for almost two decades. My deepest thanks go to them all. I am fully responsible of any remaining infelicities.

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Appendix: Transcription and Abbreviations Conventions[6]

- Syllable cut-off.
. Stopping fall in tone.
, Continuing intonation.
? Rising intonation.
! Animated tone.
____ Words with underline indicate stress.
CAP Words in capitals indicate increased volume.

[6]In this article, I follow Gail Jefferson's (1978) transcription conventions.

(…) Talk between parenthesis indicates the transcriber's best guess at a stretch of discourse that is unclear on the original recording.
[…] Three dots between square brackets indicate that some material of the original transcript has been omitted.
[] The material inside square brackets indicate the transcriber's comments/suggestions.

Bold: highlighted portions of the transcript discussed in the analysis
Italics: English translation.

Cite this article: Perrino, Sabina M.. 2025. "Translating Made-in-Italy Across Time and Space." *Signs and Society* 13 (3): 377–394. https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2025.14

Signs and Society (2025), **13** (3), 395–411
doi:10.1017/sas.2025.12

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
HANKUK UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN STUDIES

ARTICLE

Translating Feelings and Mastering Empathy Statements in New Delhi's International Call Centers

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Abstract
Empathy statements are grammatically regular, performative statements used widely in the therapy and medical industries in the United States and adapted to be used by callers in India's National Capital Region international call centers to navigate the foreign and emotionally heightened situations workers experience while speaking to customers. This paper shows the performative nature of translation by analyzing the training of empathy in a train-the-trainer training program. By identifying the grammatical structure, enregisterment, and strategic use of empathy statements in scripts, this paper shows how semiotic frameworks of emotion play a vital role in the types of translation necessitated by the mass mediation of the international call center.

Keywords: call centers; empathy; enregisterment; India; skills; translation

"That's advice, horrible advice!" Asher responded to Mimi who was a member of his training program. Mimi was a call center employee from Manipur, India. She was training to become a trainer, and at this moment, was in the middle of an activity where she was supposed to learn about creating empathy statements. Asher was a master trainer with over a decade and a half of experience in the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry in India. He was the co-owner of One Direction Skill Solutions (ODSS) and ran a Train the Trainer (TTT) program for aspiring call center trainers. Mimi had been given a situation with which to verbally empathize—somebody losing their dog. She was supposed to craft a statement to respond to the situation according to the lessons we had been learning that day. She provided the statement, "well, I'm sure you must have reached out to the police," which prompted Asher's beratement that this was not "empathy," but "advice."

Emotions do not travel freely between people, across contexts in affective flows. In call centers, talking about emotions is rigorously trained using semiotic frameworks

that make emotive statements intelligible and more importantly effective upon foreign customers. Empathy statements show the performative nature of translation in the global workplace. They serve to make the emotional intent of the Indian agent intelligible to the foreign customer, and through learning empathy statements, Indian call center workers learn to interpret expressions of emotion exhibited by customers. On another level, empathy statements also serve as a means through which the customer service agent can restate the customer's feelings in a "milder," more ideologically "neutral" form as a way of mitigating the expression of those feelings during a call.

My analysis of the translation of empathy shows the vast amount of semiotic labor that goes into creating emotional and affective effects in the global service industry. Drawing from 18 months of participant observation in the skills training industry in New Delhi, I trace this labor by analyzing the process through which soft skills trainers learn to train agents in empathy statements. In this article, I use meta-discursive behavior typifying empathy statements in call center scripts during the training of "soft skills" trainers to establish the grammatical form of these statements. The form of empathy statements, and the means through which emotions are translated, is enregistered (Agha 2005) through rigorous training programs.

This analysis of empathy statements builds off of theories of the incomplete and yet generative nature of translation in the context of post-colonial English, or the "aporia of translation" (Rafael 2016). This is a process of friction (Tsing 2011), and it generates new forms of value and meaning in its wake that take the form of semiotic frameworks. The translation of emotion through these statements is at once a cite of inequality and a cite of resistance as callers use the tools of Western emotional expression to quell unwanted outbursts of anger from irate customers. By stating feelings in the right way, the feelings themselves undergo a translation process that is meant to effectively neutralize or moderate what the client is expressing. These statements are used in customer service interactions in a wide range of fields all over the world creating a translation that is performative rather than complete.

Background

Translating soft skills, affect, and empathy

"Soft skills" is not a term that was familiar to the trainees. The terms of training were rarely translated into local languages, but rather translated in different registers of English. An exception was when Asher introduced trainees to the Soft Skills training module; he wrote on the whiteboard the Hindi words मुलायम कलाएँ (*mulaayam kalaaye*), or "soft arts," to the confusion of the trainees. The term makes little sense in Hindi. The fact that there is no easy translation of the noun phrase "soft skills" in Hindi and the literal translation of these words was meant to be humorous and elicited confusion from the group, was an allegory for the way that the types of behavior that were covered in soft skills training were often at odds to the intuitive ways that the trainees would normally engage with each other and talk about emotion in an Indian context. The work of translation required hours and hours of practice and technical theories about other nouns, like "empathy." Engaging in talk about feeling in this way was far from natural in this context; it was a skill to be acquired. The commensuration of

empathy required semiotic frameworks that could render words like skill and *kalaaye* translatable, expanding the semiotic domain of soft skills for the trainees.

The data from this paper come from a soft skills training module that I observed from 2018 to 2019. My field site, ODSS, was a company that worked with the BPOs in the National Capital Region of India to supply them with labor and training. By working with ODSS, I was able to observe their work with multiple BPOs and hundreds of workers and potential workers over the course of my 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork that lasted from 2016 to 2019. For this paper, I will be focusing on the portion of my research that involved participating in and observing a program for training call center trainers called Train the Trainer Training (TTT). I observed the training of two batches of future BPO trainers which met once a day for 6 hours every week. I collected over 70 hours of audio and video recordings of these training sessions. Upon certification, the new trainers would go on to work at call centers training new employees to work at BPOs.

Empathy statements belong to a type of training, called "soft skills training." "Soft skill" is a nebulous category that Asher distinguished from "hard skill" in that soft skills are formulated as *not* the overt task that a worker does to earn their wage. Rather, "soft skills" often refer to the unwritten rules of interpersonal conduct that overlay every social interaction in which a worker engages. "Soft skill" often describes the general "niceness" or "politeness" of a person's behavior, and it ideally results in similarly "pleasant" responses in the next turn behavior of a customer. The rise of this kind of emotive or affective aspect of workplace activities is central to the work of BPO workers, as it is for many people in workplaces across the globe (Mankekar and Gupta 2016).

"Soft skills," according to Asher, were about interacting with customers "professionally and politely." Throughout this training module, trainees were expected to learn how to build rapport, actively listen, give a polite refusal, and apologize, such that American customers would respond positively to their mannerisms and give employees good customer satisfaction scores. Despite their juxtaposition to "hard" skills, not only were soft skills deceptively tricky, but I observed through this training that "soft skills" were explicitly laid out, formulated, and constituted a central part of call center work. Rather than unwritten rules that are less central than "hard skills," these rules were explicit and treated as just as important as other aspects of call center routines. Ironically, soft skills were hard on both of these levels: they were not easy to obtain, and they were a central part of how employee labor was commodified in call centers.

The types of things associated with soft skills, navigating emotional situations, being perceived as "nice," making customers "feel things," are one reason why scholars such as Mankekar and Gupta (2016) argue that call center customer service work is "affective labor" with the call center floor being a space characterized by a kind of "raw energy" (15). Drawing from Massumi (1995), they discuss how affect is pre-internalized emotion, and it is intersubjective rather than internal:

> In contrast, in our characterization of the labor of call center agents as affective labor, we theorize affect as a field of intensities that circulates between bodies and objects and between and across bodies; as existing alongside, barely beneath, and in excess of cognition; and as transgressing binaries of mind versus body, and private feeling versus collective sentiment. (Mankekar and Gupta 2016, 24)

Empathy is often spoken about as something that is felt with others, rather than on one's own. Empathy is talked about as something outside of and in excess to language and cognition. This builds off an understanding of language developed by Deleuze and Guattrari (1980) where language exists separate from raw experience in a plane of reference. Scholars who study affect often look to exceed or get beyond representation (Stewart 2007; Tomkins 2008; Melissa and Seigworth 2010). However, empathy in call centers is inextricably embedded in learning linguistic expressions.

Empathy requires translation in that the feelings of at least two people are held to be tokens of the same type. Empathy has a relatively recent translative history. The word "empathy" itself entered the English language as a translation from the German *einfühlung* [in-feeling] in 1909, by American Psychologist Edward Titchener from the work of German Psychologist Theodor Lipps (Jahoda 2005; Cuff et al. 2016). The German term was adapted, defined, and cast into a trajectory in American psychology that eventually led to its being the center of the discussion between Asher and his trainees.

According to Asher, "empathy" is differentiated from sympathy in the fact that it is situation- and solution-oriented rather than simply mirroring feelings. This definition aligns with how professional registers of empathy are talked about in marketing and medical literature. Solution-driven empathy statements are widely popular in the United States and have been developed for training in American medicine, where doctors continue to use them to deliver bad news to patients, but in recent decades they have come to be used widely in a range of service industries, including the Indian call center (Coulehan et al. 2001; Hardee 2003). Empathy statements are often used and studied for the purpose of customer interactions (e.g., Coulehan et al. 2001; Silvia De et al. 2015; Packard, Moore, and McFerran 2018; Van Herck et al. 2023). Through codified "empathy statements" doctors and call center workers, alike, attempt to make patients and clients feel understood and cared for, or, at the very least, respond as if they feel cared for. This definition of "empathy" might seem strange to the reader who isn't already familiar with this type of professionalized empathy.[1] Through the global workplace, this kind of efficient, solution-driven approach to feelings has spread the world over.

BPOs, ODSS, translation, and new capitalism

International call centers have emerged as workplaces under what scholars have called "globalization," "global capitalism," "neoliberalism," "transnationalism," or "globalism." Business processes exist across nation-boundaries. The nature of work is changing and this is reflected in scholarship that highlights the parallel changes in how we talk in and about the workplace. Under global capitalism, language has become both a commodity itself (Heller 2010) and is the means through which commodities are formulated (Agha 2011a). Urciuoli (2008) talks about how "skills talk" reduces workers to bundles of cultural shifters that market CV writers as the "right kind of person" without being grounded semantically. The alienation of language from meaning is central to work in "McJobs" (Ritzer 2013) or "bullshit jobs" (Graeber 2018) that utilize "bullshit

[1]Recently, "empathy" is "out" in American business culture with theories of "ruinous empathy" (Scott 2019).

genres" (Gershon 2023). Within this kind of workplace, emotional labor, or labor characterized by the commodification of emotion, has emerged as a central part of most customer-facing industries (Hochschild 2012), and soft skills is a codification of this kind of labor.

BPO companies have become a common business model since the expansion of the internet and telecommunications in the 1980s and arrived in India in the 1990s after the opening of the Indian economy to foreign investors in 1991. The BPO business model is premised on a third-party company taking on some aspect of another company's business (also known as a "process") in order to cut costs for the other company. This often happens across national borders to take advantage of the lower cost of labor in former colonies. In India, the international call center has become somewhat of a poster child for the BPO industry, where multinational companies hire BPOs to handle everything from insurance claims to debt collection. Research on BPOs in India have focused on accent training (Friginal 2007; Rahman 2009; Krishnamurthy 2011; Mirchandani 2012; Aneesh 2015), broader societal impacts (Patel 2010; Shelly and Vigneswara Ilavarasan 2011), and the emergence of a class of global professionals (Noronha and D'Cruz 2009; Nadeem 2013; Nielsen 2022).

The training received in call centers is a form of translation in that norms of language intelligible and suitable for the customer must be learned and equated to the norms of new trainees. Asher often said that as trainers you "start with what they [the Indian trainees] know and bring them to what they don't know." During TTT, the trainees needed to not only learn how people in the United States and England used language, but they had to learn how to get their own future trainees to take on manners of speech that would be intelligible to future foreign customers. This ranged from speech sounds to the subject of this paper: talk about emotion.

Leidner (1993) calls these kinds of training the "routinization" of service work, where in neoliberal workplaces nearly all conduct has become scripted and highly trained. Routinization, however, is not routine. Woydack's ethnography of a multilingual call center shows how scripts are socially negotiated by employees and not top-down constructions (Woydack and Rampton 2016; Woydack and Lockwood 2017; Woydack 2019). Further, what discussion of training as simply the dispersion of neoliberal scripts misses, is the work of translation that goes into this kind of training. Translation is a generative process that creates new forms of meaning as multiple forms (each with their own context) are equated. Tsing (2011) calls this process of local interpretation and the generative-ness of globalization "friction." Under global capitalism, treating processes as scalable and interchangeable is a part of what Tsing (2015) calls scalability.

These points of international contact require translation. Translation involves an irony that leads to the generation of linguistic frameworks towards the impossible goal of rendering two things interchangeable, an impossible task. Rafael argues for an "aporia of translation" in that the work of translation is never complete, creating a generative effect (Rafael 2016). The incompleteness of the translation of call center language has led to new forms and formulations for the use of language in call centers, from "neutral" accents to scripts riddled with empathy statements. The incompleteness of translation comes from the fact that no two signs are completely interchangeable, rather translation

Form A: Past Participle

$$\left[\mathrm{I}_j \left\{ \begin{matrix} can \\ \emptyset \end{matrix} \right\} \left(\begin{matrix} hear \\ see \\ agree \\ \dots \end{matrix} \right) \left[that \left[you_k \left[\left\{ \begin{matrix} are \\ must\ be \\ might\ be \end{matrix} \right\} [verb + ed_k] \right]_{VP} \right]_{S1} \right]_{CP} \right]_{S2}$$

Form B: Present Participle

$$\left[\mathrm{I}_j \left\{ \begin{matrix} can \\ \emptyset \end{matrix} \right\} \left(\begin{matrix} hear \\ see \\ agree \\ \dots \end{matrix} \right) \left[that \left[situation_l \left[\left\{ \begin{matrix} are \\ must\ be \\ might\ be \end{matrix} \right\} [verb + ing_l] \right]_{VP} \right]_{S1} \right]_{CP} \right]_{S2}$$

Figure 1. Grammatical form of empathy statements.

involves semiotic frameworks that render them gradable, commensurate (Carruthers 2017), and, therefore, comparable.

Making customer service workers intelligible to foreign customers involves creating and utilizing semiotic frameworks that allow for different registers of speech to be compared in a meaningful way. Translation involves processes of enregisterment where registers of interpersonal communication are emblematically associated with formulations of personhood (Agha 2005). Translation expands the social domain of registers while also changing their context of interpretation. The remainder of this paper shows the semiotic work and semiotic frameworks that go into rendering two formulations of emotion comparable and therefore translatable.

Grammar of empathy

The grammatical form of empathy statements, while perhaps not explicitly known to most Americans, is a highly recognizable form of speech. "I understand that having a broken computer must be exhausting to deal with for you." "I can see that you are excited to be celebrating your new job." "I can tell that being locked out of your account would be frustrating for you." The form is recognizable and either associated with customer service or couples' therapy.

Empathy statements take a regular grammatical form. Asher identified this form in three to four parts, summarized in Figure 1.

Empathy statements start with an "I" statement and *verbum sentiendi*, "a verb of perception," like "understand" or "see," or a *verbum decendi*, "a verb of speech," such as "agree" or "tell." These verbs are sometimes accompanied by a modal verb such as "can," "may," or "will." This phrase is followed by a past or present participle adjective which is an adjective formed from another *verbum sentiendi* by the affixing of a -ed or -ing affix. Then, there is a reference to the speaker and often some kind of hedging phrase. An example would be "I understand that you are frustrated" or "I understand that the situation might be frustrating for you."

This grammatical Form A from Figure 1 includes both first- and second-person pronouns, which are deictics that cement participant roles in the empathy statement. In the grammatical form B, the subject of S1 is a situation. This could be the description of a situation or simply the phrase "this situation." Often the verb phrase in Form B

has a prepositional phrase "for you" as its compliment, but the referent of the present participle is always a situation rather than the hearer in Form B, whereas the referent of the past participle is always the hearer in Form A. The speaker is the subject of the verb of S2 which references the act of observing or recognizing which, in turn, takes as its object a complementizer phrase centered around a subject of the addressee or situation characterized by an adjective that contains within it a verb that describes some act of feeling or emoting.

Through the use of *verbum sentiendi*, acts of perception become laminated upon participants as emotional states during the act of speech. This form is similar to the one that Austin (1975) and Searle (2008) noted in their discussions of performative speech acts in that it utilizes the first person and the simple present tense with a special kind of verb (*dicendi*/'speech' or *sentiendi*/'perception').[2] In fact some forms of empathy statements are performative locutions in that they use *verbum dicendi* statements, such as "I agree."

Empathy statements are speech acts, much like performative locutions in that, rather than convey a denotational message in order to provide information (e.g., My computer is broken), they create a role alignment between the subjects of S1 and S2, the customer and customer service agent. In this role alignment, the subject of S1 is the customer (k) or the situation (l) which is affecting (k) who is explicitly indicated if there is the presence of a prepositional phrase compliment (e.g., "I see that this$_l$ must be challenging **for you**$_k$").

The form of these empathy statements was explicitly shared with the TTT trainees by the head trainer Asher. After he explained the grammatical form of the statement, he moved on to discuss the importance of selecting the right emotive adjective. This was crucial to using empathy statements effectively. The performative framework was laid out in the grammar of the sentence, but their effect was closely related to the choice of emotional adjectives.

Learning to neutralize feeling

Though the basic format for empathy statements in Figure 1 sheds light on the grammatical categories involved in these statements' production, describing the format of empathy statements was only the first TTT lesson in their use. The next part of the training was focused on differentiating between "good" and "bad" empathy statements in a wide range of contexts. This involved two kinds of semiotic frameworks: the differentiation between the two grammatical options for empathy statements and the choice of the right kind of emotive adjective. All empathy statements are not made the same, and some of those differences are embedded in overtly described grammatical categories. Form A and Form B from Figure 1 were not considered of equal effectiveness. Asher explained to the trainees that empathy statements with present participle adjectives (Form B) were better for dealing with customer feelings than past participle (Form A):

[2]For another classic discussion of linguistic performativity, see Lee (1997).

> Asher: Yeah, so you can either say, "I understand how disoriented you must feel," or you can say, "I understand how disorienting", present participle, "it must be for you." So, there are two ways of saying it. I actually prefer targeting the situation, because we don't want to say how you feel, because then we are, like, questioning their ability to deal with the situation. Like, "You must be disoriented." Maybe you're not. Maybe someone else would not be. But if I'm saying the situation can be disorienting, it means it could be for everyone. So, I prefer this one [points at "present participle" on the whiteboard] but this one [points at "past participle"] is not completely wrong. You could use that as well. "I can understand how frustrated you must be," but I feel it's better to say how frustrating the situation is, because then you are targeting the situation. You aren't targeting the person. That's what empathy is about.

The fact that the past participle of a verb and the present participle of a verb orient differently towards their subjects means that utterances with these grammatical forms of emotive verbs have a head which is either the origin of the feeling or the receiver of the feeling. In the case of "disoriented," the subject of the sentence is the one who experiences disorientation (its object), whereas in the case of "disorienting," the subject is the thing which causes the disorientation (its subject). In a sentence "*x* disorients *y*," the subject (*x*) is the origin of the disorientation, whereas the object (*y*) is the receiver of the disorientation. Disorient, as a transitive verb, takes two predicates: *Disorient(x,y)*. In the sentence "*x* is disorienting for *y*," the relationship between *x* and *y* is still *Disorient(x,y)*. In the sentence "*y* is disoriented by *x*" the relation *Disorient(x,y)* stays the same, but y is the grammatical subject of the sentence rather than the object. It is for this reason that "Jena is frustrated" and "Jena is frustrating" have very different meanings. Taking into consideration the performative nature of empathy statements, the feeling that is being laminated takes on a different object depending on which form is used and has a different social effect.

This difference was highlighted in the case of Mimi, the TTT trainee from Manipur, trying to produce an empathy statement using a derivation of the verb "to stress" for a person who lost their dog, a continuation of the introduction story. The other trainees, Natasha and Shivani, try to help her find the right kind of adjective to make an adequate empathy statement.

In Table 1, Mimi uses stressful instead of stressed with the subject of a person, indicating that the cause of the stress was "you," the hearer. Natasha and Shivani work together to fix Mimi's mistake. To further cement the lesson on participles, Asher gives the example of "stressing everybody out" as the equivalent of "stressful." To make an empathy statement, a call center worker must form a sentence with the pronoun "I" as the subject of a verb of observation, followed by an emotive verbal adjective. However, the choice of the right adjective and emotion word was important to crafting a "good" empathy statement.

Different emotive verbal adjectives in empathy statements were ranked and graded in Asher's feedback to trainees in relation to their relative "strength." Empathy adjectives that were "too strong" were undesirable, especially in the case of negative emotions. In one study of call center debt collectors, the juxtaposing of emotional

Table 1. Stressed and stressful

1.	Mimi: I understand how stressful you must be
2.	Asher: stressful you must be! [laughs] Do you know what that means? stressful you must be like you are calling the person stressful
3.	Natasha: not stressful
4.	A: stressful is fine "how stressful the situation must be." how would you say it
5.	N: how stressful the situation must be
6.	A: but if you don't want to mention the situation you want to mention the person
7.	Shivani: how stressful the situation must be
8.	A: that is the situation not the person
9.	N: how
10.	S: how str… the adjective, na?
11.	N: how stressful it must be for you
12.	A: it's stressed not stressful
13.	A:because it means you must be stressing everybody out because you lost your dog that's what stressful means that's not a good thing to say to someone

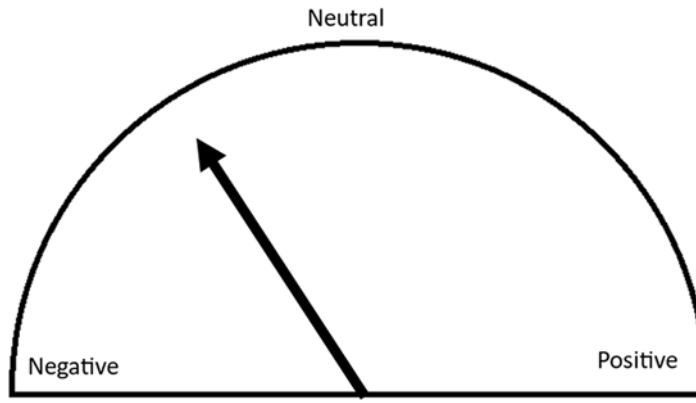

Figure 2. Reproduction of the "emoti-meter" Asher drew on the whiteboard.

orientation was one tactic used in controlling customer response in Indian call centers (Poster 2013). In the TTT at ODSS, the trainers in training were not expected to counter emotions with their opposites, but rather mirror customer emotions with slightly "less intensity."

Asher explained that emotions could be positive, negative, or neutral in their orientation and drew an emoti-meter (depicted in Figure 2) on the board where one side was negative emotions, the other side was positive emotions, and "neutral" was in the middle. Empathy statements, he explained, were geared towards the emotional orientation of the customer, but would be slightly more "neutral," in order to keep customers away from expressing extreme emotions on a call.

"Neutral" as a term is highlighted in emotive training in a way which parallels its use in accent training (author, 2025). Being recognized as "neutral" according a semiotic framework of emotions was key to being appropriate to use in empathy statements. A customer's emotions needed to be ratified but not overstated. Through training, Asher imbued certain words with relatively "marked" emotional values.

Besides their positive and negative valences, emotive words would vary in how "strong" they were. Weaker words were closer to neutral valence and better for "safer" empathy statements. In one activity, Asher had the cohort of trainees list emotive adjectives for someone who had lost their phone. The group came up with the words "disoriented," "sad," "angry," "insecure," "irate," "frustrated," "stressed," "depressed," "worried," "helpless," "tense," and "anxious." Asher then asked the group which of these words could be used in an empathy statement starting with "I understand you must be …" Some of the words were deemed "too strong" to use in good empathy statements, in Table 2 Asher describes why it is important to use words that are more neutral, rather than "strong" words.

Table 2. Neutral emotive adjectives

1.	Asher: yeah, so when you come up with emotions there can be certain words that are a little over the top, so you want to avoid those because if a customer is angry and he's also getting angry at the service then …if you say "boy I can understand how angry you are" then maybe he's not angry but suddenly he realizes yes I am now. So, you don't want to use really strong words, like even frustrated I would say [shifts hand back and forth] I mean try to
2.	Kristina: like can you use frustrated if they say, "I'm angry," then you can say, "I understand that you are frustrated."
3.	A: right so you've lowered it. Don't increase it. If he's not saying anything don't increase it. So, you want to use some of the milder ones, "I can understand how worried you must be. I can understand how anxious you must be." "Annoyed", again this is a slightly stronger word. "I can understand how stressed out you must be right now."

Shown in Table 2, Asher and my interaction during training shows how "lowering" the adjective is a tactic to deal with customer emotions. He also hierarchizes the adjectives. "Annoyed" is stronger than "anxious" which is stronger than "worried." "Angry" is also deemed "too strong" to use in an effective empathy statement.

Translating emotion and enregistering empathy

Learning the semiotic frameworks discussed above involved practice through mock scenarios where Asher would evaluate statements that the trainees came up with. This process of enregisterment often involved formulating some kinds of feedback as Indian and others as acceptable forms of empathy. Trainees practiced empathy statements in an activity where they were given nine scenarios and had to write an empathy statement for each one, which they would then present for Asher to critique. Asher's feedback was in relation to the relative "power" of the statement they designed and its adherence to the format of the empathy statement. Sometimes it was okay to break the grammatical form of the empathy statement, but those situations were also critiqued and given feedback on the relative appropriateness of the response. In this way, through repetition and constant metapragmatic commentary, trainees were enregistered into this new system

Table 3. New job

1.	Asher: so new job
2.	Natasha: so new job, could be like positive emotion
3.	A: how would you phrase the statement?
4.	N: [laughs nervously] it's like I can see how, or I can tell how excited you are but um
5.	A: ok you could possibly say that "I can tell how excited you must be" or
6.	N: so, I wish you great luck with that
7.	A: I think that might be overkill
8.	N: so, I won't say that
9.	A: it's okay if you say I can tell how excited you must be or you could say [gesture to the room]
10.	Author: how exciting?
11.	A: or
12.	Mimi: congratulations
13.	A: congratulations, one word sometimes that's enough you don't have to all of this like usually
14.	M: good luck
15.	A: good luck. That depends on how you say it like good luck with that
16.	K: my condolences
17.	A: [laughs] you can still get out. There's still time

of emotive speech. Forms which would typically be indicative of care for an Indian audience but less appreciated by American customers (e.g., advice) were banned, and gradually trainees learned how to make empathy statements on the fly.

In the first scenario in Table 3, Asher describes Nitasha's response to a customer's new job as "overkill." He also is worried that the wrong tone with the words "good luck" could indicate sarcasm. He rejects these statements but also uses comparative constructs, like "over" and "enough." There is a fine balance in finding the right power of a response that was still confusing for the trainees. Arriving at the best response of "congratulations" was only achieved after a somewhat long process of commensuration as different responses are tried, compared, and reformulated, much like how accents were trained in the previous chapter. Nuanced ideas about appropriate responses that might seem normal to an American client are rigorously trained in these back-and-forth sessions.

In Table 4, all three of the trainees in attendance that day formulated an answer to the scenario of a customer whose son has a birthday. In these responses, Asher responds to the strength of Nitasha's word "nice" but the tone of the responses of Mimi and Shivangi. In response to Asher's request for "more excitement," Shivangi attempted to sound like me by raising her pitch and on her second try did so in a way that sounded dramatic to the point of sarcasm. This kind of speech was often associated with American voices, such as mine, and felt weird for the trainees. Like with the "power" of emotion adjective for empathy statements, finding the right balance in tone was also key to nailing empathy.

The third (Table 5) scenario was a customer who was divorced. This scenario posed a problem and was meant to represent a social difference between India and the United

Table 4. Son's birthday

1.	Natasha: oh nice wish him happy birthday
2.	Asher: don't say "nice". nice is not a very nice word
3.	N: great
4.	A: great
5.	N: um wish him a very happy birthday hmm
6.	A: that's awesome …
7.	A: so, Mimi, son's birthday
8.	Mimi: that's great
9.	A: great that's not like… people are usually more excited
10.	Shivani: say what Kristina said you must be excited.
11.	A: She said a couple of more things after that and not in that tone
12.	S: how exciting [higher pitch voice]
13.	Author: [laughter] that's what I sound like
14.	S: That's exciting [even higher pitch]
15.	A: that last one was a little off… like sarcasm

Table 5. Divorce

1.	Nitasha: I understand it must be difficult
2.	Asher: no no no she was a total um[3] couldn't be happier
3.	N: um that's um
4.	Kristina: I'm free I'm free
5.	A: so how would you respond to someone who says that
6.	Shivani: I'm free?
7.	A: no who says I'm getting divorced in a couple of days I'm just trying to get her name off of my account [long pause] hello is anyone there hello hello
8.	N: I'd be like "I understand how stressed" but then again it's not stressed because he could be happy about it
9.	A: [to Author] what would you say
10.	K: good luck on the newest chapter in your life? like it depends on the tone of voice
11.	A: what would you say if you can't tell, like just really quickly "hello I'm getting separated tomorrow and I want to get my wife's name off of my account"
12.	K: I'd just say "sounds good, let me take care of that for you"
13.	A: yeah sometimes you don't even want to go there. Like just saying it like a matter of fact thing, just say it's okay

States. In India, divorce is often considered a taboo subject, especially among Hindus. However, in the United States, divorce is sometimes welcomed and might be associated with relief. The trainees struggled to find the right tone, without knowing the emotional state of the imagined customer relative to his divorce. At the end, Asher refers to me

as an American cultural expert to come up with an appropriate response to news of a divorce, which was not to empathize at all.

In this situation, I was a bit stumped at first in trying to figure out what exactly Asher was going for. I was learning about empathy statements myself. However, Asher assumed that this knowledge would be a part of my cultural knowledge as an American. This shows how empathy statements were viewed as an act of translation.

In the beginning vignette, Mimi is chastised for advising a customer. In this and in other practice situations, whenever trainees suggested what the figurative customer should do with themselves, Asher told them that what they were saying was advice and not empathy, and identified advice as an Indian response to situations. We explained to trainees that though Indians often associated advice with care, Americans do not view unsolicited advice favorably. They often feel judged rather than cared for. In a scenario where the customer was faced with a hurricane event, Shivangi suggested that they take shelter to which Asher doubled down on the importance of never giving advice to customers.

Empathy statements were formulated as alternatives to Indian ways of to responding to emotion. Once the trainees started to understand how to formulate them and use them in response to practice situations, they were taught to use them in scripts that were specific to customer service situations. In the next section, I show how these statements were used to mitigate potential emotional responses of customers in calling scripts.

Empathy in scripts

Empathy statements are always embedded in a speech chain of interactions where they are an $n + 1$ utterance, where n is something said by the customer which indicates an emotional state. Asher told the trainees that they needed to listen to the tone of voice of the customer to understand their emotional state and to listen to the customer's words to understand the situation. A good empathy statement accurately accounts for both the situation and the customer's emotional state. Using the format laid out in Figure 1, empathy statements create role alignments between customer and customer service representative to meet a goal of the customer service rep. The speech chain of these interactions is described in Figure 3. The eventual goal of an empathy statement is to intervein in the conversation so that the $n + r$ action of the customer (k) is to give agent (j) a satisfactory customer service score, or "CSAT" score. The higher an agent's average CSAT score, the more money that agent is able to make. CSAT scores are also how BPOs report success to the companies that hire them to manage their customer service. The n utterance is meant to be represented in the S1 portion of empathy statements (e.g., you must be frustrated, that situation must be frustrating) and by embedding this phrase in S2, the agent indicates their own understanding of the customer's emotion in an attempt to laminate feelings onto role alignments in an attempt to intervein in the conversational flow.

Empathy statements formed a key part of several important scripts for call center soft skills training. These include dealing with irate customers, polite refusal/service

[3] Asher uses "um" to self-censor a derogatory word for the fictive wife

$$n_k \rightarrow n_j{+}1 \rightarrow \ldots \rightarrow n_k{+}r$$

$$\text{initial utterance}_k \rightarrow \text{empathy statement}_j \rightarrow \ldots \rightarrow \text{CSAT}^4\ \text{score}_k$$

Figure 3. Speech chain analysis of empathy interaction.[4]

Table 6. Service no

Steps in a "service no"	Example utterance
1. Empathy Statement	I understand that you are excited about that model of printer.
2. Give a Reason	We do not have it in stock currently.
3. Refusal	So, I cannot sell it to you, today.
4. Alternative	I can tell you about our other models or put you on a waitlist.
5. Willingness to Help	I can definitely help you with that!

no, call openings, and apologizing. In these scripts, call center agents were meant to use empathy statements to temper clients' negative emotions.

After trainees learned the grammatical form of empathy statements and how to pick relatively "neutral" emotions to use in them, they were able to use empathy statements in calling scripts. Scripts are flow charts for interactions with customers, though customer service agents are expected to improvise and almost always do so (Woydack and Lockwood 2017). Empathy statements are worked into scripts for the general call flow and for specific interventions as moments where the agent must improvise relative to the emotional state and situation of the customer.

Empathy statements in the TTT were worked into three scripts: the general call flow, dealing with irate customers, and the service no. In a general call flow, an empathy statement is used directly after a customer identifies their problem. According to Asher, this empathy statement is meant to build rapport with the customer and ratify their emptions in the situation. In other situations, empathy statements are used as the need arises.

When a customer wants something that they cannot have, customer service agents need to say "no" while still trying to achieve a good CSAT score at the end of the call. This is done through what the industry calls a "service no." In Table 6, I lay out the steps of a service no. The empathy statement is used as the first step in the refusal to temper the response of a customer to being denied at a later step. This script is repeated each time a refusal needs to be made. Asher used the example of a customer wanting to buy a printer model but that model not being available. He started by recognizing the customer's desire for the printer in an empathy statement and then stating the reason for the denial before actually delivering the news, followed by immediately tempering the news with viable alternatives.[5]

[4]Customer Satisfaction Score

[5]I have personally found this script to be helpful in dealing with a range of situations upon returning from the field, from students who want grade inflations to saying no to the requests of administrators.

Empathy statements were translations of Indian emotive responses into more Americanized ones but also were used to translate the feelings of customers into more "neutral" forms, ideally earning high customer satisfaction scores. These statements were ways of performatively setting the emotional expectations of an interaction, sometimes altering the tone that the customer sets before the statement is uttered.

Conclusion

People, the world over, talk about feelings. The way that we express those feelings is highly variable. Further, the way we expect people to respond to our talk about feelings is contextually relative. While there has been a push in recent years away from a focus on the semiotics of such interactions, especially in literature on affect, the example I have put forward in this paper shows how feelings and their exchanges are semiotically grounded and far from universal. Rather, feelings need translating. Call center workers train hard to learn how to navigate expected linguistic formulation of feelings with the help of empathy statements.

Call center workers engage in translation as they learn a new way of talking about and formulating emotion during training. Responses that involve advice are formulated as a type of "Indian" emotional talk and empathy statements are offered by Asher as a new professional, American alternative. The rendering of words as commensurate and interchangeable is by no means a neutral process. On calls, they use empathy statements to reformulate emotional phrases of customers, using the tool of translation to navigate emotionally heightened situations. "Angry" becomes "frustrated." "Anxious" becomes "concerned." "I understand that you are worried" itself is a performative statement that sets the tone of customer interactions.

The processes laid out in the paper show how translation is not limited to words and sounds, but also can involve formulations of feeling. One emotive response can be equated to another in translative frameworks. The overtly performative nature of empathy statements is not limited to the translation of empathy, but to any form of translation. In a world where we are exposed to emotive talk from all over the world through media, translation is anything but a neutral exchange of one code for another. The act of translation itself changes our social worlds through reflexively formulating new semiotic frameworks within which we imagine ourselves and others.

Acknowledgements. This research was supported by a Fulbright-Nehru fellowship, the Center for the Advanced Study of India, at the University of Pennsylvania. I would like to thank Ashish Khan and Dr. Asher Jesudoss at One Direction Skill Solutions for their continued support of my research. I am grateful for the advice of Asif Agha, Greg Urban, and Andrew Curruthers during the research and writing process.

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Cite this article: Nielsen, Kristina. 2025. "Translating Feelings and Mastering Empathy Statements in New Delhi's International Call Centers." *Signs and Society* 13 (3): 395–411. https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2025.12

Signs and Society (2025), **13** (3), 412–430
doi:10.1017/sas.2025.9

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
HANKUK UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN STUDIES

ARTICLE

Translating Sustainability into Somatic Experience: Renderings of Eco-Cities in Southeast Asia

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Abstract
Fusing the aesthetics of futurity with the lush beauty of the natural world, planned eco-city developments like Forest City and Penang South Islands, both in Malaysia, promise luxury enclaves against climate change and the environmental stressors of existing cities. This article analyzes CGI architectural renderings used to promote and sell eco-city projects in Southeast Asia. Eco-city renderings, we argue, produce semio-capitalistic value by translating the familiar concepts of "green," "eco-friendly," and "sustainable" into something far more inchoate: feelings. They do so through their supersaturation with signs of greenness in a design strategy we label "semiotic overdetermination." Selling "green" as a feeling, eco-city renderings capitalize on present-day anxieties over urban decay and commodify "the ecological" as a rich resource of pleasurable qualitative experiences. The result, we contend, is to reinforce a neoliberal mode of subjectivity that equates consumption with somatics and reduces climate responsibility to individual consumer decisions.

Keywords: aesthetics; affect; ecology; renderings; Southeast Asia; urban

Figure 1 is *not* Penang South Islands. Penang South Islands—as a place extended into physical space—does not yet exist. It is, rather, a hyper-rendering of Penang South Islands, a composite architectural image created by layering computer-generated imagery (CGI) on top of computer-generated imagery (Halpern and Wenzel 2012). A smart, eco-city megaproject of three adjoining islands, planned for construction in the northwest peninsular state of Penang in Malaysia, Penang South Islands will be finished sometime between 2035 and 2060. Unforeseen delays, legal challenges from local fishing communities, environmental impact assessments, and bureaucratic red tape continue to slow down that timeline. Though land reclamation efforts are now underway, it will be years before the first of the three islands, dubbed "Silicon Island" for its imagined role in the Malaysian tech sector, will be somewhere that one can visit or

Figure 1. A computer-generated rendering of Makers Park, BiodiverCITY Penang (now Penang South Islands). Courtesy of BIG.

reside in. Nonetheless, Penang South Islands is already a felt presence in Penang, a perceptual filter through which residents understand the current state of their nation and region, along with its international reputation, economic standing, and environmental trajectory.

Hyper-renderings (referred to in the rest of this article as simply "renderings") of the Penang South Islands design masterplan have circulated widely across a range of websites and in newspaper and magazine articles (see, for example, Clark 2023; Harrouk 2020; BIG 2020b). In so doing, they play an active role in making visual what is currently only abstract and conceptual (Halpern 2014, 21). Such images stimulate the imagination, give form to speculation about what is to come, provide fodder for conversation, protest, and political boosterism, and make the future feel predictable. More importantly, they make it feel palpable. Renderings create an immersive simulation (see Turkle 2009, 6) of spaces as they may someday be, confusing the senses into believing, if only momentarily, that those spaces are already there for them to occupy and engage.

Notice the hyperrealism of the image in Figure 1, how it almost resembles a photograph, the pattern of sunlight and shadow that lends it depth and texture, the classic three-point perspective. Notice its "wide angle sight, [its] eternal spring glow, and [its] highly contrasted, poster-edged, lens-flared finish" (Vileda 2012, 49). Notice the pervasive mood the rendering creates: the ultra-modern buildings covered in vegetation, the abundance of water, and the mysterious white rings lining the canal, evoking wind turbines or some other unspecified mode of non-fossil-fuel-based energy production. Notice, also, the "great weather and pretty people" (Schlegel 2012, 57), the numerous active residents: strolling, cycling, and interacting along the banks of a shimmering canal. These figures, most likely cut and pasted from existing catalogs of human forms, are stand-ins for viewers, suggestions of potential residents or investors in Penang South Islands. We are meant to imagine ourselves in their place, moving along the riverbank, appreciating the climbing, jungle-like foliage, perhaps even taking a ride in one of the many bubble-shaped cars and boats depicted. The relative unfamiliarity

of the shape of these vehicles, their smooth, curved lines and indeterminate means of propulsion, further imply the near future, a time just out of reach. There is something fantastical about the vehicles, as well as the larger scenes of which they are a part. Despite their purported realism, renderings like this one show not the world not as we know it, but as it may someday be, "a techno-scientific" (Babcock 2022, 2) quasi-utopia where the realities and dangers of climate change have been muted, if not reversed, and people live in harmony with nature once again. They are meant to instill in us a peculiar mix of optimism and nostalgia; retro-futurism meets climate speculation.

In this article, we critically analyze renderings of two eco-city developments in Malaysia: Penang South Islands (in the early phases of land reclamation) and Forest City (incomplete but already open to residents, businesses, and visitors). Renderings of these eco-cities, we argue, are projects of translation within an emergent semio-capitalistic regime of "green" design. Green design, as we discuss, can be, and often is, a synonym for "sustainable" or "ecological" design, a particular ethic of responsible consumerism (Angelo 2021) applied to the built form. But it can also take on a specific valence of its own. Green implies a *biophilic* orientation towards design (see Babcock 2022), where elements of nature are brought into the urban environment. This sort of green is often represented in Southeast Asia by an "overgrown" look with plants emerging from roofs, walls, and other vertical surfaces, places where they do not typically grow. It can also be associated with a wild, or ruderal look, like that encountered in abandoned urban spaces, which Gandy (2024) refers to as an aesthetic of "ruin." This conception of green need not itself be sustainable, as plants growing out of buildings and other such biophilic design elements often require an enormous amount of labor, water, and other resources to maintain. Plants can also be destructive to the built environment, eroding walls, fences, and foundations, thereby calling into question the sustainability that such design decisions are meant to evoke. Green, then, is more a sensibility than a strict set of rules or principles, more a sensory quality than a specific moral or technical claim. In short, it is a feeling.

We use the term "feeling" in this article to describe the ambient sensibility that architects, designers, and renderers endeavor to create, and manipulate, through their work. Feeling describes less a particular person or audience's internal experience than the shared sensory environment they are made to occupy. As Fuller and Goriunova write of "anguish," feeling is a "conceptual mode of sensation, experienced in the betweenness of subjectivities" (Fuller and Goriunova 2019, 31). It is the affect that animates an "affective landscape" (Low 2016), the mood that populates a built atmosphere (Böhme 2013), the sensory qualities that constitute a place's "disposition" (Easterling 2016). Feeling can be internalized, of course. Designers, marketers, and real estate agents hope that it will be, particularly by potential buyers and investors. It is, after all, feeling that motivates action. But, in this case, feeling is not meant to describe any one singular person, or group's, internal state. In fact, the producers of eco-city renderings hope to cast a broad net, ensnaring everyone from recalcitrant politicians to aspirational middle-class consumers into its sensuous web.

Eco-city renderings are designed to generate a feeling. More specifically, they are designed to create the carefully vague but calculatedly overdetermined feeling of "green." As renderings become more and more sophisticated, employing virtual reality and other immersive technologies in addition to photo-realistic, computer-generated

Figure 2. Serenity point, BiodiverCITY Penang/Penang South Islands. Courtesy of BIG.

imagery, the experiential aspects of renderings are more pronounced. The feeling this immersion generates, in turn, helps sell projects to potential investors, developers, and regulators by tapping into global political ambitions for carbon-neutral, ecologically sustainable urban growth. Feeling, in other words, is key here. Sustainability and reduced carbon-emissions may be appealing goals, but they are hardly the visceral impulses that lead investors or consumers to take action. It is, instead, the sensory appeal of these projects that secures their chance of becoming material realities. Penang South Islands, Forest City, and other eco-city projects must be felt before they are built. Renderings make that possible.

Semiotic overdetermination as design strategy

The masterplan for Penang South Islands, replete with bubble vehicles and water features (Figure 2), was selected through a global competition run by the state of Penang, Malaysia. The winning design, originally named BiodiverCITY Penang, was by Bjarke Ingels Group based in Copenhagen, Denmark. Bjarke Ingels Group, or BIG, is a firm with an established international reputation, led by the charismatic head designer and author, Bjarke Ingels. The firm's most famous designs include the CapitaSpring Building in downtown Singapore and 2 World Trade in New York City, along with more ambitious and avant-garde work like Toyota Woven City in Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan, and Oceanix in Busan, South Korea. The eco-city project they designed for Penang, however, is of an unusually large scale, even for BIG. More than just a development, it is the materialization of an idea that BIG has been promoting at least since their design of the Copenhagen Harbor Bath in 2003.

BIG advocates for a philosophy of green design practice they call "hedonistic sustainability" (BIG [Bjarke Ingels Group] 2020a). For BIG, hedonistic sustainability is an approach to city-making that rejects the idea that sustainability is a trade-off between comfort and climate-action. In the January 30, 2024 episode of the sustainable

architecture and urbanism podcast *Ecogradia*, Ingels explained his view that sustainability is not about sacrifice, or living a less enjoyable lifestyle for the sake of the planet. For him, simply put, it is about fun. And beauty. It is about building an urban environment that people want to live in, one which is not only more aligned with the goals of planetary survival but also more richly engaging to the senses. That beauty, composed out of sleek buildings, open spaces, and layers of vegetation—a mashup of recent trends in "green architecture"—is meant to inspire a more active and healthier way of life for its residents. In this formulation, buildings are thus employed as an affective technology, a medium for inciting positive action. The "hedonistic" in "hedonistic sustainability," then, is the felt experience of green, the intuitive impulse of green, whereby "greening projects occupy the space-time of leisure," unfettered by "economic questions and forms of race, class, and gender inequality" (Angelo 2021, 23–24). The renderings BIG created of Penang South Islands are meant to evoke this set of attributes through highly recognizable specific *types* of architectural aesthetics. These attributes, such as foliage-covered walls, are tools for conjuring the sensation of how good it must feel to live in a place like Penang South Islands.

Feeling good is important here. In her book *How Green Became Good*, environmental sociologist Hillary Angelo (2021) shows that over the course of the 20th century, sustainability, signified through the green or the natural, became a normative urban trope worldwide. "Greening," Angelo argues, contains its own logics and functions through practices that are tied to shifting claims arising from the global transformation of urban spaces (Angelo 2021, 12–24). Urbanized nature, she continues, is now understood not just as a pleasing aesthetic, but as a moral good, a felt attribute of places that produce healthy, and just, people. BIG builds on such a feeling. Their designs are meant to trigger the sense of personal virtue that living green enables without requiring any subsequent loss in quality of living. This is virtuousness without sacrifice, a fiber-rich kale salad of an urban design, covered in creamy dressing that makes it go down easy.

Renderings enable the imagination of how green can both look and feel good. In their essay, "Hyper-Rendering: The Illusion of Architecture," artist-architects Halpern and Wentzel argue that the "visual beauty of the hyper-rending can mask a premature and potentially weak concept" and that, moreover, the rendering itself is "a seemingly realist snapshot of the design that appeals emotionally" by using a standardized repertoire of images of people, skies, and other non-architectural details (birds, plants, weather) to undergird its "false sense of realism" (2013, 73). The renderings of Penang South Islands make visibly real a future yet-to-be, a future that is whimsical, fanciful, and fun. Here is hedonistic sustainability as an experience waiting to be had. Such concepts, otherwise contradictory and impossible-sounding, are given form and shape in renderings like these. And if those forms and shapes are not enough to make you feel their greenness, to convince you of their promise of a better, more sustainable world, the renderings are littered with other signifiers of green—placid rocks, tranquil waters and vegetation so overgrown it creeps into the (nonexistent) frame from which we view it (Figure 2). We call this design strategy "semiotic overdetermination."

In psychoanalysis or Marxist theory, a condition is overdetermined when it has multiple causes, each in and of themselves sufficient to bring that condition about. Overdetermination describes states, or systems, that bear the weight of near inevitability, and yet are the consequence of so many factors working together that the specific,

individual factors are often difficult, if not impossible, to identify. As such, overdetermination describes something that is both abundantly evident, yet difficult to define or account for. So it is with semiotic overdetermination, in which "multiple and shifting arrangements of meaning…intersect and interact, producing new chains that disperse in different directions" (Rada 2022, 4). Signs of greenness are layered upon signs of greenness that interact with other signs of greenness to produce an undeniable sensation of greenness. While individual signs, for instance the white rings in Figure 1, may connote sustainable energy production, when combined with living walls, water features, emission-free vehicles, happy pedestrians, and hanging vines the synergistic effect is that of an ecological *gestalt*. It becomes impossible to isolate a single element that marks a place as "green."

Hyper-renderings create this affect by placing images upon images, using shapes and designs built in AutoCAD, often processed through image-generating AI to instill it with a particular look or style, and then layered with people, plants, and other figures lifted from visual databanks. Renderings, it should be noted, are not the product of a single designer's imagination or action, and the actual production of architectural renderings has long been outsourced to firms specializing in computer-generated visuals. Thus, design is always produced in a network (Murphy 2015) or assemblage (Shankar 2015) of multiple entangled actors. It is perhaps best then to "locate creativity *between* designers rather than *in* them" (Murphy 2015, 27). This is particularly true of renderings. They are collectively produced compositions, or collages, built, bit by bit, to generate the sense of overwhelm intrinsic to lived sensory experience. It is no surprise then, that eco-city renderings overdetermine their greenness. Multiple, situated actors install their own ideas of what greenness is and should be, creating a greenness redundancy that is nearly impossible to miss. Renderings bombard us with signifiers of greenness until we relent. Green here, is an affective perception built of semiotic overdetermination, not an objective description.

In *This Changes Everything* (2014), journalist and climate activist Naomi Klein insists that climate change cannot be stopped without a fundamental shift in lifestyle worldwide. We must consume radically less, she says. We must move away from an extractive model of global capitalism that makes perpetual growth its mantra. There is no other choice but to practice a self-imposed ecological austerity. In his degrowth manifesto, *Slow Down*, philosopher Kohei Saito (2024) makes a similar claim. Long-term sustainability, says Saito, requires a shift away from extractive capitalism towards what he calls "degrowth communism." BIG's "hedonistic sustainability" requires no such choice, no such asceticism, but rather only a joyous aestheticism. The single change we consumers need to make is to buy into a new development like Penang South Islands. BIG's designs take Klein's admonition and turns it on its head, celebrating new constructions and new forms of consumption as the means of changing "everything." And in such designs, the "everything" of ecological, climate-friendly existence can be seen everywhere, projecting a literal message that "everything is ecological (here)."

BIG's renderings are not only intended to sell these particular property units in the state of Penang, however. The images also function as something of an advertisement for a future Malaysia, a country that has politically committed to rapidly developing the infrastructure to be one of the world's leading suppliers of micro-chips and other crucial technologies. Hence, the name "Silicon Island" has been given to the first island

being built. The entire project will be a high-tech industrial corridor, part of the larger special economic zone of Penang, which is subject to relaxed taxes and regulations. In addition, it will serve as a permanent showcase of eco-friendly technological innovation. By being home to this eco-city, Malaysia hopes to acquire a reputation as a global innovator in sustainability and tech, a forward-thinking country associated with futurity, much like its neighbor to the south, Singapore (Babcock 2022), and able to attract international investment as a consequence. The green aesthetics associated with the project, then, have an established precedent. Babcock explains that in neighboring Singapore, monumental architecture, some designed by BIG, is often paired with lush living greenery to produce a mode of "allochronic futurity" once confined to the sets of dystopian science fiction films (Babcock 2022, 21). Orit Halpern, similarly, describes the Korean "smart city" of Songdo as "a lush, verdant, and simultaneously sterile space, part of a new network of territories that crisscross the globe" (Halpern 2014, 239). The ostensive function of Songdo, she explains, is to generate data that assists in energy reduction, but its marketing function is much broader, positioning South Korea as a leader in urban innovation. As a proposed solution for addressing climate change (ecological problems) through technological innovation (smart solutions), the eco-city has become a ubiquitous design made for export (Shwayri 2013), often in combination with or enveloped within "smart city" mandates (see Halpern and Mitchell 2023).

Defining, or not, the eco-city

Forms of urbanization and architectural design promising to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation have been given a number of names over the last few decades: low-carbon city, green city, sustainable city, smart city. These names describe ideals more than realities, urban-planning ambitions that are sometimes concretized through architectural design choices and governmental policies. Among them, "eco-city" has been one of the most touted and promoted internationally. From its earliest origins in the 1987 work of Berkeley-based urban planner Richard Register, the eco-city idea has inspired numerous projects worldwide.

Though he titled his book *Ecocities*, Register did little in the book to define the term. "*Ecocities*," he writes of the book itself, "proposes a fundamentally new approach to building and living in cities, towns, and villages, an approach based on solid principles from deep history and an honest assessment of a troubled future" (Register 2006, 1). What precisely that approach is requires some additional 350 pages of explication and examples. In the preface of the second edition of the book, Register comes closer to defining the eco-city. It is an "extremely low energy city," he writes (2006, xxi), and laments that in the 14 years since the first edition of his book "precious little progress on ecocity development has transpired anywhere" (2006, xxi). Though he is vague on what would qualify as an eco-city, Register insists that a minimum requirement is a reduction in the dependence on cars and other carbon-intensive modes of transportation. The city of today, he writes, "was built for cars, not people" (Register 2006, 142). An eco-city, by contrast, would be oriented around pedestrian traffic. It would be walkable, dense enough in configuration to enable easy ambling to wherever its residents most needed to go. When walking to one's destination is not possible, low-carbon-emitting public transportation would fill in the gap.

Figure 3. KL Eco City in Kuala Lumpur. Photo by Brent Luvaas, 2024.

Vague enough to traverse multiple purposes and contexts, much like the concepts of "green" or "eco" themselves, the concept of the eco-city has been applied in countries and climates as diverse as the United Arab Emirates (with its Masdar City), Denmark (with its retrofitting of Copenhagen), and China, with its ambitious project beginning in 2008 to build 100 eco-cities throughout the mainland (see Normile 2008; Sze 2015). Another thing to note is that some eco-city projects are not really cities at all. Or at least, not standalone cities. They are, rather, something more like the "superblocks" Kusno describes in Jakarta and other Southeast Asian metropolitan areas: "mixed-use luxurious condominiums, offices, hotels, shopping malls, and entertainment centres all in one complex" (Kusno 2023, 60). AbdouMalique Simone (2014) uses the term "megaproject" to describe the same phenomenon. Superblocks and megaprojects are located either in the center of existing cities, like Central Park in Jakarta or KL Eco-City in Kuala Lumpur (Figure 3), or in the periphery of established metropolitan areas, like Meikarta in West Java, within commuting distance of Jakarta.

Exemplifying the superblock concept, KL Eco-City incorporates high-rise residences, a built-in shopping and business complex, medical facilities, and other goods and service providers into a single development within Kuala Lumpur. It is connected by skybridge to two transit lines and two additional shopping mall complexes. In many respects, its integration into existing urban infrastructures (transport and economic) demonstrates precisely how KL Eco-City was built with ecological ambitions in mind, despite the fact that it exhibits few of the visual aesthetics associated with eco-cities, other than the vegetation growing over its fence. Nonetheless, we argue, through its compact design that minimizes the need for private automobiles, KL Eco-City appears to adhere closely to principles of sustainability. Perhaps because KL Eco-City's claims to ecological living are more apparent and easily verified than those of eco-cities like Penang South Islands, this superblock development need not rely on aesthetics to evidence its ecological ambitions.

As with any real estate transaction, location is key. Beyond Southeast Asia, Masdar City, touted widely as a pioneer in sustainable urban development, is near the airport of

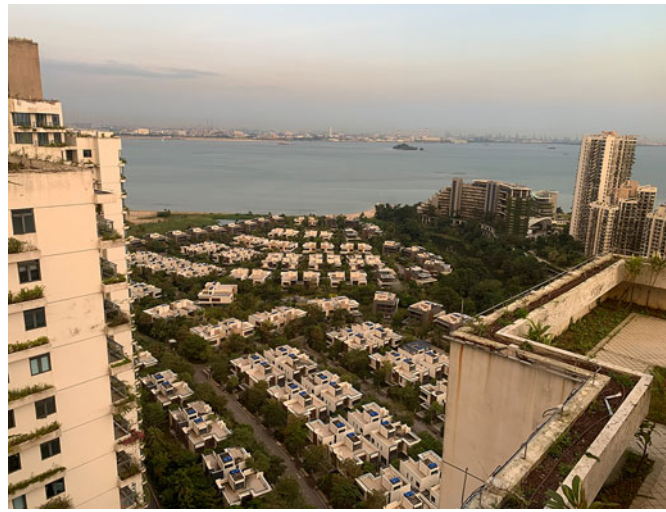

Figure 4. Forest City, as seen from the 37th floor of a high-rise residence. Singapore is visible in the background across the Johor Strait. Photo by Brent Luvaas, 2024.

Abu Dhabi. In China, the best-known eco-city projects are just outside of major cities, such as the Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City on the outskirts of Tianjin or Dongtan Island near Shanghai. These eco-cities are essentially exurban satellite communities, although renderings and models of eco-cities present these places as independently contained spaces (often surrounded by water) in order to seal the promise of entirely new living conditions (see Figure 4). Indeed, there is only sense we can think of in which "eco-cities" can be productively conceptualized as cities at all: that is, in their adherence to a model Jini Kim Watson (2011) defines as "the New Asian City." Historically, writes Watson, Asian cities like Seoul, Taipei, and Singapore operated as sites of "civic, ceremonial, or economic transactions" (Watson 2011, 2). They were bustling metropolises, locations in which activities take place. The New Asian City, in contrast, is "conceived first and foremost as a production platform—for the production of surplus values, laboring bodies, and national subjects" (Watson 2011, 2). The New Asian city is more "cognitive object" (Im, as cited in Watson 2011, 10) than material artefact. It is a thing to think with and through, as much as a place to reside and work in. Eco-cities are very much New Asian Cities in this sense, serving to promote aspirational subject positions (see Shankar 2015) and cosmopolitan ways of being. Nevertheless, eco-cities largely depend on existing, nearby urban infrastructure for their building, maintenance, and utilities. They rely upon their physical proximity to larger metropolitan areas to satisfy the quotidian requirements of potential residents.

The same is true of both Penang South Islands and Forest City, discussed below. Both eco-cites are part of existing special economic zones: Penang South Islands is in the Bayan Lepas Free Industrial Zone and Forest City is in Iskandar Malaysia, formerly known as Iskandar Development Region. Physically and visually, a clustered, superblock-style architectural development, notes Easterling, is typical of such "zones."

The zone, she explains, "is the formula that generates Shenzhens and Dubais all around the world" (Easterling 2016, 15). Originally conceived as small, walled-off enclaves "for warehousing and manufacturing," the zone has evolved over the last decade into "a world-city template" (ibid., 25). Subject to fewer restrictions and regulations than their surrounding areas, the zone enables developers to quickly erect buildings and complexes with little oversight from government agencies. They are often understood as a fast-track for development, and in fact, Malaysia made extensive use of the formula as part of its "Vision 2025" plan to become a "fully-developed" country by 2025 (Bunnell 2004). The zone, Easterling argues, isn't simply an economic model; it is an aesthetic template, consisting of glimmering high rises in close proximity, meant to mimic those in Dubai, Hong Kong, and Singapore (Easterling 2016). Add some avant-garde architectural design, vertical gardens, and lush, overgrown landscaping, and voila! The superblock in an exurban free-trade zone has been magically transformed into an "eco-city."

The utility of the eco-city concept is rooted in its appeal to a leisurely life of ecological, smart, economic stability, as well as its utilization of the language of technology and data science to solve socioeconomic issues. For planners and developers or government bodies who hope to make use of eco-cities to enhance their national brand, defining what is, or is not, an eco-city, remains more art than science. The eco-city label can be applied from the beginning of a project, as a means of countering the concerns of environmental activists, or retroactively, as a mode of "greenwashing" that lends legitimacy and moral authority to massive construction and land reclamations projects which might otherwise be held suspect. Irrespective of local conditions and specifics, however, renderings of eco-cities deploy a by-now familiar repertoire of visual signs to indicate a shared moral and ethical commitment to the ideals of ecologically sustainable living.

Forest City

We turn now to the extended example of Forest City. Arguably one of the most controversial eco-city developments in Southeast Asia, Forest City is situated 700 km south of Penang along the Johor Strait that separates Malaysia and Singapore (Figure 4). Already partially built and populated, it is within viewing distance of Johor Bahru, Malaysia's second-largest city, and the city-state of Singapore, just across the strait. Like Penang South Islands, the master plan for Forest City was designed by a major international firm, Sasaki Associates, headquartered in Boston in the United States. Also like Penang South Islands, the plan for Forest City consists of three (and in one plan, four) reclaimed islands, connected by bridges. Its renderings visualize the eco-city as a conglomeration of high-rise condominiums, with shops and restaurants at their base, interspersed with office buildings shaped like pyramids.

What makes Forest City perhaps most unlike Penang South Islands is that Forest City exists, physically, materially, and economically; it a place of residence, leisure, and governance. An immigration checkpoint is already up and running just miles from Forest City at the start of the Second Link Bridge, facilitating smoother crossings between Malaysia and Singapore. Traveling from Singapore to Malaysia by bus, Forest City is the first set of buildings you see in Malaysia, a spectacular sight looming

on the horizon that seems like its own advertisement for the development, as well as an effort by Malaysia to compete with Singapore for skyline domination. A bus transfer to Forest City awaits immediately upon crossing the border, enabling Forest City residents to commute to and from Singapore via public transportation. Standing on the manmade beaches of Forest City, you can stare directly into the industrial parks of Jurong in southwest Singapore.

The strategic advantage of such a location is obvious. As a future port city along one of the world's busiest maritime routes, Moser (2018) suggests that Forest City represents a maneuver by China to challenge Singapore's control of trade in the region. Country Garden, the developer behind Forest City, is one of China's largest development firms, and the eco-city has been touted as part of China's global Belt and Road Initiative. At the time Forest City was given the go-ahead, Malaysia's Prime Minister, Mahatir Mohammad, was himself quite suspicious of the intentions behind its development. If not for the financial backing and advocacy of the Sultan of nearby Johor Bahru, the project may not have been built. Early buyers of units in Forest City were overwhelmingly Chinese nationals, who acquired them more as investment properties than residences. In his article for *Foreign Policy Magazine*, Rachman (2024) explains that thousands of mainland Chinese traveled to Forest City to purchase units during construction between 2016 and 2020. The sales office, which was some 70 percent Chinese in composition, was flooded with interest. This interest, however, came to a grinding halt in 2020, when pandemic limits placed on Chinese overseas travel and an economic slowdown in China made investment in Forest City both less possible and less desirable. Construction ceased, and the sales office has since struggled to fill its existing units.

As of 2024, there was only one island in Forest City and one office pyramid. Though it was designed to house an eventual 700,000 residents, the current population rests somewhere between 7,000 and 10,000. It is hard to determine the precise population, as many of the properties purchased are used as short-term rentals for weekend visitors attracted to the manmade beaches, the duty-free liquor stores, and the eerie experience of walking through a city nearly devoid of people. Whether Forest City will continue to stagnate remains unclear. The new prime minister, Anwar Ibrahim, has shown more interest in the development than his predecessor, proposing that Forest City become the final stop on a new MRT line from Johor Bahru. The Sultan of Johor now sits on the board of Forest City and is advocating for a second high-speed rail line to go directly from Singapore to Forest City, complete with its own immigration office.

Meanwhile, with so few people in residence, Forest City is now home to an increasingly large number of birds and feral dogs. Trees, bushes, and brush are taking over large swathes of the development. A swamp is overtaking the empty land in front of the Shattuck-St Mary Forest City International School. The manmade pond at its center is nearly iridescent with algae. It is as if the forest itself were reclaiming the name "Forest City" as its own, along with the physical territory.

Even as the concrete buildings and asphalt roads in Forest City disintegrate from the inevitable effects of tropical weather, under-use, and industrial pollution, it is, we argue, necessary and significant to consider how it was rendered in Sasaki's winning designs because these images continue to inform how the real place is perceived, lived, and experienced. In these renderings (see Figure 5), Forest City is a verdant tropical

Figure 5. Rendering of Forest City (Sasaki Associates). Image published in Oh 2016.

landscape, located right on the water. There is an abundance of other water features as well—canals, streams, lakes—but no visible roads or parking lots, so pedestrians can move freely without having to navigate around vehicles. Here is the car-free vision put forward by Richard Register as the baseline standard for an eco-city. All forms of transportation infrastructure, according to the Sasaki design, are located underground. Such a design hides any carbon-generating activities from immediate view, reinforcing the feeling and experience of greenness and eco-friendliness as you physically move through the landscape, or navigate virtually through the renderings.

Like stacks of children's building blocks, the residences were to be built on top of stores, restaurants, and businesses, which are, in turn built on greenspaces, where families congregate and children frolic, fly kites, and throw frisbees. Underneath are roadways and parking lots in a sort of upstairs/downstairs scenario. Everything above ground—what is seen, heard, felt, experienced—is covered in plants, including the buildings themselves. This familiar supersaturation of green, or what we call semiotic overdetermination, functions as a sensual barrage of sustainability. It is a pedestrian paradise, a plush picnic in the great outdoors without the noise or pollution of traffic. It doesn't have to be carbon-neutral to *feel* carbon neutral. The ugly roadways and traffic that mar the view of so many cities, and challenge their claims to naturalness and beauty, are simply not seen, except in a "section perspective" rendering (Oh 2016).[1]

Renderings of Forest City, like Penang South Islands, also have their share of retro-futuristic buildings, obelisks and pyramids, and of course, air and watercraft. More importantly, they depict happy, active residents, living in harmony with nature, with sea turtles and manatees swimming contentedly beneath their kayaks. In the renderings of eco-cities like Forest City and Penang South Islands, health and sustainability are semiotically linked as two aspects of lifestyle that come together in the eco-city package. Solve one problem and you solve the other, the renderings seem to suggest. Here again is the ideology of "hedonistic sustainability" proposed by BIG, paired with the moral

[1]This type of rendering offers a cross-section, or vertical slice, view of a project.

goodness of green discussed by Angelo (2021), a promise that the eco-future is not about suffering, but pleasant, pleasing sensation. The images call out, in no uncertain terms: Look how nice it is in Forest City; wouldn't you enjoy being here? You don't need to be told these are eco-cities. Looking out over vast, computer-generated vistas, you can feel that they are. Our senses are filled to the brim with the evidence of it. We are invited to imagine ourselves roller-blading through them, flying kites in their vast green spaces. Feeling green. We too could live like this if we could just put up the down payment. We too could ease our climate anxieties with one easy purchase.

Of course, the "we" interpellated here is not a universal one. Both Forest City and Penang South Islands are marketed as enclaves for globally aspirational people across East and Southeast Asia to survive climate chaos *and* enjoy comfortable, stable middle class lives. They are human-made utopias that re-envision Asian urbanism as an outdoor luxury mall-meets-office-park-meets-beachfront, all within easy commuting distance of major metropolitan areas like Singapore, Johor Bahru, and Penang. Perhaps someday, they will be major metropolitan areas themselves.

For now, they remain dreams deferred. Forest City and Penang South Islands are not cities like Copenhagen or Amsterdam that have rebranded themselves as eco-cities because they have been retrofitted to be more environmentally-friendly. They are new cities, built where no city was before, where no *land* was before. They depend on sand dumped into the ocean to have any territory at all. These are going-back-to-the-drawing board models of eco-living that conjure new worlds forms of urban planning (see Ong 2011). The current world could not sustain the sustainable lifestyle these cities' designers envisioned, so Malaysia decided to build new ones instead. Hence, the otherworldly feel of the renderings, the way they render nature as its own uncanny valley.

It is tempting to write off renderings of eco-cities as mere fantasies, to dismiss them because they appear so improbable and unachievable. Numerous news articles critically compare the renderings of eco-cities like these with their present-day lived realities (Figure 6). A recent article in *The South China Post*, for instance, describes Forest City as a ghost town, an empty space that now best serves as the set for reality TV programs by Netflix among other international television production companies (Limbu 2024). *The Star* reported in August 2024 that Korean firm GG56 Korea Ltd is investing one billion dollars in developing Malaysia's first "Korean Culture Town" in Forest City, complete with its own production studio and Korean-themed shops, restaurants, and residences (Bernama 2024). In its incomplete, barely populated state, Forest City is now being treated as a backdrop, an empty shell of an urban space perfect for creating works of fiction. It is tempting to say that Forest City itself is a work of fiction.

Looking at the images included in these articles, to an extent Forest City has met some of the expectations its renderings created. It has a pretty impressive skyline with buildings that are indeed covered in vegetation, though as Moser and Avery (2021) point out, the plants that cover them are largely imported species. However, it is quiet, with no bubble cars in sight, no happy, frolicking kayakers anywhere to be found. Our own photographs, taken in Forest City, reveal a similar pattern: a dearth of people in an eerily self-referential landscape.

Figure 6. Screenshot of BBC article on Forest City as a "ghost city," March 2023.

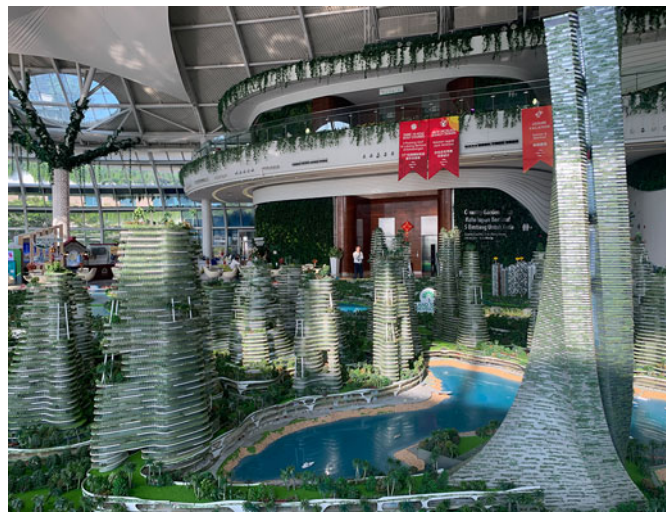

Figure 7. Forest City model showroom. Photo by Brent Luvaas, 2024.

Failed promises. Unfulfilled potentials. These are the kinds of narratives increasingly popping up about eco-cities like Forest City, whether in academic texts or journalistic accounts, already familiar tropes of any reporting on urban mega-projects in China. We are interested in these narratives, this perceived mismatch between renderings and the cities as residents encounter and experience them, but we reject the notion that renderings are somehow "fake," or that they misrepresent eco-cities, whereas the material structures that enact these visions are "real." These renderings,

Figure 8. Renderings of Forest City on display within the development. Photo by Brent Luvaas, 2024.

we argue, have a reality of their own. They have material consequence, do real work. Affective work. Feeling work. They promote investment and purchases, of course, and they impose a particular set of ideas and values onto a material landscape. They serve as continuous reminders of the current state of sustainability in the region, both inside and outside of the eco-cities themselves, and they continue to structure meaning-making encounters even within the developments as they are built and lived.

One encounters renderings of Forest City, for instance, in Forest City, whether in the massive sales office (Figure 7) where models of apartment units are on display, alongside a three-dimensional map of Forest City as originally designed by Sasaki, or in front of the very complexes renderings are meant to represent (Figure 8). What is striking upon encountering these renderings in situ is how radically they diverge from the surrounding scenes. The Forest City of renderings is a pedestrian city, all roadways operating underground. The Forest City that extends into physical space, however, is covered with roads and parking lots. Pedestrians are forced to risk the traffic. The Forest

Figure 9. The beach in Forest City. Photo by Brent Luvaas, 2024.

City of renderings is full of happy families, couples walking arm and arm through lively parks. The Forest City of material reality is practically empty. The Forest City of renderings offers residents a chance to swim and kayak in the open ocean, just offshore from their house or apartment. But in this Forest City, there are "No Swimming" signs before all waterways, warning of crocodiles and other dangers.

It is hard not to react to the renderings in situ as continuous challenges to the felt reality of the place as one lives it, a discordant layer on the affective landscape (Low 2016) of Forest City. The renderings are one set of mediators among many, creating the felt experience of eco-cities like this one. We believe, then, that we should take renderings seriously, not because they project, represent, or misrepresent some sort of tangible or achievable "reality," but rather because they rely upon and operate within larger regimes of ambition, desire, and value-production—semio-capitalistic regimes—that make a difference in how people in Southeast Asia imagine, experience, and live their lives. As one Singaporean resident of Forest City recently bemoaned to a journalist, "All around the town, there are pockets of space which are barren and under-utilised. But if you look at the 3D model on show at the sales gallery, there are supposed to be more residential towers and other amenities like yachts and shopping complexes."[2] Even in Forest City itself, where people move through the physical space of the eco-city, renderings mediate the experience of being there.

Conclusion: semiotic overdetermination and its felt limits

Like renderings themselves, the built atmosphere (Böhme 2013) of Forest City is semiotically overdetermined, chock full of actual, physical signs attesting to its status as a

[2] https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/johor-country-garden-forest-city-property-crisis-debt-china-3715791?utm_medium=email&utm_source=substack

smart, eco-city development. On the well-groomed man-made beach along the southeastern shore of Forest City is a sign reading "Prime Model of Future City" in English and "森林城市未来城市榜样" in simplified Mandarin Chinese (Figure 9). It is surrounded by palm trees and concrete sculptures of seals, each a signifier of a utopian nature that Forest City promises far more than it can currently deliver. There are similar statues throughout the development—of deer, crabs, toy soldiers, picnickers reading—as if statuary could fill the social void left by the dearth of living, breathing, human residents. We might think of these statues as carrying out a kind of affective, or atmospheric, labor, working hard to create the feeling of sustainable hedonism in a development that is as of yet unable to provide anything like it.

Unsurprisingly, both Penang South Islands and Forest City have been controversial in Malaysia from their inception. Many Malaysians doubted the ecological claims of the developers. Many also worried—the Malaysian government among them—that these eco-cities could tip the balance of power in Southeast Asia towards Chinese interests. Among the primary investors and developers in Southeast Asian eco-city projects are Chinese firms. A number of scholars have suggested that China has geo-political interest in pushing these eco-cities in the region (see Cai 2022; Han 2024; Moser 2018). Conversely, with unraveling of some of China's most prominent real estate developers, including Country Garden (the holding company behind Forest City), a reverse concern over the sudden lack of capital investment and potential buyers has also arisen.

What one actually *feels* in Forest City is not the happy-go-lucky, hedonistic sustainability promised by BIG, but an anguish not unlike the anguish inspired by climate devastation (Fuller and Goriunova 2019, 31). Eco-city renderings, we have argued, produce semio-capitalistic value by translating the familiar concepts of "green," "eco-friendly," and "sustainable" into something far more inchoate: feelings. Climate anxieties are combined with global middle-class aspirations. It is simultaneously a feeling of fear and of hopefulness, of a utopia promised and forestalled, a feeling generated by sustained imaginative work carried out most conspicuously by the designers and artists who produce renderings. Selling "green" as a feeling, eco-city renderings capitalize on present-day anxieties over urban decay and commodify "the ecological" as a rich resource of pleasurable qualitative experiences. The result, we contend, reinforces a neoliberal mode of subjectivity that equates consumption with somatics and reduces climate responsibility to individual consumer decisions. As a translational technology of commodification, eco-city renderings turn green into a somatic experience that, ultimately, operates at multiple temporal scales: from the feeling of looking *at* a rendering and feeling the leisurely green lifestyle beckoning within to the sensation of inevitable disappointment when standing in an unfinished city development. Renderings produce feelings so life-like and palpable, it is nearly impossible not to compare them to the feeling one experiences in the extended world around them.

Eco-city renderings thus bear a contemporary kinship to the early Italian Renaissance "Ideal City" paintings of Urbino, Baltimore, and Berlin. Through their perspectival representations of space and ocular experience combined with highly detailed and intricate architectural designs, these paintings are often regarded "as demonstrations of the rules of construction according to central perspective and ideals, as variation on urban spatial planning propounded in a humanist spirit" (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, n.d.). The image of the ideal city, whether in the 15th or 21st centuries,

share common characteristics: a *place* in the future where (and when) humans are strangely absent or at least far fewer in number, where good architecture signifies good governance.

This, we have argued, is what renderings are meant to do: produce feelings that inspire action. Eco-city renderings exist to generate capital investment, to provide a perspective not only on space but the opportunity to possess it. Renderings enable speculators, developers, government officials, and potential residents to envision and imagine a future they then participate in producing. They do this by layering sign upon sign upon sign, constructing an overdetermined feeling of greenness that translates climate anxiety into a purchasable, consumable future. Ultimately, renderings do not promise sustainability. They promise the *feeling* of sustainability. And in the absence of meaningful climate action, this begs the question: do renderings of eco-cities help construct a more sustainable future or get in the way of it? Do they help us imagine what an ecological alternative to the present might be like? Or confuse our senses into seeing a sustainable future where there isn't one?

After many months of looking at renderings of eco-cities under construction in Southeast Asia, visiting cities and superblocks under construction, and poring over images from those trips, we are not sure ourselves. Imagining may be the first step in acting, but rendering discourse into reality confuses these steps, producing the assumption that something meaningful has been done, when what has been done is to make feelings.

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Cite this article: Luvaas, Brent, and Jenny Chio. 2025. "Translating Sustainability into Somatic Experience: Renderings of Eco-Cities in Southeast Asia". *Signs and Society* 13 (3): 412–430. https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2025.9

Signs and Society (2025), **13** (3), 431–453
doi:10.1017/sas.2025.10016

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
HANKUK UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN STUDIES

ARTICLE

The Counting Machinery: Translation, Multiplication, and Liberal Politics of Homelessness in Paris

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Abstract
This article analyzes the interconnected translation processes that led the Paris city council to conceptualize, address, and act upon "homelessness" through counting. By translation, we mean a range of semiotic processes that connect social worlds, their objects, practices, genres, and bodies of expertise. These are usually imagined as separate: For example, auditing and volunteering, science and government, charity and policing, poverty and social hygiene. Our analysis is based on ethnographic data collected in Paris, France, between January and August 2023, during two editions of the *Nuit de la Solidarité* [Night of Solidarity], a large-scale effort by the city council, in collaboration with numerous volunteers, to count homeless people in Paris. Linking translation scholarship with academic work on quantification and liberal governmentality, we demonstrate that the semiotic process of translation is deeply interconnected with the political work performed by numbers and counting techniques, imbuing them with meaning and ensuring their capacity to exert power. Translation, we show, serves not only to link governance techniques across geopolitical borders but also to integrate various political projects and normalize and naturalize the structural inequalities that define cities like Paris.

Keywords: counting; governmentality; homelessness; Paris; translation

Introduction

On February 13, 2023, the Paris City Council held a public event at City Hall to present and celebrate the results of the Nuit de la Solidarité (Night of Solidarity, henceforth NDLS). This large-scale initiative took place one month earlier, during which city officials and over 2,000 volunteers took to the streets to count unhoused individuals and gather data on their locations, needs, and living conditions. The event at City Hall served multiple purposes: it was both a technical briefing and a civic celebration. It represented a moment of institutional self-congratulation, provided a public affirmation of shared civic values, served as a performative display of solidarity, and acted as a

platform for presenting the data collected through the NDLS. In the lead-up to the NDLS, Paris Mayor Anne Hidalgo encouraged widespread participation, framing the count as a collective act of civic duty and moral commitment.

> Since its first edition in 2018, the Nuit de la Solidarité has brought together all our partner associations and citizens each winter around our shared ambition: to reduce the number of people living on the streets in Paris. I am delighted by how much this initiative has grown: last year, 27 cities in the Greater Paris Metropolis took part. That's great news! Despite the resources deployed in recent years, we know that the needs remain immense. The Olympic Games offer a tremendous opportunity to build a legacy of solidarity for Paris – one I hope will be as ambitious as possible. We can all take action: see you on January 25![1]

The celebratory event was held in the lavishly decorated main salon of Paris City Hall, an imposing palace adorned with golden embellishments, frescoed ceilings, and massive chandeliers. Since 1357, this space has housed the city's administration and was progressively transformed into an opulent symbol of Parisian power. As attendees climbed the grand staircases and passed through gilded corridors, some visibly impressed volunteers paused to take photos, admiring the grandeur or capturing selfies with the artwork in the background. The venue's aesthetic stood in striking contrast to the avowed goal of the NDLS: to promote and mobilize solidarity with the unhoused across the city. The audience gathered in the salon was predominantly white and middle class, diverse in age but largely unfamiliar with the City Hall's opulence. Many were visibly moved by their access to a space usually reserved for the political elite, snapping pictures of the surroundings as much as attending to the cause. Those who came alone waited patiently on rows of red imitation leather chairs, flipping through books or scrolling on their phones. The event bore the trappings of a state-sponsored ceremony or philanthropic showcase—more reminiscent of an exclusive fundraiser than an act of radical solidarity.

A stage with a large screen was set up for the occasion, and a camera recorded the entire event. While the technicians, audience, and speakers waited for the ceremony, the catering staff busily organized wine and water bottles, displaying small plates and napkins on an immaculate white tablecloth. Representatives from the Paris City Council and the Grand Paris took turns speaking at the podium. Their speeches were interspersed with short clips from the NDLS, showcasing volunteers interacting with homeless individuals on the streets. One elderly volunteer explained, "We are part of a chain that allows us to identify problems, even if I don't like that word, and thanks to this little chain, our elected officials will be able to put things in place." Others recalled: "I was very moved by the encounter that I had with a man who seemed a bit unusual and who, in the end, and that was quite surprising, answered precisely in a very fair way, and that breaks down some prejudices."

These clips provided breaks between the speeches and served as memory vignettes for attendees. One of these volunteers was invited to the stage to share her experience

[1] The authors translated all the discursive data analyzed in this article from French to English.

of "her" NDLS. She highlighted the difficulties in performing the counting task due to language barriers, as some individuals her team encountered had limited French proficiency and were of varying national origins or refused to engage with the volunteers. Ultimately, she emphasized that her experience was more about experiencing a parallel world than her specific encounters that night: "We touched the world of the street." To express her satisfaction, the volunteer ended by promising to participate in the next NDLS.

Alongside projected clips and personal testimonials, a central component of the ceremony was the initial presentation and interpretation of the numerical data gathered during the count. Officials announced that "3,015 people were homeless on the night of January 26 to 27, 2023, in Paris. This was an increase of 417 people compared to January 2022," "reversing the downward trend observed in 2021 and 2022 amid the pandemic." The data were granular and demographic: "14 percent women and 86 percent men, compared to 10 percent women in 2022," "74 percent of individuals were aged 25 to 54, 8 percent between 18 and 25, and 18 percent over 55"; "57 percent of those surveyed had been without housing for over a year." Spatial distribution was also highlighted: "59 percent of the 622 people counted were found in streets, parking lots, or at social housing addresses; 30 percent in informal encampments, (…) 4 percent in hospital waiting rooms." Speakers underscored the scientific rigor of the NDLS methodology, unchanged since its launch in 2018, to ensure comparability over time. Yet while the method remained stable, officials emphasized improvements in reach and capillarity. The 2023 edition was described as the most comprehensive to date: "355 counting sectors, 252 metro and RER stations, 9 train stations, 16 Paris Habitat addresses, 43 parking lots, 4 parks and gardens, 46 informal settlements (...)." This expansive sample of homelessness presence was made visible through detailed geographic maps and colorful data visualizations (see Figures 1–3), which illustrated not only the social profiles of unhoused individuals but also their distribution across streets and arrondissement of Paris, offering both a fine-grained depiction of the situation and a comparative framework across time. Year-on-year statistics were used to demonstrate both the effects of past policy interventions and the remaining gaps, framing the city's data-driven approach as key to improving the condition of homeless people and enhancing the security and livability of public space.

The scientific validity of the NDLS was reaffirmed by a member of the scientific committee who contributed to designing the volunteer questionnaire and oversaw the quantitative processing and analysis of the data. The final speaker emphasized the NDLS as a vital tool for making homelessness visible and combating social stigma. She concluded with a call for continued public engagement in the city's solidarity initiatives and encouraged participation in future editions of the NDLS. The two-hour event wrapped up with an invitation to a cocktail party, described as a "moment of conviviality." The serious discussions surrounding the plight of homeless individuals, highlighted during the NDLS, faded into the background as attendees enjoyed trays of delicious savory and sweet snacks and glasses of wine on cocktail tables. A sense of self-satisfaction filled the cheerful audience, who felt a sense of mission accomplished and expressed their renewed commitment to the next edition of the NDLS.

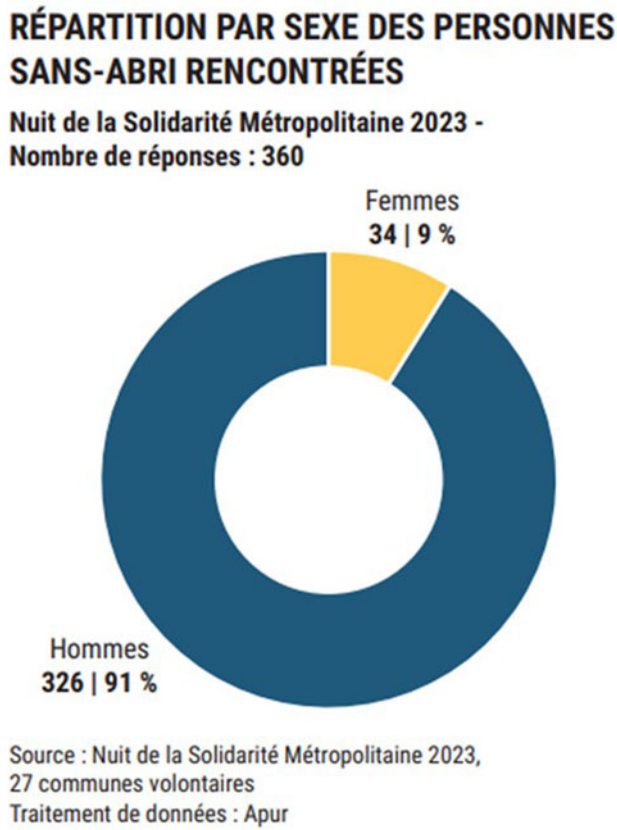

Figure 1. Breakdown by gender of the people encountered, NDLS 2023.

Counting, quantification, and the politics of translation

This introductory vignette provides insights into how the Paris city council carefully brought together diverse audiences and layered meanings and rationalities to address and govern "the issue of homelessness." We argue that this process exemplifies what Rose (1991) refers to as "governing by numbers"—a mode of ruling that makes populations governable through the production, circulation, and legitimization of numerical data. Numbers do not merely reflect reality; they actively construct it, transforming homelessness into a measurable issue and legitimizing specific forms of intervention. Building on this, we propose the concept of *government by multiplication*: a strategy that amplifies numbers' social and political reach by layering them with meanings, connections, and agendas. In this logic, homelessness is not only counted—it is entangled with other statistics, other identified crises, and policy domains, creating a dense web of governance that extends far beyond the original object.

For example, the celebratory presentation of homelessness statistics at Paris City Hall went beyond merely communicating numbers. Although the event was framed to make homelessness visible, it quickly evolved into a complex tool for generating

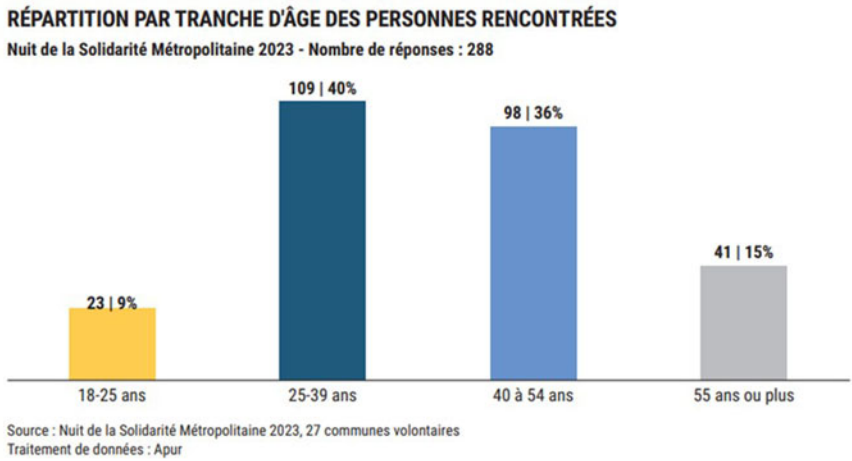

Figure 2. Breakdown by age-group of the individuals encountered, NDLS 2023.

and aligning multiple layers of meaning. The numbers objectified the issue of homelessness and showcased the city council's progress in managing it. This was achieved by tracking changes over time and linking homelessness to broader statistics on shelter capacity, public sanitation, and meal distribution. Furthermore, mapping these numbers across the urban landscape served as a technical means of visualization and underlined where interventions had been effective and which areas required enhanced governmental attention. This spatialized logic of differentiation, comparison, and prioritization assigned varying levels of urgency to targeted neighborhoods, reinforcing the city's claim to numbers-driven governance. Yet during the event, the meaning of quantification did not stop at measuring homelessness. It was mobilized as a performative technology for producing civic values. Volunteers were not simply understood as data collectors but also as moral agents: their participation was framed as an act of care, responsibility, and solidarity toward their city and its homeless population. Counting was framed as a vehicle for personal transformation, a way of becoming a "better" Parisian. Counting itself was an act of solidarity, though not in a radical or redistributive sense. Staged in the majestic setting of Paris City Hall, the event cast solidarity in the register of civic pride and philanthropic benevolence–less a demand for structural change than a performance of moral responsibility by the privileged. This individual gesture of care and solidarity was scaled up into a broader transversal alliance: as the city mayor repeatedly explained, counting homeless people served as a collective project of a better Paris. This vision was explicitly tethered to the narrative of the upcoming 2024 Olympic Games, positioning the count as part of a broader legacy-building effort.

In short, counting homelessness was far more than documenting the unhoused. It indexed resource allocation, mapped local state presence, fostered civic engagement, volunteerism, and ethical citizenship, and in 2024, aligned with Olympic ambitions, all while embodying a new model of evidence-based urban governance for a future, more inclusive Paris. This process shows how quantification multiplies meanings, becoming

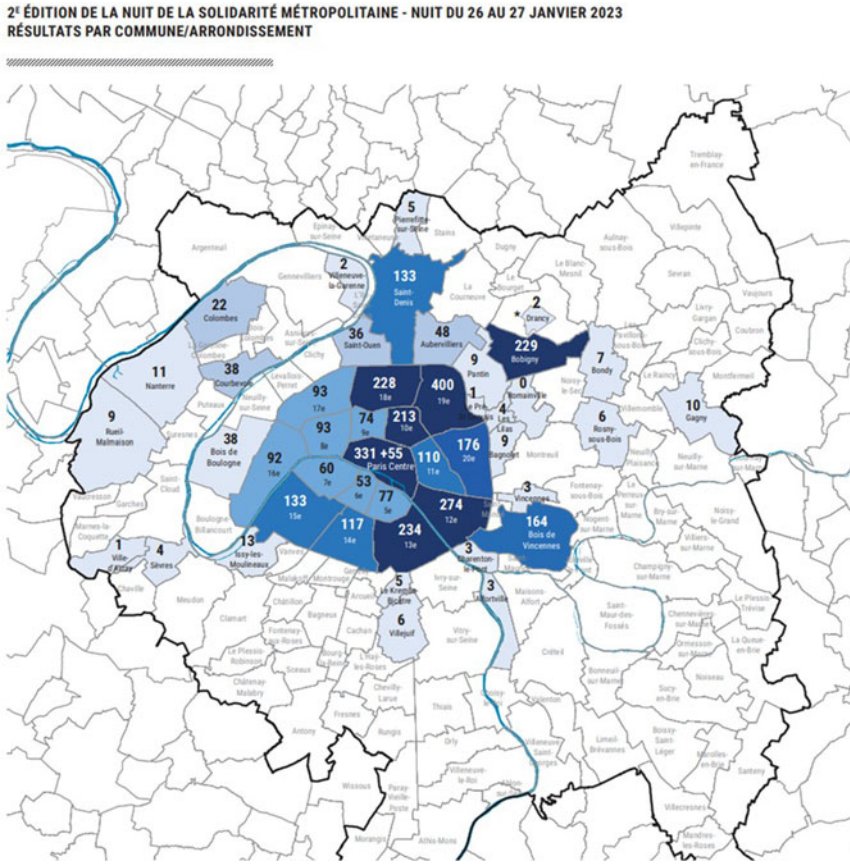

Figure 3. Second edition of the Metropolitan Solidarity Night – Night of January 26–27, 2023 – Results by Municipality/District, NDLS 2023.

a technique of knowing and a strategy for imagining and enacting social futures. It conflates governance through surveillance and policing with governance through solidarity and social cohesion.

While not focused on counting unhoused people, the shifting meanings and layered connections built around numbers and techniques of quantification, such as those we observed during the NDLS, echo meaning-making processes widely documented by language scholars and related fields. For example, Rose (1991), in his review of Cohen (1982) and Alonso and Starr's (1980) work on the politics of numbers in the U.S., shows how democracy has long been entangled with numeracy and statistics. Quantification, in this context, is not merely a tool of calculation but a signifier of democratic reason itself, producing a mode of rule that governs through numbers while shaping self-disciplined, calculating citizens. Strathern (2000) similarly traces how audit practices have escaped their financial origins to saturate universities and public institutions, where they now signal moral and ethical value. Building on this, Shore and Wright (1999, 2015a, 2015b) show how the expansion of audit has reshaped academic labor

and redefined scholarly worth. In language studies, scholars have documented how census-based quantification acquires a nationalist meaning: reinforcing nation-state legitimacy (Duchêne and Humbert 2018) or enabling minority communities to stake claims (Leeman 2004, 2013). Urla (2012a, 2012b, 2019) and Urla and Burdick (2018) show how counting Basque speakers reconfigured the terms of cultural activism, turning a nationalist identity struggle into a project of economic development. Conversely, Del Percio (2022) explores how audit logics in the Italian migration sector, typically deployed to measure impact, were subverted and mobilized to critique state power.

Extending this literature, we take the NDLS as an emblematic site to examine how quantification, the multiplication of meanings and connections it generates, are shaped by a semiotic process we refer to as *translation*. By translation, we mean three interrelated sets of semiotic processes: *First*, the semiotic production of numbers—that is, how human phenomena (e.g., experiences of homelessness) are rendered countable. It entails (a) the rephrasing of lived experiences of homelessness into quantifiable forms such as cardinal numbers and percentages; and (b) the interdiscursive citation, and recontextualization of historical techniques of quantification (including their authority, meaning and power), which serve to regiment the very processes through which these experiences of homelessness are rendered into numerical form. *Second*, the recontextualization of numbers as discursive figures—how numerical data are interpreted and mobilized to signify broader social or political realities (e.g., solidarity and cohesion, security/insecurity, "good" government, personal transformation, etc.). It includes the textual genres (infographics, guidelines, scripts) and extensive discursive work needed to make such translations intelligible, legitimate, and actionable. *Third*, reframing the very act of counting as a meaningful discursive activity—how quantification practices are narrated, made meaningful, or legitimated within different ideological, political, or institutional frameworks.

This theorization of translation builds on work in linguistic anthropology and related fields. Particularly, on Jakobson's (1960) conceptualization of translation, which, drawing on Peirce (1931–1966), he understood as an intralingual, interlingual, or intersemiotic process through which a segment of discourse is objectified and subsequently rephrased or represented into another semiotic form. Silverstein and Urban (1996) have developed Jakobson's understanding by drawing attention to the semiotic work involved in stabilizing cultural meanings, often in textual forms, and the circulation of these meanings across textual and cultural arenas through discursive processes of decontextualization, entextualization, and recontextualization. More recently, Prentice and Gershon (2022) and Amit-Danhi and Shifman (2018) have emphasized the central role of genre in this process, showing how different genre types metapragmatically shape and facilitate these movements across contexts. In sum, our understanding of translation goes beyond the simple transposition of meaning across linguistic boundaries. Inspired by Gal (2015), we approach translation as a "family" of semiotic processes that transform the form, social context, or meaning of a text, object, person, or discursive practice, while preserving some recognizable link to its "original" articulation or appearance. Crucially, translation also connects the social worlds in which these texts, objects, persons, or practices were grounded to new ones imagined to be separate (Gal 2015, 2018). Here, for example, translation connects the world of

auditing and quantification to the one of volunteering, science to government, security to charity, policing to solidarity, all helping to practice new ways of doing government. In other words, like Gal, we do not understand translation as merely a semiotic process, but as deeply imbricated with the practice of power and government.

This article examines how exactly this occurs on the ground. Our analysis is based on ethnographic data collected in Paris between January and August 2023. We focus on field notes from ethnographic observations conducted during two NDLS (the winter and summer editions in 2023), several preparatory events, and those held to communicate the results to the public. The data also include field notes from formal and informal conversations we conducted with representatives of the city council, members of the NDLS scientific committee, and textual material collected during these events. This ethnographic data allows us to explore how counting unhoused people gets articulated with a translation machinery which, as we argue, allows to exert power through multiplication: under the banner of solidarity, compassion, and humanity toward unhoused people, translation allows numbers to aggregate, multiply their meanings, connect diverse social arenas and act upon a wide array of processes—extending the reach of governmental rationalities and enlisting subjects, spaces, and practices far beyond the initial focus of homelessness.

Our analysis focuses on three translation moments: First, we begin with a review of the extended history of counting homeless individuals in France. We show how the NDLS, launched in 2018 as part of the *Pacte Parisien de Lutte contre l'Exclusion*, iterates these earlier logics and techniques of quantification, but also integrates counting and quantification techniques imported from other places, from other moments in time. These older models are cited, recontextualized, and rephrased by the Paris city council to align with a governance approach that merges state policing with a politics of solidarity, but which nonetheless repeats the same processes of exclusion where the poor are pushed out of Paris. Second, we turn to how the NDLS model is communicated to volunteers, focusing on the NDLS summer edition pre-counting training session designed to transform them into agents of change. We show how counting is narrated, made meaningful, and legitimated—and how its meaning is extended to signify broader social and political realities and distinct citizen-personae. In doing so, we also document the discursive work carried out by NDLS organizers to regiment how volunteers interpret the experiences of unhoused people and translate them into standardized data points, ensuring that lived realities are rendered legible and actionable within the logics of quantification. Third, we examine discussions from a June 2023 scientific committee meeting, where members reacted to a draft report intended to communicate data from the 2023 NDLS summer edition to the public. By analyzing how the draft report was deliberated and later revised into its final form, we highlight the translation processes through which NDLS-generated data—and the methodologies behind it—are shaped into a coherent, publicly legible narrative. Our analysis highlights that while expert knowledge is central to the form of governance enacted by the NDLS, it must be selectively narrated, reformulated, or omitted to authorize particular understandings of homelessness in Paris—and, in turn, to shape the urban politics those understandings sustain. In sum, we show how translation operates as a key semiotic process through which the NDLS mediates between lived experience, institutional authority, and public representation. Across these three moments— historical citation,

volunteer training, and expert deliberation—translation enables the circulation and multiplication of meanings attached to homelessness, while simultaneously delimiting which meanings count. Through this process, quantification becomes more than just a measurement technique. However, a mode of governance through multiplication that authorizes specific truths, organizes affective investments, and legitimizes political action in the city.

The politics of counting unhoused people

The NDLS is not the first attempt to count the unhoused in Paris. In his review of statistics on those categorized in France as Sans Domicile Fixe [without stable shelter], Damon (2000) for example shows how since the 1950s national and local media have inundated the public with very different statistics about the unhoused in Paris—each shaped by the political meanings the outlets sought to project onto the phenomenon. For example, in the 1950s, Détective reported 25,000 homeless individuals (Oct 8, 1956), while France Soir counted just 3,500 (Aug 8, 1959). In the 1970s, La Croix claimed 1,200 (Jan 1, 1972), Le Figaro found 6,000 (Dec 1, 1975), and Le Matin estimated 4,000 (Oct 27, 1978). The 1980s and 1990s showed a similar range of variations. Besides media outlets, Damon (2014) notes that NGOs and charities provided their figures: Emmaüs estimated 400,000 homeless individuals in 1989, 500,000 in 1993, and 800,000 in 1998—though these figures included the Greater Paris area, not just the city. In 2012, INSEE (Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques) reported that 141,500 homeless people were in France, and nearly 30,000 were in Paris. By 2017, however, INSEE counted just 3,000 in the capital.

Damon (2000) notes that these shifting and multiplying numbers went hand in hand with evolving ways of narrating homelessness, each adding new layers of meaning to the phenomenon. Depending on their political ideology, newspapers framed homelessness in different terms. In the 1970s and early 1980s, left-leaning outlets like Le Monde, La Croix, and Le Parisien emphasized the growing presence of unhoused young people, empathetically framing homelessness as a consequence of economic crisis and youth precarity. In the late 1980s, right-leaning newspapers and magazines such as Le Point, Le Figaro, and France Soir cast homeless individuals as unruly and dangerous, linking them to rising insecurity in the city. In the 1990s, Libération, Le Parisien, and L'Aurore spotlighted the increasing numbers of unhoused women and minors, no longer portraying homelessness as a threat to the housed, but as a source of danger for the vulnerable groups themselves.

The NDLS's counting efforts are grounded in this multiplication of statistics, translating experiences of homelessness into numerical data and embedding these figures within broader narratives. In what follows, we show how the NDLS's recent initiatives and earlier efforts led by the media and other non-public actors in the 20th century reiterate longstanding rationales of counting in Paris. However, as we argue, this reiteration is never mere repetition; it is a process of translation—one that negotiates continuity and change by selectively retaining, rearticulating, and repurposing past discourses and techniques of quantification to fit new moral and political economies. While these efforts sometimes directly address homelessness, they rarely seek to transform the lives of unhoused people materially. More often, they serve

other functions, instrumentalizing homelessness to manage broader social or political agendas.

For example, as Biraben (1963) and De Saint Pol and Monso (2007) show, unhoused people were already being counted in 17th- and 18th-century Paris as part of a broader ecclesiastical project aimed at accounting for the "états des âmes" (states of souls) of the population. Parish priests, acting as moral stewards, registered settled parishioners and "lost souls"—the poor, the vagabond, the unhoused. The goal was moral salvation through charity, discipline, and institutional confinement in monasteries and convents. Counting then was a form of spiritual accounting, embedded in a moral economy concerned with redemption rather than population regulation. This religiously grounded logic of enumeration began to shift in the early 19th century, when, as Martin and Noiriel (1998) note, a new political and economic rationality gradually mented the older moral one. While the language of salvation lingered, the institutional architecture of counting changed. The Police Bureau launched the first modern censuses of Paris in 1817 and 1829, using household-based nominative lists to map the population by name, profession, age, address, and domestic structure. The population was now individualized, spatialized, and made legible, not for spiritual care, but for governance, taxation, social control, and surveillance. With the creation of the Bureau de Statistique in 1833 (the precursor to today's INSEE) under the Loi de Police of July 22, 1831, enumeration became professionalized and systematized, drawing on the emerging science of statistics. New logics of measurement took root—social planning, economic management, and urban policing. By 1841, the quinquennial census expanded its gaze beyond fixed households to include the "floating population," i.e., short-term workers, transients, tourists, and the unhoused. Martin and Noiriel (idem) note that this expansion was a response to unrest, riots, and public hygiene that exposed the limits of bourgeois household-based enumeration. Counting no longer reinforced the moral architecture of domestic life; it also sought to capture those who lived beyond it. These "floating" individuals were not just counted; they were categorized, surveilled, and directed toward institutions designed to discipline and normalize them. Hospices, maisons de charité [houses of charity], and maisons de travail [workhouses] offered food, shelter, and clothing in exchange for labor. Enumeration thus shifted from a tool of spiritual salvation to one of biopolitical control, reframing the unhoused not as souls to be saved, but as social threats to be managed, rehabilitated, or contained.

Foucault (2004) identifies yet another layer of meaning added to the act of counting in early 19th-century Paris—one that went beyond governance and control. Counting was also tied to the cultivation of urban splendor. Far from being a neutral administrative exercise, enumeration became part of a moral and aesthetic project to transform the city into a model of order, health, and prosperity. The Police Act of the 1830s, Foucault notes, defined its mission in explicitly aesthetic and moral terms: to enhance "ornament, form, and splendor" in the city, including "the happiness of all its citizens" and "the order of everything visible." In this framework, hygiene was not just about disease prevention; it became a visual and moral imperative. Paris, hailed as the most splendid of urban centers, was to embody these ideals and serve as a blueprint for the rest of France and beyond. Counting thus became a means of identifying those in need of governance and those whose presence or condition was perceived as disrupting the visual and moral harmony of the city. It helped locate *what* or *who* threatened the

city's aesthetic order, making enumeration a key technique in producing urban beauty, civility, and control.

The NDLS's counting practices must be understood as an iteration of these older logics of enumeration. It repeats and rephrases past rationales that combined moral obligation, surveillance, and aesthetic order into a renewed apparatus of care and control, reframing and renarrating the exclusion and invisibilization of people experiencing poverty as an act of solidarity. It becomes particularly evident in how both the city council and national authorities have linked the "problem" of homelessness to the organization of the 2024 Olympic Games, framing it simultaneously as a matter of solidarity and civic responsibility, and as an issue of security, urban prestige, and visual harmony.

When the NDLS was first launched in 2018, Paris officials framed it as a progressive, community-driven initiative, modeled on U.S. efforts like the "S-Night" counts in cities such as New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. These American models paired grassroots activism with charity-led events like New York's "Sleep Out," blending enumeration with public awareness and civic empathy at a time when public authorities increasingly cut services to the poor. Unlike the top-down statistical operations led by institutions like INSEE and the Bureau of Statistics earlier, the NDLS was meant to feel participatory: a civic ritual in which volunteers and unhoused individuals collectively built a more solidary and inclusive Paris. By 2023, as preparations for the 2024 Olympic Games accelerated, the meanings attached to the act of counting and the numbers it produced began to multiply and shift again. Although solidarity remained a key theme, it was reframed. Mayor Anne Hidalgo's call to "build a legacy of solidarity" and President Macron's promise to deliver "the first ever inclusive and socially responsible Games" now circulated alongside a more securitized narrative—one that spoke of "anticipating the needs of unhoused populations one year before the Games" and "transforming the city for a global spectacle." As Deputy Mayor Léa Filoche put it, the Games were "an opportunity to develop welfare and solidarity," but they also posed "a logistical and aesthetic challenge." Paris Prefect Marc Guillaume, for his part, recast homelessness as an obstacle to urban order. The NDLS then took on new functions. Enumeration became a mechanism for managing visibility, risk, and disruption. Under the looming presence of terrorist threats, widespread strikes against Macron's pension reforms, and geopolitical tensions, the NDLS was increasingly framed as a tool for mitigating urban vulnerability. Unhoused people were no longer just citizens in need—they became potential disturbances to Olympic "splendor." In this context, solidarity was made to coexist with security, control, and spectacle, reiterating logics of visibility and exclusion that trace back to 19th-century approaches to urban poverty. Official narratives denied any intent of "social cleansing," yet the language of relocation and triage became more explicit. Paris Prefect acknowledged the need to relieve the "saturation of accommodation" in the Île-de-France and to "decongest" the capital by creating "additional and more qualitative places" for unhoused people, especially "alternative housing" hundreds of kilometers away from Paris. The NDLS counting was no longer just about solidarity; it became a means of urban choreography by mapping out who the unhoused were, where they lived, and where they could be relocated. In anticipation of the 15 million visitors expected for the Games, the city sought to help people experiencing homelessness and make them invisible. It ensured

that Olympic Paris was a space of order, cleanliness, and visual grandeur fit for global broadcast.

In sum, the NDLS offers a compelling case of translation as a semiotic process through which historical quantification techniques are strategically mobilized and recontextualized to authorize new regimes of knowledge, solidarity, and control. To discursively distance itself from the surveillance and stigmatization historically associated with these enumeration practices, the NDLS explicitly aligned with the previously mentioned U.S. models and reframed them as an act of civic empathy, solidarity, and even resistance. Deputy Mayor Léa Filoche, for instance, positioned the count as an ethical intervention in response to the state's neglect of the unhoused, rather than a bureaucratic exercise. This narrative of care coexisted with and was informed by the discourse of scientific authority long associated with state enumeration. As shown in the opening vignettes—and elaborated throughout this article—NDLS organizers consistently underscored the methodological rigor of the operation, invoking the scientific committee, the structured design of the survey tools, and the quantifiable precision of the count. Enumeration through the NDLS thus accrued a moral and epistemic legitimacy anchored in solidarity and science. However, in the shadow of the 2024 Olympic Games, civic virtue and scientific accuracy discourse were retranslated into older control logics. Solidarity became discursively aligned with displacement, rationalized as "better housing," but effectively aimed at removing unhoused people from public view.

In this way, the NDLS does not simply repeat earlier enumeration practices. From ecclesiastical "moral accounting" to statistical governance and urban securitization geared toward global branding, enumeration emerges as a technology adaptable to evolving political, moral, and aesthetic imperatives. As Damon (2000, 2014) notes, the meanings and numbers attached to homelessness have always been politically malleable, shaped by media, institutions, and civil society contestations. The NDLS contributes a new chapter: a techno-political dispositif that fuses scientific authority, civic virtue, solidarity rhetoric, and urban spectacle. Through this layered and strategic process of translation—adding and subtracting meaning as needed—homelessness is rendered not simply as a phenomenon to be counted but also to be choreographed, i.e., managed, staged, and made (in)visible in line with shifting political agendas and the imperatives of international prestige.

Regimenting counting for solidarity

On June 27, 2023, at 7 p.m., the first NDLS volunteers gathered at the city council of the 12th arrondissement for the evening training session. It marked the beginning of the NDLS experimental summer edition. Three months after the 2023 winter count results were released, the city communicated to the scientific committee that it would conduct a summer count for the first time. It was justified to gain insight into how the profiles and needs of people experiencing homelessness vary with seasonal changes. Limited to just three arrondissements, the initiative was explicitly framed as exploratory and experimental, although the rationale behind selecting these neighborhoods was never clearly articulated. At the same time, political activists, social workers, and national media were sounding the alarm on relocating homeless individuals from Paris to the

suburbs and other cities, as part of broader efforts to reshape the urban landscape ahead of the Olympic spotlight.

Nevertheless, city officials continued to emphasize the logistical and humanitarian value of this summer mapping. The count was portrayed as part of an inclusive urban vision that ensured that even the most marginalized residents would be considered in preparations for the global event. Same as for the winter count, the city council had activated its volunteering program to reach out to potential volunteers. People responded with enthusiasm, with a total number of 150 registered volunteers. The training session held three hours before the count was presented as a space to review the instructions previously communicated through mandatory online training, resolve outstanding questions, distribute documents for the counting activities, and initiate team building within the pre-assigned groups. Upon arrival, volunteers were directed to the tables corresponding to their assigned teams and given time to introduce themselves to their team members and foster a sense of cohesion among them.

This pre-counting training session was a crucial moment in the translation machinery documented in the previous section, which is about rendering counting meaningful, legitimate, and actionable to the volunteers. It shaped how volunteers interpreted both the NDLS summer edition and the lived experiences of homelessness, and transformed the latter, with the help of experts, into quantifiable data. This process, we demonstrate, required an intensive discursive effort to regiment interpretation, align moral sentiments with technocratic counting techniques, and reframe counting as a deeply personal act of civic engagement. Translation thus functioned both as a technology of knowledge—one which creates a quantifiable assessment of unhoused people in Paris—and as a technology of mobilization—narrating enumeration not simply as a task of urban governance, mapping and policing of the poor, but also as an ethical encounter, a form of solidarity and care, and even a practice of self-transformation.

This reframing began right at the start of the training session, when the mayor of the 12th arrondissement took the floor, wearing the same blue NDLS jacket that had been handed out to all volunteers, visually reinforcing a sense of collective solidarity not only with people experiencing homelessness but also among the volunteers themselves. Welcoming the crowd, the mayor explained:

> it's incredible that every time you are 150 to have responded present like in previous years in a very spontaneous way so I wanted to thank you and then especially to thank you once again for this commitment, the important thing is to go to meet them, maybe also to change our way of seeing these people, in any case to see that it is possible to have a relationship or not but in any case to try to get in contact, what you are going to do tonight it's first of all a human adventure, it's first of all an encounter but it's also something that will allow us to objectify and to bring back, put in place things that concretely are put in place, when I was talking to you about women the first night of solidarity, when we saw that they were also present in our streets throughout Paris, but also more particularly in the 12th and that the needs they were bringing up, what they told us namely that there was the need to have dedicated services [only for women], that's why

> the 12th have now specific offers and time slots specifically for women, a big big thank you for your commitment and for your presence tonight.

Here we see how the Mayor narrated and reframed the counting for volunteers as a "spontaneous" "commitment," and an act of solidarity. The count was not merely presented as data collection, but as a "human encounter," an opportunity to "meet" the other, to "build relationships." Also, the event was cast as a deeply affective and moral undertaking—a "human adventure" transforming how participants view unhoused people. This narrative of solidarity was further reinforced through material and symbolic elements: the distinctive NDLS jackets worn by volunteers, the event's very name—Nuit de la Solidarité—and the distribution of flyers and brochures such as "the solidarity flyer" and "the solidarity guide." These resources, provided to each volunteer team, offered information on local services and organizations and were meant to be shared with unhoused individuals encountered during the count, thus reinforcing the event's ethical framing as one of solidarity. Additionally, the volunteers were provided with a "volunteer guide" defining the "ethical" dimension of the counting activities, meaning that volunteers had to "Respect the people [they] meet," "Guarantee the anonymity of the people [they] meet," but also "Guarantee respect for people's dignity." In more informal exchanges, this solidarity narrative was further reinforced by the Mayor, who drew a sharp contrast between the solidarity-driven ethos of the NDLS and the repressive displacement strategies enacted by the Macron government.

In other words, the numerical data generated through the NDLS served different purposes for different audiences. For city authorities and the Paris police prefecture, the fine-grained mapping of the unhoused population was operationalized into detailed tables, maps, and infographics—resources that proved instrumental in organizing displacement efforts. However, the same data was framed as an act of solidarity for the public and the volunteers. In her address to the volunteers, the Mayor added a layer of meaning to this notion of solidarity. Solidarity was not merely a symbolic practice, but was framed as having tangible, "concrete" benefits for unhoused individuals. The Mayor's address constructed a causal link between the NDLS, the volunteers' acts of solidarity, and the development of targeted services and support for Paris' unhoused population.

In addition to shaping how volunteers understood the concept of the count as a practice of solidarity, the act of counting itself had to be carefully regimented. For solidarity to be translated into quantifiable numerical data deemed "scientific" by the city council, the volunteer guide introduced an additional interpretative principle around which a broader set of regimenting guidelines and instructions was structured: "Fully respect the methodological framework that will have been presented to you." It was further elaborated in the "conversation guide" handed to volunteers to regulate their interactions with unhoused persons. For example, the guide outlined a standardized script that volunteers had to follow when initiating contact:

> Good evening. My name is [first name], and we are volunteers for the City of Paris. We are asking everyone we meet where they will be sleeping tonight. The aim is to count and better understand the situation of people living on the streets, so that we can improve the assistance we provide in the future. This survey is

anonymous and confidential; you do not have to answer. Would you be willing to answer our questions?

The guide also offered specific instructions to help volunteers determine whether the encountered person was effectively "unhoused," for example: "Do you have a place to stay tonight? Do you know where you are going to sleep tonight? At home? Is it where you usually sleep?" Then, there are questions about the person's personal history: 'How long have you been in Paris?

These instructions were not solely designed to help volunteers interact with unhoused individuals. Nor were they merely tools to assist individuals in enacting solidarity or cultivating empathetic engagement. They also ensured that volunteers collected the precise information the NDLS deemed relevant. Crucially, this information was required to complete the three forms distributed to all teams: the questionnaire for single persons, the questionnaire for couples or families, and the form for groups of five or more people. These forms served as the primary data sources for enumerating and subsequently quantifying the unhoused population in Paris. Each questionnaire included a mandatory section with additional standardized questions. For example, the questionnaire for couples or families included questions such as: "Q1: What is your relationship? (e.g., couple, single-parent family, two-parent family, extended family, etc.)"; "Q2: Number of adults;" "Q3: Number of children present and the ages of the children"; "Q6: Are there any animals observed with the individuals?"

To ensure that volunteers properly aligned three interconnected practices—the questions posed to unhoused individuals by the volunteers, the responses provided by unhoused people, and the volunteers' accurate completion of the forms, they were required to watch a 31-minute video titled *Tutoriel la Nuit de la Solidarité (expérimentation estivale)* as part of the pre-counting training:

> [...] You are in the field with your team, counting individuals. If you encounter fewer than five people, use either the "single person" questionnaire or the "couple/family" questionnaire, depending on the situation and whether family ties are declared. However, if you are facing a group of five or more people, begin by completing the "group form" based on your observations. Then, approach the individuals and invite them to respond to the single-person or couple/family questionnaires. [...] All types of documents follow the same numbering rule. First, make sure to number the questionnaire or form correctly. The numbering includes several elements: the initials of the document type—PS for the single person questionnaire, CF for the couple/family questionnaire, and FG for the group form—followed by the arrondissement number, the sector number assigned to you, the questionnaire number, and finally an identifier for specific zones. [...] If you meet a family with more than two adults—for example, a couple and the man's mother—fill out two couple/family questionnaires. On the first, indicate: Adult 1: woman; Adult 2: husband. On the second, indicate: Adult 3: husband's mother. [...] For couples, try, whenever possible, to interview each adult about their situation, rather than recording a single response for both. Only interview adults; children under 18 are counted in the family questionnaire but are not given an individual questionnaire.

This video excerpt constructs a plausible field scenario, guiding volunteers through a step-by-step simulation of what they are likely to encounter during their count, and together with the scripted questions, questionnaires, and forms, illustrates the extent to which the counting activity was regimented. Volunteers were instructed on which forms to use, how to complete them, and how to interpret the diverse homelessness situations they might encounter. Although the consistent use of the imperative form in the instructions (e.g., "use," "begin," "approach," "invite," etc.) required volunteers to adhere strictly to the prescribed procedures, on the ground, personal judgment was often used to decide. The detailed regulation of practice demonstrates how the initiative sought to align two distinct regimes of action: on the one hand, an ethic of solidarity and self-transformation through engagement with unhoused people; on the other, the production of standardized, quantifiable data for urban governance and policing. Alignment, in this context, involved ensuring that both regimes were enacted simultaneously and fostering a perception among volunteers that these were interconnected—perhaps even mutually reinforcing or co-constitutive—practices.

This interpretative, regimenting work carried out by the Paris City Council enables and is emblematic of a broader mode of state power that extends beyond the traditional boundaries of the state. This form of liberal power, which Rose and Miller (2010) refer to as "governing at a distance," draws on Foucault's concept of governmentality and operates not through direct disciplinary coercion but, as Urla (2019), Iiana (2011), and Inda (2005) argue, through the recognition of individuals' capacity for agency. It governs by mobilizing people's hopes and desires and willingness to pursue them, and, in this case, by shaping those desires through constructing solidarity with unhoused people in Paris as a moral imperative. Here, this means that the city council governs the unhoused population by operating through, recalling, and mobilizing the ethos of volunteering but also participatory citizenship—an ethos that, as Davis and Taithe (2011) argue, is constructed in France as a moral orientation to which every good citizen of the republic is expected to align in order to be recognized, by themselves, other citizens, and the state, as a good person. Translation, in this context, is not only a semiotic technique that helps turn experiences of homelessness into quantifiable data or allows public authorities to align overlapping rhetoric of scientific authority, civic virtue, solidarity, and urban branding. It is also a technique of mobilization that draws and acts upon individuals' willingness to express solidarity with unhoused people and be active citizens of Paris to carry out urban governance while preparing the city for the Olympic spectacle.

Contesting repeated counting for a multiplication of politics

In June 2023, the NDLS scientific committee held a Zoom meeting to discuss the initial results of the summer count prepared by the Atelier Parisien d'Urbanisme (APUR), sponsored by the Paris city council. The scientific committee comprises approximately 30 experts, including representatives of public organizations and NGOs, and scholars researching homelessness in Paris. Its core functions are to ensure the scientific validity of the NDLS enterprise; to serve as a forum for expert dialogue on homelessness in Paris; to elaborate the questionnaires used by the volunteers; to inform the analysis of the collected data; and to help disseminate the results. In addition, the committee

is tasked with making methodological recommendations to enhance the NDLS and formulating policy recommendations to address homelessness in Paris. In short, the scientific committee acts as a guarantor of the NDLS's scientific legitimacy. It was in such capacity that, before the release of the summer 2023 report, it was convened to provide expert feedback on the preliminary analysis conducted by APUR.

This investment in expertise for the legitimation and conduct of governmental programs is not specific to the NDLS. Urla (2012a, 2019, also see Cameron 2000), drawing on Foucault (2008), Miller and Rose (1990) but also Hacking (1982), argues that contemporary techniques of liberal governmentality always entail the mobilization of various forms of experts and expertise to understand the characteristics and regularities of populations. Within this context, expertise becomes a technology of knowledge, serving the regulation, disciplining, and crucially the representation of the population and each individual as objects of government to be managed according to this expertise. Urla (2019) argues that this investment in experts and expertise is emblematic of contemporary forms of Western liberal government, which operate through dispersed networks of strategies, protocols, techniques, and activities. Along with Urla, we claim that this mode of governance also relies on translation practices and the multiplication of meaning, enacted by actors such as planners, inspectors, social workers, and policymakers—figures often positioned as operating outside the formal apparatus of the state, but at the same time serving the state.

In this final analytical section, we illustrate how the process of governing through experts and expertise is far from smooth. It is marked by frictions that reveal divergent and often conflicting agendas and competing forms of authority. These conflicts play out in the domain of translation. Specifically, we discuss how communicating the meaning of the data—including how it was collected, understood, framed, and presented to the public in the final report—created friction in the NDLS scientific committee. Focusing on the discussions surrounding the APUR's draft report and its entextualization into the final version released to the public—a process that is itself a form of translation (see Silverstein and Urban 1996; Park and Bucholtz 2009; Vigouroux 2009)—allows us to complicate further the role of experts and expertise within this liberal form of power. We highlight how expertise is selectively invoked, reformulated, or erased to produce and authorize knowledge about unhoused people in Paris—and, by extension, the urban politics such knowledge informs.

Scientific committee members had received the report in advance for review. During the meeting, the initial speakers—representing APUR and other institutional bodies—offered commentary on the new results. After this introductory part, one of the two sociologists present requested to speak, noting that she would be unable to stay for the entire session. She expressed concern and frustration that the NDLS had become "more of a political initiative than a scientific one." She added, "As we can see from the data, we gain nothing new from the latest report." Later, she claimed that the committee was "now primarily composed of institutional representatives rather than independent researchers." Although the committee was nominally made up of 10 scholars (historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists), she suggested that many had disengaged because their critiques regarding methodology or embedded biases had been overlooked. Indeed, aside from one other researcher, she was the only scholar attending the meeting. She clarified that she accepted the political

implications of data collection altogether. She believed that numerical data are never purely scientific, disconnected from their "social and political implications." However, the "repeated counting activities and the overproduction of numbers did not lead to any new knowledge." She also raised concerns about what she described as "the excessive solicitation of homeless individuals during the annual count." She contrasted solidarity with what she framed as a "politically motivated act of urban governance repackaged as a performative act of solidarity." She concluded that the repeated counting efforts had become "detached from knowledge generation and appeared to serve another, more political purpose." She concluded that "as a scientist," she had "nothing further to contribute, since her suggestions had consistently been unacknowledged." Although she did not explicitly refer to the removal of unhoused people from Paris, her remarks echoed broader concerns raised by a coalition of NGOs. Several organizations had recently published a comprehensive, highly mediatized report titled *Le Revers de la médaille* ("The Other Side of the Medal"), denouncing the "social cleansing" activities ordered by the Paris Police Prefecture in the lead-up to the Olympic Games.

The NDLS organizers and the APUR representatives poorly received her remarks. A representative from the city council addressed the criticisms by stating:

> [It is] a public policy initiative carried out by the City of Paris, and we are also trying to ensure that this operation is grounded in a scientific approach. That may surprise you—it is not perfect—but it remains an ambition […] From the outset, this has been a count where we aim to count as comprehensively as possible. That does not mean we count everyone, but we try to give ourselves the means to count as much as possible.

The data analysts from APUR (themselves trained quantitative sociologists and political scientists) emphasized that the data collected, and the resulting analysis were based on established, scientifically grounded methodologies. Some highlighted that the scientific committee plays a key role in ensuring transparency regarding both operational methods and the interpretations produced. They noted that the committee had been established specifically to identify methodological weaknesses, which, they acknowledged, persist, and provide expert guidance on improving these shortcomings.

Despite the heated debates, the concerns raised by the scholar during the meeting did not appear in the final report released to the public. The report later published on the City Council's official website and further disseminated through press, was 63 page long and structured into four parts: an introductory section reiterating the actors involved in organizing the NDLS; additional information from the winter 2023 count; the presentation of numerical data and the related analysis and findings of the NDLS 2023 summer edition; and a concluding summary. While in previous years the Scientific Committee had issued a separate report featuring their methodological assessment, it was now integrated into the report's third section as a subsection titled "Feedback from partners and members of the Scientific Committee." However, instead of presenting the outcomes of the scientific meeting, the APUR included a general statement—purportedly on behalf of the Scientific Committee—and brief paraphrased excerpts from interviews they had conducted with three committee members who had participated in the summer NDSL: a representative from INSEE, one from the Greater

Paris Metropolitan Area, and one from APUR. Notably, no interviews with independent researchers from the committee were included. Echoing the responses to the concerns raised during the Scientific Committee meeting (though without explicitly referencing them), the assessment presented in the report emphasized the foundational methodological principles on which the NDLS counting activity is based. These were quoted as: "From the point of view of scope, individuals who declare not having access to shelter on the evening of the operation are taken into account" and "From the outreach perspective, the instruction is to interview every person encountered in the field, in order to limit biases related to perceptions of homelessness." The report further explained: "Because of the impact of summer seasonality on the occupation of public spaces, mobility, lifestyles, and sociability, the instruction was the subject of much reflection," and "The instruction to 'approach everyone' was perceived as difficult to implement and potentially counterproductive." Nevertheless, "[The scientific committee] concluded that maintaining this outreach instruction was necessary." Beyond these general statements, the report also included more specific rephrased comments from the interviewed committee members, outlining the challenges of attempting to interview everyone. These included: "The Scientific Committee interviewed reported ongoing reflection on how to adapt the instruction during the operation, for example by prioritizing certain zones or configurations depending on space occupation," and "The Scientific Committee also noted that the complexity of applying the instruction had a direct impact on the atmosphere within the teams, with cohesion sometimes weakened." In other words, the difficulty of engaging with every individual encountered complicated data collection. It undermined team dynamics, leading to disbanded teams or deviations from the planned routes and zones they had been assigned to.

In sum, this reflects an additional dimension of the semiotic work performed by translation. The final report constructs a single enunciator—"the Scientific Committee" without specifying who said what, reifying a semiotic process of entextualization, inscribing speech into writing that Park and Bucholtz (2009) consider to be essential for the construction of institutional authority—it entirely omits the concerns raised by the researchers. These included the political nature of the initiative, the biases embedded in the methodology, the excessive solicitation of unhoused individuals, the lack of a genuinely solidarity-driven purpose, and the limited generation of new knowledge from the data collected. Instead of echoing the methodological responses the researchers received during the committee meeting, the report strictly frames the discussion regarding technical and procedural issues. In other words, translating expert knowledge from the Scientific Committee into the public report involved an erasure of difference, dissent, and contestation. The heated debates were rephrased into a streamlined, technical narrative to optimize the counting process and prepare it for future operations.

The authority of scientific expertise for liberal power is then a precarious one. While experts and expertise are central to the techniques through which liberal governmentality operates—particularly in urban politics, such as those we documented in the lead-up to the Olympic Games in Paris—translation plays a crucial role. It serves to filter this expertise, highlighting the meanings and bodies of knowledge that support specific techniques of power, such as mapping unhoused people to create a

more "welcoming" Paris for the Olympic spectacle, while erasing or rendering invisible others that might hinder or subvert political authority.

Conclusions

In this article, we demonstrated how the Paris Nuit de la Solidarité involves several instances of translation.

First, we showed how the NDLS's counting repeated and rephrased earlier techniques of knowledge used to analyze and surveil population regularities while simultaneously reframing them as matters of solidarity, urban prestige, and visual harmony. Second, we demonstrated how translation rendered the act of counting unhoused people meaningful, legitimate, and actionable for the volunteers and shaped how they interpreted experiences of homelessness, later turned into quantifiable data. We argued that this translation process required an intensive discursive effort to regiment interpretation, align moral sentiments with technocratic counting, and reframe counting as solidarity. Third, we explored how translation made it possible to selectively invoke, reformulate, or erase forms of expertise to produce, legitimize, and authorize knowledge about unhoused people in Paris. In sum, we showed how translation enabled power to be exercised through multiplication: translation allowed the numbers of unhoused people in Paris to be aggregated and rendered tangible through maps, tables, and infographics; it multiplied the meanings of counting—as a practice of science, auditing, branding, policing, and solidarity; it connected diverse arenas of governmental intervention, such as urban governance, the Olympic Games, and homelessness; and it produced citizen subjectivities that informed new modes of liberal governance operating through the mobilization of citizens' desires and hopes.

This multiplication of meaning through translation did not merely align categories often imagined as distinct or opposing, such as science and politics, solidarity and surveillance, numbers and human experience. It also shaped a network of unexpected connections, interdiscursive links, and unlikely alliances. This dynamic becomes particularly evident in the *The Other Side of the Medal* report about the urban policies implemented by the Paris Police Prefecture ahead of the Olympic Games. While informing the public that over 20,000 unhoused individuals had been removed from Paris, the same report celebrated the NDLS's efforts to identify the needs of unhoused people—knowledge that, according to the coalition, had been ignored by public authorities in their urban governance strategies. At the same time, the NDLS's detailed mapping of unhoused individuals enabled the Police Prefecture to identify and remove them so effectively. In other words, the NDLS and its counting activities served as both a tool of advocacy and a mechanism of knowledge production that facilitated the removal of the very individuals it sought to support. Similarly, while the Paris City Council publicly expressed concerns about the "social cleansing" of the city's streets, the same City Council provided the data enabling such practices through its repeated counts and increasingly refined counting methods. Moreover, the volunteers, most of whom had participated in the NDLS to support the cause of unhoused people, were, through their civic engagement, helping to create the conditions for the removal.

Although this web of knowledge, meanings, unexpected connections, and subjectivities facilitated by translation may resemble what Deleuze and Guattari (1980) call

a *rhizome*—a nonlinear, nonhierarchical, and open-ended network of meaning and politics—we argue it is better understood as what Rose and Miller (2010) term "governing at a distance," or, as we suggest here, *governing through multiplication*. This form of governance aspires to capture the whole population and each individual by acting through an ever-expanding network of organizations, actors, and people to advance its agendas. Within this logic, translation becomes a key technique enabling this multiplication, both in creating new connections and legitimizing them. However, this network of connections—or *nodes* (Deleuze and Guattari: idem)—does not expand uncontrolled. Instead, translation and the regimentation of translation allow meanings, links, and alliances to spread in multiple, sometimes seemingly contradictory or unexpected directions, while still supporting the expanding aims of urban governance. The NDLS illustrates this precisely: translation made it possible to align acts of counting with solidarity, resilience, and security, enabling the program to multiply its meanings and effects while advancing a broader agenda of urban transformation, policing, and control. This specific mode of operation is not specific to the NDLS. In several interviews with Paris city officials, they explained that the NDLS was embedded in a broader politics of resilience, promising greater security, livability, and prosperity beyond the Olympic context. This resilience politics is to be multiplied and enacted by each citizen, each household, each condominium, each street, and each neighborhood, aligning personal and community needs with those of capital and its government.

While governing through multiplication appears less overtly coercive than authoritarian forms of politics currently gaining ground in many parts of the world, it is no less disruptive, particularly for those relegated to society's social and economic margins. Nor is it without consequences for how we imagine our cities: as spaces ordered through moral logics of livability, security, and prosperity. What distinguishes the form of power we documented in Paris is that the translation machinery multiplying and legitimizing made this power appear more acceptable, more inclusive, and therefore less authoritarian, yet not necessarily less harmful.

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Cite this article: Del Percio, Alfonso, and Cécile B. Vigouroux. 2025. "The Counting Machinery: Translation, Multiplication, and Liberal Politics of Homelessness in Paris." *Signs and Society* 13 (3): 431–453. https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2025.10016