



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

TO THE ABSENT READER, TO THOSE WHO ARE GOING TO ARRIVE: ON TRANSLATION, RADICAL INDISCIPLINE AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL CARE

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To those who lack the right to the sea

How to describe the sea to a child who has never seen it?

How to do so for a child who will most likely never see it?

How to describe the sea to an indigenous child who lives in a state system that established borders regulating what is property over the land and the sea, as well as the movement of people across them, hence what is proper for people to see or even to imagine?

How to describe the sea to a child who might never afford to travel to the sea?

How to make it possible to situate historically this particular imagination of the sea, for the eyes of a child, to conjure up this child as an historically situated subject, while at the same time describing a horizon of reality that is unlikely to ever happen?

In *Canción para un niño boliviano que nunca vio la mar* (2004),¹ Pedro Lemebel decides to do so resisting a logic of scarcity: that logic, which impinges upon both what is named, and produced, as “reality” and also the possible imagination that stems from this reality. Lemebel entrusts his words

to produce a different horizon of desire for reality, hence to produce a reality that is imagined by this desire:

And how can I tell you about it, what damp words can I use to narrate it, chiquito llocalla,² little cub from La Paz who was never in front of that salty uproar of the oceanic plan. How to make you see, little aymara girl, if you never witnessed this music and its waves gurgling the concert of the beautiful sea.³ (Lemebel 2004, 105)

Lemebel starts his short text with getting rid of all the images of the sea the child may be possibly confronted with, while it is impossible for them to actually see it. He writes this text as “a letter addressed to your oblique little eyes that in a thousand ways try to imagine this big blue pond” (105).⁴ The sea, he writes

is not like your school teacher tells you, describing the widest part of the Titicaca, this area where the sky lays back on the musk green water, where there are no hills, and the horizon disappears in an emerald blade that, somehow, looks like an eye of the sea. [The sea] neither looks like that Disney caricature that they show you in Bolivian schools, with fish in all colours jumping all around, with bathers and parasols in eternal summer holidays, with golden beaches and blue waves in an excess of pedagogical idealization.⁵ (105)

In his letter to this unknown child, Lemebel abounds in details: he plays with language and its “verbal melody” (Monsiváis 2007, 11), articulating his letter with invented, onomatopoeic and seductive words, sentences that seem to have a taste, a smell and an icastic quality to them. In other words, Lemebel substitutes the supposed absence of the sea—the premise of scarcity on which the very imagination of this scene, for the eyes of this child, is predicated—with a proliferation of images. The latter are not just artful descriptions of the sea as a vision, or an idea, but they are images of a particular history, and an embodied memory: his own.

The images consigned to the little imaginary Bolivian citizen are images of the first time Lemebel went to see the ocean. He describes his experience as already situated in specific conditions of existence, conditions that are not equal for all children: “as a poor child, I have lived this experience at the age of five” (Lemebel 2004, 105). The narrated experience is already collective: all the families living in Lemebel’s working class neighborhood in Santiago had the opportunity to go to the beach on a day trip in January or February every year, travelling with minibuses rented by community associations, and there was an eager expectation on the part of every child toward this event. The journey to the sea is described joyfully, even if the minibus would regularly break down during the route and the families had to wait hours before the mechanical failure could be fixed; even if the out of fashion bathing suits the families would wear on the beach had to be mended every year by the mothers the night before the trip, even if the encounter with the sea was going to last merely the time of an afternoon, and soon everyone would be rushing back to the minibus with burning skin, as it was essential to have sunburn and “look like lobsters to demonstrate that one had been to the beach” (107). Although it was the first time the young Lemebel went on this outing, the description seems to participate in a temporality that is cyclical: that of the neighborhood, that of

poverty, that of an eager and dispossessed imagination of the world and its marvels, from the point of view of a periphery of a big city in the South of the Americas. Alongside its undeniable poetic quality, the actual description of the sea as an event appearing before the eyes of those children has a distinctive political quality. Looking at the sea is “like seeing the sky upside down, a living sky, desiring, howling echoes of submarine beasts. It is a liquid sky that extends like a foamy sheet a bit further, infinitely far, until my eyes of poor child could not arrive” (107).⁶

The sea is here much less a vision than a political image whose poetic quality stems from, but is also inevitably entangled with, the material, historical and social experience that surrounds it: that of a group of children furiously enjoying the beach in the bit of leisure that the day trip offered them, not as a privilege but as a right. What the description makes appear, to put it simply, is the children’s sheer right to the sea, it is every human’s very right to the sea. The right to the sea appears as a glimpse of imagination, as an aesthetic glimpse reclaimed from the infinite prose of those who have always had a privileged access to the sea, from the many pages of those who did not ever consider, in fact, their possibility to encounter the sea as a right.

I hesitated for a moment whether to write that those images chosen by Lemebel to conjure the sea for the eyes of a Bolivian child, in this text, pertain to history, or to memory. Yet, all Lemebel’s work makes the distinction between these two hardly ever relevant. Or to say it otherwise: it is through an embodied memory that a specific account of history always emerges. It is through the speaker’s individual body and experience that collective experience can be not only recognised, but actively constituted, that it can be named according to a language exceeding the code that is seemingly given to it for articulating itself. In Lemebel’s work, that is, what becomes very apparent is that such distinction—which, as Elizabeth Freeman has suggested, is furthermore traditionally gendered (Freeman, 2005, 62–63)—pertains to a very specific conception of history and memory, and their relation with power, one that the polymorphous universe and flamboyant militancy of Lemebel’s work are overall at pains to queer. In a sense, as Carlos Monsiváis suggested, all Lemebel’s chronicles, letters, radio interventions, performances were the “opportunity to elevate his own everyday life to the status of a landscape for a battlefield” (Monsiváis 2007, 5).

Even in the space of imagination, this battlefield is always common: Lemebel speaks to

his girlfriends⁷ (in various senses of the term), to his neighbours, to those alike him and to the absent ones, of whatever sort (at the beginning I suppose that Lemebel does not imagine but absent readers, who are going to arrive), to all those who help him maintain his adequate tone, his crafty and innocent delivery of the tragic and the comic. (6, my translation)

Lemebel always “speaks,” even as he writes, and this is not because he does not master literary language exquisitely, exploring at large the rich possibilities of variation that his particular form of written Spanish allows. It is because his writing-as-speaking functions essentially very much like what Saussure called *parole*, hence it is “fundamentally outside of the field of knowledge because inside of it there is something like a subjectivity, a speaking subject one cannot account for, or who cannot undergo a general rule” (Revel 2003, 55, my translation). His writing is a form of speaking

also because it always addresses someone, it is always “for” someone, it invites others to join in. Or else, he speaks to and for “the absent readers” (Monsiváis 2007, 6), those who appear as characters in his stories, but who are never “extras” (Didi-Huberman 2009) in the scene of history that he evokes. This is the case for all the queer subjects that appear in the short and intense sketches of his texts (Lemebel 1995 and 1996), for the political opponents to Pinochet’s regime or the young girls abused in the school or the neighborhood, the disenfranchised students whose stories are touched upon in the radio chronicles Lemebel transmitted in his program *Cancionero* on Radio Tierra between 1994 and 2002 (Lemebel 1996 and 1998), or in his only novel *Tengo Miedo Torero* (2001), the fabulous bodies who died in the criminal fire which destroyed the legendary gay disco La Divine in Valparaíso on September 4th, 1993, described in another of his memorable chronicles (Lemebel 1995, 61–62).

This is the case, as well, for the child to whom *Canción para un niño boliviano que nunca vio la mar* is addressed. He speaks to this child, evoking their absence, waiting for their arrival. And it is indeed ‘they’ who are the addressees. Although the text is titled *Song for a Bolivian child who never saw the sea*, the child whom Lemebel speaks to is already multiple. He starts naming the child with affectionate epithets: “chiquito llocalla, pelusita paceño” (little indigenous boy, little one from La Paz) (Lemebel 2004, 105), then the child is a “niñita imilla” (little indigenous girl) (105),⁸ then again a “niño boliviano” (a Bolivian boy) (107), whose face is also described as a “little aymara face” (105). The child addressed is the same one, and yet multiple: it is a child named with a handful of different linguistic possibilities that are not variations on a main identity, but actual singularities encompassed by a language that strives for a plural deployment. This multiple naming recognises the many different possibilities written Spanish must be able to open up to in order to let all these children have enough oxygen to speak through it, to make these children appear within it in their likeness and their difference, as equivalent and not as identical. At the same time, those epithets already resonate, as well, with the derogatory uses that hegemonic Spanish has made of words derived from indigenous languages, marked by the derogatory attitude towards indigenous people that the language of the coloniser has forever imprinted upon Latin American societies, the language and the attitude that so actively shapes the class divide in which those children are already inscribed.

This child, then, is imagined as being already overwritten in multiple languages, multiple ways to be a citizen of the state of Bolivia: none of which is neutral, objective, natural, as it were. All these children exist already as “citizen,” and they are marked, here and there throughout the letter, in this text and in history, with features of specific forms of citizenship they find themselves inhabiting at birth, because of living in the periphery of a metropolis, because of descending from indigenous people of a particular land, because of being born into a family who could not afford the leisure to go to the sea. There is nothing natural, so to say, about this child, as much as there is nothing natural about the sea that emerges from Lemebel’s childhood story. They are both a child and a sea that are historically and politically connoted, and the intention to make them appear as such is interwoven within the language chosen, respectively, to hail the child and to describe the sea.

Lemebel could have easily titled the letter *Song for Bolivian Children who never saw the sea*; but somehow the act of imagination upon which this communication is predicated is intimate, and reclaims a confidence that only a one-to-one conversation allows. It is a conversation with a child who is not indistinct, but very situated in each and all of those bodies briefly convoked in the text: a little child living in the big city of La Paz, a little aymara girl, a young indigenous girl, perhaps already working at the domestic service of someone, in a household, language leaves one to imagine. They too are not extras in Lemebel's childhood story, they are not negligible *figurantes* for a lyrical trip on memory lane. The intimate conversation with the child that the speaker entices is intrinsically public: it is a letter of solidarity to all the disenfranchised children the child stands for, it is for all the children who, like Lemebel, saw the sea for the first time on a day trip, for just a few hours, chewing sand and chicken rushing back to the minibus that would drive them back to some sort of periphery, for all children who cannot even dream of a minibus driving them to the sea once a year. But first and foremost, this letter is a conversation left as a message in a bottle for the absent ones, the ones "who are going to arrive" (Monsiváis 2007, 6).

This solidarity with the child is grounded in a common citizenship: being, or having been, inhabitants of a shared territory of dispossession. Interestingly, it is only when this solidarity and this specific citizenship have been established (through the description of his first outing to the beach) that Lemebel also acknowledges, in the letter, the incidental margin of privilege that his own national citizenship—the one appearing on his passport, the one according him citizen's right—grants him, as opposed to this particular child: the fact that he, as a Chilean citizen, grew up in a country with access to the sea, while any Bolivian child grows up in a landlocked country.

The dispute over the sea between Chile and Bolivia has been a heated conflict between the two states since the War of the Pacific (1879–1884). As a consequence of the war and the following treaties, Bolivia lost 120,000 sq. km of land and its sovereign access to the Pacific Ocean, and it has tried to regain access to the ocean ever since (Cohen and Klein 2017, 106–118).⁹ The reason why this dispute is of such significance (so much so that every year Bolivia still celebrates the Day of the Sea, *el Día del Mar*, observing the loss of the Litoral Department with nationalistic parades in maritime costumes) goes much beyond symbolic value, as it is related to the plenty of natural and mineral resources—such as nitrate, silver and copper—present in the geographical area of the Atacama desert (the area Chile expropriated from Peru and Bolivia as a result of the war at the beginning of 20th century), resources that have historically been objects of exploitation not only on the part of Latin American states, but also of foreign powers (from British merchants, in the 19th century, to contemporary global mining corporations) and that are especially relevant to contemporary neoextractivist politics in Latin America (Monteón 1975; Clarke and Foster 2005). As in many other parts of the country, the indigenous populations have been particularly affected by the capitalist expropriation and exploitation of natural resources in the Atacama desert, as well as from the resolutions that states' sovereign powers have predicated upon the land and the sea, and their economic and social consequences: I am referring here not only to the populations living in rural areas, but also to the majority of the lowest social strata in cities and urban centers, where the class divide—in Latin America, as in the rest of the world, for that matter—is inextricably interlocked with race.

The long duration of the dispute over the sea between Chile and Bolivia is the historical background, but certainly not the core of Lemebel's letter—and for that matter, not my focus in this text. It is so because, as Lemebel makes clear in the conclusion of his text, states are after all nothing but historical concretions of economic and social logics that exceed any reason of State, as well as the contingent temporality of territorial disputes over borders. The core of the letter is obviously the encounter between two inhabitants of a landscape of poverty and dispossession, in which the historical framework of sovereign power has already shaped the expectations and the rights, and therefore the margins of imagination of the possible, for any citizen. For that matter, although that memorable first outing to the beach was, Lemebel admits, more of a torture than a leisure experience, even if he is fully aware that in any stretch of imagination those very same conditions, if any, would probably also characterise any other poor child's first encounter with the sea, Lemebel concludes by saying that he "would give anything so that this experience would not be alien" to this imaginary Bolivian child:

I would do anything, included gifting you with that meter of this long oceanic serpent that perhaps belongs to me. So much coastline to allow a few and lazy rich to fan themselves with the property of waters. This is why, when I hear the neo-patriotic speech of some Chilean I feel ashamed, especially when they talk about having won the sea with arms. Especially when I hear the presidential pride disqualifying a child's beach dream. But the presidents pass like the waves, and the god of the waters will keep waiting in their eternity your gaze of a sad indigenous child to lighten it up one day with your blue flash of lightning.¹⁰ (Lemebel 2004, 107)

The gift, if this is how we choose to understand this letter, is obviously not in the promise of that meter of Chilean coast that, ironically, Lemebel imagines being accorded to him by the state as property qua Chilean citizen. It is rather to be found in the way this text articulates the question of the right to the sea, for this child and for any other reader; it is in the attempt to make this right emerge as image, an historically, socially and politically connoted image. The desire to make this image appear, in a sense, can only be spoken, not written about, as the language available to describe the sea is, in a way, already polluted by endless images of privileged access to the sea, as well as to its poetic rendering in discourse. Hence, the language chosen for addressing all the absent children who have been and will be cast away from "the property of waters" (107) should necessarily exceed that order of discourse. While acknowledging the damage, the pain and the inequality that characterise the very historical conditions of enunciation for this text, Lemebel's language, however, does not give up to a logic of scarcity the abundance of imagination.

To my Black and Global Majority colleagues

I realise that when writing "language," in the last paragraph of the previous section, I actually meant to say "linguaggio," that is the word that occurs to me in Italian as I am composing this text, and that would be "lenguaje" in Spanish, the language Lemebel used in speaking and writing. In the absence of an English word (other than "speech," or "idiolect," neither of which really persuades me, as they strike me, respectively, as too imprecise and too individual a term for what I mean to

say) allowing me to capture what I have thought in my mother tongue, and then having bounced back in resonance in the mother tongue of the (supposed) subject of my essay, I take a moment to temporise before moving further in my prose.

Giving up the particular breath of a word is an operation that I usually make mechanically, inscribed as my writing already is in the cogs of the global English academia: it is an operation that runs smoothly through the page, my capacity or willingness to take quick decisions in translation already fine tuned to the particular social productivity that my job as an academic requires of my labour power, in the international professional world in which I operate. It happens less smoothly, I think, in the space of teaching: perhaps because the presence of other bodies in space, of other others, as it were, always obliges me to struggle (or equally, to indulge) to fill the gap between languages, to arrest discourse at least for a moment, and rest for an instant on language itself.

This happens, I realize, whenever I stumble upon a word, or when a student or a colleague stumbles upon my funny pronunciation of a term, or else when they catch me misusing an expression, or rejoicing at the discovery of yet another meaning of some very common English words. It is perhaps this intermittent temporising on language itself, that is so domestically inscribed in my teaching and academic life, that makes it less awkward for myself when someone compliments me for my English (after I have worked and lived in English for more than ten years), or else jokingly imitates my Italian accent or pronunciation, or remarks with a smile that the word I have just used is cute, but “it is actually not an existing word in English.” I have the privilege—of class, whiteness, nationality, professional status—to navigate smoothly those borders that visibly marks, at times, my linguistic difference in the UK, that remind me of my constitutive differing from the “proper” use of the language “we” standardly work in within globalised academia: although I am excluded from the “property of language,” expressed in the use of what is proper, I have made my homework to learn its tools and structures, not as efficiently as to pass as an English-speaker, but well enough to function in the code employed as currency in the economical system of knowledge in which I write and teach. I have thereby acquired a temporary linguistic citizenship in the landscape of globalised academia.

As an open letter to UK Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies white scholars, recently written by a group of UK-based Black and Global Majority academics and students, members of the “Revolution or Nothing Network,” extensively articulates, the making visible of differences, and their supposed markers upon the language, upon the body and upon the very epistemology in which we all work, is much more pressing and violent for all those who cannot afford the same privileges I have, those who cannot “pass” even if they did all the homework, and who still have to navigate daily the “foundational racist values for our fields” (Revolution or Nothing, 2020), manifesting themselves in the particular UK corner of globalised academia both in everyday interactions and as a broader and more profound institutional problem:

racism in our disciplines manifests as both epistemic erasures and appropriations as well as microaggressions and overt racist behaviours.

Our fields are underpinned by and built on values that have historically privileged colonial knowledge systems. These knowledge-systems have in themselves been, and continue to be, produced through processes of extractions from and appropriations of the labour and intellect of Black and Global Majority thinking and making. (ibid.)

As the letter goes on to argue, such underpinning nourishes the systemic racism that endures in contemporary academia not only by enabling everyday interactions that continuously produce and make those markers of difference appear, but profoundly characterises the very notion of “difference” produced, taught and circulated in the academic context. Not only systemic racism shapes systems of validation, recruitment, funding, and governance of UK universities and research projects, hence directly influences the professional lives of those who undergo its consequences, but also imposes notions of what is “proper” to research and teach, and how. It is so because the epistemological framework that is assumed as the standard has been produced in and has produced, on its part, Western, white academia. In this context, the word “diversity,” so much championed in the benevolent efforts of neoliberal academia to open up its gates to non-Western, non-white artists, scholars, histories, functions as a volatile fig leaf:

Colleagues’ conflation of diversity and decolonisation manifests as a cosmetic window-dressing solution by merely adding a few more Black and Global Majority authors to their reading lists, without any acknowledgement, understanding or interrogation of discourses and practices of power that their curricula choices continue to uphold. (ibid.)

Alongside the solid critique to the substantial Eurocentrism and imperialist attitude characterizing the field of theatre and performance studies, the letter also includes a list of personal episodes of everyday racism, a list of undesirable, unwanted moments in which markers of difference were first produced and then made visible to one of the letter’s signatories, who speak, however, in a collective voice throughout. These episodes are, in a sense, little chronicles, told as in a one-to-one conversation with a “white colleague,” who features in the title as the letter’s addressee. Inscribed within the necessary acidity that the letter expresses and requires, not least because the collective voice conveys a long accumulated historical frustration and inequality, those episodes seem to convoke an intimate tone of conversation: the reader is addressed as a singularity, as one among many, equivalent but not identical. A bit like in Lemebel’s letter to the Bolivian child, who is already multiple, also here the addressee could have been the larger group of “white colleagues,” but the choice of speaking to a singularity (which explicitly resonates, here, with Hazel V Carby’s 1982 article *White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood*) performs an invitation to consider one’s own place in relation to this text and to UK academia, to take on personally and politically the invitation made by these singularities coming together in a “political, collective and positive identification” striving to exceed any categorization in relation to whiteness (ibid.).

This performative move, this intimate choice, seems to welcome me into this text as a receiver, it invites me to be part of this conversation. Or else, this move constructs a possibility of imagination in which I am, in fact, that “white colleague” addressed in this letter in her singularity and her

difference, as equivalent and not as identical to all the other white colleagues working in the field of theatre and performance in the UK. I receive this letter as someone historically situated, in her white body and her European citizenship, in her Marxist politics and her education that was shaped in Western academia, in her permanent (as permanent as anything can be these days in the UK) position as lecturer in a UK university, in her familiarity and estrangement with respect to the Global North, in her substantial unease to think of places where she has worked, loved, taught and learned in, like Latin America, as a compact and indistinct “Global South,” as someone caught precisely in the predicament that Gayatri Spivak has persuasively described as the “double bind” (Spivak 2012), and on which I shall return later on in this text.

The stakes of the invitation, in this conversation, are high: or at least so this particular reader understands them. This is an invitation to both engage in a political struggle on an institutional level (to be actively antiracist, and influence with praxis the structures that enable racism as economic, political and epistemological oppression) and to contribute to dismantle the very *episteme* that across four centuries, at the very least, has sustained the particular structures of our knowledge production and education. This episteme is the very same matrix out of which the idea of “cultural difference” was articulated, alongside a plateau of kindred, slippery concepts, such as, “diversity,” “marginality,” “interculturalism,” “inclusion,” as well as categories that, periodically, are put forward to connote “other” individual subjects, and reduce the need of a structural political and institutional change to a benevolent tokenization. The stakes that this letter raises, then, in its invitation to the white colleague as “an ally and an accomplice” (ibid.) is in my view no less than that of vigorously questioning the system of epistemological thinking that makes possible the identification of any marker of difference.

My reply starts, in a sense, with this essay, and of course it does not and cannot terminate here, as it is a reply to the call launched by these colleagues, in the present, but more importantly, in fact, it is a conversation *with them* directed *to those who are going to arrive*: to the students we are all educating in the system of globalised academia, that extends much beyond national boundaries, to those absent colleagues whose access to white, Western academia is already predicated, institutionally, on the translation of the materiality of their practices, and on the bowing to the artificial altar of diversity. It is therefore a reply that resolutely leaves white guilt outside, and strives to think together what political capacity we can build to operate within this system in solidarity, to question its canons and to possibly curb its development.

To force language open: on translation, and epistemological care

I have “received” this letter as I was writing this text and therefore in dialogue with Pedro Lemebel. In doing so, I was also imagining how exciting, generative, necessary it would be to bring Lemebel’s work into the space of my undergraduate teaching in London. As soon as I started imagining how it would be—what my students would make of Lemebel’s chronicles, how the documentation of Lemebel’s performance and activist work with the collective La Yeguas del Apocalipsis (the performance art duo he co-founded with Francisco Casas, active between 1987 and 1997), now largely available online, could make an excellent resource for collective learning—my desire started

shrinking a bit. First, I started listing in my mind the descriptors that, surely, would have to sustain my choice in my syllabus: a “queer performance artist,” a “queer activist,” a “Latin American performer and writer,” “a counter-cultural artist of indigenous descent”—while having very clear in my mind that the entirety of Lemebel’s life trajectory has been a struggle to complicate any narrow identification in any such category, not only because, as he persistently repeated, as a “maricón, pobre, indio y viejo” (a poor, old, indigenous fag, quoted in Banaji, 2019), he exceeded in multiple ways the identity considered proper for a Chilean citizen, but also because he categorically rejected the prison that each and all of these categories constituted as a site of solitude and identity. As in the letter to the imaginary Bolivian child, Lemebel constantly strived to enlarge the territory of common citizenship for those who were constituted historically by dispossession and reduced to marginality because of a centre established by means of violence, while he rejected all together the system of power that invented and affirmed marginalisation, and then attempted to recuperate it *as difference* in discourse. I could immediately translate, in my mind, the disguise of different forms of diversity converted into metrics that would sustain my pedagogical choice. And yet, none of those categories, in and of themselves, would be possibly big enough to contain the materiality of Pedro Lemebel, in fact none of these markers of diversity would enable to emerge what I see as Lemebel’s fundamental epistemological force.

Beyond categories crafted to name the things we do in the classroom, there is of course the materiality of teaching: the moment in which I, for example, would find myself discussing Lemebel with my students. There, the questions arising confront directly how to clog the very system given to us to negotiate knowledge in academia, the very patterns given to us both—teachers and students—to inhabit the space of education. I would need, in other words, to ethically think an act of translation, without letting go of the necessary historicity and locality, that is also the political stake, of a language, of a body and of a speech (un linguaggio) that my students are very likely to be unfamiliar with.

How to perform this act of translation?

How to translate Lemebel’s radical indiscipline into the customs of a discipline, namely that of theatre and performance studies in global academia?

How to clean up language of all the benevolent categories of diversity that suffocate the encounter with the material itself and the potential difference it could open up for my students? And the word “difference,” as I hope to explain, interests me here as a possibility of radical alterity in itself: a difference emancipated from any parameter of identity, from any stable reference to “sameness.”

How not to neutralize in advance the epistemological force that a work like Lemebel’s has marvelously released not only outside, but also despite of the field of knowledge and power that marked both his marginalization for most of his life, and his reduction to icon in his afterlife?

How not to lose the context and the politics that made this work possible, not as a “work of art,” but as a social, political and aesthetic praxis, historically situated and itself producing history?

How to resist this reduction, while recognising, however, that it is the same reduction that globalised Western epistemology, that global capitalism has long operated on all subjects not immediately translatable into figures of capital?

Translating the short quotes from Lemebel's text into English, in this essay, has been a difficult task, and I have come to the conclusion that it is ultimately an impossible task. This, of course, does not mean that this work has not, or it should not, be translated, taught, written about in languages other than Spanish. This neither comes down to my unlikely position as a translator of a language, Spanish, that I myself do not master perfectly, or to my position as an outsider of the national, geographical and cultural context in which Lemebel's life and work took place, in the long duration of the postcolonial reason ingrained in and prefiguring Chile's dictatorship, and then in the neoliberal democracy that followed it.

This has to do with what I recognise as an intrinsic, generative impossibility. I am interested to think of this impossibility and interrogate through it the conditions on which language moves across orders of discourse, including the one in which this very essay, this very special issue, this very journal participate, including the one in which the scene of my classroom previously evoked is already inscribed, including the one in which the letter written by my Black and Global Majority colleagues was produced. In fact, I wish to explore this sense of impossibility not primarily regarding Lemebel's work as an object, but as a trigger to thinking *with Lemebel* what is at stake in a radical shift in epistemological frameworks, what is at stake in translation, and in the particular form of writing-as-speaking that he consistently experimented with during his life. Ultimately, I wish to invite Lemebel's voice into a conversation that is long due in the arts and humanities in global academia. This conversation concerns the impelling necessity to not only enable the circulation of texts, performance works, and critical theory elaborated outside of the English-speaking world, but also to question how such texts and performance work can exceed their own reification in terms of "cultural difference," a notion that while striving to construct the "global" constantly operates dynamics of erasure of multiple ways in which one is inscribed into a social fabric, such as class, gender, and the yet to be named further specifications that actively organise political and aesthetic representation (for a discussion of the ambiguity of the idea of cultural difference see Sharpe and Spivak, 2003, 617-618).

I invite Lemebel's voice into this conversation because he seems to me an exemplary teacher in what Gayatri Spivak has called, reclaiming and making her own an expression originally put forward by Schiller, an "aesthetic education," which in Spivak's formula corresponds to the "training of the imagination for epistemological performance" (Caruth and Spivak 2010, 1023). What the concept and the practice of "aesthetic education" responds to, in Spivak's thinking, is a commitment to undo the premises of the hegemonic epistemology that Enlightenment has long established in Western societies. This very epistemology, Spivak argues, continues informing, regulating and programming "our access to the global in its specificity" (Butt 2014, 4). Sabotaging the logic of the Enlightenment, in which Schiller's hope in the creative faculty of imagination is profoundly inscribed, means for Spivak to think the double bind between the political and the ethical, to address the possibility of exceeding the point of differentiation, to practice translation as an

impossibility and a necessity, as an ethical instantiation of our being-human, and our participating in history.

Adopting the idea of “double bind” from Gregory Bateson’s *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*—where the expression describes “unresolvable sequences of experience” (Bateson 1972, 206), characterized by the simultaneous communication of contradictory instructions, leading to “a situation in which no matter what a person does, he [sic] ‘can’t win’” (205), and that is often associated with the subsequent emergence of schizophrenia—Spivak extends the concept to “a generalisable description of the type of tension between the vital and the institutional (or body and mind) that Kant tries to make sense of” (Butt 2014, 3). She holds the double bind up as the epistemological premise of any form of access to the “global” today. The double bind is the aporetic condition in which we navigate the impossibility and the necessity of translation in globalized knowledge production and its systems of power, and it is also the key for reading a crisis in that logic inaugurated by Kant’s “architectonic of faculties” (Spivak 2012, 26), in which Schiller’s idea of “aesthetic education” was inextricably grounded. Sabotaging Schiller’s own structural faith in imagination, and in the principle of reason that he borrowed from Kant, Spivak reclaims “aesthetic education” as an approach to the imagination mobilizing the latter as an instrument for a chosen, situated epistemological othering of oneself, involving both “the figuration of the ethical as the impossible” (104) and the persistent attempt to supplement an inevitable and “founding gap between the historical and the political” (98). In other words, “the image of the other as self produced by imagination supplementing knowledge or its absence is a figure that marks the impossibility of fully realizing the ethical” (104).

Working on the very cusp of the double-bind, then, Spivak welcomes the figure of schizophrenia as a possible collective, shifting position, sustaining the plumbing of the “intrinsic forgotten and mandatorily ignored bi-polarity of the social productivity and the social destructiveness of capital and capitalism” (27) on which contemporary globalised academia is predicated. She addresses the practice of teaching and learning as the inevitable site where the double bind is not safely found and played with, but, rather, experienced as a continuous confronting of contradictory instructions without possibility of benevolent solution:

In the ferocious thrust to be “global”, the humanities and the qualitative social sciences, “comparative” at their best, are no longer a moving epistemological force. They will increasingly be like the opera, serving a peripheral function in society. As to whether they will draw as much corporate funding as opera – whose glamour the curricular humanities and social sciences cannot hope to match – remains to be seen. Already it is the relatively glamorous think tanks and monolingual “interdisciplinarity” (read shrinking diversity and Americanized monoculture) that are gaining funding. US “core curricula”—minimally “politically correct” by including “multicultural” classics—again in English translation—are travelling internationally. (26)

Against the grain of this scenario, Spivak demands that translation happens as gesturing toward the experience of “ethics as the impossible figure of a founding gap” (117): the gap at the core of

any construction of “another” that is not oneself. The act of translation, in this context, is the consistent recognition of an aporia, the patient attending to the materiality of what a “deep language learning” (26) could be, it is the “grabbing of an outside indistinguishable from an inside” that constitutes “an inside, fit to negotiate with an outside, going back and forth and coding everything into a sign-systems by the things grasped” (241).

The idea of translation as a form of shuttle, as what happens in the gestures that the “human infant” does in learning to grab, in so doing constituting a “crude coding” (241) between herself and the rest of the world, is borrowed by psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, but in Spivak’s terms this grabbing (during which “violence translates into conscience and viceversa”) is the movement of “violent production of the precarious subject of reparation and responsibility” (242). It is this subject, constantly in becoming, that the experience of teaching should always strive to bring about. And this, of course, is not just a matter of language: “the concept-metaphor ‘language’ is here standing in for that word which names the main instrument for the performance of temporizing, of the shuttling outside-inside translation that is called life” (241). If the humanities and qualitative social sciences may salvage any form of epistemological force today, a vital step is to turn the classroom into a space where the mind cultivates a different habit to think one’s own space of repair and responsibility, which may well be the safe terrain of English as a mother tongue, as a start, but only insofar as this allows an impossible mending of the materiality of translated language and experience. While necessarily insufficient, this is a gesturing toward revising “the philosophical error of confidence in accessing the ethical reflex directly, rather than insist on an epistemological preparation into the possibility of a relationship without relation: the reflexive re-arrangement of desires” (11).

As I consider the stakes of teaching as “uncoercive rearrangement of desires” (108), I return to think of Lemebel’s letter to the Bolivian child, and to Lemebel’s presence in my classroom, and in these pages, as a speaking voice, not as an object of study. I am regarding his multifaceted writing, his speaking on the feminist community radio Radio Tierra, his performing in the streets of Santiago, as a teaching in what it may mean, in practice, to radicalise otherness, to make it impossible to reduce difference to a logic of ipseity, a logic that operates not only between different languages but is in fact already inscribed in one’s own supposed mother tongue. While always speaking to and from what was perceived as “minority,” Lemebel always threw a shadow, as it were, on the immunised cells of difference that being recognised as a minority seemed to bring about:

To speak of minorities it is necessary to understand that one does not refer to a mathematic sum, but to a relation with the power. Therefore, women, homosexuals, lesbians, young people, old people or indigenous people are minorities. Although they are a multitude before a sole man with weapons. But I do not speak on their behalf. Minorities have to speak for themselves. I only perform in writing a sort of amorous ventriloquism, negating the ‘I’, producing a tongueless void of a thousand speeches (un vacío deslenguado de mil hablas). (Lemebel in Schaffer, 1988)

Again, I am forced to make an awkward decision in translating the marvelous term “deslenguado” into “tongueless,” keeping in mind that the carnality of Lemebel’s language would surely not appreciate having the “tongue” cast aside from the practice of language. The amorous ventriloquism described in this passage, however, could be another way to look at the double bind that Lemebel himself recognized as marking his own access to writing, his own shuttling within a language that, in a sense, was already very much affected by its thrust to be global.

As Gwendolyn Harper, who took on the unease and the responsibility to beautifully translate one of Lemebel’s chronicles, suggests:

For Lemebel, language is political and local. In the epilogue to *Zanjón de la Aguada*, he worries over the collapse of the terms *pueblo* (“the people,” in a political sense) and *gente* (“people”), a collapse likely brought about by the pervasiveness of English, which pins the strength of its democratic concept on a mere article. How can Lemebel’s local resistance to English, the now-global language of capitalism, possibly translate into English? (Harper 2017)

The answer to this question inevitably brings us back to the figure of a generative impossibility, and significantly Harper too proposes to look at Lemebel’s work itself as the disorderly site of such impossibility, staging the act of an incessant weaving of a social fabric into language, an act that by its own quality cannot but rip the language off and leave a certain work of mending to be done by the reader, the listener, the translator:

Lemebel’s own writing offers an approach that wedges openings amidst such collapse. Spanish, a language in which the entire world divides into female or male, cannot represent Lemebel’s transgenderism, or the lives led by the trans community in Santiago, a community which Lemebel came to represent, especially in the aftermath of the AIDS outbreak. Lemebel’s response is to force language open: with hyphens, with double entendres, with syntactic arabesques, with invented terms like *mariposear* (a verb form of *mariposa*, or butterfly, which sounds like *marica*, a derogatory term for a gay man). His dissatisfaction with language is coextensive with his love for it, as his capricious conjunctions of syllables and sly wordplay become the very nodes of his resistance. What most risks getting lost in translation is Lemebel’s simultaneous acidity and tenderness, a generosity towards language and the world even amidst steely resistance to its conditions. (Harper 2017)

I am wondering whether “to force language open,” to smuggle in the social and the historical into what is consistently given as ahistorical, and therefore unchangeable, is a pointer toward what Spivak, in an exhausting and dense footnote of her book, calls “a patient epistemological care” (Spivak 2012, 519 n.57), the one that we should perform with our students, sharing the burden of impossibility and reparation, sharing the task of responsibility for those who are going to arrive. Such epistemological care, itself produced by the condition of violence, has nothing benevolent to it: it is a declaration of unrest, at the very least, a conscious decision to bring translation outside of

the territory of individual craft, and make it a shared, collective task, as the one that decolonisation, at its core, should constantly strive to be.

The generative nature of such impossibility, the declaration of unrest within the smooth mechanics of global academia, the relation with the materiality of the language that is given to function within it, and that is itself already stained in blood, is at the heart of the practice Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui has articulated throughout her life, that she distinctly understands as an unfinished process of learning and teaching. Epistemic violence in Bolivia (the nation where Cusicanqui lives and works, but her thinking actually refers to the broader Latin American region) meant, in fact, not only the marginalisation of a multitude of indigenous idioms—languages like the Aymara and the Quechua that Cusicanqui has consistently brought into the texture of her own writing, inside and outside academia—but also the erasure of the intellectual genealogies that through those languages have produced concepts-metaphors that are now lost to theoretical and practical ways to think reality. “Behind the physical elimination of Aymara *amawt’as* (philosophers) and *yatiris* (healers) during the sixteenth-century Spanish conquest of the Americas, lies the ‘spiritual’ annihilation of the philosophical uses of the Aymara language” (Cusicanqui and Ilich Bacca, 2018). According to Cusicanqui, this process goes hand in hand with the progressive construction of ever new stereotypes of the indigenous that “combines the idea of a continuous territorial occupation, invariably rural, with a range of ethnic and cultural traits, and classifies indigenous behavior and constructs scenarios for an almost theatrical display of alterity” (Cusicanqui 2012, 99), clearly fine tuned with the project to keep at bay indigenous populations’ capacity to affect the state. Global academia is not immune to this mechanics, and on the contrary according to Cusicanqui, the recent establishment of a “discourse” on decolonization in North American universities has functioned according to very similar logics, that presuppose that the relations of force, within epistemology, are not altered, and “alterity” is at the same time reified as cultural difference, and erased in its materiality of history and politics (97–101), in what appears as a form of “epistemological extractivism” (Grosfoguel 2016). As Cusicanqui has famously synthesized, “the postcolonial is a desire, the anticolonial is a struggle, the decolonial is an obnoxious fashionable neologism” (quoted in Gago, 2016).

But regardless of labels, so often perfectly inscribed in and lubricating the gears of the very epistemology erasing or reifying “alterity,” Cusicanqui’s political and intellectual practice is itself gesturing toward what decolonising would mean, as a collective, nameless endeavour, rather than a concept already attached to systems of validation and institutional “cosmetic window-dressing solutions” (Revolution or Nothing 2020). After all, decolonization, she affirmed, is a group task: “You cannot decolonize on your own, because, as Jim Morrison and also Foucault said, we carry the lords inside of us because of cowardice and laziness” (Gago 2016). Interestingly, when Gayatri Spivak visited Bolivia, despite a proposed list of official translators, it was Silvia who decided to do the simultaneous translation, but, above all, who showcased the undiscipline of the text and of linear translation. “How to translate the term double bind belonging to the schizo that Spivak uses into Spanish? In Aymara there is an exact word for that, which doesn’t exist in Spanish: it is *pä chuyma*, which means having the soul divided by two mandates that are impossible to fulfill” (Gago 2016).

The space of temporizing on the impossibility and necessity of translation, in which the encounter between Spivak and Cusicanqui took place, resonates for me with the “generosity towards language and the world even amidst steely resistance to its conditions” that Harper (2017) suggested might be precisely what could get lost in the translation of Lemebel’s texts. On this generosity, on this impossibility, I wish to close this essay, again staging Lemebel in the uneasy place of a double-bind, again inscribed, as at the beginning of this text, in an unlikely scene of “aesthetic education,” again writing-as-speaking a shuttle of solidarity for those who are going to arrive.

Hablo por mi diferencia

In 1986 Lemebel walked in high heels, wearing make up depicting a hammer and sickle emerging from his mouth and extending to his left eyebrow, into a public leftist convention taking place in Santiago at the Estación Mapocho, and read the text that to this day is probably the most famous, most translated piece of his work: *Hablo por mi diferencia (I speak for my difference)* (Lemebel 1996, 2015). The intervention is a milestone in the denunciation of the long lasting culture of homophobia within the Left: happening at the dawn of Pinochet’s dictatorship and prefiguring the transition to democracy, Lemebel’s manifesto signals, politically and poetically, the multiple ways in which oppression was marked upon his body, making him not fit not only within the categories of identity imposed by fascist power, but also operating in epistemological frameworks like Marxism, and in political formations at pains to defeat fascist power. While standing as an ultimate reclaiming of the subversive potential of difference, the manifesto is, in my view, also a passionate call to complicate the notion of difference: to affirm, as it were, that difference only exists because is captured in discourse as such, in a somehow reassuring constant relation between ipseity and alterity. “I speak for my difference” says Lemebel “and I am not so strange” (Lemebel 2015): it is a difference that does not admit reduction. The multiple ways in which such difference was constituted, that is, cannot be reduced to Lemebel’s homosexuality, and so in the solidarity that any Marxist politics must build, oppression needs to be spoken in a language that is multiple: because it was not only the communist opponents to Pinochet’s regime that were persecuted during dictatorship, but also the queers, the indigenous, the indigent, the disenfranchised, according to a logic of sameness whose brutality, in a sense, only varies as a matter of frequency in democracy. The utopia of a communist horizon of equality, for which Lemebel continued to work throughout his life, although rejected time and again from both the party and the episteme of Marxism, needs to give up the reduction to categories of “difference,” or will not be. On the cusp of the future, in the double bind of his present, in the unlikely classroom of this Leftist convention, Lemebel spoke the words of an impossible letter, performing in high heels the epistemological care of both engendering and resisting the language of a difference through which, one day, we may learn to be done with the very idea of sameness.

Notes

¹ 'Song for a Bolivian child who never saw the sea' (my translation). To my knowledge, this text has not been translated into English, all quotes in this essay are translated by me. I am grateful to Xel-Ha López for mentioning this text to me, during a seminar on political imagination that I gave at the Centro de las Artes de Guanajuato (Mexico) in February 2020.

² In Bolivia, the Spanish word 'llocalla' means indigenous.

³ "Y cómo te lo digo y con qué humedad de letras te lo cuento, chiquito llocalla, pelusita paceño que nunca estuvo frente al estruendo salado de la planicie oceánica. Cómo hacertelo ver, niñita imilla, en estas letras, si nunca fuiste testigo de esa música y sus olas crespas chasconeando el concierto de la bella mar" (Lemebel 2004, 105).

⁴ "es una carta dirigida a tus ojitos oblicuos que de mil maneras intentan imaginar ese gran charco azul" (Lemebel 2004, 105).

⁵ "que no es como te lo cuenta la profesora en el colegio describiendo la parte más extensa del Titicaca, esa zona donde el cielo se recuesta sobre las aguas verde musgo, donde no hay cerros, y el horizonte desaparece en esa lama esmeralda que, de alguna manera, también semeja un ojo de mar. Tampoco es similar a esa caricatura Disney que te muestran en la escuela boliviana, con peces de colores saltando por todos lados, con bañistas y quitasoles eternamente en vacaciones de verano, con arenas doradas y olas turquesas en un exceso de pedagógica idealización" (Lemebel 2004, 105).

⁶ "Era como ver al cielo al revés, un cielo vivo, bramando, aullando ecos de bestias submarinas. Un cielo líquido que se extendía como una sábana espumosa más allá, infinitamente lejos, hasta donde mis ojillos de niño pobre no podían llegar" (Lemebel 2004, 107).

⁷ In the text: las amigas.

⁸ In the Aymara and Quechua languages, the term 'imilla' refers to a young girl, an adolescent, and it is often used in a derogatory way, and mostly associated to a young indigenous girl employed as domestic servant in a household. I am grateful to Paulina Oña who has helped me navigate the politics of use of all these terms in Bolivian Spanish.

⁹ In 2013 Evo Morales took the territorial dispute at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, that have recently deliberated that Chile has no obligation to renegotiate the terms of Bolivia's sovereign access to the Ocean.

¹⁰ "Incluso, te regalo el metro marino que quizá me pertenece de esta larga culebra oceánica. Tanta costa para que unos pocos y ociosos ricos se abaniquen con la propiedad de las aguas. Por eso, al escuchar el verso neopatriótico de algunos chilenos me da vergüenza, sobre todo cuando hablan del mar ganado por las armas. Sobre todo al oír la soberbia presidencial descalificando el sueño playero de un niño. Pero los presidentes pasan como las olas, y el dios de las aguas seguirá esperando en su eternidad tu mirada de llocalla triste para iluminarla un día con su relámpago azul" (Lemebel 2004, 107).

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Biography

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