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Another Kind of Relation: Translation, Creative-Critical Practice, and the Decolonization of Critique

Abstract – What kind of translation is an academic essay? This article explores creative-critical writing as a form of critical interrogation of academic writing, focusing on the processes of extraction, transformation and authority which are signified in its institutionalisation. Drawing on Chakrabarty's theory of translation and colonial power, as well as recent reconceptualization of language as a multimodal faculty, I argue that a too rigid translational direction of the essay in arts and cultural studies (from practice to writing) erases different cultural systems of symbolic representation by privileging anglo-European knowledge systems. Through detoured analysis of Matthew Arnold's writings on translation and critique, and M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* and "Discourse on the Logic of Language," I offer a decolonising reading of creative-critical practice which, by decentring European academic language, can offer more intentional translational models of critical engagement in the arts and humanities.

Keywords : translation, creative-critical practice, research creation, multimodality, decoloniality

Résumé – Quel genre de traduction est un article universitaire ? Cet article examine l'écriture créative-critique comme forme d'interrogation critique de l'écriture académique, en se concentrant sur les processus d'extraction, de transformation et d'autorité qui se trouvent signifiés dans son institutionnalisation. En m'appuyant sur la théorie de Chakrabarty sur la traduction et le pouvoir colonial, ainsi que sur la récente reconceptualisation du langage en tant que faculté multimodale, je soutiens qu'une orientation traductive trop rigide des essais dans les études artistiques et culturelles (de la pratique à l'écriture) efface différents systèmes culturels de représentation symbolique en privilégiant les systèmes de savoir anglo-européens. À travers une réinterprétation de l'analyse des écrits de Matthew Arnold sur la traduction et la critique, ainsi que de *Zong!* et « Discourse on the Logic of Language » de M. NourbeSe Philip, je propose une lecture décolonisatrice de la pratique de la création critique qui, en décentrant le langage académique européen, peut offrir des modèles de traduction plus opérants pour la pratique critique dans les arts et les sciences humaines.

Mots-clés : traduction, pratique créative-critique, recherche-création, multimodalité, décolonialité

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Another Kind of Relation: Translation, Creative-Critical Practice, and the Decolonization of Critique

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Creative-critical practice is a term used in the UK to describe forms of writing and art practices which challenge the division between practice and theory in literary and art criticism. Put in simple terms, creative-critical writing bends the rules of academic writing to make space for different forms of writing or making as modes of knowing. By challenging the separation between practice and theory, it asks important questions: what forms of knowledge and perspectives might be precluded from the conventions of academic writing? What can other forms of writing know or epistemically explore that academic writing cannot, and how might the incorporation of creative writing into literary criticism achieve what literary criticism alone cannot? To claim one birthplace or origin for creative-critical practice would be impossible. As a practice and research method in the humanities, it has many names with various degrees of nuances (postcritique, research creation…), and more than one institutional or historical reasons for existing. In Britain, what is by some called creative-criticism can be traced to when scholars of literary criticism and writers started to coexist after the creation of creative-writing department in the 1970s, in an institutional context where the REF, or research excellence framework, has traditionally prioritised academic writing over creative writing.[1] Creative-critical practice can be thought of as the creation of a different kind of relation between what is traditionally perceived as the subjects and objects of literary theory and criticism, cultural studies, and art criticism. One way to think about creative-critical practice, then, is as a dialogue between previously mutually exclusive domains of knowledge: a productive disturbance of boundaries between subject and object in the production and circulation of knowledge.

In this short essay I want to explore the challenges of creative-critical writing to forms of epistemic coloniality which privilege mind over body, separate thinking from feeling, thought from matter. These formal distinctions, translated into hierarchies of knowledge between writing and other modes of thinking, are justly interrogated by many practitioners of research creation and creative-critical practice.[2] Erin Maning and Brian Massumi, for example, assert: "every practice is a mode of thought, already in the act. To dance: a thinking in movement. To paint: a thinking through color. To perceive in the everyday: a thinking of the world's varied ways of affording itself".[3] Building on this statement and on the works of decolonial thinkers such as Quijano, Vazquez and Mignolo's analysis of epistemic colonialism as a formal imposition of monomodal, text-based systems of knowing over diverse epistemic practices, my contention is that creative-critical practices could be read as a particular form of academic address to power and hegemonies of knowledge which prioritise academic writing as the only epistemic language.[4]

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[1] Lise Jaillant, *Literary Rebels: A History of Creative Writers in Anglo-American Universities*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023.

[2] Stephen Benson and Clare Connors, *Creative Criticism: An Anthology and Guide, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press*, 2014; Katja Hilevaara and Emily Orley (eds.), *The Creative Critic: Writing as/about Practice*, London, Routledge, 2018; Florian Mussgnug, Mathelinda Nabugodi, Thea Petrou (eds), *Thinking Through Relation: Encounters in Creative Critical Writing*, Oxford, United Kingdom, Peter Lang Verlag, 2021.

[3] Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, p. 7.

[4] Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America", *Nepantla: Views from South 1/3* (2000), p. 533-580; Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality", *Cultural Studies* 21/2-3 (2007), p. 168-178; Walter D. Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality", *Cultural Studies* 21/2-3 (2007), p. 449-514; Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011. Rolando Vázquez,

Recently, many academic studies, including my own, have explored the role of interlingual and multimodal translation in research creation, situating translators as creative-critical practitioners in their own right.[5] In this essay, I would like to explore how creative practices instigate their own research into the forms of epistemic translation, or translation between different life-worlds and epistemic systems, at work in the traditional form of literary criticism and academic writing.[6] To do so, I will first engage with the politics of translation at work in the work of academic criticism since Matthew Arnold, and reflect on the poetics of form in Western economies of knowledge production. What role does multimodality, understood here as the capacity to represent the world in more-than-one mode, play in creative-critical practice as research? What do we gain by engaging our critical faculties beyond language? To explore how engaging our critical faculties across more than one language and more than one modality can challenge the structural coloniality of academic knowledge production, I will lean on M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* and "Discourse on the Logic of Language" as exemplary works of multimodal and multilingual poetic practice. I will argue that Philip's fragmenting of legal English, her gestural traces toward suppressed African languages, and her typographical experimentation offer a powerful interrogation of writing's complicity in epistemic coloniality, demonstrating how creative-critical practice can expose and resist the violence embedded in seemingly neutral acts of academic translation.

Criticism and/as Translation: The Case of Mathew Arnold

Translation studies as a discipline is not limited to interlinguistic translation, but to the study of translation between different media and modalities of expression. As early as 1959, Roman Jackobson in "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation" famously devised a classification model of translation which expanded what was perceived as "translation proper" to other forms of semiotic communication.[7] The extension of the framework of translation studies to other forms of semiotic communication underscored translation as happening across semiotic systems as well as word-based linguistic boundaries. Recently, the study of epistemic translation practices has further illuminated the role of translation in the study of knowledge transfer, and the role of modality in that context. In concluding his 2017 book *Translationality*, Douglas Robinson suggested expanding Roman Jakobson's well-known three-part classification of translation by adding a fourth category: inter-epistemic translation.[8] This new category concerns translation across distinct knowledge systems and emphasizes how knowledge moves between various "written genres (or semiotic worlds)" in a process of narrative reframing "which is never a 'cloning' of knowledge, of course, but always involves … 'translationality': adaptation, transformation".[9] Such studies, as articulated in Bennett's work on "epistemic translation", have illuminated how meaning is embedded in particular knowledge systems, including, as she states, the "complex multimodal operations taking place between the dominant epistemologies of the global North (or West) and the informal knowledges of the global South (including East)".[10] As shown by Bennett and Robinson, knowledge transfers taking place between distinct cultures can involve different modalities of expression as well as different word-based linguistic systems. When the original mode through which knowledge is conveyed gets lost during translation (particularly when translators apply Western epistemological norms and thought patterns) the process can become extractive and distortive,

"Translation as Erasure: Thoughts on Modernity's Epistemic Violence", *Journal of Historical Sociology* 24/1 (2011), p. 27-44.

[5] María Carmen África Vidal Claramonte, *Translation and Contemporary Art: Transdisciplinary Encounters*, London, Routledge, 2022; Delphine Grass, *Translation as Creative-Critical Practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023; Lily Robert-Foley, *Experimental Translation: The Work of Translation in the Age of Algorithmic Production*, London, Goldsmiths Press, 2024; Kasia Szymanska, *Translation Multiples: From Global Culture to Postcommunist Democracy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2025.

[6] Karen Bennett, "Epistemic translation: towards an ecology of knowledges", *Perspectives*, 34(1), 2024.

[7] Roman Jakobson, "On Linguistic Aspects of Translation." In *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti, London and New York, Routledge, 1959/2000, p. 113-118.

[8] Douglas Robinson, *Translationality: Essays in the Translational-Medical Humanities*, New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 200-203; Roman Jakobson, *op. cit.*, p. 113-118.

[9] Douglas Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 200.

[10] Karen Bennett, *art. cit.*, p. 1-16.

imposing a single, universal framework of understanding onto what are actually diverse epistemic practices. Bearing this in mind, we can extend this critique to the realm of academic practice of criticism and the relation between creativity and criticism in academe more generally.

Looked at from the perspective of modality, traditional academic writing in the arts operates a very specific direction of travel: from multimodal practice to writing. The "directionality" or "translationality" of criticism establishes the dominance of European writing systems, and more specifically English, as enlightened models and modes of thinking, as forms of writing through which we might sense and make sense of the world around us. When I analyse a visual artwork in an essay or text, I also represent this artwork in writing either through description and analysis, whereby a certain form of abstraction and translation into language is operated. The operation of languaging critique in academic prose, as crucial to reflection as it is, particularly when it happens between the cultural contexts of the Global South and Global North, a cultural translation in its own right, translating other ways of codifying and thinking in more than-one-mode into academic prose. In *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Dipesh Chakrabarty showed such epistemic transposition of what he calls "life-worlds" into universal categories precisely hinged on specific translational operations from the particular to a form of universality which, in fact, bore the traces and reproduced European cultures. In that sense, Chakrabarty explains, "the problem of capitalist modernity cannot any longer be seen simply as a sociological problem of historical transition (as in the famous "transition debates" in European history) but as a problem of translation".[11] In this context, Chakrabarty calls for us "to pay critical and unrelenting attention to the very process of translation" at the heart of knowledge production.[12]

One way to approach the question of the relationship between creativity and criticism in academic settings is therefore to analyse the relationship between the creative and the critical *as* a translation: a translation between multimodal forms of thinking and writing which bears ethical significance when it comes to representation. This translation, to adapt Rancière's words, not only determines what is knowledge and what is not, it also determines, socially, what Rancière calls "the distribution of the sensible", in that it: "simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it."[13] The rules around the "distribution of sensorial domains", according to Rancière, also dictates "in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution", and therefore who can or cannot claim knowledge as their own.[14] In other words, the norms shaping the language of critique structure who is deemed knowledgeable, and therefore what experiences, and whose voices, matter as objects and subjects of epistemic interest.

Interestingly, one of the earliest articulations of objectivity in criticism was formulated around questions of translation and fidelity. In "On Translating Homer", Matthew Arnold, considered in the UK one of the fathers of critique, admonishes the translation of Francis William Newman who, in the words of Lawrence Venuti: "developed a foreignizing translation practice and opposed the English regime of fluent domestication".[15] According to Venuti: "Compared to Schleiermacher, Newman enlisted translation in a more democratic cultural politics, assigned a pedagogical function but pitched deliberately against an academic elite".[16] That Newman transgressed the norms of translation to democratise knowledge is interesting in its own right: what in these specific norms of reproduction, excluded the majority of readers? But this was not a question with which Arnold, who produced his own version of Homer which he opposed to Newman's troubled himself with. Instead, Arnold's

[11] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 29.
[12] *Ibid.*, p. 17.
[13] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, London and New York, Continuum, 2004, p.12.
[14] *Ibid*.
[15] Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, 2nd ed., London and New York, Routledge, 2008, p. 141.
[16] Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time", Essays in Criticism, London, Macmillan, 1865, p. 1-41.

argument does not position itself as conservative or political, but as neutral: for him, the task of criticism is "to see the object as in itself it really is", thereby shifting the debate from questions of function to questions of truth.[17] While Newman's approach questioned the distribution of knowledge implicated in specific translation norms, Arnold's appeal to fidelity positions criticism beyond social politics. While Newman interrogated norms through practice, Arnold appealed to a neutrality of translation norms which have since been debunked by scholars' efforts to situate cognitive authority as "politically and socially mediated".[18]

If criticism, as the Newman versus Arnold discussion shows, is central to translation practice in the manner in which the translation of a specific text is consciously approached, translation also features as an important, if not often overlooked, element of critique. What kinds of transfers and extractive practices are nested in the translation and conversion of literature and the arts into academic criticism? Part of the answer is already present in Arnold's essays on criticism and translation, which see in the creativity of Newman's translation of Homer an attempt to disrupt symbolic capital, and therefore a challenge to a particular social and economic order. Criticism, in the eyes of Arnold, serves a specific social and bordering function, which is to stop the circulation and redistribution of idea across social classes. This conception of translation norms as forces that shape and regulate social imaginaries also operates in postcolonial contexts, as reflected in Haroldo and Augusto de Campos's view of translation as a form of creative and critical appropriation of original texts.[19]

To explore how creative-critical practice can resist these extractive translations, I turn to M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008), a work that exemplifies multimodal interrogation of writing's role in epistemic coloniality. Philip's engagement with legal language and the archive demonstrates how certain forms of writing actively participate in what Quijano identifies as the coloniality of knowledge. By questioning the role of legal language in the murder of the enslaved through poetic language, *Zong!* exposes the violence inherent in the very act of translating bodies, lives, and genocide into legal writing.

M. NourbeSe Philip's Multimodal Resistance to the Coloniality of Writing

In an interview published in *Violent Phenomena: 21 Essays on Translation*, NourbeSe Philip explores the form of domestication which her poem *Zong! As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng* was subjected to by Italian translators and publishers.[20] The poem, performed over sixty times to this date across the world, examines the murder by drowning, in 1871, of 130 African slaves thrown overboard by the shipmen of The Zong, in an attempt to profit from insurance money. *Zong!* is in itself an excavation of silence, since all that remains of the events are the remnants of the legal dispute which ensued in Gregson v. Gilbert, a text which Philip haunts and occupies from the perspective of the victims. *Zong!* is both a mourning and an embodied critical address to the mechanisms of historical forgetting couched in legal and scientific language. Philip explains how *Zong!* "became yet another site of colonial claiming" through the refusal of her Italian translator and editor to abide by her request that every single word must breathe in a way that "they are always in relationship to the words above and below".[21]

After stating that her translator "never acknowledged, let alone accept the validity of what I was saying regarding the formal properties of the work", Philip theorises this attempt to domesticate *Zong!* as "an example of the articulation and performance of whiteness – a certain Eurocentric whiteness that leads with a nurtured, carefully cultivated innocence about Italy's role in the machinations of

[17] Matthew Arnold, *On Translating Homer*, London, Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861. Project Gutenberg, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/65381/65381-h/65381-h.htm (accessed 15.12.2025)
[18] Lynn Hankinson Nelson, "The Very Idea of Feminist Epistemology", *Hypatia*, vol. 10, no. 3 (summer 1995), p. 32.
[19] Haroldo De Campos, *Novas: Selected Writings*, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 2007.
[20] M. Nourbese Philip, *Zong! As told to the Author by Setaey Adamu Boateng*, Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008.
[21] M. Nourbese Philip, "Dystranslation", in Kavita Bhanot and Jeremy Tiang (ed.), *Violent Phenomena: 21 Essays on Translation*, London, Tilted Axis Press, 2022, p. 293.

colonialism and racism".[22] Philip's first-hand testimony of the machinery of cultural appropriation is embedded in a view of language as "unimodal" and formless, a view of language which weighs heavily on the bodies of the enslaved in her poems, making them sink, breathless, under the weight of dehumanising legal paperwork. This sinking under the weight of legal writing is performed in one of Philip's recorded readings of *Zong!*, where Philip is seen carrying a book on top of her head while dancing in a way which resembles simultaneously the movements and sounds of a body breathing and sinking in the sea.[23]

Philip suggests that to write the experience of African slavery into English is to break the taboo of silence which permeates the language (English) in which this experience is translated into. But for this, "the Carribean demotic", a language Philip identifies as the language of the black diaspora, must be invented on the page and through performance: "to keep the deep structure, the movement, the kinetic energy, the tone and pitch, the slides and glissandos of the demotic within a tradition that is primarily page-bound – that is the challenge".[24] This translational poetic space becomes a place where translation is mattered and matters, as Lily Robert-Foley shows in her analysis of experimental translation in *Zong!* through the "re/de/composition of the raw material of the archive in *ZONG!*".[25] Through typographical experimentation, performed sound, and the use of African languages (Twi, Yoruba, Igbo) violently suppressed during the Middle Passage, *Zong!* demonstrates how legal writing operates as a mechanism of dehumanization: translating bodies into property, murder into property loss, and genocide into insurance claim. As Anna Quéma puts it: "the medium is the message", and as Alberica Bazzonia adds: "The reparatory function of the text is inseparable from its form".[26]

While in the context of the legal text forming part of the archive of *Zong!*, the printed word is made to weigh much more than life itself, on the pages of the poem, the written language becomes negative space for breath, allowing Philip to explore language as an embodied practice beyond formal linguistic and written norms: "I'm still hunting, trying to find the word or words to describe the Middle Passage, site of so much grief and trauma, final home to so many of us, searching through poetry to find the word that will best describe what happened to us […]."[27] This, as is described on the back cover of the book, is done through the incantation of a poetic language that is "parts song, moan, shout, oath, ululation, curse, and chant".[28]

This attunement to the life-worlds of the enslaved ancestors in the poem requires a "dystranslation" not only from the European languages themselves, but from their very attachment to writing over breath work, as explained here in Philip's letter to her Italian translator.[29] After all, Philip is translating the story of Satae Adamu Boateng, described as the "voice of the ancestors revealing the submerged stories of all who were on board the Zong" and listed as co-author in many digital libraries.[30] In her letter to her Italian translator, she explains why the silence on the page must weigh more than Italian grammar and typography as follows:

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[22] *Ibid.*, p. 293.
[23] "*Zong!* Collective Durational Reading & Performance b current studio, 601 Christie St Toronto, November 29, 2013", in "Excerpts of *Zong!* readings, durational readings and performances 2013-2015", between 6 min 35 sec and 10 min 50 sec. https://youtu.be/zLlUFzrhyAg?si=xLL9poqLMeVvllcD (last accessed 09.01.2026).
[24] M. Nourbese Philip, "TheAbsenceofWritingorHowIAlmostBecameaSpy", *She Tries her Tongue: Her Silence Softly Breaks*, Middletoown CT, Wesleyan University Press, 2014, p. 77-91, p. 89.
[25] Lily Robert-Foley, *Op. cit.*, p. 66.
[26] Anne Quéma, 'M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*: Metaphors, Laws, and Fugues of Justice', *Journal of Law and Society*, 43.1 (2016), p. 103; Alberica Bazzoni, "Translating across Lines of Identity and Domination: The Case of M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*", *Comparative Critical Studies*, 20 (2013), p. 37-59.
[27] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Blank: Essays and Interviews*, Toronto, Book Thug, 2017, p. 33.
[28] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong! As told to the Author by Setaey Adamu Boateng*, *op. cit.*, backcover.
[29] M. NourbeSe Philip, "Dystranslation", *Violent Phenomena: 21 Essays on Translation*, Kavita Bhanot and Jeremy Tiang (ed.), 2022.
[30] Canadian Digital Library Collection, https://canadiandigitallibrarycollection.ca/Contributors/B/Boateng-Setaey-Adamu (last accessed 08.01.2026).

> The most important activity happening in *Zong!* are the silences on the page, not the words. The central and organizing principal around which the words are laid out in the sections that follow Os is that no word or word cluster can come directly below another, thereby allowing them to breathe into the space above. In seeking the breath in the space above, the words echo the actions of those who were thrown overboard the slave ship Zong. They also resonate with the long struggle of Africans to find the breath and space of freedom—from the maroons running from enslavement to George Floyd, whose last words were, "I can't breathe."[31]

Inverting the economy of capitalism and property laws underpinning the Gregson vs Gilbert legal pronouncement, *Zong!* creates its own economy of signification and significance in writing. This creative and multimodal engagement is signified in her embodied opposition to the universality of the English language as a writing and legislating medium on "the when", "the which", "the who", "the were" and "the be"[32] of the "Maafa, a Kiswahili word meaning "terrible occurrence" or "great disaster""[33].

For English-speaking descendants of enslaved people, Philip argues, this violence is doubled: the language through which they must speak and write is the same language that enacted their ancestors' legal erasure. Philip further explains how her poetry engages with translation in this historical context:

> Translation perhaps provides the best metaphor for what we, the descendants of the *Maafa*, do—translating what has happened, and is still happening, into words, music, movement, painting. Working with language, however, raises particular issues of translation. Is there a word in English, or other colonial languages, for that matter, for what happened to us? In an article on translation and the work of the late Malinke author Ahmadou Kourouma from Côte d'Ivoire, Dr. Haruna Jiyah Jacob asks whether it's possible to make French people understand the Malinke word *monnè* (*monnew*, plural), which "captures all the suffering and humiliations imposed on his people by colonialism," if there is no word in French for what happened to them. Jacob asks whether the absence of certain terms in a language render translation impossible; I wonder whether the absence of certain words in a language make understanding an experience impossible. If those words do not exist, how do speakers of that language understand that for which no word exists, or what they cannot or refuse to perceive?[34]

Philip's poetic approach to writing as translation practice has something crucial to say about the coloniality of the translation operation at the heart of our amodal understanding of language as a scientific apparatus of knowledge. In *Zong!*, the use of space, breaks and silences on the page articulates the absent in the very translational movement from past to present, and challenges the "metaphysics of presence" at the heart of logocentric forms of knowing.[35] What is interrupted, through the multimodal friction present in her work, is the illusion of transparency between inhumanity of slavery and the drowning of the enslaved people aboard the Zong, and the critical, legal and philosophical discourses which this event has been translated into. As pointed out by Alberica Bazzoni, her ethical stance echoes Saidiya Hartman's strategy of resistance to "critical fabulation":

> Narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method, as is the imperative to respect black noise – the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law […].' Echoing Hartman's ethical strategy, *Zong!* shows us the ethical necessity of creating the languages and modalities in which the experiences of those traditionally excluded from Western philosophy and historiography can be articulated and heard. For Philip shows us that creativity and experimentation are, beyond their aesthetic dimensions, political and ethical necessities.[36]

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[31] M. NourbeSe Philip, "Outline of Events Related to the Unauthorised Translation of *Zong!* as told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng by Renata Morresi and Benway Series Press", official website https://www.nourbese.com/outline-of-events-related-to-the-unauthorised-translation-of-zong-as-told-to-the-author-by-setaey-adamu-boateng-by-renata-morresi-and-benway-series-press-2/ (last accessed 08.01.2026).
[32] M. NourbeSe Philip, "*Zong!* #7", *Zong!*, *cit*, p. 15.
[33] M. NourbeSe Philip, *Blank: Essays & Interviews*, *op. cit*, p.23.
[34] *Ibid.*, p.23.
[35] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trad. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
[36] Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts", *Small Axe* 12/2 (2008), p. 12.

Echoing such resistance to "critical fabulation", Philip's earlier poem "Discourse on the Logic of Language" explores the rigorous control imposed on slaves by their owners (Philip, 1989). It is a poem which actively resists the notion of language itself as a static, objectively knowable entity, instead presenting it as a doing, a performative languaging of relations. The poem's polyvocality invites the readers to explore the voices present in different sections of the page in relation to each other, thereby defusing and contesting the possibility of an objective knowledge uncontaminated by the point of view of others. Rationalisation and objectivity are voiced in two texts, while a third-person narrative of a black enslaved mother and her newborn crosses the texts vertically in the left margin. The poem is organised in two sections split between two pages. Across each two-page spread, the text on the right is an anatomical description of speech. On each right side of the left page are "edicts" describing measures to be taken by slave owners in ruling over the African slaves. The aim of each edict is to focus on preventing slaves to communicate among themselves. The linguistic imposition of English as a "mother tongue" – a consequence of one of these edicts – is explored in a poem written in the first person on the left. In the far-left margin of the left page a text written vertically describes an enslaved mother's act of licking "the creamy white substance" covering her newborn body as if to clean off the layer of whiteness imposed on its body. Both the layout and the capital letters of the text seem to contrast with the other texts. While the characters in the text are silence, the text's importance is highlighted by the use of capital letters. As if mimicking the mother's cleaning and caring gesture, the vertical mise-en-page of this particular text seems to perform the act of licking the other texts on the right, echoing visually the act of cleaning the "creamy white substance" off the newborn. Both the mother's silence and the form of the text resist the very logic of knowability at play in the other texts.In form, the text points to a language beyond the whiteness of the languages imposed on mother and child.

Philip's multimodal resistance to the extractive logic of academic translation reveals what is at stake in the relationship between practice and critique. By refusing to translate the experience of slavery into either conventional poetry or academic prose, "Discourse on the Logic of Language" demonstrate how creative-critical practice can expose the colonial violence embedded in monomodal and monolingual systems of knowledge production. This is not to say that academic writing is problematic individually or within itself, but that the global standardisation and therefore imposition of this form of writing and language as the only medium of epistemic translation certainly constitutes a form of systemic coloniality which reifies who and what can be spoken within academic institutions.

Modality and Power: Rethinking Academic Writing as Translation

Looked at from the perspective from a multimodal and therefore more-than-verbal perspective, traditional academic writing in the arts operates a very specific direction of travel: from multimodal practice to writing. This kind of translation is not only epistemic, as we have seen, but experiential in the sense defined by Campbell and Vidal as what makes "experiences translatable across the linguistic and sensory boundaries and media that together serve to generate, maintain or challenge cultural hegemonies".[37] This direction of travel establishes the dominance of European writing systems, and more specifically English, as enlightened models and modes of thinking par excellence, as the medium through which we might sense and make sense of the world around us. When I analyse a multimodal artwork in an essay or text as I have just done, I also represent this artwork in writing either through description and analysis, whereby a certain form of abstraction and translation into language is operated. The operation of languaging critique in academic prose, as crucial to reflection as it is, particularly when it happens between the cultural contexts of the Global South and Global North, a cultural translation in its own right, translating other ways of codifying and thinking in more than-one-mode into academic prose.

Translation studies itself operates a separation between translation theory and philosophy, and translation practice as I have written elsewhere. In that context, translation practice is traditionally under scrutiny, objectified by theory or the realm of "pure" translation studies, which offers critical insights

[37] Madeleine Campbell and Ricarda Vidal, "Introduction: Materiality and play as affective and embodied means of (un)knowing", *The Experience of Translation: Materiality and Play in Experiential Translation*, London, Routledge, 2024, p. 2.

into the practice and outputs of translation. Creative-critical translation practices address this disparity by exploring approaches to translation criticism and translation theory which undiscipline the border and hierarchy between practice and theory. This means, in practice, making forms of theorising that adapt, sometimes speak the language of, that which is being studied: what forms of thinking happen in translation practice? What if practice could turn the table on theory, and make theoretical claims its object of investigation? As Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh reminds us, such a critical investigation of theory by practice invites us to think about the process through which theory comes to be recognised as theory, and to ask who is acknowledged as playing a significant role in the inception of theory, and who is relegated to the margins. She writes:

> There is a long history of implicitly and explicitly dismissing the intellectual and conceptual work of people positioned outside of the northern academy. This history has been characterised by "exploiting" and "extorting," to use Paulin Hountondji's terms (1992, 242), "their" words to develop concepts and theories rather than acknowledging "their" words as concepts, theories, and knowledge. Indeed, as Mbembe argues (2016, 36), critiques of the "dominant Eurocentric academic model" include "the fight against what Latin Americans in particular call 'epistemic coloniality,' that is, the endless production of theories that are based on European traditions; are produced nearly always by Europeans or Euro-American men who are the only ones accepted as capable of reaching universality; a particular anthropological knowledge, which is a process of knowing about Others—but a process that never fully acknowledges these Others as thinking and knowledge-producing subjects.[38]

As Fiddiqn-Qasmiyeh and all the authors cited in this passage point out, dominant academic norms often serve a function of information extraction and appropriation in the guise of knowledge production. The work of academic writing, in this context, actively participates in bordering knowledge between North and South by acting as the default "modality" of academic transmission.

Other critics, such as Katherine McKittrick, note that the system of disciplinary classification is embedded in logics of racial distinctions:

> The rigid and restrictive underpinnings of disciplinary thinking become apparent when we notice that categorization – specifically the method and methodology of sustaining knowledge categories – is an economized emulation of positivist classificatory thinking (thinking that is produced in the shadows of biological determinism and colonialism). Generic. Genus. (…) In this learning system, the (fictive) differences between humans swell.[39]

As McKittrick suggests, the framework of epistemological recognition and authorship attribution is also a model of reproduction of cultural capital: bordering knowledge across disciplines, separating the creative from the critical, art from criticism, participates in a broader definition and categorization of people and cultures. Within this epistemic framework, who does the practice, and who does the theory? Who is the scholar, and who is the studied? Who and what becomes the subject and object of knowledge? In this, translation plays an important role. In "Translation as Erasure: Thoughts on

Modernity's Epistemic Violence", Rolando Vázquez notes for example the processes of erasure which accompanied the use of translation as a colonial strategy. This operation of translation, he writes, renders invisible everything that does not fit in the "parameters of legibility" of its epistemic territory".[40] While literary and art criticism are translational and working across modalities, creative-critical practices further our epistemic frameworks by opening the work of critique to innovative forms and tools of experiential and critical mediation.

My point in saying all this is not to undermine what might be deemed traditional literary and art criticism, but rather, to probe at the universality of their model and their function in academic settings. Bearing in mind that every medium of cognition is itself translational, are dominant academic writing norms capable of carrying across, or translating, all forms and ways of thinking, feeling, and knowing?

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[38] Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "Recentring the South in Studies of Migration", *The Palgrave Handbook of South-South Migration and Inequality*, dir. Heaven Crawley and Joseph Kofi Teye, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, p. 62.

[39] Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2021, p. 38.

[40] Rolando Vázquez, "Translation as Erasure: Thoughts on Modernity's Epistemic Violence", *Journal of Historical Sociology* 24/1 (2011), p. 27-44.

What modalities of thinking are made inaccessible to knowledge in the process? The critical engagement with slavery and writing I have just described is written poetically in Nourbese Philip's works, and yet, creative practice is still rarely attributed the same degree of epistemic deference as academic writing properly speaking. To forget the critical function of creativity in redrawing and questioning the borders of what we think we know, however, silences the critical investigation (and visitation) of theory by practice located in such works as *Zong!* and "Discourse on the Logic of Language", a creative-critical visitation which writes back against the erasures of epistemic coloniality.

Conclusion

As scholars working within decolonial frameworks have demonstrated, there exists an extensive history of extracting while simultaneously dismissing the intellectual and conceptual contributions of those positioned outside the Northern academy. Quijanos' concept of the "coloniality of knowledge" illuminates how this epistemic violence operates: dominant academic structures systematically privilege European and Euro-American traditions as the sole repositories of universal knowledge, while relegating other knowledge systems to the status of mere raw material or objects of study rather than recognizing them as legitimate sites of theoretical production.[41]

Approaching academic criticism through the lens of translation reveals how these power dynamics are embedded in the very cultural fabric of knowledge production. The seemingly neutral act of translating multimodal practices into academic prose operates as what Quijano identifies as a technology of the "coloniality of power": a process that extracts knowledge from diverse epistemic sources while simultaneously erasing the modalities through which that knowledge was originally constituted and expressed.[42] When left unchallenged, the unidirectional movement from creative practice to written critique replicates colonial extractive logics: knowledge is mined from multimodal sources, stripped of its original form, and repackaged within the linguistic and epistemological frameworks of Western academe. This translational violence mirrors the broader operations of epistemic coloniality which Quijano describes, where certain forms of knowing are systematically devalued and transformed to serve the reproduction of dominant knowledge structures.

The separation of disciplines, the divide between creative and critical work, participate in what Quijano terms the "coloniality of being", the production of hierarchies which determine who can be a producer of theory and who remains an object of study. Within this epistemic framework, some fundamental questions emerge: Who engages in practice, and who produces theory? Who and what becomes the subject versus the object of knowledge, and under whose authority? Poetic methods of enquiry such as NourbeSe Philip's interrogate these structures by resisting the logic of academic prose, instead maintaining the irreducibility of embodied, sensorial, and material forms of knowing. Creative-critical practice, understood as a refusal of this extractive translation, offers a space where artistic works can write back against the coloniality of knowledge itself by asserting the epistemological validity of thinking in more than one modality and more than one language.

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[41] Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America", *Nepantla: Views from South 1/3* (2000), p. 533-580.
[42] *Ibid.*

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