

Compilation 18

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4

The Toxicity of
Continuity

Patricia Reed

5

Hedayat: The
Opium of
Translation and
Creating the
Impossible Memory

Saleh Najafi

7

The Labour of the
Larynx: Leveraging
Performance Across
Space (Notes from
'A/S/L')

Raqs Media Collective

The Toxicity of Continuity

Patricia Reed

June 3rd, 2020

Excerpt from the article:

(...) To describe something as ‘toxic’, in both biological and sociological senses, is to evoke something that produces harm. Although toxicity is more routinely understood as the injurious contamination of an organism by some entity *external* to it, thereby upsetting its ‘healthy’ or consistent functioning, in the context of concepts, toxicity can occur in the opposite direction: by preserving what is *internal* to its self-referential modes of thought. That is, by continuing to confirm what is (thought to be) known, true, sufficient, necessary, or good. Avoiding conceptual contamination is the shirking of possibility to think or know otherwise, and the name for this is unreason. It is to remain fixedly entrenched in ones existing situational perspective, a plight Achille Mbembe described as “mental self-amputation.”

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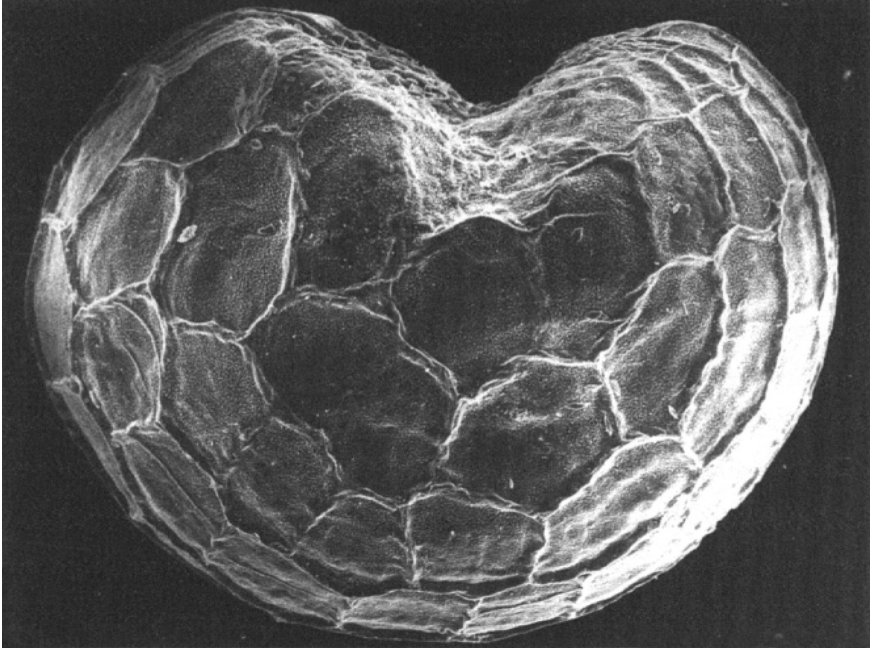
Hedayat: The Opium of Translation and Creating the Impossible Memory

Saleh Najafi

October 7th, 2020

This article is currently only available in the printed version of the
magazine.

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Seed of *papaver somniferum*, from *Poppy: The Genus Papaver*, ed. Jeno Bernath, CRC Press, 1999, page 71.

The Labour of the Larynx: Leveraging Performance Across Space (Notes from 'A/S/L')

Raqs Media Collective

July 15th, 2005

...It's 6.30 pm as Ritu Sharma gets ready to leave her modest apartment at Paschim Vihar, West Delhi, in her smart casuals for another evening out. No, she's not going out partying with friends. A car will soon ferry her, along with other colleagues to her new place of work, GE Capital's sprawling communications complex in Gurgaon. The moment she enters the complex, she will turn, quite literally, into another person. Ritu will become Ruth, a customer-relations executive with an American accent. As the sun rises over the Atlantic coast of the United States of America and sets on North Delhi, Ritu, now Ruth, will start calling customers across the US, moving slowly towards the west coast, following up on credit card bills, mortgages, dues and doing the occasional tele-marketing.

"You wake up as Ritu, but answer to the name Ruth"

30 March 2001, Economic Times, New Delhi

On a global scale - awakening and exhaustion, love and grief, hunger and joy are all emotions that occur at the same time, in different places. When it rains bombs in Najaf, it is time to cook breakfast in Seattle. When someone ends a working day in an industrial suburb somewhere in the United States, the office moves, across the internet, to a location in Delhi where a new person occupies the virtual workspace that her distant colleague just left. She opens his file as he walks home. A call centre worker (called a Remote Agent in the Outsourcing Business, something which became an issue even in

the US Presidential Elections of 2004) in Delhi cuts through 'dead air' with a definitely American nasalization in her voice as she closes a sales pitch.

One way of looking at computer screens in the work places of the new economy is to see them as glass walls that make up the architecture of a globe spanning urban cluster. These walls too have ears, and often words land on them, bearing news of emerging realities.

In a video, text and sound installation called 'A/S/L' ('Age/Sex/Location') we took the missives that emanate from the work places of the new economy as the basis for a performance about the labour of performance in the outsourcing business. For us, this was an opportunity to explore an allegorical mode of interpreting the everyday life of global connectivity through labour and electronic communication devices.

In this work, fictional call centre workers ('remote client service agents') and a couple of bots meet in a chat room where they dramatize the consequences of the relentless remoteness of agency on a daily basis. Speech as work, and IRC as play, foreground conflicting signals in the course of a work shift across call centres. A woman morphs from Sunita in Delhi by day, to Sandy in Jersey City by night, and to a chat handle called 2Far4U2C in between. Accents and identities, age, sex, and location, slip in and out of their selves as they work the trans-global beat.

In this installation (which also doubles as a piece of text based electronic theatre), transcripts of chat sessions constitute an electronic patchwork that also includes real and simulated audio recordings of conversations between call centre workers and their clients, images of a female larynx, the text of a re-worked dialogue from the Upanishads, and video recordings of a spoken English class in Delhi.

A/S/L is a work that asks for a consideration on the accidents of history that produce millions of larynxes and tongues that can be shaped to speak the glossolalia of a global, accent-neutralized English.

The cadence of this speech is the rhythm of the new global workplace, and it brings with it a strange new existential tension between the opportunities brought about by a sudden occupational and economic mobility, and the erasure of self, in turn underwritten by an insidious humiliation of a coerced masquerade that internationally outsourced call centre work often invokes in its worker. But when the call centre worker in India threatens the unwaged person who has defaulted on her credit history in the United States on the telephone, or is in turn abused by an impatient client, the certitudes of all our standard political cartographies of 'first' and 'third' worlds scatter in the face of the storms in the networks.

The realities of one space underwrite the inequalities of the other.

The map of the world is a grid of reflecting surfaces, and the call centre worker is a figure in this mirrored world, demanding a new understanding of the world; of what it means to labour, in a place, and across space.

The emergence of the global call centre industry, of which the city of Delhi is an important node, demands a new and incisive look at the intersection of networks, technology and culture. It signals a new kind of work, and a new kind of worker, whose invisibility (in the network) is mirrored by a rhetorical excess of 'national wealth generation', 'new global work culture' and 'cheap labour' that, in the end, renders the conditions that produce this work and the experience of the worker, equally invisible.

I. The Historical Location: The Making Of A Productive Larynx

The new economy in our part of the world is cantilevered on a

fortuitous accident of geography and culture, and a long history of reading and writing in the English language. It is important to remember that India contains the second largest pool of proficient English speakers in the world. The intensity of the education system is able to produce millions of English speaking young people from lower middle-class, and middle-class, backgrounds from the metropolitan cities and small towns of India. This is the legacy of a troubled and violent, complex and contradictory history of the last 300 years in South Asia, which has to do with the histories of colonialism, and the nation-building project. These are histories of the movement of ideas, technologies, goods and people, enforced and voluntary. From within this history has emerged a body, more specifically a larynx, which is gifted at learning - very quickly - diverse accents, styles and manners of speech in the English language. This historically constructed larynx is today a precious lode of raw material ripe for mining in the global economy.

The appropriation of English by a millions of people in South Asia, and specifically in India, mirrors an earlier moment in the history of linguistic transactions. For at least six hundred years until the middle of the 19th-century, Persian had been the language of administration, of the courts, of business and of much of cultured discourse in India. It also acted as an intermediary between different Indian languages, and as a *via media* between Indian and European languages.

Knowledge of Persian then, like proficiency in English today, was a means to a better life, and to contact with the wider world. Naturally, various professional groups and castes in medieval India, Hindus as well as Muslims, made an intimate knowledge of Persian a key strategy in their quest for cultural capital, social mobility and economic gain. Precisely because Persian was an alien language for everybody, it allowed for the possibility that proficiency in it would mitigate the effects of hierarchies and differences in social status fixed at birth in a highly stratified society. Learning Persian made it possible for many people to re-invent themselves, as clerks, as poets, as story tellers, as merchants, as scribes and as intellectuals, even if they did not belong to the Persianized elite of the medieval court.

This historical context of the important precedence of a language from 'elsewhere' as a kind of bridging device within the diversity of South Asian/Indic cultures provides us with some understanding of the role that English plays today. English, then, becomes something akin to a technology, a software that one learns and works with, in order to operate the functions attendant to the fact of being present in a highly networked global economy.

II. The Networked Location: The Anxiety Of Location

...Once, while working I got someone on the line who got really difficult to deal with. I was calling him to follow up on his credit card payment record. This guy knew that I was calling from a call centre, somewhere in India. So he said to me, "Do you even know how to spell CREDIT? I mean, C-R-E-D-I-T! Put me through to your supervisor, or some real American person..."

Anchal/ Anna, in conversation with Monica Narula

Paradoxically, the more 'world class' and globally produced the products are, the greater is the level of anxiety about their place of origin. The realities of contemporary trans-national capitalism require a global workplace, but the 'else-where-ness' of this workplace is always a problem. The fantasy that capitalism wants each of us to buy into is that of an endless circulation of materials and products across space, coupled with an unwillingness to accept anything but an adhesion or stickiness of people within space - something that functions as the sheet anchor of an increasingly unstable world. If you are a person who has defaulted on their credit card payments somewhere in the United States, it is unlikely that you will take seriously a voice that originates far away, especially in India, when that voice threatens you to send the credit sharks after you if you don't pay. This claim to authority that call centre workers frequently have to deploy loses all credibility if it is seen as being

made from a remote location. The same goes for an aggressive sales pitch. Proximity, thus, is the key to the blandishments as well as the rewards of capitalism.

As a client I must get a sense that the offer, or the threat, is 'at my threshold' for it to have an acceptable reality quotient. The virtual masquerade that underpins the work of the remote agent is based on a sense of what is viably 'real' in today's world. The masquerade underwrites the invisibility of the worker and her actual location in space. It creates, instead, a new synchronicity and convergence between the 'client' and the 'agent' on a virtual terrain. It would be unwise to belabour the lack of substantive truth in this compact brought about by the delicate operations of the call centre worker's larynx, the suspension of disbelief about the fact that English can be spoken with such felicity in far away places, and the exigencies of the global working day. Rather, it may be more productive to think of this performance as representing a new condition of being, and a new skill set, in a world where recorded messages tell us so much about who we are and what we may do next, and for which vocalization, pitch, tone, timbre and a certain degree of aural-cultural knowledge have become crucial navigating tools.

III. The Economics Of Location: Not Just 'Cheap Labour'

Generally, when call centres are referred to, they are bracketed within the rhetoric of 'cheapness of labour'. A critique based on this view expresses a 'moral turn' built into the larger rhetoric of 'the exploitation of poor countries by rich countries'. These theorizations are over simplifications. They are signs of a deep inability to think about the political economy of the trans-national present. It needs to be understood that the benefits of the performance/masquerade are not translatable simply in terms of the much touted possibility of employing 'cheap labour' in a third world location. Every investment decision rests on a careful calculation of the cost per unit, within a

framework of legitimate industrial activity and the larger political-economic stability of the space of production. Infrastructural capacity, the cost per unit of energy, taxation policies, interest rates, and the relative flexibility of labour laws are all elements in such a calculation. Further, when talking of labour, particularly in a global context, we often tend to forget that labour capacity is always calculated within pre-defined parameters of cognitive and operational skills. Hence, productivity, efficiency, bargaining norms and the normative concerns that mark the workplace (what management can do, enforce, get away with or even what it cannot do) are all crucial to the cost/benefit calculation.

It is critical to understand that socially necessary labour is required to reproduce any specific kind of labour. This implies a level of material, educational and cultural attainments that a given society can make available to its workforce and the drive towards labouring that it induces by offering a series of quantifiable wages or value-laden rewards. At present, many spaces within the territory of the Indian state seem to be favourable to the corporations who are constantly in search of spaces of production with the lowest overall cost per unit. It would not be unrealistic to visualise a future in which Call Centre Industry corporations based in India invest in creating remote agents in Bangladesh, Myanmar or Cambodia. To assume otherwise is to misread the faceless and placeless global nature of networked (C)apital.

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