Transnational American Studies

Edited by
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“Feebler than the Original”:
Translation and Early Black Transnationalism

1 Translation as Theft

On January 12, 1855, Alfred Tennyson’s poem, “The Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaklava,” appeared in the pages of Frederick Douglass’ Paper. The newspaper’s introduction to Tennyson’s verse – the poetic rendering of an ill-fated cavalry charge in the Crimea – explained that the “London literary correspondent of the New York Tribune recently said that TENNYSON could not write on the themes of the present war; but the following thrilling lyric, from the last London Examiner, is a splendid refutation of that affirmation” (Tennyson 4, original emphasis). As Frederick Douglass’ Paper intimated, the London Examiner had only recently printed Tennyson’s new poem in its December 9, 1854 edition and it would not be long before the lines became famous in the United States. This was to be expected for a new work from the British Poet Laureate, whom in 1856 the Saturday Evening Post acclaimed as “the greatest living poet” (“Poetical Works”). As one writer for Putnam’s Monthly Magazine put it, the “Charge of the Light Brigade” “rang through the world as the only really thrilling thing that had been inspired by the Crimean tragedy” (“Alfred Tennyson” 391). Indeed, American newspapers and magazines apparently reprinted and commented upon Tennyson’s “Charge of the Light Brigade” so much that, by October of 1856, another article in Putnam’s declared the poem to be “more popularly quoted than anything else he has writ” (“What Is Poetry” 380).1

1 For an overview of Tennyson’s reputation in the antebellum United States, see Eidson. For the provenance of “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” see McGann 192-202.
The towering reputation of Tennyson and his work in the United States offers one possible explanation as to why the black abolitionist and editor, Frederick Douglass, chose to reprint an apparently occasional verse in the pages of his newspaper. Bruce Douglass’ Paper had, after all, often reprinted British and American literary works, going so far as to serialize Charles Dickens’s mammoth novel Bleak House in its entirety. However, a letter from the paper’s New York City correspondent James McCune Smith, also appearing in its January 12, 1855 edition, suggests that the “The Charge of the Light Brigade” illustrated more than the journal’s active participation in a transatlantic literary culture. Set as an imagined dialogue between his pseudonym Communipaw and one Fylbel, Smith’s letter stages a critical reading of Tennyson’s poem. During the discussion, Fylbel inquires after Communipaw’s opinion regarding the poet’s thundering refrain, “What think you, he asks, “of Cannon to the right of them, / Cannon to the left of them, / Cannon in front of them / Volleyed and thundered;” is n’t that grand?” Much to Fylbel’s surprise, Communipaw brusquely responds, “Flat burglary!” Pressed to clarify his remark, Communipaw explains that Tennyson’s lines are “a translation from the Congo, feebler than the original” (Smith, “Correspondent” 3). He bases this critique on his discovery of a Congolese war chant, a song he had found while perusing a French literary journal. This song, Communipaw contends, not only provided Tennyson with the source for his recent poem but also helped spark the Haitian Revolution.

In this article, I take Smith’s reading of Tennyson as an occasion to explore how discourses of translation and transnationalism overlapped and informed one another in early black American writing. In doing so, I build upon the work of scholars such as Ifeoma Nwankwo, who has examined “the pivotal importance of nineteenth-century texts in the development and public articulation not just of Black or African Diasporan identity, but also of ideas about the significance of transnational engagement for those identities” (18). I contend that, in developing practices and theories of translation, black American writers explored the possibilities and limits of this “transnational engagement.” In his work on the international contours of black modernism in the twentieth century, Brent Hayes Edwards emphasizes the importance of attending to “the ways that discourses of internationalism travel, the ways they are translated, disseminated, reformulated, and debated in transnational contexts marked by difference” (7, original emphasis). Examining writings in twentieth-century newspapers and periodicals, Edwards contends that “[t]aking up questions of the travels of discourses of black internationalism requires investigating in particular the multiplicity of translation practices – and transnational coverage more general – that are so crucial to the fabric of this transatlantic print culture” (9). Bringing a similar focus to the nineteenth century reveals the crucial role translation played for black Americans navigating what Anna Brickhouse describes as a “New World arena characterized precisely by its transnationality: by the overlap and simultaneity of different national claims upon territories as well as upon literary texts and traditions” (7).

Indeed, as Brickhouse and others have argued, the transnational condition of the early Americas was one defined by its reliance on translation. Edward Gentzler, for example, writes that “translation in the Americas is less something that happens between separate and distinct cultures and more something that is constitutive of those cultures,” concluding that “translation is not a trope but a permanent condition in the Americas” (5, original emphasis). Focusing on practices of translation in nineteenth-century American literature in particular, Colleen Boggs contends that “American writers conceptualized and practiced translation as American literature, and vice versa, that they understood American literature as a form of writing that was always in translation” (6, original emphasis). In his letter to Frederick Douglass’ Paper, James McCune Smith levels a powerful critique against the theory of invisible translation common in the United States, reading such endeavors as plagiarism and theft. As Lawrence Venuti explains, a work of translation dedicated to the principle of invisibility gives the “appearance that it reflects the foreign writer’s personality or intention or the essential meaning of the foreign text – the appearance, in other words, that the translation is not in fact a translation, but the ‘original’” (1). In place of this theory, Smith proposed a...
method of translation grounded in a commitment to transparency and a recognition of its own limits, demonstrating a way of unpacking the meaning of the untranslatable without attempting to erase it. Such a practice, I argue, represents a crucial tool for teasing out the relationships between and among transnational black communities constituted in part by their differences. I begin by examining how James McCune Smith fashioned himself in his letters to Frederick Douglass’ Paper as a particular kind of translator and situating his writings within the context of early nineteenth-century theories of translation. I then turn to Smith’s January 1855 letter to the newspaper, unpacking the multiple layers of translation that ground his reading of Tennyson, and exploring his insistence on the untranslatable. I conclude by considering how Smith’s example offers some important insights for the practice of transnational American Studies.

2 Communipaw and the Black American Translator

James McCune Smith, a self-described “son of a slave,” was born in New York City in 1813 (“Freedom” 270). He attended the African Free School No. 2 on Mulberry Street, an institution sponsored by the New York Manumission Society. Smith excelled in his studies, and in the summer of 1832 left the United States to study medicine at the University of Glasgow in Scotland. He remained in Europe for five years, during which time he earned his B.A., M.A., and M.D., and also kept a journal that would later be excerpted in the Colored American, a New York City-based black newspaper. Introducing the first extract to its readers, the paper’s editor declared Smith to be “one of our most worthy and beloved young brethren,” who possessed “all that eminent talents and moral worth furnish to an individual” (Cornish 3). Upon his return to the city, Smith began practicing medicine and treated poor New Yorkers, black and white alike. He opened an office and pharmacy on West Broadway and, in 1843, accepted the position of physician for the Colored Orphan Asylum. Smith also worked as a teacher out of his home, composed and delivered a number of lectures, and wrote numerous articles for the city’s black newspapers. His office became a central meeting place for black activists struggling against the injustices of racial oppression. As Carla Peterson writes, Smith “was the heart and soul of New York’s black community” (194). In addition to praising Smith’s “eminent talents” and “moral worth,” the editor of the Colored American described to his readers how, beyond his residency in Scotland, the Doctor had “visited London and Paris, availing himself of the institutions of those renowned cities, and mingling in their best circles” (Cornish). Smith’s education in Scotland and his time spent on the continent allowed him opportunities to pursue his interest in foreign languages. Smith had already demonstrated an interest in studying languages as a child working in a blacksmith’s shop, having been described by a contemporary as standing “at a forge with the bellows in one hand and a Latin grammar in the other” (qtd. in Morgan, 606). Smith would formally study Latin at the African Free School and Greek in Glasgow, and by the time he was writing his account of “The Charge of the Light Brigade” he was also fluent in French and possessed a knowledge of German, Spanish, Italian, and Hebrew.\footnote{For the details of Smith’s life, see Morgan; Peterson; Stauffer, Introduction.}

As New York Correspondent for Frederick Douglass’ Paper, Smith drew upon his experience with multiple languages, casting himself as a translator for the paper’s readers. Smith signaled his adoption of this role through his choice of pseudonym: Communipaw. As Smith explained in an 1852 letter to the newspaper, he had chosen for his alter ego the name of a scene from Washington Irving’s writings on the history of New York. “I am a plain Dutch negro,” Smith wrote, “well known in the flats, and Harsimus and Bergen, and way up to Hell Gate, and am lineal descendant from one of the foily fellows whom Washington Irving alludes to in his sketch book, as shining and laughing on our side of Buttermilk Channel” (“Letter” 1). As Irving explained in his 1809 History of New York (written under his own pseudonym of Diedrich Knickerbocker), Communipaw was the American Indian name for the spot where New York’s first Dutch settlers originally landed, a name they retained when they established their first village. Communipaw was thus, Irving proclaimed, “the egg from whence was hatched the mighty city of New York!” (82). In an 1839 article for the Knickerbocker magazine, Irving – this time writing as Hermanus Vanderdonk – expanded upon his earlier description, declaring Communipaw to be
the first spot where our ever-to-be-lamented Dutch progenitors planted their standard, and cast the seeds of empire, and from whence subsequently sailed the memorable expedition, under Oloff the Dreamer, which landed on the opposite island of Manahatta, and founded the present city of New-York, the city of dreams and speculations. ("Communipaw" 257)

In claiming the mantle of Communipaw, Smith invoked a transnational and multilingual story of American origins while also highlighting the central role that displacements played in that tale, as the term expresses two overlapping claims to a single space, referencing not only the village of New York’s “Dutch progenitors” but also the American Indians who had named the land. Of course, the Dutch settlers would face their own removal at the hands of the English, and according to Irving retreated from the city back to their original settlement. In Communipaw, “determined to resist all foreign intermixture or encroachment,” the remaining Dutch adopted a policy of “strict non-intercourse” with the newly named New York City, and “not a boat ever crossed to it from Communipaw, and the English language was rigorously tabooed throughout the village and its dependencies” ("Communipaw" 259). Economic realities, though, forced the Dutch to soften their stance so that they could trade with the English, and they gradually established “an intercourse with New-York.” There was, however, a crucial condition for the renewed contact with the English: “it was always carried on by the old people and the negroes: never would they permit the young folks, of either sex, to visit the city, lest they should get tainted with foreign manners, and bring home foreign fashions” ("Communipaw" 261). Fearful of cultural contamination, the Dutch only conducted business with the English via the elderly and their black slaves. One possible explanation for this choice could be that the village leaders assumed their elders were immune to the lures of the English, and cared little for the cultural purity of those they held in bondage. However, in the History of New York, Irving had suggested that the “Dutch negroes” conducted the trade with the English because they were far more skilled at such endeavors than their white counterparts. He wrote:

These negroes, in fact, like the monks in the dark ages, engross all the knowledge of the place, and being infinitely more adventurous and more knowing than their masters, carry on all the foreign trade, making frequent voyages to town in canoes loaded with oysters, buttermilk, and cabbages. They are great astrologers, predicting the different changes of weather almost as accurately as an almanac; they are, moreover, exquisite performers on three-stringed fiddles: in whistling, they almost boast the farfamed powers of Orpheus his lyre, for not a horse or an ox in the place, when at the plough or before the wagon, will budge a foot until he hears the well known whistle of his black driver and companion: – and from their amazing skill casting up accounts upon their fingers, they are regarded with as much veneration as were the disciples of Pythagoras of yore, when initiated into the sacred quaternary of numbers. (83)

Here, Irving describes Communipaw’s black inhabitants as the perfect traders. They can understand and predict the patterns of the weather and thus determine when they should undertake their voyages; they have command over the beasts of burden that will carry their wares; and they are masters of mathematics and can thus quickly calculate a bill of sale. Comparing these traders to the “monks in the dark ages” and the Orpheus of Greek mythology, Irving lends a mystical quality to these abilities, implying a quality of knowledge unknown and unknowable to the white “masters” who have remained isolated in Communipaw. Unlike the later inclusion of old white traders, here the village’s black residents alone “carry on all the foreign trade.”

Irving’s use of the term “foreign” carries with it a range of meanings. In his History the black men and women who travelled between Communipaw and New York City navigated multiple kinds of foreigners and domestics including the spatial (the country and the city), national (Holland and Britain), and linguistic (Dutch and English). Moreover, those that James McCune Smith claims as his kin did not simply move from New York to Communipaw and back but interacted with both the Dutch and the English, using their skills and abilities to connect these two communities. In other words, they served as translators. Indeed, in the parlelance of the antebellum United States, “translator” precisely described the role that Communipaw’s black inhabitants performed. The 1846 edition of Noah Webster’s American Dictionary of the English Language defines the verb “translate” first as “[t]o bear, carry or remove from one place to another,” a kind of transportation certainly undertaken by the black traders of Communipaw. The third definition reiterates this notion while including the element of going between people: “To transfer; to convey from one to another.” And it is in the sixth definition that Webster
addresses linguistic translation, defining to translate in this case as “to interpret; to render into another language; to express the sense of one language in the words of another” (581). In Irving’s tales, Communipaw’s black inhabitants fulfilled each of these definitions, acting as the consummate translators in a variety of ways. By donning the mantle of a “plain Dutch negro” from that village, Smith moved himself into a similar position. In her analysis of Smith’s writings for Frederick Douglass’ Paper, Carla Peterson reads his choice of pseudonym as expressing a relationship between Smith and the village of Communipaw itself. “By reinventing himself as Communipaw, Smith gave himself a new ancestry,” Peterson writes, and “he presented himself as a composite of different races and ethnicities” (220). Peterson thus reads Smith’s pseudonym as a textual embodiment of his larger political strategy of creating cross-racial alliances, a practice perhaps exemplified by his close relationship with the white philanthropist and abolitionist Gerrit Smith. Without discounting Smith’s deep commitment to interracial cooperation, I would argue that in the case of Communipaw he specifically aligned himself with that village’s black inhabitants rather than the village in general, and did so in order to signal his own prowess at moving between and among multiple locales, nations, and languages, thus framing his contributions to Frederick Douglass’ Paper as the work of a translator.

Adopting the role of translator allowed Smith to participate in an ongoing and lively debate about the purpose of translations. Boggs points out that, in declaring translation to be the act of rendering “into another language” rather than into one’s own, Webster defined translation not as “a movement of the foreign towards the familiar, but a movement from the familiar to the foreign” (26). Though she does not explicitly say so, Boggs’s reading reveals how Webster’s definition echoes the argument of one of the most influential translation theorists of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Schleiermacher. In his 1813 lecture, “On the Different Methods of Translating,” Schleiermacher contended that a translator’s job was to transmit through the translation the experience of reading the original in a foreign language. In other words, though writ-

ten in the reader’s native tongue, the translation should retain the “sense of encountering the foreign” that accompanied reading a foreign language (53). Such a method, declared Schleiermacher, “leaves the author in peace as much as possible and moves the reader toward him” (51). To borrow from Boggs, then, this mode of translation carried the reader “from the familiar to the foreign.” Schleiermacher firmly rejected the opposite approach, whereby the translator worked toward the “goal of translating just as the author himself would have written originally in the language of the translation,” considering that such an aim “is not only unattainable, but is also in itself null and void” (57). Kirsten Silva Gruesz explains that debates over translation in the Americas, inspired by Schleiermacher, “were centered around competing views about whether to work toward preserving the foreignness of the original text [...] or toward assimilating it into the target language, slipping silently and invisibly across the linguistic border” (106). Such debates were especially relevant for American poets since, as Gruesz writes, “[a]nalyzing poetry was widely regarded as a kind of apprenticeship to the vocation: a coming-of-age for younger poets yet to prove themselves, or a ritualized form of homage to an important influence” (27). The poet-translator Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, again according to Gruesz, followed Schleiermacher’s lead, but not all American writers interested in translation took the same approach. Edgar Allan Poe, for example, argued in an 1846 piece that if the goal of the translator should be to “render the original that the version should impress the people for whom it is intended, just as the original impresses the people for whom it (the original) is intended” (Marginalia 126, original emphasis). Poe argued for a method of translation grounded “less upon literalness and more upon dexterity at paraphrase,” one that would forego any attempt to retain a sense of the foreign and instead concentrate on the intended meaning, rather than the language, of the original. Through this approach, Poe argued, “a translation may be made to convey to a foreigner a juster conception of an original than could the original itself” (127). Rather than attempting to make the familiar foreign, Poe here argued for a kind of translation that would produce a work that would not simply make a foreign original familiar, but

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6 For a similar interpretation, see Stauffer, “Brotherhood.” For more on the relationship between James McCune Smith and Gerrit Smith, see Stauffer, Black Hearts 134-81.

7 For an extended analysis of Schleiermacher’s theory of translation, see Venuti 99-118.
would indeed erase any traces of translation and thus claim the mantle of originality for itself. This theory of invisible translation (exemplified by but certainly not limited to Poe) represents what Eric Cheyfitz likens to “politics of translation that repress translation as dialogue in order to constitute it, under the guise of dialogue, as monologue” (xix). Articulating the political implications of such a theory, Cheyfitz argues that United States “imperialism historically has functioned (and continues to function) by substituting for the difficult politics of another politics of translation that represses these difficulties” (xvi). For Cheyfitz, the theory of invisible translation expresses not only an approach to rendering a foreign-language text into English, but also a policy of foreign relations that envisions everywhere as always accessible to interventions and appropriations by the United States.

3 Transparent Translation

James McCune Smith realized the high stakes of translation and lambasted Tennyson for practicing precisely the kind of invisible translation advocated by Poe. Moreover, in labeling the British poet’s allegedly unattributed refrain a “burglarly,” Smith unequivocally cast such a mode of translation as a robbery. Framing Smith’s critique of Tennyson as primarily a commentary on the fallacy of cultural purity, Carla Peterson reads Smith’s letter of January 12, 1855, as a suggestion that “[h]igh culture [...] was not pure but the result of borrowings from different cultures, African as well as European,” and contends that the “one lesson readers needed to take away was that they should never make assumptions about what constituted high culture.” Such a claim, Peterson continues, had profound implications, since “[a]ll the very moment when American intellectuals were striving to define national identity, Smith was arguing that all cultures, that of Britain as well as of the United States, had come into being by means of theft resulting in different forms of ‘mingling’” (221). Rather than a broad commentary on the origins of high cultural productions, I consider Smith’s letter as a critique of invisible translation – a method that in this case attempted to violently replace an African song with a British poem – and read his engagement with Tennyson as an impassioned attack on a politics of translation that appropriated and eradicated the histories and cultures of oppressed peoples. As an alternative to such practices, Smith articulated a theory of translation grounded in the principle of transparency. Hence, throughout his reading, Smith cum Communipaw emphasized the presence of an ‘original’ text, going so far as to present it alongside its ostensible translation. For example, after proclaiming Tennyson’s refrain a theft, Communipaw invites his interlocutor Fylbel (and by extension the readers of *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*) to examine the stanza alongside the Congolese source text. “Look in the *Revue des Deux Mondes,*” Communipaw declares, “Vol 4th, page 1040, (I picked it up at Baillière’s,) and you will find the Congo original, published four years ago, and as old as – Africa; compare them.” To facilitate such a comparison, the newspaper then printed the Congolese chant and the refrain from “The Charge of the Light Brigade” in sequence, powerfully asserting the original status of the African song by literally placing the “Congo” atop Tennyson. First, “Congo”: “Canga bafio te / Canga moune de le / Canga do ki la / Canga li.” And below, “Tennyson”: “Cannon to the right of them, / Cannon to the left of them, / Cannon in front of them, / Volleyed and thundered.” Seeing the two verses placed one after another, Fylbel immediately agrees with Communipaw’s assessment of Tennyson’s version as “feeble the original,” exclaiming, “[h]urrah for our mother-land! ‘Canga li!’ Glorious war cry; it beats ‘Volleyed and thundered,’ out of sight” (Smith, “Correspondent” 3).

Significantly, it is a visual juxtaposition of the two stanzas that compels Fylbel to quickly accept Communipaw’s reading. In other words, a comparison of the two verses’ formal features, rather than their linguistic content, reveals Tennyson’s robbery. For what, in the fiction of Smith’s letter, Tennyson translated from the “Canga Li” chant into “The Charge of the Light Brigade” was not its language per se but rather something less easily defined but immediately recognizable. As Fylbel’s reaction explains, Tennyson had attempted to copy the spirit of “Canga Li” as a “glorious war cry,” translating its power – contained partly in its rhythm and sound – into a celebration of British valor. Challenging a poet with this kind of theft of spirit was not unheard of, and indeed Tennyson’s own work had once provided Poe with an opportunity to make a similar claim against Longfellow. In an 1840 review of Longfellow’s work, Poe contended that the American poet had plagiarized Tennyson’s “The Death of the Old Year” for his own “Midnight Mass for the Dying Year.” Poe grouped Longfellow’s theft with
“the most barbarous class of literary robbery; that class in which, while the words of the wronged are avoided, his most intangible, and therefore his least defensible and least reclaimable property, is purloined” (Voices*). He went on to explain that “nearly all that is valuable in the piece of Tennyson, is the first conception of personifying the Old Year as a dying old man, with the singularly wild and fantastic manner in which that conception is carried out,” and that Longfellow had robbed him precisely “[o]f this conception and of this manner” (“Voices,” original emphasis). Communipaw cast “The Charge of the Light Brigade” as a similar kind of “literary robbery,” one that stole not the words but the conception and manner of the original. Moreover, he framed Tennyson’s theft as a translation, thus equating the practice of invisible translation advocated by American writers such as Poe with the plagiarism those very same writers so fiercely condemned.

Yet Smith’s letter to Frederick Douglass’ Paper moved beyond simply critiquing a dominant mode of translation, as Communipaw rooted his reading of Tennyson in a transparent practice of translation, one that he performed for the paper’s readers. In addition, the New York correspondent offered his readers opportunities to engage in their own translations by citing his source text and inviting them to purchase copies for themselves. As Communipaw informed Fylbel, he had initially encountered the Canga Li chant in the French-language literary magazine Revue Des Deux Mondes. There, the French writer Gustave D’Alaux had used the chant as the epigraph for his article on Haitian history, entitled “L’Empereur Souloquo et Son Empire.” Before offering his own translations of D’Alaux, Communipaw invited his readers into the world of transatlantic and multilingual print culture, revealing that he had purchased the periodical at Baillere’s, a Broadway bookshop operated by a family that also had branches in London, Paris, and Madrid (see Clark 6). Communipaw also precisely cited his source, informing readers that D’Alaux’s article had appeared in Revue Des Deux Mondes four years before his own and going so far as to give the volume and page numbers. Communipaw thus drew a map of sorts back to his source text, and had any readers chosen to follow it they would have found D’Alaux’s piece exactly where Communipaw said it would be and thus been able to follow along as he translated passages from the French journal onto the pages of Frederick Douglass’ Paper.

D’Alaux had likely encountered the Canga Li chant in Moreau de Saint-Méry’s 1797 Description de Saint-Domingue, and for the most part framed it (as had Moreau) as part of a Haitian religious ritual. However, D’Alaux also mentioned the song in the context of the Haitian Revolution, and it is those observations that Smith translated for Frederick Douglass’ Paper. “Gustave D’Alaux, from whom I quote,” Communipaw relates to Fylbel, “says, ‘When these incomprehensible words, chanted alternately by one and by many voices, rolled out on the midnight air, (s’élancéaient en crescendo du milieu des ténèbres), the old St. Domingo planter had need to count his slaves, and the patrol to be on the alert’” (Smith, “Correspondent” 3). In performing a translation of his own, Smith revealed in practice his own theory of translation. For the most part, the New York correspondent offers a close rendition of D’Alaux, relying more upon literality and less upon Poe’s “dexterity at paraphrase” (Marginalia 127). In the one instance where he does take some artistic license – the phrase “rolled out on the midnight air” – Smith includes the original for his readers (in case they haven’t actually gone out and found the French magazine) precisely so that they can see what he has done. Smith performs, then, Schleiermacher’s preferred method of translation in his rendering of D’Alaux, going so far as to retain a sense of the foreign by including a piece of the foreign-language original in his translation. Yet in addition to making Smith’s own translation transparent, this inclusion also emphasizes the role that the paper’s readers could potentially play in the translation process, by in effect inviting them to check his work. Regardless as to whether Smith actually expected his readers to run out and secure a copy of D’Alaux’s article (or even to read the French he included in his own) he offered it as a possibility, thus presenting a scenario – even if only imaginary – where readers held Communipaw’s letter in one hand and D’Alaux’s article in the other, performing their own translations alongside those of the paper’s New York correspondent. Smith thus introduces, if only tangentially, the notion

* For a history of the Canga Li chant and its reception, see Fick 57-58; Geggus; Thornton.

* See D’Alaux: “Quand ces mots incompris, alternativement chantés par une et plusieurs voix, s’élancéaient en crescendo du milieu des ténèbres, les colons de l’ancien Saint-Domingue faisaient compter leurs esclaves, et la maréchaussée était sur pied” (1040).
of translation as a communal act, rather than the task of a single
translator isolated and elevated above his readers. To put it another
way, if Schleiermacher had envisioned the translator as carrying
the reader toward the author, Smith’s work carried his readers into
the translator’s chair.

4 Translating the Untranslatable

In addition to presenting a theory of translation grounded in
the principle of transparency, Smith used the “Canga Li” chant to
demonstrate how an acknowledgment of the untranslatable also an-
chored this method. Pressed by Fybel to “[t]ranslate the Congo,”
Communipaw curtly replies, “[c]an’t do it” (Smith, “Correspondent”
3). With this abrupt refusal, Communipaw recognizes the existence
of the untranslatable, of that which cannot be rendered into a famili-
ary tongue. Scholars have pointed out how such a recognition offers
a powerful challenge to the practice and politics of invisible transla-
tion, to the notion that anything and everything can ultimately be
made familiar. As Colleen Boag writes, “untranslatability marks
the limitations of universalizing claims” (30). Moreover, as Boag
observes, a theory of translation that acknowledges its own limita-
tions complicates Cheyfitz’s claim that “the very activity of transla-
tion, no matter how decorous, based as it is on a certain foreign
policy, is an act of violence,” his sense that any American practice of
translation is necessarily an imperial venture (Cheyfitz 37). “Only
when translation is not already an act of imperial appropriation”
Boag argues, “can the notion of a failed or incomplete translation
exist” (30). In having his expert translator Communipaw admit
his own limitations, Smith clearly distinguished his theory of trans-
lation from the imperially inflected practice articulated by Poe. As
presented in Smith’s letter to Frederick Douglass’ Paper, Tennyson’s
stolen refrain powerfully represented a theory of translation unable
to conceive of the untranslatable, as the poet had attempted to ren-
der the “Canga Li” chant familiar by translating it into a celebra-
tion of British courage. While recognizable (at least to Communipaw),
this effort at translating the untranslatable necessarily failed, pro-
ducing little more than a feeble echo of the original’s power.

However, while Communipaw recognized the “Canga Li”
chant’s linguistic untranslatability, he nevertheless perceived the
song’s revolutionary potential by reading and translating D’Alaux,
and though he could not translate the chant’s language for his read-
ers, he could offer them a rendition of the French critic’s impres-
sions. Significantly, Smith demonstrated his theory of translation by
rendering two moments in D’Alaux’s piece where that author specif-
ically situated “Canga Li” in the context of the Haitian Revolution.
The first expressed the effect of “Canga Li” on Haiti’s slaveholders,
who could not understand its words but nevertheless recognized its
potential to inspire their slaves to rebellion and thus increased their
vigilance, while the second considered the impact of the chant on the
island’s enslaved population. “’Behold the secret of that mysteri-
ous power,’” wrote Smith in his translation, “’which (in Hayti) in
1791-2, in the space of a single night, transformed indifferent and
heedless slaves into furious masses, and hurled them into those in-
credible combats in which stupid courage baulked all tactics, and
naked flesh struggled against steel’” (“Correspondent” 3).10

Inviting his readers to understand “Canga Li” despite his inability to offer
them a linguistic translation — to “[v]eelier the secret of that mys-
terious power” — Communipaw cast the chant as untranslatable yet
nevertheless knowable, suggesting that its meaning could be divined
by observing its effect. D’Alaux’s framing of “Canga Li” as a battle
cry of the Haitian Revolution — a reading adopted without quali-
fication by Smith — represented the accepted interpretation of the
chant, and one that profoundly shaped attempts at translation. In
developing a translation of “Canga Li” that reflects its role in Hai-
tian religious rituals, historian John Thornton explains that earlier
translators grounded their efforts in an “understanding that as a
revolutionary anthem” the chant “must involve killing whites” (211).
In his foundational history of the Haitian Revolution, The Black Ja-
cobins, C. L. R. James offers a translation that exemplifies this ten-
dency, rendering the words of “Canga Li” as “’we swear to destroy
the whites and all they possess; let us die rather than fail to keep
this vow’” (18). Though offering a similar rendition would have
violated Smith’s commitment to acknowledging the untranslatable, the


10 See D’Alaux: “Voila le secret de ce mysterieux pouvoir qui, en 1791-92,
transformait, dans l’espace d’une seule nuit, les esclaves indifferents et dis-
semines de la veille en masses furieuses, et les laissait Presque desarmes
dans ces combats invraisemblables ou la stupidite du courage decoconcerait
la tactique, et ou la chair nue finissait par user le fer” (1043).
New York correspondent expressed the same sentiment by translating D’Alaux. Hence, though “Canga Li” resisted a direct rendering, and thus refuted an imperial politics of translation, Communipaw nevertheless drew upon his skills as a translator in order to reveal the critical role the chant had played in a successful black American revolution. In attempting to translate “Canga Li” into a stanza of “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” Communipaw implied, Tennyson had tried to silently co-opt, and thus erase, that revolutionary history. By insisting on the chant’s untranslatability, then, Smith declared such an erasure impossible.

Of course, while the untranslatability of “Canga Li” potentially protected a history of black American revolution from appropriation and eradication, it also presented some difficulties for black Americans in the United States who hoped to use the chant to inspire a domestic uprising. In Smith’s letter, Fylbel articulates this concern, as well as a plan for overcoming the chant’s linguistic impenetrability. He exhales, 

“Canga Li” must yet ring in the interior of Africa: I go in for extending the area of Slavery: for the renewal of the African slave-trade: let them import a million a year: then, in six years (rising and stretching out outward his long right arm,) before this arm has lost its vigor, away down in the sunny South, those six millions of ‘children of the sun,’ restless under the lash, and uncontaminated, unenfeebled by American Christianity, may hear in their midst “Canga li,” and the affrighted slave owners, not stopping to count their ‘people,’ will rush away North faster than they did from St. Domingo. (Smith, “Correspondent” 3)

Communipaw’s companion hopes to sidestep a problem of linguistic translation by resorting to bodily transportation. By reopening the international slave trade, Fylbel hopes to “import” millions of Africans to the United States and then sit back and wait for them to spark a slave insurrection. Fylbel argues that these African men and women would, unlike their American counterparts, possess an “uncontaminated” and “unenfeebled” commitment to liberty, and thus immediately become “restless under the lash.” The revolutionary anthem of “Canga Li,” Fylbel concludes, would provide the spark for a population primed for armed resistance.

Smith thus voiced through Fylbel the seductive idea of an original, “uncontaminated” culture that could be carried unaltered across the Atlantic, while marking his own dismissal of such a notion by couching it in a plan to enslave six million Africans and having his alter ego Communipaw interrupt Fylbel – imploring him to “[h]ush” – and quickly change the subject (“Correspondent” 3).

Yet, like Communipaw’s recognition of the untranslatable, Fylbel’s proposal underscored the powerful differences between and among communities of the African diaspora. In his letter, then, Smith began to think through the role that such differences might play in a theory of transnational black identity, a line of inquiry picked up by scholars such as Stuart Hall, who envisions a “diaspora experience” defined “not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference” (235). Making a similar point, Ifeoma Nwankwo contends that “[d]isjunctedness and difference are as constitutive of African Diaspora culture and history as are manifestations and evidence of contemporary and historical bonds” (18). In a culture constituted not simply by difference but especially by the recognition of that difference as “necessary,” a practice of translation that works to unpack the meaning of such differences without attempting to erase them would prove invaluable. “If a discourse of diaspora articulates difference,” writes Brent Hayes Edwards, “then one must consider the status of that difference – not just linguistic difference but, more broadly, the trace or the residue, perhaps, of what resists or escapes translation” (13). In his treatment of Tennyson, Smith articulates a method of translation capable of comprehending the untranslatable without removing it, and thus envisions a way of grappling with the differences that constitute the cultures of black transnationalism.

5 Translation and Transnational American Studies

In conclusion, I would like to consider Smith’s reading of the “Charge of the Light Brigade” not only as a transnational cultural production – blending and juxtaposing British poetry, Congolese song, French literary criticism, and theories of translation from Europe and the Americas – but also as a guide for transnational American studies. In examining how acts of translation can both reveal as well as obscure transnational networks, Smith’s work suggests that an attention to translation can produce crucial insights into just how transnationalism works. A number of recent studies
have borne out this proposition, marking, I hope, the beginning rather than the culmination of a transnational American studies attentive to practices and theories of translation. For example, the place of translation in the writings of many of Smith’s black American contemporaries would benefit from a close (re)examination. A list of such men and women might begin with authors such as William Wells Brown and Martin Delany, but could also include less well-examined scholar-activists such as William C. Nell and Charlotte Forten. Moreover, in addition to pointing the way toward future subjects of study, Smith’s commitment to a scholarship that openly— and often incompletely— unpacks the constitutive nature of differences rather than overlooking or obscuring them offers an important model for a discipline that examines transnational formations that often emerge out of the violent collision of national communities.

Works Cited


“Peebler than the Original” 247


--- Though by no means a complete list, see for example Boggs; Brickhouse; Edwards; Gruesz.