

Translation and Migration, Utopia and Dystopia: Representations of the Labor of Cultural Mediation in Fictional Eastern Europe and the Real US-Mexico Border

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Recommended Citation

Richie, James L. IV () "Translation and Migration, Utopia and Dystopia: Representations of the Labor of Cultural Mediation in Fictional Eastern Europe and the Real US-Mexico Border," *Vernacular: New Connections in Language, Literature, & Culture*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/vernacular/vol10/iss1/13>

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Cover Page Footnote

Thanks to Dr. Simona Bertacco and to Theo Barthes who gave feedback on this work.

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1. Suspicion the Foreign: A Historical and Theoretical Overview

The field of translation studies has documented many cases in which Anglo-American culture responds to the work of cultural mediation with suspicion, as scholars in this field have observed how this suspicion is directed at translators. Even predating the establishment of the United States of America as a country, in the territory that would become the nation, tensions between Indigenous people and colonial settlers often resulted in hostility toward translators. Translation theorist Moira Inghilleri notes in her book *Translation and Migration* (2017) the condition of Sassamon, who acted as a facilitator and an interpreter between the Puritans and the Wampanoag. Inghilleri notes that “Though he had grown up in a world where Puritans and Indians existed side by side with much shared experience, tensions between the two sides had gradually deepened....Sassamon, blamed by Eliot for Philip’s refusal to convert and blamed by Philip for his troubles with the English and for traveling to betray his plans to the English – was murdered by some of Philip’s men” (*Translation* 44). The United States, thus, emerged from conditions of tensions between Europeans and non-Europeans, and these tensions are deeply rooted in the history of the nation. The suspicion of translators, while not taking the form of murder, has persisted into the twentieth century, and it persists in the present. The role that racialization plays in the systematic distrust of translators must be noted in the twentieth century context as well. Inghilleri also observes that, at Angel Island, an immigration center that received mostly immigrants from China there was a strong distrust of interpreters who facilitated the interrogations of incoming Chinese immigrants. Inghilleri notes that there a was a “culture of

distrust and discrimination” (*Translation* 52) toward Chinese-born interpreters amidst fears that they were collaborating in unethical ways with potential immigrants.

From these historical conditions, in the United States, the ideologically conditioned response to the foreign has been either to view it with suspicion or to try to dominate and appropriate it for the purposes of territorial expansion and assimilation. In his essay, “Translation, American English, and the National Insecurities of Empire” which analyzes United States military policies related to studying critical defense languages and the use of native interpreters, translation theorist Vicente Rafael notes the weaponization of foreign (non-English) languages in American ideology. Rafael notes that “[t]he systematic instrumentalization of foreign languages to serve nationalist ends runs far and deep in American thinking” (2). This form of instrumentalization of language reflects the overall tendencies in capitalist society. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer note observe that in capitalist society, the only valid form of knowledge is that which seeks to produce technology. Adorno and Horkheimer define the aim of technology as being “to produce neither concepts nor images, nor the joy of understanding, but method, exploitation of the labor of others...What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings” (2). We can potentially view how American ideology uses non-English languages as a form of technology: something that is valid only when it can be used to dominate others. When the United States military uses interpreters for purposes of intelligence, which can in turn be used to dominate other cultures, this use of non-English language is ideologically justifiable. Uses of non-English language for purposes other than domination, however, cause suspicion in Anglo-American culture, and as we have seen in the historical examples referenced previously, interpreters are often subjected to suspicion.

In addition to the instrumentalizing approach to non-English languages, interpreters see themselves instrumentalized in this system. Inghilleri notes in her book *Interpreting Justice: Ethics, Politics, and Language* (2012) how the paradigm of viewing interpreters as passive conduits removes the recognition of the humanity of interpreters from research on the work that they do. Inghilleri observes that the majority of studies on legal interpretation “prioritize linguistic and cognitive skills over ethical and moral responsibility... This commonly expressed view paradoxically reinforces interpreter invisibility” (*Interpreting* 82-83). American ideology conceptualizes non-English languages in terms of how they can be used for domination and exploitation, and this same conceptual framework relegates interpreters to merely possessors and applicators of linguistic knowledge. It is especially telling that interpreters are not consulted for their cultural knowledge or ethical insight from the perspective of the non-English culture. As merely conveyers of linguistic knowledge, interpreters are reduced to their instrumental role within the system of power. Outside of contexts in which interpreters facilitate the use of non-English languages, forms of control are even imposed on the use of non-English languages inside the United States. Rafael notes that “In the official and arguably popular imaginary, the foreign can be recognized only when it is subordinated to the domestic” (4). While it is acknowledged that several forms of migration are necessary for political and economic purposes, the use of non-English languages is confined to certain spaces: enclaves of immigrant communities or worksites in sectors in which work is carried out by a mainly immigrant community (such as certain forms of agricultural or construction work). The ideologically conditioned need for the foreign to be instrumentalized, thus, penetrates deeply into the political unconscious.

2. Real and Imagined Cultural Mediation in American Ideology

While the historical and theoretical examples outlined above give us some idea to what extent the suspicion of the foreign has an ideological hold over subjects, turning to art produced from within these ideological conditions can reveal the experiences of those who do the work of cultural mediation. Moreover, a comparison between artistic representation and autobiographical account of this type of work can demonstrate the similarities and differences between the perception of this type of work in the popular consciousness and the reality of its material conditions. I propose one such a comparison can be made by examining the role of cultural mediation in the independently developed video game *Papers Please* (2013) created by Lucas Pope and the autobiographical book, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (2017) by Valeria Luiselli. In *Papers Please*, the player assumes the role of The Inspector, a customs official who checks the documents of potential border crossers into the country of Arstotzka, a fictitious Eastern Bloc country. *Tell Me How It Ends* is Luiselli's autobiographical account of her interpreting work with child asylum seekers in the American legal system. While the two texts selected for comparison may, at first glance, seem to occupy entirely different worlds, there is more linking the two that reveals itself after analysis.

The historical memory of the working conditions in the Soviet Union may shed some unique insight into the contemporary American relationship between subjects and their working environments. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek connects themes of unfreedom and language (or mechanisms of communication) in the Soviet Union and the relevancy of these themes to our contemporary conditions of freedom and expression or lack thereof, by conveying them through this joke:

[A] German worker gets a job in Siberia; aware of how all mail will be read by the censors, he tells his friends: “Let’s establish a code: if a letter you get from me is written in ordinary blue ink; it’s true. If it’s written in red ink; it’s false. After a month, his friends get the first letter, written in blue ink; Everything is wonderful here; the shops are full, food is abundant, apartments are heated, cinemas show films from the West, there are many beautiful girls ready for an affair – the only thing you can’t get is *red ink*. (6, his emphasis)

For Žižek, the red ink in this joke functions metaphorically for our inability to articulate our conditions of unfreedom in contemporary incarnations of late capitalism. The setting of Siberia, however, adds rhetorical strength to this argument. As a historical setting, the Soviet Union forces contemporary readers (especially those in the so-called West) to consider the impact of state censorship on private forms of communication and expression. Just as Žižek’s joke does, works of art that utilize the Eastern Bloc as a setting, can be used intentionally to communicate political realities of capitalist countries. Conditions of surveillance, however, are currently perceived as the diametric opposite of the assumed conditions of freedom US workers.

Anthropologist David Graeber notes how the conditions of the Soviet Union have come to represent the opposite of the current reality in industrialized countries, as Graeber observes that “[t]his is always represented as exactly what would never happen under capitalism” (17). Upon further analysis, however, the dichotomous relationship between working conditions in the historical Soviet Union and working conditions in contemporary, capitalist, industrialized countries prove to be more of an ideological categorization rather than reflective of the lived experience of workers in the two systems. Graeber elaborates, noting that many blue-collar workers in the United States currently have “backbreaking schedules designed with scientific efficiency”

(18). Despite the ideological claim that living under a capitalist society is fundamentally different from living under a communist one, the experiential reality of working conditions under both economic systems is the same for millions of workers.

Beyond demonstrating that there are similarities in working conditions between the USSR of the historic imagination and the contemporary reality of contemporary, industrialized countries, I would like to call attention to one particular aspect of such working conditions that those involved in the work of cultural mediation experience in their work as a result of the suspicion directed (especially in Anglo-American culture as my area of focus) at them: spiritual violence. Graeber notes that subjects who work in conditions of constant surveillance and whose work obligates them to actively cause harm to others endure spiritual violence. Graeber observes that such working conditions “induce feelings of hopelessness, depression, and self-loathing. They are forms of spiritual violence directed at the essence of what it means to be a human being” (134). In this essay, I argue that, as agents of systems of control, those involved in the labor of cultural mediation experience spiritual violence through 1) the constant scrutiny of the dominant culture and 2) their awareness of the harmful effects of the institutions in which they work on those who are marginalized. The act of being caught between two cultures creates the conditions whereby interpreters and those who work with migrants (in any form) are susceptible to spiritual violence. By examining these two works, *Papers Please* and *Tell me how It Ends*, one set in a dystopian depiction of a fictitious country and the other challenging the utopian (in the sense of being unrealistic) norms of immigration policy in the US, I intend to show how the compulsory need to subject interpreter figures to spiritual violence is deeply ingrained in American dealings with the experiences of the foreign.

3. Participation in a System of Spiritual Violence in *Papers, Please*

In the game *Papers Please*, the player embodies the character of The Inspector, a state employee responsible for vetting border crossers who attempt to enter the fictitious country of Arstotzka by checking the documents that these migrants offer for inspection. The act of verifying the ‘truth’ of these documents comprises the main gameplay feature of *Papers Please*. The setting, development, and premise significantly distinguish *Papers Please* from the video games that are produced in the mainstream, or to use the industry term ‘AAA’ games, and these significant disruptions of the forms of the medium of video games enhances the game’s defamiliarizing effect, thus strengthening its themes. While almost all mainstream games (and most indie games) offer the player the promise of fantastic adventure, fights with dragons and scaling castle walls, as well as the chance to play as an avatar, who significantly contrasts with their real selves in that an accountant from Michigan can play as a barbarian or a wizard in a fantasy setting, *Papers Please*, by design, offers an anti-aesthetic experience. The player is presented with the immigration center: a desk full of analogue technology surrounded by armed guards and long throngs of would-be migrants. The presentation of the migrants also contributes to the hostile aesthetic, as their faces are often sullen and emotionless. The speech of the migrants is also inflected with marked features of Slavic languages. This linguistic markedness is exemplified best by the character of Jorji Costava, who frequently reoccurs throughout different stages of the game with invalid documents. When questioned about the validity of his documents, Jorji will respond with phrases such as “[y]ou no like passport? I understand. I come back with better one” (*Papers, Please*). The linguistic difference in cases such as these serve not only to contextualize the work within its Soviet-inspired setting but also to create additional

difficulty, as the player must decode the intentions of characters who use unconventional patterns of speech for English-language dialogue.

As a work of interactive storytelling, *Papers, Please* confronts the player with challenges to progress from each stage of the work to the next. The moment-to-moment gameplay challenges which the player must overcome, or the ‘gameplay loop,’ consists of verifying the age, gender, and appearance of migrants in their documents with their personal appearance. As a gameplay feature, document checking is very far removed from the grand adventures of mainstream gaming. On its surface, it seems redundant and unengaging, as handling documents may be a factor already in the school or work setting that players should be escaping from in their turning toward video games as a medium of entertainment. Lucas Pope has imbued the document checking in *Papers Please*, however, with several layers of signification. The verification of factual accuracy acts as a solid gaming mechanic; it escalates in difficulty, as new criteria for documents are introduced. When hearing the stories and conditions of the migrants, players are led to question whether having the correct documents is truly the best criterion for deciding who should (and who should not) be allowed to enter the country. Another feature of the game’s overall presentation that contributes to its emotional resonance with players is the setting. Since Arstotzka is evocative of the Soviet Union (in its color schemes, fonts, the accents of the characters and the political conditions of the story), the player’s own knowledge (to whatever extent that may be) of conditions of unfreedom in the Soviet Union, or more generally, in the Eastern Bloc, are then layered onto the events as they unfold in the game. While the Inspector, as a character, may seem to have freedom, in that his decisions have an effect on the status of the migrants as they try to enter Arstotzka, the Inspector himself is a subject within both the systems of signification and the material conditions of the systemic institutions around him.

In many ways, the situation of the Inspector reflects the working conditions of contemporary interpreters, translators, or mediators in the process of immigration.

Beyond the presentation of the game (in its visuals and gameplay features), another factor that distinguishes *Papers Please* from mainstream games is the theme of agency and its relations to violence and power. In most video games, players identify as their avatars, who are barbarians or wizards in fantasy settings or high-tech super soldiers in science fiction settings. In mainstream games, players achieve their goals through using violence: slaying dragons to get treasure or saving the world by confronting a dystopian overlord. In *Papers Please*, however, violence is used by many characters, but never by the player. Moreover, the threat of violence is constantly directed at the player. The violence that is directed toward the player character assumes many different forms. Sometimes, the Inspector's workday is cut short by a terrorist attack. The terrorists in the game serve to both thematically reinforce the danger in the work that the player is doing, both in the perceived fear of the other and in the response of the government of Arstotzka to the terrorist attack, as the guards begin firing their machine guns toward the direction of the attack. The more extreme violence, however, comes from the psychological use of violence toward the player through economic means. At the end of each day, the player is awarded with a quantity of credits (a monetary value) depending on the player's ability to process documents correctly. Processing a higher value of documents earns a higher value of credits, yet credits are deducted for noncompliance with the regulations in the admission of migrants. Admitting migrants whose documents are invalid or incongruous between the written document and the appearance of the migrants causes a deduction in the sum of credits that the player receives. The Inspector needs the credits to tend to the material needs of his family members. Thus, allowing for the admittance of migrants whose documents do not meet the

standards set forth by the officials can result in harm toward the Inspector's family if the Inspector is not able to pay for enough food and heat to prevent his family members from becoming sick. Potential endings for the game include the inspector's family members dying due to lack of material resources or the Inspector being arrested or sentenced to hard labor for noncompliance. Despite all the negative outcomes that admitting unauthorized migrants into Arstotzka can bring about, there are several instances in which the player is tempted to allow these unsanctioned entries. By placing themselves into the role of the Inspector, players experience the surveillance element present in the conditions of spiritual violence that real interpreters experience.

Papers, Please presents players with several situations, which pose moral and ethical dilemmas. In these nuanced situations, players may wish to allow migrants to enter even though the migrants are using invalid documents. The group study by Paul Formosa et al. "*Papers, Please* and the Systemic Approach to Engaging Ethical Expertise in Videogames" outlines the approaches that players take to resolving moral dilemmas presented by situations in the game. The study notes that players "[f]irst, to try to always follow the bureaucratic rules as best you can no matter what the content of those rules are and no matter who they are applied to. Second, to mostly apply those rules correctly, but to make a few exceptions on moral (or other, perhaps selfish) grounds" (Formosa et al. 217). That is to say, for most players, the solutions that they employ when confronted with ethically ambiguous situations are, first, to rigidly adhere to the bureaucratic processes, and second, to modify these processes when they are unable to justify applying them to the presented situation. When players are confronted with such challenges, they encounter the simulated forms of spiritual violence that real cultural mediators encounter in their working conditions. The conditions of constant surveillance, the constant threat of violence

toward the Inspector or the members of his family, and the cases in which players have a compelling reason to admit unauthorized border crossers into Arstotzka, in which players know that conforming with the regulations of the state can lead to situations which produce harm, effectively simulate the conditions of spiritual violence that Graeber outlines.

4. Interpreting and the Inversion of Ethical Norms in *Tell me How it Ends*

In the autobiographical *Tell me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions*, Valeria Luiselli recounts her experiences as an interpreter for migrant children seeking asylum. The book serves to both document Luiselli's lived experiences but also to show the inherent systemic flaws within the legal institution. In addition to the book's function as activist literature, its unique structure is notable. Luiselli notes that the problem with relaying the stories of immigrant children is the resistance of these stories to the narrative forms commonly used in mainstream fiction and nonfiction writing. Luiselli observes "[t]he problem with trying to tell their story is that it has no beginning, no middle, and no end" (7). The Anglo-American reader is conditioned to look for narrative plot points in both fictional and nonfiction accounts. Luiselli confronts the challenge of recounting the true stories of the experiences of immigrant children despite the fact that these narratives do not conform to established narrative patterns. Faced with this problem: Luiselli employs a unique solution: throughout *Tell Me How It Ends*, Luiselli uses the questions from the questionnaire given to children asylum seekers as markers of the structure of the plot of her narrative. Luiselli opens the book with the first question, "Why did you come to the United States?" (6) and places the subsequent thirty-nine questions throughout the book. These questions often act as headings, opening new chapters or sections of the text. In this solution, Luiselli uses the bureaucratic form as a literary convention. The reader is compelled to continue progressing through the stories to 'work through' the questions despite the fact that the narratives

of the children interviewed can present challenging events to the readers who are removed from the situation of migration. For Luiselli, the importance of the narratives of these children being read is neither a profit motive nor an aesthetic ideal, as for the author, there is an ethical imperative to communicate these stories. Luiselli notes:

And perhaps the only way to grant any justice—were that even possible—is by hearing and recording those stories over and over again so that they come back, always, to haunt and shame us. Because being aware of what is happening in our era and choosing to do nothing about it has become unacceptable. Because we cannot allow ourselves to go on normalizing horror and violence. Because we can all be held accountable if something happens under our noses and we don't dare even look. (30)

In a system of radical injustice, for Luiselli, the only just course of action is telling the stories of the marginalized. In this context, being able to tell these stories and have them read by the mainstream Anglo-American population is morally necessary. Luiselli's solution for engaging the reader, in this case, becomes a way of confronting a system of injustice. Furthermore, the need to communicate the stories of these children echoes Luiselli's task as an interpreter and demonstrates to the reader the importance of communication in an unethical system.

As in *Papers, Please*, Luiselli also details how cultural mediators handle ethical dilemmas. Luiselli presents the situation of the interpreter as one both bound by ethical and professional practices but also as one in which the ethics of everyday life are turned upside-down. Luiselli observes that, while the interpreter is ethically and professionally prevented from fabricating any details in the children's account, an effective interpreter does scan for and highlight certain elements, which are relevant to the reasons the state will grant asylum. Luiselli observes:

On the one hand, it's important to record even the most minor details from each story because a good lawyer can use them to strengthen a case in ways that might not have been evident to an interpreter. On the other, although it's not in the protocol, we often look for more general categories for each story that may tip the legal scale in favor of the future client in a future trial—categories such as “abandonment,” “prostitution,” “sex trafficking,” “gang violence,” and “death threats.” But we cannot make up the answers in their favor, nor can we lead the children to tell us what is best for their cases, as much as we would like to. It can be confusing and bewildering, and I find myself not knowing where translation ends and interpretation starts. (61-62)

Under ordinary circumstances, a responsible, rational adult would not wish to hear that a child has encountered experiences with gang violence, prostitution, or the other categories that Luiselli mentions. The legal system pertaining to immigration law in the United States, however, creates an inverse of the standard viewing of a child's exposure to these issues. Nonetheless, the interpreter often works with unwilling participants, who do not wish to acknowledge their proximity to these topics. Thus, the real interpreter is faced with a similar moral dilemma: embellish the truth or leave the children's narratives unaltered, despite the fact that this may result in the child's being removed from the territory of the United States. Here, what Luiselli shows us is how interpreters who really work in the immigration system suffer from the same spiritual violence that players of *Papers, Please* experience in simulation.

The suspicion of the foreign, even directed at interpreter figures, can be seen in several moments throughout *Tell me How it Ends*. Early in the book, the author notes how she is afraid to tell Americans that she is from Mexico. While reporting on child immigrants (a story which led her to work as an interpreter), Luiselli did not say that she was Mexican to the locals and

used the cover story that she was researching for a Western that she was writing (23). Among the local population and protesters who had travelled from other states, the Anti-immigrant sentiment was so strong that the presence of non-white identity, in and of itself, could potentially arouse suspicion and possibly even violence. Luiselli elaborates, however, that the language used to frame concepts related to issues of immigration is imbedded with ideological values. For instance, Luiselli highlights that the terminology used to describe non-citizens dehumanizes those who were not born in the United States. Luiselli observes that even the category that applied to her had this effect, noting “‘nonresident aliens.’ That’s the term used to describe anyone from outside the United States—‘alien’—whether or not they are residents. There are ‘nonresident aliens,’ ‘resident aliens,’ and even ‘removable aliens’—that I know of” (8). The suspicion toward foreigners and those who do work to help them integrate into society is encoded in the very language used to describe the situation in both legal and everyday language. Even though this dehumanizing language is derived from the legal system, the effect of such categorization can be perceived by those who are subjected to it.

5. On Cultural Mediation as a Form of Caring Labor

Both Pope and Luiselli’s works reveal the interest on behalf of the institutions of power to inflict spiritual violence on those who are involved in the work of cultural mediation. Those who are involved in the facilitation of the migration process, through interpreting spoken language or other interactions, place themselves in proximity to the marginalized, and their work is focused on understanding the needs and goals of these outsiders. Cultural mediation in this context, therefore, could be considered a form of what feminist scholars refer to as caring labor, which is “generally seen as work directed at other people, and it always involves a certain labor of interpretation, empathy, and understanding” (Graeber 236). The parallels between cultural

mediation in a context of migration and caring labor, which is often done by women and undervalued due to the ways in which it escapes quantifiability (Graeber 261-262), reflect other ways in which translation, a form of cultural mediation specific to working with written documents, is culturally seen as inferior to other forms of communication. The cultural assumptions that denigrate translation when compared to monolingual writing often equates the former with femininity and the latter with masculinity, unevenly distributing prestige along these gendered lines. There are historical precedents in which entire national literary canons, constating mostly of male authors, have been translated by women (or even one individual woman). This is the case with Russian literature, in which the works of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Chekhov, and Gogol were first popularized in English-speaking regions thanks to the translations of Constance Garnett (Simon 64-67). However, the image of the feminine work of translation as being subservient to the masculine work of monolingual writing creates the ideological valuing of one form of writing over the other in patriarchal societies. Suzanne Jill Levine, a prolific translator of Latin American literature, notes that translators are often referred to as the “handmaidens” of literary writing, and she calls this designation “one of the tradition’s misogynist labels for this oft maligned but indispensable figure in literary history” (ii). The work of cultural mediation, due to its proximity to outsiders as well as gendered associations, is perceived by Anglo-American culture as both suspicious and inferior to monolingual communication. For these reasons, works such as those of Luiselli and Pope, which act as representations of the labor of cultural mediation, can serve in the important function of changing the public perception of this important type of cross-cultural caring labor (in addition to highlighting the often-underappreciated importance of caring labor in general).

6. Simulation and the Future of Perception

These two works, *Papers, Please* and *Tell Me How It Ends* are valuable due to what they can teach their audiences, especially in a society that views interpreters and migrants with suspicion. Given their straddling of two cultural worlds, translators, interpreters, and other cultural mediators, have a unique relationship to the foreign. Those who find themselves in this liminal space approach the foreign from outside of the instrumentalizing context with which this society usually approaches the foreign. Cultural mediators who work with the intention of integrating immigrants into society work against the processes of domination, instrumentalization, and appropriation. Cultural mediators may not always be entirely successful in their attempts to work against these projects, but they operate while working from a different mentality. The proximity of the interpreter figure to the foreign cultivates this unique mentality. Workers whose position obligates them to interact with incoming migrants and whose knowledge allows these workers to understand the stories and experiences of these outsiders, whether that knowledge is literally knowledge of another language or understanding the process of immigration as it is really experienced by immigrants, have a fundamentally different understanding of the dynamic between the immigrants and society. Cultural mediators, therefore, have a different understanding of the foreign than those who are not engaged in this type of work. Cultural works which successfully cause their readers to embody the experience of cultural mediators (such as the non-fiction book and video game surveyed in this study), therefore, can be invaluable not only for changing the popular perception of cultural mediators and the work that they do, but such works can also change the perception of the foreign in how it is understood in general (especially in Anglo-American culture).

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