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**Review of Kavita Bhanot and Jeremy Tiang’s (eds.) *Violent Phenomena: 21 Essays on Translation***

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Bhanot, Kavita, and Jeremy Tiang, eds. *Violent Phenomena: 21 Essays on Translation*. n.p.: Tilted Axis Press, 2022.

*Violent Phenomena* is a response to one of the significant political concerns of our moment, that of decolonisation. Let’s begin by reminding ourselves of Tuck and Yang’s ineluctable statement that however much “decolonisation” may have become a buzzword in recent years, “decolonisation is not a metaphor”. It “brings about the repatriation of Indigenous land and life” (1). Accordingly, twenty-four writers and translators from across the world here direct the “violent phenomenon” of decolonisation – in the words of Frantz Fanon – to the cultural establishment of literary translation, a field which editors Kavita Bhanot (editor and translator) and Jeremy Tiang (translator) accurately describe as “dominated by middle-class whiteness” (8). The volume aims to problematise translation as a neutral field, highlighting instead the “imperialist mindset” (9) at play where the “seemingly benign ‘curiosity’ [of Western readers of translated works] can be questioned as an assertion of power” (9).

This review can only provide the barest introduction to the breadth and richness of the content and approaches in *Violent Phenomena*. Contributions range across memoir, scholarly work, interviews and literary analysis, with some pieces strongly based in translation and/or political theory and others prioritising the human experience. For this reviewer, that diversity of thought and form, offered by contributors from over a dozen different ancestries and mother tongues, was rich, inventive and absorbing.

The collection opens with a quasi-academic conversation/article between Gitanjali Patel and Nariman Youssef, printed in landscape rather than portrait format and including extensive quotations “from translators for whom [the translation] mainstream is not enough” (18). Kaiama L. Glover considers blackness, race and “cleansing” material by examining her own translation of the Haitian Vodou novel *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves* [Hadriana in All My Dreams], while Aaron Robertson writes of his unpublished translation from Italian of *Memories of an Ethiopian Princess*, highlighting the relationship between Italy and nations in the Horn of Africa. In contrast, Korean translator Anton Hur explores the supremacist mythos of “the English reader” – white, male and literary – who is the default target of mainstream translations.

Khairani Barokka debunks “the colonial right of people privileged by Empire to access all kinds of information” (66). A speaker of three Indonesian languages, including one under threat, Barokka emphasises that “there are things that [non-locals] *should not* translate, and that, as indigenous peoples, we do not want them to even have access to” (74, original emphasis). Eluned Gramich relearns herself and/in Welsh, while Paraguayan-born Elisa Taber demonstrates *mythopoetizaje* (“the recreation of myths (mythopoesis) born out of mestizaje”; 268) explicating texts presented in Guaraní, Spanish and English. Polyglot Indian translator Madhu H. Kaza writes of the central disjunct in her relationship to her mother tongue, Telugu: “In the last decade I have translated contemporary Telugu fiction into English, and yet it remains improbable to think of myself as a translator from this language” (306). Another multilingual, “mutt mixed-breed Latina translator” (150) Lúcia Collischonn, contributes a “academic-essay-manifesto-crônica” (150) in defence of the L2 translator and against the

colonial supremacy that considers them an “incompetent *underling* suboptimal beings” (153, original emphasis).

Scholar Sofia Rehman examines the complexities of being a feminist, decolonising translator of classical Arabic texts, and Layla Benitez-James analyses issues around translating racialised terminology as a Black, mixed-race woman from Texas. Sandra Tamele, granddaughter of assimilated Mozambicans, explores her relationship to imperial and African Portuguese and to languages of Mozambique, while Monchoachi (one name only) considers the status of Martinican Creole between *crié* (spoken) and *écrit* (written) forms. This is complemented by an afterword from Monchoachi’s translator, Eric Fishman, which situates his writing in a Francophone and Creolophone cultural context. Shushan Avagyan gives a scholarly history of translations from Armenian; Onaiza Drabu sets out the invisibility of Kashmiri, as the language of a contested territory; and British Pakistani Sawad Hussein shares racist episodes from her history as a “BROWN WOMAN” (171, original emphasis) who is a translator of Arabic.

In essays focused on poetry, Hamid Roslan, an ethnically Malay Singaporean, considers his experimental bilingual Singlish/English poetry book *parsetreeforestfire*. Tobago-born M. NourbeSe Philip and Ghanaian-American Barbara Ofusu-Somuah share an interview about “untranslatability” and a performance of the book-length poetry cycle *Zong!*, centred on the drowning massacre of 133 enslaved Africans in 1781. Mona Kareem is scathing of mostly monolingual poets creating “renditions” of poems through often unacknowledged literal/other translations; her title: “Western poets kidnap your poems and call them translations: On the colonial phenomenon of rendition as translation” (143-150). Anticaste publisher Yogesh Matriya shares his experience rendering into English the work of Dalit poet Nagraj Manjule.

Despite the high calibre of contributions, the collection is not as well designed and laid out as other Tilted Axis titles I have read and enjoyed (Tilted Axis is a UK small press which has exclusively published translations since its founding in 2015. Its publications were originally translated from Asian languages only, although recently it has expanded its ambit to include works from the African continent). This decreased quality may hint at a rushed production phase—perhaps submissions were longer than expected, but both page count and price point were strictly limited. Among other issues, apparently random sentences, paragraphs and pages are printed in darker type for no clear reason, while the lighter type is slightly hard to read; left and right margins are laughably slim, and text falls in the gutter; footnotes are crammed into the already tight bottom margin, and are neither attractive nor systematically formatted across the anthology. It is unfortunate that these flaws drag on the reader’s attention and diminish the physical attractiveness of the volume. Elsewhere, the designers have responded quite well to the demands of typographically experimental work, such as text running in two columns across the spread (as in Patel and Youssef’s piece, or in Ayesha Manazir Siddiqi’s defence of Urdu, an essay which “is also a prayer for the tender things, those that become lost, damaged or forgotten when a dominant language overtakes one less powerful”; 83).

Printing issues aside, I found this collection of writings confronting, stimulating, wide-ranging, insightful and overall thoroughly fascinating – I have longed for a fellow reader to discuss it with. It is no pleasant process to have one’s ideas and thinking patterns around translation and language violently disrupted, and that is as it should be. As Bhanot and Tiang close their introduction, “Colonialism is violence, and it is difficult to see how decolonising could be anything other than a violent disruption” (13). This volume is highly recommended, challenging and rewarding for all writers, translators and mindful users of language.

**Bibliography**

Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1-40.