

Meditation on Pedagogy: (Un)Translating Jasper Ridge

How does a comparativist take on the exercise of a tour? How can I, a scholar of literature, encourage people to engage thoughtfully with these landscapes? In addition to offering practical advice, this is an exercise in identifying a topic that articulates clearly why the humanities matters in contemporary society at large and at Jasper Ridge in particular.

One of the functions of the university is to solve problems: academic disciplines exist to produce knowledge that, at best, works out new answers relevant to respective fields. An engineer builds a more efficient renewable energy system, a cybersecurity expert protects a company's sensitive data, a law graduate resolves a dispute between two parties. But not every discipline exists to solve. In particular, the humanities, or the disciplines that *interpret* the works of human culture, frames problems; we ask questions that need to be addressed.

The first problem that I want to frame for the new generation of **Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve ('Ootchamin 'Ooyakma)** docents is the idea of Jasper Ridge as a translation zone, which seems particularly fruitful. One way to think about all of us, future docents, is as translators of this place: During tours, we interpret the source language of the Jasper Ridge ecosystem and landscape and domesticate it to our target audience, the members on our tours, in ways that fine-tunes a response between the dialectic of scientific objectivity versus story-centered anthropomorphism— or perhaps, on our best days, we consider both Cartesian western epistemic approaches to the environment (the separation of us from the organisms we study) and traditional ecological knowledge (TEK, the integration of subjecthood in all organisms).¹

Faculty Director Tadashi Fukami, borrowing from Albert Marshall, an indigenous elder, calls this complementary approach “two-eyed seeing.”² As Marshall puts it, learning to see from one

¹ As a revealing aside, when I type indigenous knowledge into Google, the first link that appears is from the White House government website [titled: What is “Indigenous Knowledge” And Why Does It Matter? Integrating Ancestral Wisdom and Approaches into Federal Decision-Making.](#)

²Bartlett C, Marshall M, Marshall A. Two-Eyed Seeing and other Lessons Learned within a co-learning journey of bringing together indigenous and mainstream knowledges and ways of knowing. *J Environ Stud.* 2012;2: 331–340. doi: 10.1007/s13412-012-0086-8

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eye the strengths of Indigenous knowledge, and from the other eye the strengths of mainstream [Western] knowledge.³

As proven last week, we are more than equipped for the task of translation—once we get going, it is even difficult for some of us nature lovers to snap out of the trance of natural history and ecology.

Yet I also want to problematize the reflexive assumption of perfect communication across this space by invoking the *Untranslatable*, a concept used by literary scholar Emily Apter.⁴ That is, what if we thought about Jasper Ridge as a space of non-translation, mistranslation, incomparability and finally untranslatability? Rather than looking for kumbaya moments between *Homo Sapiens* and non-human animals or organisms, zooming in on a bald eagle soaring over the reservoir against an azure sky, admiring the graceful flight of violet-green swallows near the field station, soaking in the peaceful soundscape of the dam or admiring a *Dirca* bloom in March, I invite us to look at difference and opacity.

It is difficult for me to be precise here because each of our tour attendants will have various moments of noticing that are worthy of teasing out. One of the most generative ways to alert yourself to these is to pay attention to what moments tour attendants are “instagraming,” and I mean this literally, when are they taking out their iPhone camera and snapping moments?⁵ It is in these snapshots that activates the most potential for tension.

For example, I will now show several slides of the four photos that my friend and colleague literary scholar and architect María Gloria Robalino Ceped took on an informal tour that I gave to her on May 20, 2024. After the tour, I asked her to send me every photo that she took and a reflection. It is interesting that three out of the four photos are of the Searsville dam. I will now move onto her comments.

“I have a longstanding interest in reservoirs, so I was struck the most to learn that the lake we saw at Jasper Ridge was a **reservoir**. The word “**Reservoir**” has an island-quality, as

³ An indigenous scholar who has written with verve and persuasion about the merits of indigenous knowledge is Robin Wall Kimmerer, through the analogy of the sweetgrass (*Anthoxanthum nitens*).

⁴ Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*. Verso Books, 2014.

⁵ I want to thank Laura Jones for suggesting this idea.

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it feels heavily anachronic and disconnected from contemporary ecological discourse. The same is true for the word "Preserve," with which it holds a strong semantic resonance, and is a word that is part of Jasper Ridge's official name "The Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve." The idea that we must "preserve" a site intact re-introduces the dangerous assumption that this landscape must always remain pristine and intact, even when seasons of fire and change are vital for the healthy development of its Redwood trees, as our guide AJ pointed out.

"**Reservoir**" also brings to mind the word "**Reservation**" and the vexed relationship of Jasper Ridge with the Indigenous groups that used to own the land. The label "Indian Reserve" stirs the same feeling of uneasiness in me that the word "**Preserve**" does. It implies the idea that a culture is being "reserved" or "preserved." In other words, that it is being forcefully calcified into a governmental definition rather than allowed to develop on its own terms like other cultures that don't face the same pressures to prove themselves "authentic" in order to gain land rights."

María Gloria's photos—and her subsequent reflections—point to her fascination with water but also to a tension: here it is in the anachronistic language of this space.

Morality:

Furthermore, María Gloria's comments about "Preserve" as part of Jasper Ridge's official name resonates deeply with my own ethical impetus when giving tours: first and foremost our tours *should* center morality/environmental care/Indigenous ways⁶ and then scientific reason (and not the other way around).

In an article titled, *Mapping Erasure: The Power of Nominative Cartography in the Past and Present of the Muwekma Ohlones of the SF Bay Area* Les W. Field, Alan Leventhal and Rosemary Cambra address two events in the 20th century that constructed the erasure of the

⁶ I am purposefully avoiding the term environmental justice in favor of environmental care. Justice centers autonomous individuals; care theory centers individuals dependency and highlights the unchosen obligations we have towards each other (*multispecies reciprocity and interdependence*). Care can reorient justice around and challenge isolated liberal subjects at the center of justice. I borrow this from a talk by Nathaniel Otjen on May 29 titled: Avian Care: Conflict and Interdependency in Birdkeeping.

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Ohlone people. The first was the arbitrary termination of their relationship with the federal government in 1927 and the second was the “extinction sentence” inscribed by Alfred Kroeber in his authoritative tome, *Handbook of the Indians of California* (1925).⁷

The authors focus on “nominative cartography,” the power to erase and implant in the service of colonial projects, arguing that the Spanish colonial project made possible the categorical erasure of the Ohlone presence that occurred after U.S. statehood (1850). Furthermore, we can also see how epistemic erasure was enacted by Kroeber.

There are striking parallels with the settler colonial state of Israel, which the authors draw upon. Historian Rashid Khalidi describes the “Israelification of Palestinian geography” to talk about how the process of naming places privileges one dimension of a complex reality at the expense of others. Prior to the “recent introduction of ‘Ootchamin ‘Ooyakma as the Indigenous translation of Jasper Ridge, as formally recognized by the university,” we can think of Jasper Ridge as just a Stanfordization of Ohlone geography.⁸

What I am saying connects back to the start. As you all recall, on the first day of this class Professor Rodolfo Dirzo stated that **Jasper Ridge** is not a pristine place and has never been. When pristine was anglicized in the 16th century, people borrowed the meanings of “early” and “original” from the Latin word *pristinus* and applied those meanings to what is **desirable** as well as to what is not: the “pristine” past was a place when things were in their oldest or original state, uncorrupted, unpolluted—in short, **better**.

On our tours, as we reflect upon the long history of habitation by the Muwekma Ohlone peoples here, we challenge this notion of a pristine American wilderness untouched by humans and devoid of sin.⁹ Pristine is not dissimilar from the notion of the wild at the center of the American nation-state project. From the romantic sublime of the 18th century to the attraction of

⁷ Let us not forget the genocidal statement of CA’s first governor, Peter Burnett, in his first address to the new state’s legislature: “a war of extermination will be waged until the Indian race becomes extinct”. See: Leventhal, Alan M., Les Field, and Rosemary Cambra. “Mapping Erasure: The Power of Nominative Cartography in the Past and Present of the Muwekma Ohlone of the San Francisco Bay Area,” 2013.

⁸“Introducing ‘Ootchamin ‘Ooyakma | Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve.”.

⁹Treuer, David. “Return the National Parks to the Tribes.” *The Atlantic*, April 12, 2021.

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primitivism and the frontier of the 19th, the removal of Indians to create a “pristine wilderness”—uninhabited as never before in the human history of the place—reminds us just how invented, just how constructed, the American wilderness really is.¹⁰

Yet in challenging the pristine image of Jasper Ridge and various semantic anachronisms, we are also reintroducing the idea of the “untranslatable.” Despite how “pristine” or “desirable” parts of Jasper Ridge may seem, there is something deeply undesirable and therefore impossible to translate about the specters of this place which I have been discussing: History.

Part 2: History

“We have a word for idyllic towns where the youth suicide rate is three times as high as it’s supposed to be: haunted. Palo Alto is haunted,” writes American journalist Malcolm Harris in his garish 700-page tome *Palo Alto: A History of California, Capitalism, and the World*.¹¹

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, one of the most influential postcolonial intellectuals, also uses the word haunted when describing her translation process. In the preface of her French-to-English translation of Aimé Césaire’s *A Season in the Congo*, she writes that “translation is the most intimate act of reading. And to read is to pray to be *haunted*. A translator may be a ventriloquist, performing the contradiction, the counter-resistance, which is at the heart of love.”¹²

Jasper Ridge is untranslatable because, despite the love we have cultivated for this place, which for me has become a metonym for Stanford (for what is Stanford now without Jasper Ridge?), we are haunted by the kinds of large historical crimes of our environs that, since committed, can never truly be set right. We are reminded of this week after week, as we amicably pass along Sand Hill Road, where venture funds and billions of dollars sprung up like spring wildflowers—of the past and the present overlapping.¹³ As we drive past the intersection of Junipero Serra Boulevard, the 18th-century founder of the California mission system, the specters of this place disturb us.

¹⁰ Cronon, William. “The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” *Environmental History* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 1996): 7–28.

¹¹ Harris, Malcolm. *Palo Alto: A History of California, Capitalism, and the World*. Little, Brown, 2023.

¹² Césaire, Aimé. *A Season in the Congo*. Seagull Books, 2010.

¹³ “Stanford Will Seek to Rename Serra Mall in Honor of Jane Stanford.” September 13th, 2018.

Part Three: Materiality

This is a philosophical point on the impossibility of fully capturing this history in concepts or language,¹⁴ but allows me to transition into my second reason for the burden of translation: the materiality of the place/JR.

Fanya Becks, whose 2018 dissertation is titled *Articulations of the Ineffable: Narratives, Engagement, and Historical Anthropology with the Muwekma Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area*, quotes Native American civil rights leader Standing Bear in the context of foreigners not understanding America. “People who have not lived in a place for generations and whose ancestral blood and bodies have not merged with the place cannot know it,” Standing Bear said.¹⁵ I have not lived in or around Jasper Ridge—neither have any of my ancestors; my only connection to it is one forged by this course. Furthermore, I still can not tell a *Quercus douglasii* from a *Quercus lobata* without taking a hard look at the leaves lobes and even then I might be guessing. My classification-obsessed self knows how to use binoculars but has no sense of intuitive connectedness with the land—only a learned one. I can try to enter a modality in which my worldview begins to accept the animacy of rocks and soil, in which the landscape becomes part of me, but then I enter a sort of performativity that contrasts much of what we have been learning. There is nothing wrong or shameful in me acknowledging the shortcomings of the Western episteme, despite the fact that I will soon be crowned a docent, but I hope I am gesturing towards humility connected to the ethical project of the untranslation zone.

Part 4, Pedagogy:

One of the main goals of this talk has been to try and articulate a conceptual framework for thinking about pedagogy on our Jasper Ridge tours: starting tours with the untranslatable. In addition, there are some clear ways forward that may be less theoretical because all of us are all dealing with the Stanford System, a scarcity environment which parallels other cut-throat places and perpetuates the idea that we, the chosen ones, need to struggle somehow to keep moving on: if we are not suffering, we must be doing it wrong. This is capitalism par excellence, and the

¹⁴ I have been informed from this both by Walter Benjamin and Hayden White’s discussions on history.

¹⁵ Becks, Fanya Sandili. “Articulations of the Ineffable: Narratives, Engagement, and Historical Anthropology with the Muwekma Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area.” Phd, Stanford University, 2018.

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Palo Alto way par excellence. We are in the rat wheel of production—no pain, no gain—and so the platitudes go on. One of the ways that JR tours can challenge these logics is because, depending on how we lead, the place is perfectly conducive to slowing down and orchestrating attention to noticing, experiencing and sitting with the unresolvable.

- 1) It seems like a particularly resonant way to address the untranslatability then is by incorporating silence. I did this for 1-2 minutes on the tour that I watched Eva Shen masterfully lead last week. As we approached the redwood grove, I noticed that after two-hours of non-stop attempts of translating every organism on site, we would all benefit from surrendering ourselves to silence.

Here is what former medical doctor Emily Kim, one of the people who joined our tour, had to say:

“Hi AJ, I am typically in motion most of the time, busy with minuscule to large tasks. I am not the type to reflect, meditate, or soak things in. Even at the fairy ring, one of my favorite places at the ridge, I am busy looking at plants, trying to identify bird song or feathers, or if I’m giving a tour, talking about the redwoods and giving historical and scientific information. So stopping for a moment of silence at one of my favorite places ‘Gave me permission’ to stop, empty my mind, and enjoy the beauty surrounding. It is therapy!”

- a) *Silence as a way to acknowledge the past, as a way to humbly render bear the myth of nature fluency, as a way of healing.*

Conclusion:

I have proposed so far that we think of this space as untranslatable. But if we *a priori* accept Jasper Ridge as untranslatable—does this mean that we should give up on our attempts to render this place to others? The alternative title of this talk was going to be “Against Translating Jasper

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Ridge” — but I was afraid people would misunderstand what I am saying.¹⁶ Obviously I am not against translation— we do not want to end up with the impossibility of a tour or without knowledge being conveyed — but I want to impress on you that this whole business of knowledge dissemination needs to have a humility in the face of all that we do not know and an awareness of how much is untranslatable, how much is incommensurate between the worldview represented in the Stanford System and the indigenous world view. In particular, I have proposed that we foreground differences, perhaps found in these instagramable or other snapshot moments of our tours, as metaphorical barriers that impede the fluid vocalized or writerly transmission of this landscape.

Above all, I have tried to show how a humanities scholar can contribute through a *reframing* of this space. John Hennessy used to say when he was president of Stanford that the function of the university is to solve problems. Yet for us in the humanities, the function is not to solve but to identify problems and to make already existing ones more complicated, often looking at unsolvable challenges: I hope that I have convinced you that the problems of translation at JR, or the untranslatable, are particularly apt representations of this. I’d like to close with a couple lines from “Savage Sonnet”, a new [Poem](#) by Zeina Hashem Beck (**slide 9**):

- *This didn't begin with our people, no. Ask any natives & they will tell you the lands remember, even when tongues don't.*

Thank you.

¹⁶ Part of this talk stemmed from a long conversation at Bytes cafe over morning coffee with Faculty Director Tad Fukami on May 17 about TEK. He used this translation metaphor when describing how to incorporate TEK with mainstream scientific methods: “If you are multilingual and are truly fluent, you do not mix two languages; when you speak in English, you think in English and when you speak in Arabic, you think in Arabic. You become almost a different person because there is an entire culture associated with one language. On the other hand, beginners of a new language might *translate*. If you have a Spanish word, then you translate it into English, try to understand it, and then try to speak in Spanish. This is not what a lot of good scholars say about TEK: indigenous science should be considered an independent way of looking at nature – we should look at them as separate but complementary and there is a lot of potential at Jasper Ridge.” In other words, we should not translate—I push this further in my vision: we should admit the “untranslatable.”

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