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# Rethinking Translation Emergent, Geographic, and Transformative

Serin Houston et Dan Trudeau

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### Résumé de l'article

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# Rethinking Translation: Emergent, Geographic, and Transformative

**Serin Houston**

Department of Geology and Geography, Mount Holyoke College  
shouston@mtholyoke.edu

**Dan Trudeau**

Department of Geography, Macalester College  
trudeau@macalester.edu

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## Abstract

The term “translation” shows up in myriad sites within and outside of academia. It is frequently used to explain processes of movement and connection between languages, places, contexts, and ideas. Despite this ubiquity, translation as a concept is undertheorized within social science academic discourse. This paper responds to this gap by epistemologically rethinking translation and arguing that translation is emergent and geographic. The practices, processes, and politics of translation, therefore, can generate conditions for social transformation, which can lead to co-liberation. With this in mind, we draw on ideas of “improvisation,” “accompaniment,” and “emergent strategy” to conceptualize our rethinking of translation. We illustrate the possibilities of our rethinking by tracing translation within and through the Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) in Seattle, Washington, a municipal government-led endeavor to eliminate institutional racism and race-based disparities. Situating translation as emergent and geographic shifts attention to the ways and contexts through which possibilities



for social change emerge in time and place. Thus, our theorizing of translation has broad utility for critical geographic inquiry and the specific study and praxis of local scale policy-making and governance.

## Keywords

Translation, emergent strategy, Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI), place, time, scale

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## Introduction

As teachers, scholars, members of families and communities, and people making sense of the complex world we inhabit, we are all constantly engaged in translations. Perhaps the most common association with the word translation pertains to linguistic translation, which is the practice, method, art, and act of shifting prose (written and oral) from one language to another (Bassnett 2014). Through this process, translation works to render visible and roughly equivalent ideas and words in different languages (Davies 2021).<sup>1</sup> Relatedly, scholars of actor-network theory draw on translation to explain the ways different places are linked together through the movement of policies from one setting to another. In linguistic, narrative, and translation studies, scholars frequently write about translation as a spatial metaphor presumably because spatial metaphors offer frameworks for understanding complex processes and how to navigate them (Mitchell 2003; Kremer 2020). Yet, as Katherine McKittrick (2021, 12) cogently explains, “Metaphors move us. Metaphors are not just metaphoric, though. They are concretized.” Indeed, material consequences arise from the ways in which we conceptualize and marshal metaphors (Smith and Katz 1993). While we find great insight in these usual approaches to understanding translation, they still strike us as limiting. In particular, the embodied, context-specific, responsive, and potentially liberatory qualities of translation can become buried in such articulations. We seek to shift this balance by rethinking translation.

We draw upon “emergent strategy” (brown 2017), “improvisation,” and “accompaniment” (Tomlinson and Lipsitz 2019) – which we expand upon later in the paper – to argue that translation is emergent and geographic. Furthermore, the practices, processes, and politics of translation can generate conditions for social transformation, which can lead to co-liberation. We ground our theorization through discussion of the Race and Social Justice

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<sup>1</sup> There are also salient linkages between translation and design thinking, which entails an iterative process that moves through a series of steps: “empathise [sic], define, ideate, prototype, and test” (Dam and Siang 2020, para 1). David Morgan (2011), for example, considers how chair designs have been translated between different raw materials (for instance, wood to metal) and what these tangible translations reveal about aesthetics and the assumption of replicability often tethered to translation. Recognizing phases of ideation and change, as emphasized in design thinking, can both nuance understandings of how material designs and objects evolve over time and how the meaning of translation can expand.

Initiative (RSJI) in Seattle, the purportedly first municipal government-led initiative in the country to directly tackle institutional racism and race-based disparities (Seattle Office for Civil Rights 2008).<sup>2</sup> Specific to our interests in translation and governance in US cities, positioning translation as emergent and geographic opens up possibilities for noticing and theorizing how ideas and strategies for social transformation move through policy and practice.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, embedded in the generative possibilities of translation are the contingent and embodied practices of people who facilitate the movement and emplacement of ideas. Translations are, therefore, persistently emergent because ideas – including their formation as policies, plans, and strategies for action – are not merely re-assembled after their first articulation, but rather take shape through the labor and creativity of people who adapt and adopt them in particular moments and places.<sup>4</sup> The recurring emergence of translations thus speaks to the possibilities for structures and systems to be remade and energizes inquiry about how movements for social transformation may leverage local-level policy initiatives to affect power geometries at multiple spatial scales (Massey 1999).

Our assertion that translation is also geographic rests on three main contentions that we advance in this paper. First, we contend that translations are emplaced. Second, translations and their implications are multi-scalar, and third, we assert that temporality threads through translations. From the passage of calendar time from when a policy is exported from one context and takes root in another to the ways in which past actions inform contemporary places and experiences to the future visions that people translate into and embody in the everyday, translations are temporally specified. Temporality is a condition of geographic processes, which are in turn shaped by the power geometries of a place (Massey 2005). Translations form, but are not determined, in place, and thus it is vital to investigate how efforts to imagine and incorporate novel ways of thinking and doing create new possibilities in place and time. Highlighting the geographic specificity of translation helps shed light on the practices, processes, and politics of translation. While we engage with these points within the

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<sup>2</sup> The RSJI explicitly centers racial justice because of the stalwart barriers that racism and white supremacy present to equity and the belief within Seattle's municipal government that systems and structures were designed to perpetuate race-based disparities and thus could be re-imagined and fundamentally transformed (Houston 2019, 135).

<sup>3</sup> Fran Tonkiss (2019) offers a five-part comparative urbanist framework founded upon design thinking and translation. This framework centers upon "spatial practices that are informal, incremental, improvised, impermanent, and insurgent" (Tonkiss 2019, 16). Examining cities through time and space in such a manner highlights how urban spaces are in motion, how urban forms shift and evolve, how collaboration unfolds, and how many factors, forces, and entities shape the design of a city (ibid, 24).

<sup>4</sup> As Claire Hancock's (2016) discussion of the geography of language translation highlights, the transfer of meaning in one context to another is embedded in place-based knowledges and understandings, which affect how – and whether – ideas from elsewhere land and are taken up in a new location.

ambit of urban policy implementation, we see the potential for broader application in critical geography of this perspective on translation.

Concerning the study of policy implementation, translation has surfaced as a favored concept to examine how ideas for urban governance, planning, and development move from one place to another. The policy mobilities literature has generated a theoretically rich description of translation. In this vein, scholars have reached for translation in order to supplant diffusion models used in the literature, which understand the movement of ideas through a lens of transfer. Speaking to this shift, Jamie Peck (2011, 21) writes “policies are not, after all, merely being transferred over space; their form and their effects are transformed by these journeys, which also serve to remake relational connections across an intensely variegated and dynamic socio-institutional landscape.” By the same token, ideas are not simply transplanted from one place to another as there are considerable efforts undertaken to prepare ideas to move and settle elsewhere as well as relationships that make certain routes possible (or not) and practices that shape how ideas are received and constituted anew.

Critical geographers studying policy mobilities in particular have drawn on an actor-network theory approach to foreground the ways different places are connected through the translation of urban policy and planning ideas from one place to another (McFarlane 2011; McCann and Ward 2013; 2015). Michel Callon’s (1986) description of translation has proved particularly influential in such work (e.g., see Tait and Jensen 2007; Weisser et al. 2014; Adelfio et al. 2021). Callon (1986) sees translation processes as moving through four successive moments in which an original object is transformed and redefined so that it may be understood in a new context and through different registers of meaning and knowledge. Intermediaries, including human and non-human influencers – such as planning consultants, guides for best practice, and policy texts – are critical to Callon’s articulation of how ideas are prepared to be mobile, who moves them and how, and what enables the ideas to be taken up in another place. As Malcolm Tait and Ole Jensen (2007, 116) describe, “much of the work of translating [urban development] models is about enrolling other actors by representing their location as similar to the location in which the model is currently working.” Furthermore, in order for ideas to be “taken,” there is both a practice and politics to them (McFarlane 2011). Ideas are translated for a purpose and there are relations of power and privilege involved in the work it takes to both move and take up new ideas. Translation is thus emplaced, social, practiced, and contingent.

We appreciate the contribution of policy mobilities’ research that configures translation as a geographic phenomenon in which the movement and interpretation of an idea are predicated on the particularities of place and the potency of actants that enable circulation. While policy mobilities scholarship has done much to move beyond the notion that ideas are merely transferred through translation, there is still a fixation on how initial ideas, policies, and models shift – and continue – through the successive moments of translation. This framework, we feel, diminishes the capacity to understand translation as a creative process critically influenced by embodied practice through which new possibilities in time and place emerge.

Our rethinking of translation, thus, emphasizes the labor undertaken to imagine alternatives, shape these into policy, and emplace these visions in material ways. This approach recognizes that even though a comparable policy may be in operation in multiple locations, its emergence in a particular place is novel and ought to be understood in terms that acknowledge the work undertaken to create new possibilities within a specific context.

To the extent that policies circulate within and between places and are transmitted and emplaced elsewhere, we maintain that such translations are also scalar. For instance, adrienne maree brown (2017) argues for adopting concrete actions that center the value of inclusivity in everyday practices as a vital way to enact broader systemic change. brown emphasizes that shifting hiring practices, revamping meeting structures, and altering interpersonal interactions can have ripple effects as small actions accrete and can contribute to re-fashioning broader systems and structures. Such an approach aligns with J.K. Gibson-Graham, Jenny Cameron, and Stephen Healy's (2013) claim that reframing how we think is fundamental to acting differently and in turn creating conditions that further new possibilities for social change. These theories of change remind us that institutions are human-created and thus able to be transformed within and across spatial scales.

Our emphasis on the embodied practice of translation, its emergence through existing power structures, and its geographic operation represents a noteworthy break from existing conventions for theorizing translation in the mobility of ideas and policies. We put forward this rethinking of translation because we see how it can catalyze our imaginations and center relational and embodied knowing and doing to counter the perpetuation of white supremacy, settler colonialism, cisheteropatriarchy, and other oppressive power relations. Advancing a theorization of translation as emergent and geographic and attending to the emplaced practice of knowledge production prompts us to share how we arrived at co-authoring this piece. Dan has had long standing hesitations with the prevailing ways in which translation has been conceptualized. When he read Serin's book, *Imagining Seattle: Social Values in Urban Governance* (2019), about the translation of the social values of sustainability, creativity, and social justice into practice he felt he may have found a fellow traveler in thinking anew about translation. Serin's 'Author Meets Readers' event at the annual meeting of the American Association of Geographers in 2021 provided a venue to virtually connect. Thus began what has been a generative collaboration, one that persistently accounts for our context-specific and embodied realities and affords a setting for translating ideas and politics into practice. We will now turn to the key theoretical concepts of emergent strategy, accompaniment, and improvisation that compel and substantiate our rethinking of translation before considering the translations in and of the RSJI.

### **Translation as Emergent**

Our rethinking of translation as emergent combines two distinct sets of ideas, emergent strategy (brown 2017) and improvisation and accompaniment (Tomlinson and Lipsitz 2019). Emergent strategy entails a constellation of beliefs, mindsets, and embodied practices for incorporating visions for co-liberation into everyday life, especially, but not only, within

organizations participating in social justice movements. Recognizing the profoundly complex relationships that differentially harm every body living within oppressive systems, like settler colonialism and white supremacy, brown (2017) offers with emergent strategy a hopeful articulation of how we can each transform right now and thus usher in what Tiffany Lethabo King, Jenell Navarro, and Andrea Smith (2020) describe as “otherwise worlds.” brown argues that movements to advance social justice in general are shaped by what individuals do in particular.

Adopting mindsets and practices that support interpersonal change and align an individual’s conduct with a desired future state of a more just society can influence successively broader relationships and facilitate social transformation. brown identifies myriad sites where embodying different ways of being and thinking fosters the emergence of new possibilities. For instance, crafting adaptive agendas for meetings, building collaborative leadership structures, and embedding anti-racist and equity practices in the day-to-day conduct of an organization can transform individuals, organizations, communities, and more. Throughout *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, brown defines emergent strategy as an intentional, iterative, interdependent, multi-scalar and adaptive process that creates possibilities for new ways of being, doing, and thinking and facilitates relationships that nurture social transformation.

Drawing on brown’s work, three elements of emergent strategy are integral for our foregrounding of the practices, processes, and politics of translation. First, there is a belief that movements for social change are always evolving in ways that are non-linear. Movements fluctuate because of the relationships, processes, and people that fuel their organization and direction. They evolve too because of a frequent emphasis in justice efforts on collaboration, mutual reliance, and shared leadership. This attention to the creative and iterative interactions between individuals and social transformation underpins our conceptualization of translation.

Second, there is a perspective in emergent strategy that understands how relationships at the smallest scale can reverberate and shape patterns at larger scales. brown uses fractals, which are complex forms made up of simple patterns that repeat over and over, to describe this notion of “scaling-up” change. Observing that fractals are never-ending repeating patterns, brown argues that justice movements can effect change through participants’ everyday practices and orientations towards others because society exists due to our collective interdependence. Accordingly, changes in ourselves and in our relationships with others can catalyze broader transformations. As brown (2017, 191) explains, “Emergent strategy is about shifting the way we see and feel the world and each other. If we begin to understand ourselves as practice ground for transformation, we can transform the world.” These possibilities for and actualities of multi-scalar social transformation inform our rethinking of translation.

Finally, emergent strategy emphasizes that for movements to generate social transformation, they must operate intentionally and adaptively across different places. Movements are often reactive or opportunistic as well as strategic. They can generate new formations when action – whether it is improvised or planned – is aligned with purpose. Such

embodied practice is key to emergent strategy. We understand intentionality and adaptability through time and place as fundamental to our rethinking of translation.

In sum, brown's framework of emergent strategy offers a theory of change that guides our rethinking of translation and underscores the implications of translations. In particular, in contrast to standard appraisals of translation as derivative of an original and linear in orientation, we experience and theorize translation as dynamic, iterative, and recursive. We also find political possibility and analytical purchase in the multi-scalar framework of emergent strategy as we consider translation anew. Translating values into practice within interpersonal relations, policy creations and implementations, and institutions indicate how the emergence of translation can contribute to co-liberation. Finally, attuned to emergent strategy, we center embodiment in our understanding of translation.

We also find inspiration and resources for rethinking translation in a second set of ideas, namely Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz's (2019) discussion of accompaniment and improvisation. These authors offer these tools to build "insubordinate spaces," which are "sites where people who lack material resources display great resourcefulness in deepening their capacity to free themselves and others from subordination, to imagine how things could be otherwise, and to move toward enacting that vision" (Tomlinson and Lipsitz 2019, 12). Accompaniment refers to a way of being, perceiving, sensing, and acting (Tomlinson and Lipsitz 2019, 23). It has roots in liberation theology, music making, and traveling as a collective. It is a tool for lending support to fellow travelers in movement, one that includes bearing witness to struggles and embodying solidarity. A social activity that is not rushed or forced, improvisation centers upon responding to systems of subordination to identify alternative possibilities and moving along pathways that have not yet been fully formed. Put differently, "improvisation requires working in concert with others through careful listening, responding, and collaborating" (Tomlinson and Lipsitz 2019, 35). Hence, the tools of accompaniment and improvisation promote possibilities for relationships of respect, recognition, and solidarity across differences and facilitate imagining alternative social formations.

Tomlinson and Lipsitz's articulations of accompaniment and improvisation provide conceptual tools for us to illuminate the geographic dynamics of emergent processes. Accompaniment and improvisation help us track how attentive listening, intentional collaboration, and creativity in the moment facilitate the movement of ideas about social transformation from the realm of imagination into material life. The corporeal sensitivity of accompaniment and improvisation enables us to surface the ways that the relational and embodied practices of translation support the emergence of new possibilities in place and time. Furthermore, just as accompaniment and improvisation require individuals and groups to be adaptive and committed to common cause, translation encompasses unexpected possibilities and layers of sense-making. Indeed, as we trace the non-linear, adaptive, interdependent, and responsive nature of translations, the multiple power relations and geographic contexts that shape visions and actions for transformation come into sharper focus. Conceptualizing translation as both emergent and geographic yields insight into intersectional



power relations in ways that are new and attentive to the embeddedness of place and the possibilities of social transformation. We see this epistemology as holding great value for critical geographers who examine the practices, processes, and politics of social change and challenge normative ways of knowing and doing.

Our framework of emergent strategy, improvisation, and accompaniment expands upon Richard Freeman's (2009, 8) claim that translation is "a complex, creative process in which form and function, intention and outcome are not given, but emergent." Freeman's writing engages the multiple and seemingly contradictory uses of "translation" as it appears in different expressions. He offers one of the most elaborate and critical examinations of translation to date, clarifying it as a creative and emergent process. We find this orientation compelling as it seeks to capture the actually-existing practices and situations involved in circulating meaning from there to here. Thus, building on Freeman's work, we rethink translation by incorporating ideas from brown and Tomlinson and Lipsitz. Our goal is to illustrate the power of thinking differently about translation as emergent and geographic.

Conceptualizing translation as a creative, multi-scalar process that is embedded in place necessarily recognizes the importance of temporality in the ways that translation operates as well. Recalling that we understand temporality as a condition of geographic processes, we further acknowledge that the time register of emergence is infused with complexity because there are multiple experiences of temporality. Critical scholarship of Indigenous and Black experiences reveals the divergent ways that people experience and contest time and emphasizes how temporality comes to bear in projects that aim to envision and embody otherwise worlds (King, Navarro, and Smith 2020). Indeed, "the commonplace conception of time as neutral, universal, and inherently shared" is a way of apprehending temporality within the logics of capitalism and settler colonialism (Rifkin 2017, ix). As Mark Rifkin (2017) observes, cultivating this common assumption of time – what he calls settler time – and disciplining bodies to follow its logics serves as a means of oppression and limits how we conceptualize futurity in a place, thus restricting the imagination of something different. Rifkin advocates for "temporal sovereignty" as a way to disrupt logics that colonize temporality.

Acknowledging that there are multiple ways of apprehending and experiencing time enables practices of improvisation and accompaniment to arise and facilitates the emergent translations for otherwise worlds. Moving toward temporal sovereignty likewise benefits from an awareness of the disciplining work of controlling how people conceptualize temporality. George Lipsitz (2016) demonstrates how the imposition of a fixed, universal, and linear sense of temporality serves as a resource that law enforcement uses for domination, forcing people to "lose time" or "waste time" through interdiction, arrest, and/or incarceration. This operates as one way that Black people in particular experience what Brittany Cooper (2016) calls "time discrimination," which leads to shortened life spans and constrained autonomy over how one spends time. Building on these points, Charles Mills (2014) identifies how cultural politics "racialize time" and create what he terms "white time," which curtail everyday embodiments. Black and Indigenous perspectives of temporality that fuse the experiences and knowledges

of ancestors with the current moment also break down distinctions of past and present that define the linear conceptions of temporality that are rooted in settler time and white time (e.g., see McMichael and Katonivualiku 2020; Mills 2020). Creating possibilities for social transformation to emerge in a particular context draws upon practices and processes that both recognize different experiences with time and enable an approach of temporal sovereignty to arise.

In closing, improvisation, accompaniment, and emergent strategy are multi-scalar, place-attuned, and temporally rich ways of engaging with and understanding social transformation. We embrace these concepts for their support in focusing on the practices, processes, and politics of translation as emergent and geographic. Drawing on these ideas in our rethinking of translation thus foregrounds the potentiality of fostering relationships that promote empathy and solidarity. We turn now to show how the RSJI demonstrates the fractal dimensions of transformation and illustrates the persistent emergence evident in the building, implementing, and sustaining of policies in Seattle.

### **Translations in and of the Race and Social Justice Initiative**

Concerted prior activism and advocacy laid the foundation for the Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI) to officially launch in Seattle in 2004 under the leadership of then-Mayor Greg Nickels and Germaine Covington, then-Director of the Office of Civil Rights. Proudly described as the first municipal government-based initiative in the US to address institutional racism (Seattle Office for Civil Rights 2008), the RSJI extends throughout Seattle's municipal government with a network comprised of departmental change teams, a cross-divisional core team, a RSJI sub-cabinet, and a RSJI coordinating team (Race and Social Justice Initiative n.d.). This structure was conceptualized and crafted to have reach and depth throughout city government. The RSJI has persisted through mayoral, city council, and city employee transitions and does not have an expiration date. It is a multi-scalar, temporally-expansive, and place-specific investment in social transformation that takes shape in and through many translations.

Initially, the RSJI focused on five areas within municipal government: "workforce equity... economic equity... immigrant and refugee services... public engagement... [and] capacity building" (Seattle Office for Civil Rights 2008, 8). Key practices that sought to advance transformation in these areas include mandatory and optional capacity building training for Seattle city employees, the creation and implementation of equity filters, shifts in departmental practices and expectations, and the formation of new policies and the revision of others (Seattle Office for Civil Rights 2008). These were all geographically specific endeavors that aimed to address the root causes of institutional racism within Seattle's municipal government and race-based disparities in the city at large. The explicit goal was institutional and structural transformation. This approach echoes Winona LaDuke and Deborah Cowen's (2020) claim that "infrastructure is not inherently colonial" (LaDuke and Cowen 2020, 245). These authors reframe infrastructure as necessary for social transformation. A pipe can convey freshwater or crude oil. Railroads can be a cog in the continuation of petroculturalism or appropriated to

serve alimentary purposes, remaking economies for an otherwise world. The RSJI works to transform the infrastructures of municipal governance and in so doing create a more just and equitable city. Examples of concrete changes generated by the RSJI include a linguistic translation policy that requires many city documents to be represented in up to 14 different languages, a neighborhood planning approach that is principally community-led, and an equity analysis of every line item in the city budget (Houston 2019, 149-157). Over time, the RSJI has grown from an effort within municipal government to one that intersects with community organizations throughout Seattle to more recently being upheld as an exemplary model for racial and social justice urban policy work and replicated in other US cities.

To ground our rethinking of translation in an actually-existing example, we draw upon the RSJI to demonstrate that the translations within and of the RSJI are emergent and geographic. Put differently, we engage with the RSJI to emphasize the utility of rethinking translation as we apply our framework to the examination of urban governance vis-à-vis the RSJI. The purpose of this discussion is to shed light on the potential applicability of conceptualizing translation as emergent and geographic in other empirical settings. The RSJI data stems from ethnographic research Serin conducted in 2009 and ongoing document analysis (see Houston 2019 for the full research project of which the RSJI is a part). While Serin analyzed the translations of social values into practice within Seattle's urban governance in her book, here we accent translation as emergent and geographic to illustrate the application of our theorization of translation.

The early crafting of the RSJI underscores how a commitment to emergence and geographic specificity enabled the RSJI to depart from the status quo, animate imaginative futurist visioning, and challenge oppressive power relations. Indeed, the development of the RSJI illustrates the translation of ideas into action through embodied practices. Sierra, who identifies as a person of color and worked in city government, described the early development of the RSJI as follows:

Obviously, we were drawing on all the available good thinking and technology that we could find, but we still had to figure out how to navigate it [the RSJI], how to structure it and package it, if you will, and then disseminate it, and then figure out how it was going, and all of that stuff, in this context. And there isn't anybody else doing it [racial justice work] in this context in this way. So, when you got to that point, you know, we could take other people's stuff and use it, but then there was a point where we had to leap off with it [*laughter*] and go because there just wasn't a trail to follow.

Sierra speaks to various translations that facilitated the creation of the RSJI. For instance, city employees translated ideas from organizations and individuals committed to racial justice, equity, and community organizing to the RSJI. Yet, recognizing that these concepts and practices could not merely be transplanted to Seattle and expected to flourish, the crafters of the RSJI attended to specific contexts in their designs, considering, for example, the staff in a

particular department or a process for how ideas were vetted by the city council. Through such practices, they paid attention to the particularities and power relations of place.

Accordingly, the translations of the RSJI were not uniform or standardized. Departmental level autonomy was built into the structure of the RSJI so city departments themselves could tailor their capacity building training, for instance, to their specific needs and work. There was a sense of palpable possibility and a shift in consciousness coursing through the municipal buildings and city hall. To this point, Serin's notes in her research journal after interviewing Sierra share the sensation that "something is in the air so the momentum around this movement [for change] is growing." While there was not an "opt-out" option for the RSJI, the flexibility in form afforded departments the chance to undertake transformation at a pace and in a manner that included the entire departmental staff. This helped ground and emplace the RSJI and demonstrated the ethos of accompaniment, the practice of collaborating and adapting in the name of a shared outcome.

An aspirational future and a centering of equity guided the endeavor, yet there was tremendous latitude in the translation of these ideals into material practices. In her research notes, Serin recalled, "I'm coming to realize that when you are in a state of becoming a lot is hazy so we talk in abstractions" while also concretely enacting an intention to not perpetuate "business as usual" models. All the different members of city government with their own positional authority improvised and adapted so over time the embodied form and material expressions of the RSJI emerged. City employees didn't limit their thinking and actions to templates of "best practices in urban policy." Instead, they responded to the specific contexts of racial injustices and discrimination in Seattle and cultivated the emergence of relevant transformative processes and practices. Spending time on such translations furthered buy-in so an ethos of social justice expanded throughout city government.

The development and implementation of the RSJI, an approach that links the interpersonal with the structural, highlights multi-scalar interdependencies and employs systems analysis to achieve transformation. These emphases overlap with brown's notion of emergent strategy, particularly the crucial point that "how we build patterns and relationships ... can hold our complex nature through relatively simple interactions" (brown 2022, para 3). Expanding on this point, drawing on the form of fractals, brown (2017) underscores how changes in interpersonal interactions can reverberate to produce broader transformations. Speaking to such processes of change, Marta, a former Seattle city employee who focused on policy analysis and equity, explains that through the RSJI, city employees found that "instead of going against each other, you can say 'oh, okay, this is a piece of the system that is doing this to us.' So, let's take this out and get rid of it." In other words, acknowledgment of how systemic oppressions translate into everyday interactions enabled city employees to identify pieces of systems that truncated social justice work and then devise varied plans to alter them.

Such systems analyses and shifts in everyday behavior surfaced in meetings and trainings as well. For example, as Serin described during her research in Seattle, during a RSJI capacity building training about interracial work teams, the "multiracial group of colleagues

dove into conversation and reflected honestly and seriously on their positionalities and socializations. The participants then used these insights to strategize about how they could craft collaborative interracial work groups within Seattle's urban governance given systemic and individual factors" (Houston 2019, 142). Participants deftly recognized the challenges racism presents for respectful and equitable mixed-race collaborations. Then, while still located within a conference room with typical presentation formats used, participants translated the ideals of future racial justice into concrete practices and actions that they could take now within their roles in city government. Participants identified current power structures at work and then intentionally sought to embody alternatives.

The politics, processes, and practices of translation cohered within this capacity building training to the extent that the participants both envisioned and specified future practices while also inhabiting such ways of working in the present. There was an attitude of "Let's get ready for the future! We don't know what it's going to look like, but if I was getting people around me together to be ready for the next things that we needed to be doing, what kind of skills would they have? What would they be like?" (Sierra, former city employee). This deliberate endeavor to improvise and bear out co-liberation now demonstrates the possibilities for embodying social transformation embedded in translation. It also speaks to the willingness of city employees to not know exactly how translations of purpose and intention were going to unfold. Through making time for practicing accompaniment, reflexivity, improvisation, and deep listening, city employees enacted multi-scalar transformation by changing their interactions and ways of work. These translations were done to help remake infrastructures and systems. Put differently, through such capacity building trainings – and related work like unsettling normative assumptions about required job qualifications or how a meeting should be run – the RSJI foregrounded temporally-expansive and multi-scalar social change. By translating future visions into everyday actions, city employees embodied time's plurality and emplaced transformation throughout city government.

Trusting the generative possibilities of improvisation and emergence while holding fast to the recognition that change had to happen was crucial to the development and persistence of the RSJI. To this point, Marta, who worked in city government, described the key attributes of Seattle as the following:

We are really trying to figure out how to live in this world where there are no borders, where languages are getting mixed all the time, where populations change from week to week. So, we can't be that static local government that it used to be because the people that we serve are always changing. 98108, the most diverse Zip Code in the country, 90 different languages.<sup>5</sup> We had shifts in

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<sup>5</sup> Others suggest that the zip code of 98108 is home to speakers of 40-50 languages (e.g., see Seattle Times staff, 2010 for more discussion of this topic).

population like from one year to the other, and so how do you create a structure at city government that can respond to that?

Marta succinctly discusses the multi-faceted dynamism of Seattle as a place and the associated need for flexibility, evolution, and sensitivity in municipal government. She makes plain that by the time of our interview city employees recognized that maintaining the status quo was neither relevant nor effective. A radical reconfiguration needed to occur. The related social transformations took time and disrupted assumptions that it was not financially sound to invest in the practices and processes of emergent and geographic translations. The pathways to social transformation were varied and not predetermined. Instead, with an explicitly political and institutional commitment that translated to and through interpersonal embodied relationships and a reconsidering of practices and policies, the RSJI unsettled normative actions and created space for social transformation.

The scope and goals of the RSJI have evolved over time illuminating once again the generative emergence and geography of translation. In the early years of the initiative substantial labor focused on helping white people in particular identify, discuss, and seek to ameliorate racism through municipal government. Now, the focus has evolved in response to the current context and through iterative translations of purpose. For example, in 2019 the RSJI's stated core foci included: 1) continuing to change internal practices and decision-making processes to "eliminate institutional and structural racism" (RSJI 2019, 2); 2) recognizing and replacing white supremacy culture within the workplace with a relational culture of well-being, belonging, and racial justice (RSJI 2019, 3); 3) coordinating internal municipal government work for racial justice with community-led efforts and being "accountable to communities of color" (RSJI 2019, 4); and 4) collaborating with "national and regional racial justice leaders" to advance racial justice (RSJI 2019, 4). These areas of concentration represent changes from the initial five areas of focus for the RSJI, and the emergent translation of the value of social justice into practice has assumed more nuance and dimension as well as temporal and place-based specificity.

By 2020, the discourse circulating within the RSJI became more incisive. For example, the 2020 publication of "RSJI Truths" lists ten core truths. These include acknowledgment of the role of racialization and racism in shaping society, the interdependencies of liberation, and the responsibility of everyone – including governmental entities – to participate in racial justice work. At the top of this list of truths is the following: "Truth 1: Colonialism is at the root of white supremacy" (RSJI 2020, 1). RSJI work from 2021 extends these translations of purpose and underscores the embodied and relational facets of co-liberation and the consequences of white supremacy. For instance, a RSJI 2021 memo titled, "Building a Relational Culture," begins with the statement, "The culture that has been internalized and normalized by organizations throughout our U.S. society – from government to non-profits and even some grassroots organizations – was created by white, wealthy, Christian, cis-gender, straight, non-disabled men coming from Europe who wanted to protect their place within hierarchy and empire" (RSJI 2021, 1). Directly naming the systems of oppression that seep through society

and linking them to everyday work in Seattle's municipal government signals the persistent discursive and material emergence of this endeavor within temporal plurality.

The translation of social justice in and through the RSJI over twenty years of work, many city employees, and multi-scalar changes in social, political, economic, and environmental contexts have all informed the current iteration of the RSJI. Assorted translations of intention, meaning, and implementation have aided the evolutions of the RSJI from an effort that was located in a single municipal office to a widespread civic practice. We see the uptake of ideas, language, and implementation tools from the RSJI in other cities as well. This migration of policies and practice from one city to another is often discussed in the extant literature on policy mobilities. Following this recognition, we emphasize, however, that the differential articulation of RSJI policies across multiple urban contexts underscores the emergent and geographic nature of translation and points to the influence of improvisation and accompaniment in the work of enacting social transformation in municipal policy and governance.

The work of the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE), a US-based network promoting the institutionalization of equity and anti-racism in the work of government organizations, illustrates this point (Houston 2019). Started in 2015, GARE provides training, organizes conferences, shares best practices, and facilitates learning. Among the resources GARE promotes for advancing racial equity are the tools and frameworks developed for Seattle's RSJI. In this way, GARE has helped to both legitimate RSJI and circulate its approach. GARE is one of the key reasons why RSJI ideas have traveled and informed racial justice policy development in King County, Washington; Madison, Wisconsin; Portland, Oregon; and Austin Texas, to name a few places.

A cursory survey of these efforts shows both similarities with and differences from Seattle's RSJI. GARE's involvement and the promotion of RSJI as transformative and impactful are constants in each place, but it would be a mistake to approach these as derivative of Seattle's policies. While we see these initiatives forming a constellation of aligned practices that affirm the fractal interdependence of social change, investigating translation as emergent and geographic nuances our understanding. In particular, rather than focusing on the movement of ideas or their interpretation based on the original, as other approaches to translation would counsel, rethinking translation in the ways we call for shifts attention to the creative work undertaken to generate different multi-scalar ways of thinking and doing in time and place.

The RSJI is non-linear, responsive, collaborative, context-specific, and constantly arising. Considering the social transformation imagined by this endeavor and enacted through it sheds light on the possibilities of emergent strategy. Indeed, creating space in municipal government for such an approach to governing counters the normative pressures of oppressive systems, acknowledges harm, and articulates a commitment to repair. Such work stitches accompaniment and improvisation into the fabric of social relations that are knitted together in the moment and signals possibilities for embodying co-liberation and otherwise

worlds. Through applying our theoretical intervention to this example, we sought to demonstrate the analytical opportunities afforded through rethinking translation as emergent and geographic and gesture towards the possibilities of expanding and applying translation to a host of different empirical examples.

### **Cultivating Social Transformation**

Our rethinking of translation as emergent and geographic offers five key insights for a critical geography concerned with studying and enacting social transformation that can contribute to co-liberation. First, rethinking translation as emergent highlights that new possibilities for movements and everyday interactions can arise out of smaller actions. Second, emergence emphasizes that translation involves embodied practice. The endeavor to transform societal systems begins with a commitment to transform ourselves and our conduct with others. It further involves unlearning modes of thought that enable oppressive systems such as settler colonialism, cisheteropatriarchy, and white supremacy to persist in a place. Third, our approach also entails an ethic of generative imagining and collaboration and engaging practices of accompaniment and improvisation to respond to needs as they emerge. Indeed, through embodied practices that transform individuals and shape interpersonal relationships, new capacities for action and new possibilities for social transformation surface. Fourth, rethinking translation as geographic acknowledges that spatial, scalar, and temporal contexts matter to what is possible. Ideas for otherwise worlds cannot simply be transplanted. They must be cultivated in time and place because interrupting and dismantling systems of oppression is part of the social infrastructure that makes the pluriverse thinkable and actionable. Moreover, our theorization of translation further identifies that cultivating co-liberation through governance practices hinges on the stewardship of institutions that center anti-racism in policy development and implementation, circulate language and patterns of thought, demonstrate commitment and patience, and dedicate resources to advance visions for alternative futures. Finally, existing power relations are not immutable. Imagining alternatives and fostering their emergence is a way to disrupt structures of domination. Translation can thus function as an approach for bringing processes, politics, and practices of co-liberation into the lived experiences of right now.

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