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RAVISHING RAVICKA: THE WORK OF TRANSLATION AND CRISIS IN RENEE GLADMAN'S EXPERIMENTAL NOVELS

How do we deal with untranslatable words, from a fictional vocabulary? How do words create a world beyond the page? How do imaginary worlds speak to the ongoing crises in our world that range from overlooked to unspeakable? Experimental novels offer a different way to consider these questions, because they use form to disrupt our habits of reading and perceiving the world. I turn to Renee Gladman's Ravicka novels, a series of four experimental narratives, to consider these questions. Gladman's imaginary city-state serves as a kind of social science fiction that demonstrates how we make sense of languages and experiences that cannot be translated, whether that's the literal words of Ravic into English, or the impediments of translating bodily gestures into language, or translating the experiences of marginalized people into terms that those outside such groups can grasp.

First I explain the world of the Ravicka novels, how they describe an imaginary city-state in the throes of an unspecified set of crises that seem to include environmental, civil, and ontological calamities, yet how characters are coping with everyday life in the midst of these crises. These novels spindle around not so much events or actions that drive a plot, but words—words that impede our directly understanding an action or idea, or words that a narrator can't express, or words that require supplemental meaning through gesture or bodily comportment. I conduct a close reading of one Ravic word, *pareis*, that occurs across the novels and provides a window onto how the novels' experiment with representing the unrepresentable. Though never explicitly defined *pareis* seems to be a ritual bodily action performed as a greeting or reconnection. [L]
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The fact that the novels invent a language and culture, and reinvent narrative form, allows them to push the edge of what can be expressed while still evoking a world we can be a part of. The novels present a fragmented but compelling and emotionally resonant tale of the persistence of a network of friends, lovers, and colleagues in the face of an unspecified—and perhaps even inconceivable—set of crises. On the one hand, their imagination gives us space to reconsider our own social relations in a wider lens: how might we consider the body as more fully invested in communication, even through printed books? On the other hand, the encounter with untranslatable words can allay our anxiety about having to grasp the whole, and thereby reorient us to the text in a more open relation to what it offers us, in its own terms. The hospitality of Ravicka, accepted by taking up these novels, offers a lesson in how to read more actively and attentively. [L]
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