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## Translation as an exercise in otherness

Rodrigo Garcia Lopes

Panel: At Language's End

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## Rodrigo Garcia Lopes (Brazil)

### Translation as an exercise in otherness

Translation is fundamental for my creative process and my poetic praxis. I began translating when I was 16, after reading Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading* in which he defended translation as an ideal tool, a real and personal poetry workshop, for the beginner poet. This advice never left me and, since then, translation has become an obsession, a passion, a source of pleasure. In my case, it is important to mention that what I consider my serious writing and my practice of translation as having began almost simultaneously. It also became an addiction for me, for when I read a poem that moves me I feel an immediate impulse to render it in my own idiom. Since then, I've translated poets from Rimbaud and Whitman to Japanese haiku (Bashô, Shiki, Buson); from old and anonymous texts, such as the Anglo-Saxon "The Seafarer" or the medieval poems from the Provençal troubadours to contemporary poets such as the French Guillaume Apollinaire, the Irish Samuel Beckett, the Chilean Roberto Bolano, the Americans Sylvia Plath, Laura Riding, Paul Auster, Allen Ginsberg and John Ashbery.

I believe in finding a balance between the literal and the poetic, what the great Brazilian poet-translator Haroldo de Campos called *transcreation*, or, according to Russian linguist Roman Jakobson, "creative transposition." I find it important to translate not just the content but also all the formal aspects that constitute the text, its signifying form, the play between meaning and sense, its sound and spatial features. A good translation must necessarily deal with the materiality of language. Without attempting to translate these aesthetic features the poetic text would be just banal prose or mere confession. I also believe that a translator has to be a reader and a writer at the same time. He or she needs to have a decent knowledge of the source and target languages.

As one would expect from a poet-translator, I don't hold to the Italian saying "traduttore, traditore" (that is, "translator, traitor") which claims it is impossible to be faithful in a translation. I try to betray neither too much or too little. I don't believe that poetry is untranslatable, or, as Robert Frost famously argued, that "poetry is what gets lost in translation". What I do believe in is translation as an act of otherness, a way to dialogue with other eras and create an understanding other cultures. The translator occupies a space between two worlds, cultures, times, and literary traditions. My ambition has been to make the translation of a work seem more original than the original itself, as if it was first written in Brazilian Portuguese. I approach it as a critical and creative activity. In translating, you are able to re-poetize the original in your own language. Translation is an art, in fact, that enables me to recapture, on privileged occasions, the creation's moment.

I consider translation as a critical activity, for I am not a professional translator who works on demand. Generally, I approach editors with a complete project of translating a specific author that I think would enrich Brazilian literature. In bilingual editions, I also write extensive essays on the books and authors I am translating, as in the cases of Rimbaud's *Illuminations* (1994), Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (2004) and the Anglo-Saxon poem "The Seafarer" (2004). There is also a significant amount of research that needs to be done for each project: the writer's biography, their historical and social contexts, the poetic tradition they are coming from or rebelling against.

From 2006 to 2011 I did less translation work in order to concentrate my energies on my 400-page historical-detective novel. In it, the amateur detective is a Scottish translator-interpreter who goes to Londrina, Brazil in 1936 with Lord Lovat, the president of Parana Plantations Limited, to help to solve the mysterious disappearance of the British land company's accountant, its main doctor and the doctor's wife, also a doctor. The key to the enigma is a Provençal love song by Arnaut Daniel, sent anonymously from the company in Brazil to end up on King Edward VIII's desk in his residence in England. Edward VIII was allegedly one of the company's owners. Adam Blake, the translator, is my alter ego, and I have

managed to put all my experience as a translator into Blake, who, in my novel, is a bridge between languages. Londrina was known as an “international colony” which had around 32 ethnic groups. It means Little London, or “born in London”, and was colonized by Parana Plantations from the 1920s to the beginning of Second World War. They bought 20% of the Parana state, a huge area with virgin forests and some of the most fertile land in the world, named “red land”. The solution of the mystery has to do with Blake’s attempt to make sense of Arnaut Daniel’s song, mainly the enigmatic word *noigandres*, while other crimes continue to shake Londrina. What will be discovered could destroy Edward VIII’s reign.

For me, the best poetry translator is a good poet. I’ve tried to learn new ways of writing and perceiving through the authors I’ve translated, then incorporate and assimilate those ways into my own poetry. This has become a natural thing to me. Maybe that is why I am not a poet who follows a distinctive voice or style, which is instead highly polyphonic and marked by a great range of forms, styles, and poetic dictions.

I finish with a poem of mine, “Canibal,” from the book *Visibilia*, here translated into English by American poet and scholar Charles Perrone, in his *Brazil, Lyrics and the Poetry of the Americas*. He called this short poem “a mesh of history, linguistics, literature, and more, that is transamerican and ultimately, transatlantic” (185). The word “canibal” was supposedly coined by Columbus in reference to the New World savages he found in the Caribbean island (hence Caribbean). I found an affinity with the Latin word for dog (*cannis*), which in Portuguese is *cão*. *Cão* also means the Devil, in Portuguese. The last line refers to the character of Caliban in Shakespeare’s play “*The Tempest*,” which was the inspiration for this poem. The idea was to depart from the perfect anagram Canibal and Caliban to tell a brief history of America, of conquest, servitude, as well as resistance.

#### THE TEMPEST

Canibal, a Latin word  
Meaning, as *canis* does, an animal  
With the loyalty of a dog.

In the Bermudas, sublime irony,  
It will be a devillish wind  
And it shall be called *huracán*.

And when the boatswain  
Suddenly points to a new land  
Then it will be Caliban.