

How Do We Create a Philosophy of Translation?

<https://centerforfiction.org/videos/how-do-we-create-a-philosophy-of-translation/>

Katrina Dodson, moderated by Heather Cleary
Literary Translation Clinic
The Center For Fiction / Cedilla & Co.
Thursday, May 20 at 7pm ET

Below are notes (section A) and references (section B) from Katrina's discussion. The references are not an exhaustive list, but rather, examples of the kind of reading itinerary translators can set for themselves while continuing to hone and adapt their philosophy of translation.

A. NOTES

1. Main translation projects discussed:

The Complete Stories, by Clarice Lispector

Macunaíma: The Hero With No Character, by Mário de Andrade

2. General thoughts on forming a philosophy of translation:

On the medieval craftsman (who only asks "How?" to get the work done) vs. the Renaissance artist (who begins with "Wither?" *Where do I go?*) see John Berger on Albrecht Dürer in *Portraits*, p.60 (Verso).

3. Overall vision of the arc of your work:

Questions to inform what you want the focus and impact of your work to be:

How do I understand what translation is and what it is meant to do?

How do I choose what to translate?

(Of course, most of us first choose a text to translate because we've fallen in love with it and we want to understand it more intimately and share it with others. But as we press forward, we should reflect more on why we want to translate a certain text or author, what our priorities are for choosing who or what to translate.)

For each text, we should ask:

What strengths and affinities do I bring to the translation?

What are my blind spots and limitations in relation to this project and how might I remedy these?

What is its relationship to a particular people or history (literary, cultural, political)?

To what and whom am I responsible when translating this text?

How do I understand the work in its original context and in the new context that I'm bringing it into? What adjustments will the new context require?

Is it necessary to frame this text for a new audience? If so, how will I do so? Will I do it in the book itself (introduction, translator's note, footnotes, endnotes, etc.) or perhaps in essays or interviews outside the text?

4. Determining your specific approach for translating the text at hand:

For each text, we should take its particular pulse, discover where the life of the work lies and how best to revive it in another language. It's never a word-for-word transaction, and each work requires its own set of guiding principles. If you translate according to a fixed set of rules, your translation will be a thought experiment (and dead on the page) instead of embodying a mix of coherence but also spontaneity and unruliness that comes with a work that lives and breathes. I map out a set of guiding principles with each text, but I'm always ready to revise them and break away from them in moments when my intuition and imagination call for something different.

Some basic questions I ask are:

What makes this work compelling and why? How can I bring this force into English?

How do I understand the author's relationship to this work and the author's own philosophy of composition?

How do I understand the key components of this author's style and voice in this work?

How can I perform or inhabit this author's presence on the page? (translation as performance, as portraiture, as interpretation)

Within the work:

What are the main qualities of this passage and what is the effect? What drives this effect? (the language, the rhythm, the image, the action, the emotion, the mood, the humor?)

How can I best produce a similar or compensatory effect?

What are the main elements I must preserve and what is expendable?

Examples of different ways of evaluating language effects:

1. I often ask about the pace of reading. Is this description or image meant to unfold quickly in the reader's mind? Is there a certain dramatic momentum required? Then the language shouldn't call attention to itself and should convey the image or action as clearly and easily as possible. Or is this a moment to slow down and stall a bit and make the reader stop and think? Is it a moment of poetic or emotional intensity that requires a deliberate pause? In what way should it snag? Should it be jarring or somehow still pleasing?
2. unmarked vs. marked language. My usage here is a bit loose (compared to proper linguistics usage), but basically unmarked language is straightforward language that follows conventional usage. It tends to read quickly (description, focus on character, conjuring a

scene that's effective for keeping its momentum). Marked language deviates from the norm, is stylized, perhaps ungrammatical. It tends to read more slowly (more poetic, trips you up, stops you in your tracks). It can be an idiolect individual to the author or character but it can also be a colloquial or regional way of speaking characteristic to a certain group of people. Try to match this in whatever way you can, if not in a word for word way, then in an overall feel. This is not always possible, especially with dialect or colloquial speech, but sometimes you can compensate by making a flourish or deviating from standard use in different parts of a sentence or passage than happens in the original—because different languages are flexible in different places.

B. REFERENCES

1. Useful volumes when starting out:

The Translation Studies Reader, ed. Lawrence Venuti

In Translation: Translators on Their Work And What It Means, eds. Esther Allen and Susan Bernofsky

*Especially Susan Bernofsky's essay "Translation and the Art of Revision"

2. Conferences / panels / lectures / interviews:

Retranslating Literary Classics panel at Columbia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2ykytca6Y8>

Translating the Future, celebrating 50th anniversary of PEN World of Translation conference

<https://www.centerforthehumanities.org/programming/translating-the-future>

Translation Now Conference, Boston University, and BU Translation Seminar

<https://www.bu.edu/wll/translation/translationnow/translation-now-videos/>

<https://www.bu.edu/geddes/events/translation/seminar2021/>

American Literary Translators Association (ALTA) annual conference

<https://literarytranslators.org/conference>

Us & Them reading series: <http://usandthemreading.com/>

Translation events: https://arts.columbia.edu/writing/translation/upcoming_translation_events

Translationista: <http://translationista.com/>

"The Art of Translation" interviews in *The Paris Review* (I did one with Margaret Jull Costa

<https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/7570/the-art-of-translation-no-7-margaret-jull-costa>)

"The Translator Relay" series at *Words Without Borders*

<https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/dispatches/article/the-translator-relay>

3. Texts for expanding our vision of translation:

Anita Raja, “Translation As a Practice of Acceptance,” translated by Rebecca Falkoff and Stiliana Milkova

<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/criticism/anita-raja-translation-as-a-practice-of-acceptance/>

Erin Moure “Fidelity Was Never My Aim (But Felicity)” in *My Beloved Wager* (and all of her work!)

<https://newestpress.com/books/my-beloved-wager>

John Keene, “Translating Poetry, Translating Blackness”

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2016/04/translating-poetry-translating-blackness>

Madhu Kaza, Editor’s Note to “Kitchen Table Translation” issue of *Aster(ix)* journal (and the whole issue)

<https://asterixjournal.com/note-translation/>

Don Mee Choi “Translation is a Mode=Translation is an Anti-neocolonial Mode”

<http://uglyducklingpresse.org/publications/translation-is-a-modetranslation-is-an-anti-neocolonial-mode/>

Also Choi’s writing about her translations of Korean poet Kim Hyesoon. Interview at AAWW:

<https://aaww.org/an-expelled-tongue/>

Translators notes and translations of interviews in her translations of Kim Hyesoon, most recently *Autobiography of Death*. <https://www.ndbooks.com/book/autobiography-of-death/>

Sawako Nakayasu, *Say Translation is Art* (and her other writing/translations too)

<https://uglyducklingpresse.org/publications/say-translation-is-art/>

(Both the Choi and Nakayasu are part of the pamphlet series by Ugly Duckling Presse)

This Little Art, Kate Briggs (Fitzcarraldo)

Lydia Davis, “Some Notes on Translation and on *Madame Bovary*” in *The Paris Review*

<https://www.theparisreview.org/letters-essays/6109/some-notes-on-translation-and-on-madame-bovary-lydia-davis>

Emily Wilson, Introduction to *The Odyssey*

I didn’t mention these, but here are 2 manifestoes for expanding ideas of translation:

“A Manifesto for Ultratranslation,” by Antena Aire

This link downloads the PDF: https://antenaantena.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/ultratranslation_eng.pdf

Deformation Zone: On Translation, Joyelle McSweeney & Johannes Göransson

<https://uglyducklingpresse.org/publications/deformation-zone-on-translation/>

4. Translations that expand our ideas of what translation can be and how to deal with “untranslatables” (i.e. puns, idioms, word play, culturally specific terms, multilingual texts):

Raymond Queneau, *Exercises in Style*, trans. Barbara Wright

Patrick Chamoiseau, *Texaco* and others, trans. Val Vinokurov and Rose-Myriam Rejouis

Wilson Bueno, *Paraguayan Sea*, trans. Erin Moure

Names of the Lion by Ibn Khālawayh, trans. David Larsen. more about the project on Larsen’s site: <https://paintedlantern.blogspot.com/p/lion-faq.html>

5. Comparative translation studies:

I didn’t get to mention these, but studying how different translators approach the same text is a great way to evaluate various approaches and see where your own philosophical tendencies lie.

Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei, Eliot Weinberger

Various translations of *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon. See Meredith McKinney’s essay “*The Pillow Book: Translating a Classic*” <https://www.kyotojournal.org/in-translation/on-translating-a-classic/> and the comparative study *Worlding Sei Shōnagon: The Pillow Book in Translation* by Valerie Henitiuk (compares translations of the famous opening passage).

Tolstoy/Dostoyevsky translations. See Janet Malcolm essay “Socks” in the *New York Review of Books*. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/06/23/socks-translating-anna-karenina/> Pevear & Volokhonsky response: <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/09/29/on-translation-tolstoy/> (see also P & V’s notes to their retranslations of *Anna Karenina* and other classics)

Other authors/works with multiple translations with varied approaches: Proust, Flaubert, Sappho, *The Tale of Genji*, Clarice Lispector.