

**TRANSLATING AFRICAN DIASPORA WRITING: THE  
POETIC WORLDS OF CONCEIÇÃO EVARISTO IN *POEMS  
OF RECOLLECTION AND OTHER MOVEMENTS***

**TRADUZINDO LITERATURA DA DIÁSPORA AFRICANA: OS  
MUNDOS POÉTICOS DE CONCEIÇÃO EVARISTO EM *POEMAS  
DA RECORDAÇÃO E OUTROS MOVIMENTOS***

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**ABSTRACT**

The artistry of translation, in and of itself, is an intellectual and cultural enterprise that requires a certain amount of delicacy and cultural negotiation. It is important to highlight that central to the process of translation is the interpolation of culture, as poetic works engender a fundamental component of culture itself, that being language. Intercultural translation, as a part of the discipline of Translation Studies, requires a close cultural analysis in terms of form and content in order to approximate socially constructed meanings from the original cultural context into the appropriated language/culture of transmission. In as much, the task of translating Conceição Evaristo's *Poemas da recordação e outros movimentos* (Evaristo, 2008) (*Poems of recollection and other movements*) was for both of us - translators - a process laden with idiosyncratic challenge, neologistic creation, visceral employment, metaphysical cultural transcendence, and creative re-writing. The work, completed in 2013, for different reasons, will only be published fully as a bilingual edition this year.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Translation; Conceição Evaristo; language.

**RESUMO**

A tradução envolve atividade intelectual e cultural que demanda determinados graus de delicadeza e negociação cultural. É importante destacar que como elemento central no processo de traduzir encontra-se a inserção da cultura, na medida em que as obras poéticas geram um componente fundamental da própria cultura, através da linguagem. A Tradução Intercultural, como parte dos Estudos da Tradução, requer análise cultural atenta em termos de forma e conteúdo a fim de fazer aproximações de significados construídos socialmente do contexto original para a devida língua / cultura alvos. Sendo assim, o objetivo de traduzir para o inglês *Poemas da recordação e outros movimentos* (Evaristo, 2008) (*Poems of recollection and other movements*) de Conceição Evaristo foi para nós, os tradutores, um processo carregado de desafio peculiar, criação de neologismos, dedicação visceral, transcendência cultural, e re-escrita criativa. A tradução, concluída em 2013, por motivos diversos, está planejada para vir a ser finalmente publicada por completo em edição bilingue neste ano de 2020.

**Palavras-chave:** Tradução Intercultural; Conceição Evaristo; língua e linguagem.

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The artistry of translation, in and of itself, is an intellectual and cultural enterprise that requires a certain amount of delicacy and cultural negotiation. It is important to highlight that central to the process of translation is the interpolation of culture, as poetic works engender a fundamental component of culture itself, that being language. Intercultural translation, as a part of the discipline of Translation Studies, requires a close cultural analysis in terms of form and content in order to approximate socially constructed meanings from the original cultural context into the appropriated language/culture of transmission. In as much, the task of translating Conceição Evaristo's *Poemas da recordação e outros movimentos* (Evaristo, 2008) (*Poems of recollection and other movements*) was for both of us - translators - a process laden with idiosyncratic challenge, neologistic creation, visceral employment, metaphysical cultural transcendence, and creative re-writing.

In our effort to bring the creative richness of Evaristo's lyricism to an English-speaking audience, our aim is not to argue or question, as some might, if Translation Studies as a discipline has been moving in such a radically different direction from Linguistic Studies. In fact, we are implored to consider and to utilize the methodological perspective of dealing with regions and cultures, not as closed entities or polarities, but by looking at processes of transfer, exchange, and interaction in the sense of entangled or shared histories and cultures, as in the case of the African Diaspora, specifically in Brazil and the United States. In fact, during the course of translating Afro-Brazilian writer Conceição Evaristo's poems into English, we were challenged to rethink key concepts and premises that link and divide Brazilian and North American concepts in different parts of the world with respect to African descendant communities. Actually, our project is embedded in university and extra-university research and supports historical-critical foundation, rigorous engagement with the literatures of the African Diaspora (specially in Brazil and in the United States) and their histories, the social history of cities and the study of political and philosophical thought as central fields of research not only for the area of cultural studies, but also for African / Afro-Diasporic intellectual history and other academic disciplines.

So, in an attempt to respond to the growing interest within and beyond the academic field of Translation Studies in the role played by translators in redressing the injustices of an increasingly polarized and conflictive society, these brief, yet critical remarks, focus on the translation of African-diasporic literary texts as a means of exchanging and representing meanings across and within cultures. The fact that the two scholar-translators involved in this project represent two distinct national and ethnic cultural configurations, the process of translating Evaristo's volume of poetry became the active and experiential process of cultural mediation. Articulations from across, within and sometimes "without" were engaged in order to render in English the closest cultural equivalent. To boot, and due to Evaristo's linguistic creations and colloquial idioms, select concepts were retained in the Portuguese language. In so, we decided to add notes that would approximate meaning of those idiomatic expressions and neologistic creations retained in the original Portuguese.

Contemporary globalization has made translation extremely relevant in the post-modern public sphere. Translation as boundary crossing and as a place of mutual convergence represents the most crucial nexus for understanding and articulating contemporary translingual identities, as it considers both, transcription into another language and inscription into another culture. However, does it simply translate meanings or does it generate new meanings? The process of translating Evaristo's poetry presented an intellectual attempt to answer some of the questions surrounding translation from an interdisciplinary perspective, which involves Cultural Studies, Gender Studies, Post-colonialism, regionalism and colloquialism. Therefore, we started from the assertion that translation is essentially an intercultural activity, rather than just an inter-lingual process. In the contemporary world, transcultural representation of different natures is recurrent. In the agenda of the contemporaneity, globalization of communication, multiculturalism, tradition and cultural transmission generate constant ideological debates, originated in politics. In such a scenario, the role of translation is seen as essential for the spreading of cultural diversity in the contemporary world. Roads taken (and those not taken) in the past are essentials for the linking of these to the new, cross-fertilized languages that constitute and energize the field in the future. Thus, and to return to the initial inquiry, the process of translation does in fact elicit neo-articulations of culture and difference as translators delve into the painstaking process of transmitting semiotic markers cross-culturally; in our case, from Brazilian Portuguese to American English.

In *The Translation Zone* (Apter, 2005), author Emily Apter examines the vital role of Translation Studies in the view of comparative literature as a discipline. Among several points, Apter emphasizes the tension between textual and cultural translation, the role of translation in shaping a global literary canon, the resistance to Anglophone dominance, and the impact of translation technologies on the very notion of how translation is defined. The book speaks to a range of disciplines and spans the globe on the definition of foreign or symbolic languages in the humanities, while recognizing the complexity of language politics in a world that once was more geographically monolingual than multilingual. The arguably shift toward multilingualism is that which fascinated us as intercultural translators. While working with Conceição Evaristo's poetic work, the influence of regional and community-based linguistic forms or modes of communication were ever-present in written form. From the linguistic peculiarities of Brazilian Portuguese spoken in Evaristo's home-state, Minas Gerais, to the colloquialism spoken by members of that same state of African descent, Apter's notion of 'the tension between textual and cultural translation' was ever present. Often, there was no word or phrase in the standard Portuguese that emitted the same cultural symbolic meaning, thus complicating a pure 'textual' translation. As mentioned earlier, when encountering moments where there was no resolve to the tension, we chose to leave the lexicon or lexical phrase in the original language and offer a note to the readership.

In his 2003 work entitled *What is World Literature* (Damrosch, 2003), David Damrosch looks at the manner in which words change as they move from national to global contexts. Presenting world literature not as a canon of texts but as a mode of circulation and of reading, Damrosch argues that 'world literature is work that gains in translation.' When it is effectively presented, a work of world literature moves into an elliptical space created between the source and receiving cultures, shaped by both but circumscribed by neither alone. Established classics and new discoveries alike participate in this mode of circulation, but they can be seriously mishandled in the process. From ancient epics to contemporary writing today, foreign works have often been distorted by the immediate and hasty needs of their own editors and translators who have not given the topic the necessary attention it deserves. In our attempt to bring to the corpus of 'World Literature', as defined by Damrosch, the artistry of cultural-linguistic mediation was crucial to render a translation in the English that was comprehensive to an English-speaking audience, albeit North American, but nuanced with cultural relevancy and poetic stylistics utilized by the poet. In cases where the poet used alliteration, onomatopoeia, or any other poetic device, we were careful to try to manipulate the English to offer a mimetic style without the cultural loss in terms of content.

It is our belief that critic Gayatri Spivak makes an important contribution to the debate. Defined by many as one of the obligatory books of first decade of our century for comparatists and as one of the most passionate defenses of Comparative Literature, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* (Spivak, 2005) does not tell us that Comparative Literature is at an end. On the contrary, and according to Judith Butler:

It charts a demanding and urgent future for the field, laying out the importance of the encounter with area studies and offering a radically ethical framework for the approach to subaltern writing. Spivak deftly opposes the 'migrant intellectual' approach to the study of alterity. In its place, she insists upon a practice of cultural translation that resists the appropriation by dominant power and engages in the specificity of writing within subaltern sites in the idiomatic and vexed relation to the effacements of cultural erasure and cultural appropriation. She asks those who dwell within the dominant episteme to imagine how we are imagined by those for whom literacy remains the primary demand. And she maps a new way of reading not only the future of literary studies but its past as well. This text is disorienting and reconstellating, dynamic, lucid, and brilliant in its scope and vision. (SPIVAK: 2005, p. x)

And she concludes by saying, "Rarely has 'death' offered such inspiration."

Taking all of this into consideration, it is not difficult to understand the challenges translators encounter when faced with cultural articulations of family, religion, race, marginality, power, gender and ethnicity, among others. In the bare field of translations of African-American literary texts into Brazilian Portuguese and of Afro-Brazilian texts into English, efforts start to be

made in order to fill in the gap. When working with African-American and Afro-Brazilian texts we contend that one must take into consideration the historical transformation and re-enunciation of the above-mentioned themes, as well as the role of translation in negotiating the connections between cultural history, tradition and the modern, for example.

In such an international environment of diasporic and transcultural connections, discourses of authenticity and heterogeneity are constantly thrown one against the other. In between them we find the concept of “hybridity” as a controversial but complex debate–provoking topic at present. Such intellectual discourse reminds us of Johannes Fabian’s work – one of the first anthropologists to introduce the concept of popular culture into the study of contemporary Africa. In *Moments of Freedom - Anthropology and Popular Culture* (Fabian, 1998), Fabian addresses the element of time and shows how spatial thinking about culture, ethnicity and globalization acts as an obstacle to appreciating the contemporaneity of African popular culture. As he teaches, the classical culture theory did not account for large aspects of contemporary African diaspora. His power of analysis and the range of theoretical questions he explores, besides his constant connection to other fields such as History, Folklore Studies and Cultural Studies are highly suggestive and important for those working not only with African themes but with the African Diaspora as well. We found Fabian’s assertions particularly relevant in our effort. With Evaristo, we found that often times, the locus of enunciation of from the hybrid space, where cultural notions of family, culture, ethnicity were challenged and rearticulated from the vantage point of Brazilians of African descent and their place on the historical continuum of national discourses.

Narrowing the focus of our article to the bilingual work we accomplished, we may affirm that our specific research object – that is, in few words, the understanding of how blackness translates into different contexts and geographical spaces – only recently started to attract scholarly attention as primary topic of research to be systematically analyzed by researchers devoted to Translation Studies. In assessing the translation of works by authors of African ancestry, a question that inevitably surfaces is: “What are the political and cultural contexts which define the selection, translation and reception of translated African–American works into Brazilian Portuguese?” or “Which are the assumptions about Afro-descendent Literature in Brazil and in the United States?” The understanding that such questions are much wider and deeper than they may seem, leads us to new questions as well as to an interesting mapping related to Translation Studies, to the Afro–descendents, as well as to an incipient understanding of how identities are constructed in different geographical spaces.

As far as the abovementioned are concerned, we have been quoting a book released in 2010, by Lauro Maia Amorim: *Translation, Blackness, and The (In)Visible – Harryette Mullen’s Poetry in Brazilian Portuguese* (Amorim, 2010). The African–American Harryette Mullen is a poet, short story writer and master of huge literary knowledge. Born in 1953, she is Professor of African–American Literature and Literary Creation at the University of California, Los Angeles. In her work, she is always innovating and debating joyfully with words, creating texts of multiple meanings and dealing with topics such as the globalization, consumerism, mass culture and the politics of identities. The results are texts of difficult decoding for Americans and, consequently, of greater vicissitude to a translator who may wish to “write her” in a foreign language. Likewise, we have tried to offer, at least to this point, a perspective based on our intellectual and creative engagement of translating into English language a Brazilian poetic text. Again, much of Maia Amorim’s observations related to the culturally creative task of translating Harryette Mullen’s work into Brazilian Portuguese was experientially observed and tackled with during our process.

In his efforts – and clearly aware of the obstacles and tensions to be faced ahead – of translating Mullen’s poems to a Brazilian audience, Amorim gets to something of extreme relevance to any researcher eager to understand how blackness translates into different contexts and geographical spaces. During his work, routine assumptions come to surface: generally silent, but absolutely divergent points that clearly show the difference in American and Brazilian imaginaries concerning the Afro–descendent. In fact, he brings to surface intriguing problems related to the relationship between Literature and blackness across different cultures. Specific conflicts, varied implications and consequent potentialities give rise to the appearance of challenging aesthetic questions to the researcher’s work. In the final result of his translation work, Amorim shows how racially loaded many Brazilian expressions are and, moreover, how diverse the construction of blackness is in Brazil compared to in the United States. At the same time that, through her poetry, Mullen searches to walk into a *locus* which goes beyond the univocal and static questions of race, Brazilians reading her translated text will always have in mind their own views of race, making

explicit the principles of the so studied “myth of racial democracy”. Likewise, English-speaking audiences who, either critically or not, engage this translation will have a glimpse into the racial, gender, and class politics of Brazil. The challenge for the readership is to disengage one’s own epistemological understandings of race, gender and class politics based on the reader’s locus of cultural articulation. In order to approximate an understanding of the triangulation of utterances in Evaristo’s poetry, the reader, English-speaking that is, must approach the work with the acknowledgement that the “English” represents linguistically a cultural context where the English-language cultural trajectories do not govern the implied or explicit cultural discourse. In so, the reader opens up to the possibility of neo-epistemologies that challenge or provide a ripe comparative contextualization of the themes lodged within Evaristo’s poetic verses. This is exactly one of the key points that have led Translation Studies to be recognized as part and, at the same time, an essential instrument of Comparative Literature: translation not only allows the understanding of the variable reconstructions of the “Other”, through languages and cultures, but also gives us the necessary conditions to visualize how it may itself present new possibilities of interpretation which may affect the way through which readers of the target culture evaluate not only a specific work of foreign literature, but also, through the printed word, their own literature. From a complimentary point of view, we may say that issues once considered invisible become explicitly and outrageously visible after translation. Or in the Amorim’s own words:

As such, the (in)visible “shop window” of translation makes possible reflections on the inside (“blackness in Brazil”, for example) as well as on the outside (“blackness in the United States”) in such ways that blackness exists on both sides of the pane of glass: it is at the same time both one and, unexpectedly, the other. (AMORIM: 2010, p. 147)

Thus, it was our hope that the themes embedded in Conceição Evaristo’s *Poems of recollection and other movements* provided a cross-cultural engagement of “blackness” for an English-speaking audience as configurations of “Black culture” are manifested in both Brazil and in the United States.

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