

## THE CHANGING PROFESSION

## Toward Afrofluency

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My experience of translation has been, for the most part, unburdened. Translating has not been my principal professional occupation, nor has it been my field of study. It has become, however, a singularly integral praxis for me over the last decade—one of the most important expressions of what I do with what I know as a researcher and professor.

I came to translation organically. In 2013, the editor of a small independent press commissioned me to translate the Haitian Spiralist author Frankétienne's 1968 novel *Mûr à crever* (*Ready to Burst*) from French into English. I had published the first full-length scholarly monograph on Spiralism three years earlier, and so I welcomed the opportunity to return to Frankétienne's work and to the worlds it had opened up for me. Taking on the translation aligned entirely with the intention that animated the earlier work I had done on Spiralism: to shed greater light on and encourage a wider readership of Frankétienne's writing and that of the two other authors I considered in my study.

I jumped into that first translation project untrained, unstudied, and guided loosely by a confidence that I knew enough about Haitian literature and was proficient enough in French and in Haitian Creole to do a decent job of it. This was true, for the most part, but the experience ultimately was as much one of learning as of doing. In approaching *Ready to Burst* as a scholar, I had always left the book intact in a certain kind of way; I entered into public conversation, even debated with it, probing and questioning it in the hopes of excavating its layers. But in every aspect of this critical work, Frankétienne remained always and unequivocally The Author and I remained The Reader. In bringing his novel into the academic arena through carefully chosen fragments, with curated elements spotlighted and mined for the formal and conceptual treasures they contained,

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I never made any secret of my mediation. I stood explicitly between *my* reader and *his* text, sharing my own insights but in no way unbuilding the edifice of his book.

Translating this work, this novel I knew so well and had considered so thoroughly over so many years, turned out to be an intervention of an entirely different order. It demanded—allowed for—what felt more like an affective relationship than a scholarly inquiry. The translation was a shared project. My and Frankétienne's creation. Mostly mine? Mostly his? That was unclear and, for me, not so important to determine at the time. Because whatever it was, this new and different connection—this trans(re)lational encounter—engendered feelings of protectiveness and concern. Translating Frankétienne's work into the Anglosphere felt something like introducing a new lover to old friends. I was deeply implicated in whatever first impression his book would make on a bunch of *étrangers*—not just strangers, but foreigners to boot.

The translator I have since become still *feels* just as much in doing this work. Needless to say, though, I have gained greater clarity about those feelings over the last decade and have grappled with them pointedly in subsequent projects. I have resolved to some greater extent the imbricated matters of mediation and ownership, and I have arrived at a number of overlapping givens that guide my practice. These may not be every translator's givens and, as such, they may be debatable. But they won't be debated here. Only posited. They frame and ground my work as a translator. They are the answers I give to students, colleagues, readers of my works in translation, and to any others who inquire.

Given number one: *Blackness matters*. Not in the biological sense, clearly, but as a concept and a construct that is an inevitable condition of social being. Blackness matters everywhere and to everyone and in all languages. How can I make such a sweeping claim without falling into the dangerous trap of ethnocentrism, without failing to recognize “the virtue of particularity, placeness” (Seale). I suppose I can do so by embracing the fact that no matter how much or how little or how specifically Blackness matters in any particular global context,

it always matters in the Anglosphere—in English, my mother tongue and “target” language—the audience for whom my work as a translator is destined.

That Blackness matters fundamentally is a trickier assertion than it might at first seem. When it comes to works written by racialized authors, the racial identity of their translators comes into play in myriad ways—some troublingly unnuanced, even ham-fisted. I'm referring to the elephant in the room: Does a Black-authored text functionally or ethically require a Black translator? The short answer is no. Blackness matters, but it isn't everything. It certainly isn't enough. There may be value in the shared experience of racialized existence and identification, but sharing a race with the author of a text does not in and of itself make a translator more competent to render that text in a target language, no more so than mere proficiency in a source language suffices to make a good translator. Taxonomy be damned, that elephant is a red herring, and a troubling one at that, inasmuch as it leads away from one of the most crucial contributions of translation in the context of Black literature—to attest to the diversity, instability, contingency, and idiosyncrasy of Black identity across the globe, a diversity that requires translation by whosoever is willing and capable.

Of course, willing is one thing, but to be truly capable of translating a Black-authored work of literature is another. Once we've dispatched with any presumption of exclusively race-based legitimacy, we can think about adjacency as in fact more useful to translation than identification. Our value as translators inheres in our in-between position—our situation in the space that at once separates and connects the firsthand expression that is the author's original text and a third-party consumer of that text. Our intercession smooths out the rough edges of the encounter between two language worlds. Our contribution and our talent are a matter of the intimacies we let flow through us. These intimacies might be accessed in part through common racial identification but, in the end, they require some distance—some open, unresolved space for curiosity and study, investment and intention. As I have written elsewhere, to dwell in that space

is a commitment we absolutely must assume (“Blackness’ in French”). The protectiveness and concern I felt during the experience of rendering my very first translation are feelings I articulate now as responsibility. Accountability.

Which brings me to given number two: *Translation is power*. It is power—ironically, and perhaps especially, because of the relative lack of power wielded by translators and translation within the broader literary institution. On the one hand, it is true, yes, that translation makes up a distressingly slim tranche of the market for American book publishing, and that translated works from non-European cultures are perceived as having particularly limited market potential. Putting aside the obvious point that only in cultivating a community of readers by supporting works in translation can the publishing industry expect to increase the number of consumers, we are nonetheless left with the incontrovertible fact of the relative commercial unviability and invisibility of translated literature.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to accept that the undeniable paucity of opportunities for (published, reasonably compensated) translation work amounts to disempowerment. We must not lose sight of where our power lies, nor should we too easily yield to the limitations of fundamentally colonial institutions that determine how race—how Blackness—does or does not travel across languages and cultures. Our power as translators resides first and foremost in our choice of what to translate; and in choosing, we must be clear in our intentions. We must have intentions in the first place. Clarity of intention enables us to hold ourselves accountable to our authors and our desired readers, to recognize structures of coloniality and our complicity within them, and to resist a posture of supplication with respect to publishers and marketers that may risk compromising the works we have elected to shepherd into the world.

In my own work as a translator, being intentional has meant (among other things) being attentive to the more and less subtle, but always inevitable, silencing embedded in translation. Here I do not mean only the obvious and egregious violence of cultural carelessness, which I reject. I am

thinking, rather, of the more subtle matter of restraint. As a committed scholar of Haitian fiction, I am deeply aware and wary of the overwhelmingly negative labels that attach to Haiti in the Anglosphere. As a translator of this literature, I necessarily worry that certain of the nation’s cultural idiosyncrasies might be misinterpreted by my largely US-American readership: some of the works I have chosen to translate tell stories about unsavory Black Haitian subjects, others lay bare elements of Vodou that risk confirming troublesome stereotypes, and others show less-than-progressive attitudes toward gender and sexuality. I worry about the reception of these works, but I choose to translate them nonetheless, and I am careful not to smooth out too much.

Beyond the matter of choice, I am also careful not to use the works I translate as vehicles for my own politics or political desires. I do not imagine any more or less intent than their authors originally revealed on the page, and I think pointedly about who my writers were writing for in their global and local source contexts. I consider the concessions they may have made, in full (if resigned) understanding of those contexts, as they worked to avoid the “insult of dust” (Glover, “Haitian Literature”). And so, as much as I may want—from my vantage point in the twenty-first-century United States—say, less heteronormativity or more Creole, for example, those readerly desires are distinct from my task as a translator. To indulge them would be an abuse of my power.

Admittedly, however, I do have an agenda—a political desire that I indulge through my translation work. That agenda responds to given number three: *Cultural imperialism is (also) a Black thing*. In popular culture especially, there has long been a tendency to flatten singular Black experiences into a single, albeit nuanced and multivalent, US-anglophone Black Experience. This African American cultural hegemony is a function of the fact that “Blackness” has been discussed so openly in the United States—thoroughly buttressed by a lexicon of explicit terms and positions and aided by the diffusion of Black American culture worldwide through jazz and hip-hop. But “the models

which predominate and prevail in the US are not universal or the limits of what is possible” (Keene). If Black identity has historically found expression, however fraught, as the unassailable sociocultural and political experience of a vocal minority in the United States, it is nonetheless insufficient in a global frame, and can even be dangerously silencing.

On the most basic level, this silence amounts to the subtle violence of nonrepresentation. But there are higher costs, still, and they are especially apparent from where I sit as a Haitianist. African Americans, readers I pointedly translate *for* (again, these are my politics), are in many ways denied access to Blackness beyond the borders of the United States and thus are led to view places like Haiti through the prism of American whiteness. They are, then, largely without means to build the discursive resistance needed to combat the pernicious racist narratives about Haiti that infuse both popular culture and the mainstream news media. Black Americans have been more and less subtly discouraged from viewing Haitians as kin—as hemispheric and diasporic subjects who have struggled in similar-but-different ways against racial capitalism. As a result, Black America too often absorbs and even espouses disparaging anti-Haitian discourse, a phenomenon of misrecognition and misinformation that limits the globality of the ostensibly global movement for Black lives.

We elide the differences among Afrodescendant peoples across the globe at our collective peril. We risk leaving ourselves blind to worldviews and perspectives that might be grounds for potent new solidarities. We risk leaving insidious colonial structures in place, insufficiently questioned. Translation, in my view, contests these blind spots. It is a practice of refusal, providing fodder for efforts to put together a puzzle of the Black world that pushes against the hierarchies of the Mercator map. Through my translation work I hope not only to chip away at distorted or unbalanced representations of Blackness in the Anglosphere, but also to cultivate Afrofluency.

To be clear, fluency, as I understand and intend it within the context of translating Blackness, does

not aspire to transparency or mastery. Afrofluency does not imagine that communication across languages is or should be unfettered. Rather, Afrofluency calls for creating conditions of relation, in the Glissantian sense. It is a prerequisite for conceiving a global ethnopolitical community capacious enough to accommodate irreducible singularity. Though grounded in an effort to facilitate access and perhaps empathy, Afrofluency neither fears nor seeks to compromise opacity. Though it encourages recognition of the common experiences of racialized being in this world, it does not require—it resists, even—anything that smacks of ethnoconformity. But what Afrofluency does require is a tolerance for discomfort and a commitment to imagining community in ways unfixed and unsettled. Afrofluency resolutely contests the balkanization of the Black world and urges us to refuse the frame of the nation-state and other pernicious avatars of colonialism. It is transgressive in its submarine yearning toward borderless connection, but it does not truck in the illusions of perfect conveyance. Submarine. Like water, Afrofluency is flow—fluid, in the sense of changeable, not rigid. And translation is its most fundamental condition of possibility.

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