

## Recall This Book

### 48 Transform, Not Transfer: Lisa Dillman on Translation

Elizabeth Ferry:

From Brandeis university, remotely, welcome to Recall This Book, a podcast that looks backward to see into the future. Our idea is to assemble scholars and writers from different disciplines to make sense of contemporary issues, problems, and events, by looking at books that shaped the world we inherited today. Our hosts are myself Elizabeth Ferry – hello - and Pu Wang, who is an associate professor of modern Chinese literature at Brandeis university. His specialties are literature and culture and comparative frameworks, critical theory, and translation studies. And he's also an accomplished and highly-regarded poet. Hello, Pu and welcome.

Pu Wang:

Hi, everyone.

EF:

And we're also very glad to welcome our guest for this week, Lisa Dillman from Emory University. Lisa is a Professor of Spanish and Portuguese, and she's a translator, very accomplished translator. She has translated many novels and scholarly works, and most recently several works by Andres Barba, as well as Yuri Herrera's *Signs Preceding the End of the World* and *The Transmigration of Bodies*. In 2016, she won the best translated book award for *Signs Preceding the End of the World*, which is the topic of our podcast today. Welcome Lisa. We're really happy to have you.

Lisa Dillman:

Thanks. Hi, I'm really happy to be here.

EF:

Great. So maybe Lisa, you could start by telling us a little bit about the book and about your experience of translating it.

LD:

Sure. Yeah. I think it's a complicated book by all accounts and it's a novel that can be viewed in what I think of as three different, but complementary ways.

So it's the story of a young woman named Makina who travels to the United States in search of her missing brother, she's been sent on this mission by her mother. And in that sense the novel can be read as a fairly straightforward, literal, social commentary on U S

Mexico relations, on lots of issues, surrounding migration, treatments of immigrants, social justice, feminism, all sorts of contemporary issues.

It's also kind of a classic quest tale in which, you know, you have all of the steps you might see in, in any classic quest. So you have the call being set forth in this case, by a woman set forth by Makina's mother Cora, who sends her to find her brother, so we have a sort of inversion of stereotypical gendered roles. We have Makina as the sort of archetypal heroine. And of course, she crosses into this new world and has many tests that have to be passed before she can reach her goal, which is not a straightforward one in which can be debated what that means.

And then there's also a reading as this being a, the entire book, being a voyage to Mictlán, which is the Aztec underworld, and in that reading the souls of the dead must travel. It's sometimes eight, sometimes nine steps in order to reach Mictlán where their souls can be at peace. And in that reading of the book, Makina would, would actually be dead the entire time.

So it's a complicated book and it's also a complicated on all sorts of linguistic levels, which makes translating it or which made translating it both really, really fun and rewarding, and also incredibly challenging.

EF:

You know, I'm not a scholar of translation studies unlike Pu, who will have much more to say probably, but, you know, there's sort of on the one hand, there's this idea of translation as this kind of carrying across and then can it succeed or fail at being a sort of clear lens or perfect transferal. And often the answer to that is no, it never can. It always entails some form of loss, right? But what you're suggesting and what it seems like the book is suggesting is kind of getting out of the idea of loss or gain entirely to this sort of multiplicity, simultaneity of multiple worlds or something like that. Does that make sense?

LD:

I would agree with that. I, I find it far more fruitful to, to think of translation as a remediation or an iteration or a proliferation than I do a, a transference because precisely as you've just said, I think conceiving of translation as a transfer of meaning automatically leads to this rhetoric of loss.

EF:

Yeah. Which sort of seems to be embracing the indeterminacy of the text, but kind of stopped short of doing so as fully as, as this might.

LD:

Yeah. Precisely. Yeah.

EF:

It seems like the, I mean the novel itself is in some ways about translation too, right? Makina is this kind of, you know, this messenger, a character, this border crosser, um, there's a great line at one point where she says, uh, you are the door, not the one who walks through it as a kind of principle of living. So I'm curious what either of you think about that.

PW:

Yeah. I, I think, you know, if I may add Lisa, I would like to, to add on to Elizabeth's question about this novel being not only text you translated, but also a novel about translanguaging existence or translanguaging death you know, as a, as a scholar of literature, I simply cannot resist citing your translation of some very important lines. Elizabeth went for one line and I'm thinking about the place where the protagonist Makina enters the United States, this is the moments of border crossing. She's a messenger. She is the symbol of a switchboard and a translator is always compared to a messenger, especially in the, the instrumentalist view of it. And to, she starts to hear this intermediary tongue among the Latinos.

And then there is the line about language as being like the protagonist Makina herself. Makina is "malleable, erasable, permeable." These words can also be used to support your arguments about the inherent instability of language, literature, and the text. I would really like you to come back to that moment to think about this larger theoretical question within that's a very specific plot of Makina being a female messenger entering the United States, seeing this world and encountering Latinos and calling the other people Anglos.

LD:

Yes. I think that in many ways, it, as you said, the book is about translation as a metaphor and in a literal sense, right? It's Makina herself literally is a translator. She literally translates for people at the switchboard in not two but three languages. And, you know, she's a character who a lot of people have referred to as sort of kickass She's an ass-kicker. And what's really fascinating to me is that this power of hers derives from wielding language, right? The power that she is able to have over people, wherever she goes, she does use a little physical force as well, but the power that she truly has derives from her skill with translating words, as well as knowing which words not to say, and when not to say them. And so, as you said, when she's at home, she works as a switchboard operator working in three languages.

And then when you refer to this, the beautiful intermediary tongue that she talks about on arrival into the U.S. when she is wandering around the town, that she arrives to. One of the things that I find so generative and hopeful, and just lovely about this is that she, she views this intermediary tongue as a source of celebration. And I know that there has been a lot of poetry scholarship on the ideas of loss and the pain of losing languages, but for her, it's something to celebrate. And she rebels in the creativity of this new language that is being made by these new inhabitants of the land where she is. And she is shown in this situation

sort of learning because this is a new language and in some senses kind of transcends perhaps her knowledge of English, which she already had, and already used at the switchboard, but then continues to use.

I mean, again, in one of the most poignant, I think scenes any entire novel when she, along with a group of other men are detained by a cop. Again, she uses language, right? She uses language to get out of the situation and in this case language is made material. So she snatches a pen and paper and writes down a series of words that leaves the cop so gobsmacked he basically lets people go. So yes, I think in many, many ways, the novel is about language, the power of language and the malleability of language.

EF:

I mean, I read in the bio of Herrera, the author, that he has a PhD in linguistics. And also that you and he spoke a lot about over the course of your translation, right? Did he ever talk about these questions about translation and language as a dimension, as a subject of the book?

LD:

Absolutely. Absolutely. And I would say now I'm working on his fifth book now, so we've gotten to be fairly good friends, I would say. And all of his books have language as a central theme, one that perhaps could be overlooked, that might not literally form a plot element, per se, that would be arguable. But the wielding of language and the power of words and the material realities that one can create with them, I think, is something.

EF:

Yeah. Yeah. And, and I guess I was, just to be more specific, have you talked about these kinds of theories of translation that you were touching on, or this sort of idea of the multiple worlds that languages produce or things like that?

LD:

Perhaps not at the time that I was translating it, I actually translated this book probably seven years ago. So, you know, many, quite honestly many of the books that I have read and have influenced my thinking about translation most, have been written since it seems. Although, I partially feel like they have articulated senses that I had, and didn't know how to put into words. And I will also say that Herrera is by far, by far, by far the most, perhaps embracing of this post-structuralist indeterminacy of any writer I've worked with. He has from the start spoken about, co-creation and has talked about things like, you know, the importance of being true to the translation.

EF:

So, co-creation of the text between the author and the translator, you mean?

LD:

Yes. And the reader as well.

PW:

Right.

LD:

I mean, I would, I don't know if I can say this, I don't know if I know this is a fact, but my strong inclination is that one of the reasons he has not often, or super openly spoken about the entire Mictlán reading of the novel, is because he believes, this part I'm sure, that the novel means what meaning you bring to it. He is not the purveyor of meaning. And so therefore...

EF:

Right. There's not a secret text that he has the key to or something like that. Yeah.

LD:

If you didn't, if you didn't realize this, you missed it.

PW:

I think Herrera's fictional novelistic language sometimes speaks volumes to our urgent politics of languages in the United States and beyond. I have to go for this line, "more than the midpoint between home world and Anglo they're telling is that nebulous territory between what is dying out and what is not yet born." So, it's just a line that is so powerful, not only in the flow of the plot about Makina's journey, it is something I would like to quote in my next book about translation. But at the same time, I think this line speaks directly to the current cultural, political debates here and beyond.

LD:

I think that's really interesting. And I think it's another sign of hopefulness in these very bleak times. But the concept of, because, you know, when you speak of linguistic purity and for decades people talked about Spanglish as some sort of bastardization, both on the left hand, on the right, right? Either it's incorrect English, or it's incorrect Spanish. It's something, you know, for people who don't know how to properly speak one language or the other. And so this linguistic elitism, and the idea then of, because in the section two that you're quoting there, Pu, he talks about people believing something to be perfect until they slip into another tongue.

And so, I very much like the idea of what is dying out, being this elitist concept of linguistic purity and what is coming, being this plurality and this acceptance. It's something that I, in political terms, I think of to myself now, quite a bit in terms of this place that we're in with such horrific political views and such extreme hatred and intolerance being just spewed. And sometimes I think, yes, but this is dying out.

EF:

Hmm. Yeah. Right. It's interesting to have a book that's called *Signs Preceding the End of the World* described as hopeful, but I definitely agree with the reading of it.

Well, maybe this is the moment in which we shift to our recallable books section. This is when the part of the conversation where we kind of suggest things for each other and for our listeners that we might want to read or engage with further. So, I don't know, Pu, have you brought a recallable book to our table?

PW:

Yes, actually I tried to do something counterintuitive, but I think in the spirits of Lisa's translation of *Signs Preceding the End of the World*. I have a really heavy book here. So actually it is a dictionary, so this is *A Dictionary of Untranslatables*.

It is a kind of an encyclopedia, a dictionary for philosophers, especially for philosophers working in the European continental tradition. But in your translator's notes, Lisa, you mentioned how you end up turning the concept of the literary concept of verse into a verb in order to translate Herrera's neologism. So I think that's a moment where, you know, according to your interpretation, where I saw this convivial experience of the Arabic traditions and Latin tongues. And actually *A Dictionary of Untranslatables* is a kind of, in a way, very European project. It is about actually some key concepts in the European philosophical traditions that historically are considered as the tokens of universal value, for example, the concept of freedom, the concept of justice, the concept of being. We know that in many East Asian languages, we do not have the word "to be."

So actually, you know, living in today's world, when we look at all these concepts from the European cosmopolitan traditions, they are actually untranslatable. "Being" is one of the most fundamental concepts of a Western philosophical tradition, traced back to Greek roots. But the very foundation is a verb that is quite unique and particular to a certain part of our family tree of human languages.

And so, leafing through this book, I also noticed that's actually the...you know, even when we only look at the philosophical concepts, there was a deep cross-fertilization of languages, of Latin, Hebrew, and Arabic traditions. In addition, this dictionary is originally a collective project, collective endeavor done in French, and now it's available in English. So that shows us that even for untranslatables, we can have a translation. So that's also another way of our celebration of translation in our global culture. Yeah.

EF:

Yeah, Fantastic. Okay. Lisa, what have you brought?

LD:

Okay, well, I have here, a book called *Impostures*. It's funny when you said Pu that you had a very large book. I thought, Oh my gosh, I wonder if he brought this up.

It's a fairly new book called *Impostures*, and this is also in the same vein. It is a translation of al-Hariri's poetry from Arabic, a groundbreaking translation. And I've yet to read it, but I have read several reviews about it, and I'm very excited about it because al Hariri's poetry is often thought of as untranslatable and is firmly grounded in wordplay, palindromes, riddles, et cetera. And so, Michael Cooperson, the translator, has been very creative in his translatorial moves and translated many of these poems. He translated each of the poems in a distinct literary style. So there's a poem translated into Cockney rhyming slang, a poem translated into, I believe like cowboy English, poems that imitate Mark Twain, et cetera. Again, sort of upholding the idea of translation as a creative, authorial act, which transforms meaning in its search to recreate an analog to the original source text.

EF:

So as usual, I came with something and then decided to do something else in the middle of our conversation, which to me is a sign of a good conversation because it's gotten me some new thoughts and new ideas. The thing that I would like to bring is a book of poems by a poet named George Kalogeris called *Guide to Greece*. And it's a book that is both about the kind of Greek, about a series of different kinds of ancient and contemporary, Greek poetic traditions and sort of extending those, including the poet Cavafy and, other poetic traditions that I don't know as well, because I'm not an expert, but there's a lot of beautiful self-consciousness about that. And then also his own Greek-American upbringing in Massachusetts.

So I think that, you know, it's a book that really beautifully brings together these questions about how to write Greek poetry in English, but also what it means to be Greek in the United States. And, seeing this kind of flow of language that is both kind of continuous, but also sort of constantly making these new forms. And I think even the title of the book, which is *Guide to Greece*, kind of exemplifies that. So I think it's very much within the spirit of both Herrera's book and the story that it tells and also the project of translation.

LD:

That sounds wonderful. Yeah.

EF:

So, and for our listeners, all of these will be on our website so that you get a chance to check them out.

Well, I want to very much thank Lisa and Pu today. Thank you so much for a great conversation. It was really a pleasure.

And in closing, I want to tell all of you that Recall this Book is the brainchild of John Plots and Elizabeth Ferry it's affiliated with Public Books and is usually, but not right now, recorded and edited in the Media Lab of the Brandeis library. It typically has co-hosts of John and myself, and a number of different colleagues, including, Pu and others in, at Brandeis, in Boston and beyond. Our music comes from a song by Eric Chasalow and Barbara Cassidy "Flyaway." sound editing is by Claire Ogden and production assistance, including website design and social media is done by Nai Kim and Nai is also the co-producer of this episode.

Mark Dellelo oversees and advises on all our technological matters. And we appreciate the support of university librarian, Matthew Sheehy and Dorothy Hodgson and the Mandel Center for the Humanities at Brandeis. We always want to hear from you with your comments, criticisms, and suggestions for future episodes. And you can email us directly at [ferry@brandeis.edu](mailto:ferry@brandeis.edu) or [plotz@brandeis.edu](mailto:plotz@brandeis.edu), and you can contact us via social media and our website.

If you enjoyed today's show, please be sure to read a review or rate us on iTunes or Stitcher or wherever else you get your podcasts. And you may be interested in checking out past episodes, including topics like vectors of warfare with Vincent Brown, Adaner Usmani on the origins of mass incarceration and Leah price on children's books. So thank you and goodbye until next time.