

# A WHITE BRAZILIAN MAN TRANSLATING POETRY BY AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN: TRANSLATION OF AFFECTION, (DIS) CONNECTIONS,<sup>1</sup> INTERBEING, AND THE AFFECTION OF TRANSLATION

## UM HOMEM BRASILEIRO BRANCO TRADUZINDO POEMAS DE POETAS AFRO-AMERICANAS: A TRADUÇÃO DO AFETO, (DES)ENCONTROS, INTEREXISTÊNCIA E O AFETO DA TRADUÇÃO

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, I elaborate on the awareness that, as a White man, my materiality takes part in a socioeconomic and political system that, regardless of personal merit, benefits me, unlike the vast majority of Black men and women, whose rights are marginalized. The questions I propose to answer are: in what way, despite being a White man, does translating the poetry of Black women produce affects that overcome these oppositions? Despite my own limitations, such a translation experience entails the possibility of a relationship described by monk and activist Thich Nhat Hanh (1991) as interbeing, which suggests the Buddhist concept of sunyata, meaning “emptiness of inherent existence” (CARLUCCI, 2022). All beings, according to Mahayana Buddhist philosophy, are interconnected at a deeper level of (inter)existence in that, between the Self and the Other, despite all differences, they maintain an existential connection in which they affect one another. Here, I purposefully play with the sense of “affect” and “being affected by” to reflect on love, as invited by African American activist, anti-racist, teacher, and artist bell hooks (2000), whose writings on love reverberate the issues I intend to discuss.

**Keywords:** Translation Studies; poetry by African American women; affection; interbeing.

### RESUMO

Neste artigo desenvolvo, em um primeiro momento, a consciência de que, como homem branco, minha materialidade participa de um sistema socioeconômico e político que, a despeito dos meus méritos pessoais, dele sou beneficiário, ao contrário da imensa maioria de homens e mulheres negras que se encontram à margem dos seus direitos. As questões que me proponho responder são: de que forma, mesmo sendo homem e branco, traduzir a poesia de mulheres negras pode produzir afetos que transbordam a oposição homem branco vs mulher negra? Buscarei discutir que, a despeito das limitações que se podem atribuir a mim, haveria, ali, nessa experiência tradutória, a possibilidade de uma relação de *interexistência*, tal como discutida pelo monge budista Thich Nhat Hanh (1991), a qual remonta, historicamente, ao conceito shunyata, que, no budismo, significa “vazio de existência inerente” (CARLUCCI, 2022). Todos os seres, segundo a filosofia budista mahayana, são, antes, interconectados em um nível mais profundo da (inter)existência, de forma que entre o Eu e Outro, a despeito de todas as diferenças, mantêm, entre si, formas de conexão existencial em que tanto um quanto o outro se afetam mutuamente. Aqui, jogo, propositalmente com os sentidos de “afeto” e “afetar” para refletir a respeito do amor, tal como nos convida a ativista afro-americana, antirracista, professora e artista bell hooks (2000), cujos escritos sobre o amor reverberam as questões que pretendo discutir.

**Palavras-chave:** Estudos da Tradução; poesia de poetisas afro-americanas; afeto; interexistência.

### INTRODUCTION: OUT(SIDE) OF BLACKNESS, SIDED BY AFFECTION IN TRANSLATION

In 2017, Ana Maria Klein, a professor of Education and expert in Human Rights and Research with Human Beings, who was then coordinator of the Black Nucleus for Research and Extension at the Sao Paulo State University at Sao Jose do Rio Preto (NUPE), invited me to take part in a roundtable at an event called “Women in Plural,” organized by the local Brazilian Bar Association, in partnership with the São Paulo State University and UNILAGO, a private university. I was invited because since 2006 I had been working on issues related to Translation Studies and blackness, especially focusing on African American poet Harryette Mullen as her poetry became the subject of my doctoral dissertation, defended in April 2010 at Binghamton University (SUNY).

<sup>1</sup> I am particularly grateful to William F. Hanes for his suggestion of translating “*desencontro*” as “disconnection.”

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Through this academic experience, in 2014 I published a book of my own translations of selected poems by Mullen, entitled *(Un)invented colors: the African-American Poetry by Harryette Mullen* (Dobra Editorial). Two years later I co-authored, along with Dennys da Silva-Reis, a special issue of *Cadernos de Literatura em Tradução* that triggered a collective debate on translation and blackness. In this issue, I analyzed my own translations of three poems by award-winning African American poet Gwendolyn Brooks in an essay entitled “*O drama e a alegria da tradução: Gwendolyn Brooks versando a vida em três poemas*” (“The Drama and the Joy of Translation: Gwendolyn Brooks Versifying Life in Three Poems”) (AMORIM, 2016).

The roundtable I was invited to, entitled “Oppression, Gender, and Professions,” brought together four Black women, three of whom were lawyers. Professor Mônica Abrantes Galindo, the table’s moderator, was an expert researcher in Science Education at Sao Paulo State University. As both a scholar and translator, I was given the opportunity to present a selection of translated poems by female poets, including Harryette Mullen, Gwendolyn Brooks, Dominique Christina, and Maya Angelou.<sup>2</sup> I particularly recall that round table because it was, in fact, quite significant, especially from the viewpoint of affection. The issue that arose for me at that moment was that my presence at the table should have gone largely unnoticed. It was a round table of Black women sharing their life trajectories and struggles for survival in a racist society, the enormous challenges they faced to get their Law degree and become professionals in a labor market extremely resistant to Black lawyers, especially Black female lawyers.

At that moment, being a White man who had never suffered any form of racism or social exclusion and had never been subjected to the kind of oppression that women – and especially Black women – have historically suffered, it made me aware that the people who, in fact, should be there at that round table with those four outstanding Black women were the four African American poets only, i.e., the above-mentioned women I had intended to introduce to the audience that day. On that day of the event, I understood that I needed to position myself as nothing more than the translator of a selection of their poems. I wanted neither the audience nor the guest speakers to think I was posing as a sort of representative, “speaking” on behalf of those poets. I did hope that my translation would be considered a transparent and direct vehicle for conveying the voices of those Black women,<sup>3</sup> along with wishing, by some magical sleight of hand, that I could “disappear” from the stage, or at least be reduced to the discreet, almost unnoticeable voice of an off-screen narrator, as in a documentary on a sensitive topic.

Of course, the narrator cannot be fully expunged from the process of narrating. As a matter of fact, not even the maximum possible distance will remove the framing from the narrative camera: narrating is more than displaying the Other as an object that supposedly exists in itself. The Other will always become entangled in a relationship of interexistence produced through the narrative process.

However, it must be pointed out that translation entails an equally intimate or emotional reading as narration, because if, in the narration process, an apparent distance is created between the narrator and the narrated, translation re-presents (more than simply represents) the Other, no longer exactly the same, but filtered through and as a part of the translator.

Here is the paradox of translation: if we agree with Jacques Derrida (1981) translation inescapably turns itself into the Other – another text (the source text) from which it has been derived, and without which it cannot exist – while simultaneously replacing it, becoming a text in its own right with a life of its own. When considered according to Zen Buddhist monk and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh’s (1991) reasoning, the translated text can only occur in the realm of “interbeing,” i.e., a relationship grounded by the condition of interexistence. The interexistence of both the text from which a translation has arisen, the human beings who have made it possible, and the text’s re-presentation in translation (a hybrid relationship between the translator and what the Other transmits through the translator’s interpretation) engenders the unexpected: all of the consonances, dissonances, affections and even disaffections that translation can bring about among readers.

2 I had selected for my speech a few poems by Mullen and Brooks that I had translated long before the event, and a poem that Dominique Christina recited during a slam poetry contest (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PmLyumKQr4M>) that was translated for subtitles to the video, although the subtitles have never been made available on Youtube. They were used, for the first time, for the purposes of my oral presentation only at the event abovementioned.

3 It is virtually impossible to attain such self-invisibility, as has been shown in discussions about translation from a post-Nietzschean or post-structuralist perspective. However, here I am referring to what I was feeling at that particular moment at the roundtable, i.e., my intention, which, for obvious reasons, could never be accomplished.

But, getting back to the roundtable, I found myself embarrassed and apologetic, trying to shake off any kind of recognition from the audience or the other speakers. It was then that Dr. Galindo very compassionately and kindly replied: “Such discussion, Lauro, should engage society as a whole, and not only Black women or the Black community; it’s crucial for you to take part in this debate and make a contribution.”

The question that I had been asking myself, which had hovered in my mind since I first came across Harryette Mullen’s poetry, was that although, as a White man, my translational perception could never be derived from *within* blackness, in all its wealth of artistic, experiential, and poetic expression, as well as its traumatic history, I nevertheless understood that, through the intertwining process that translation entails, my approach, both as a reader and as a translator of Black female poets, should primarily represent something *beyond* the linguistic and aesthetic exchange that every poetic translation necessarily entails.

To me, translating a selection of poems by Black female poets meant a fundamentally affective undertaking, although it might have appeared to those who read the poems in translation or those who attended seminars about these poems, as a merely intellectual endeavor. However, translating affection is also a matter of (dis)connections, one of which, probably the most discussed in the field of translation studies, is the problem of translation as a response to the linguistic, cultural, and aesthetic challenges that poems generally involve. Difficulties arising from the differences between languages, cultures, and aesthetic projects are quite familiar to translators worldwide.

Mullen’s poems, for example, are replete with cultural references from African American music, poetry, and popular culture, in addition to puns that reinvent/rearrange English expressions to evoke particular racial and emotional issues. As a translator, my response to these experiments ranges from successful solutions to partially fortunate options to insufficient results within the limits of translatability, at least at that point (new approaches by other translators may be more inventive and productive than my initial ideas).

However, the most conflicting of all “disconnections,” so to speak, and likely the most difficult one, as already mentioned above, was the fact that I am a White man: I have not personally or socially experienced the life of the Other, the Black woman, her spiritual and experiential sensitivity derived from the diversity of experience that only her place in the world could translate in all its uniqueness. As a White man, my materiality participates in a socioeconomic and political system that, regardless of personal merit, benefits me, unlike the vast majority of Black men and women, whose rights are marginalized, not only as citizens but as human beings.

However sensitive and conscious my own vision may be in identifying and deconstructing the oppression that prevails in our capitalist society, it nevertheless entails blind spots that I cannot fully comprehend due to the filters that accompany my social position and condition as a White man. Deconstructive efforts against the roots of sexism, with which most men have been ingrained, must be constant, attentive, and tireless. Inevitably, although I was educated and raised by women for most of my childhood and adolescence, the framing of my gaze, as a White man, may not detect subtle details of the Black woman’s experience between the lines of poetry, including that which perseveres in the lyrical self as silent pain effusing through the interstices of words, but which, paradoxically, might be disguised as a joy manifested as a form of resistance and resilience to survive the thunderstorms of injustice, exclusion, and abandonment which have swept over these women.

Certainly, social, gender, and racial inequalities ultimately result in differences of power, the result of which in Brazil is that a large contingent of people of African descent remains systematically dispossessed of their social and human rights. In such contexts, people can only speak from a particular point of view derived from their standpoint in space, time, and within a social framework permeated by ideology. “Place of speech”, a concept emphasized by Black female scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (1990) and Djamilia Ribeiro (2019), dialogues with standpoint epistemology and Black feminist theory, i.e., there is a clear need for both place and name in collectively (rather than individually) located positions – within space, gender, class, race, and sexuality – of subaltern subjects, such as Black women. They struggle for equal rights and visibility against historical marginalization and exclusion, which also includes critical assessment of their status within other protest movements, such as feminism, when it overlooks the intersectionality of concurrent forms of oppression ingrained in hegemonic discourse.

However, it must be considered that no single person can speak universally about ideology, class, race, or gender: there is no high ground upon which one can be free from the discursive or sociological coercion that grounds one’s position in the world. Thus, as a White male Brazilian translator, living in one of the richest states in the country and working as a university professor, I do benefit from the social and economic capital from

which most Brazilians of African descent have never been able to profit (despite having contributed to it). Thus, assuming one's place of speech in such conditions of privilege is not simply desirable, it is urgent, as Ribeiro (2019) has clearly pointed out:

One of the most recurrent mistakes we see happening is the confusion between place of speech and representativeness. A black transvestite may not feel represented by a cis white man, but such cis white man can theorize about the reality of trans and transvestite people from the place of speech he occupies. We believe that there can be no such disresponsibility of the subject of power. The black transvestite speaks from her social location, as well as does the cis white man. If there are few black transvestites in spaces of privilege, it is legitimate that there is a struggle so that they can actually have choices in a society that confines them to a certain place; therefore, the fight for representation is fair, despite its limits. However, speaking from places is also breaking with the logic that only subordinates speak from their locations, which leads those inscribed within the hegemonic norm not to even think about themselves. In other words, there has been an increasing need for cis white men to study whiteness, cisgender, masculinity. As Rosane Borges claims in her article "What is a place of speech and how is it applied in public debate," thinking about a place of speech is an ethical standing, because "knowing the place from which we speak is fundamental for us to think about hierarchies, issues of inequality, poverty, racism and sexism." (RIBEIRO, 2019, p. 82-83, my translation)

Moreover, Ribeiro (2019) asks a key question that clearly echoes Spivak's (1988) seminal article "Can the subaltern speak?":

A simple question that helps us reflect on is: how many black authors has the male and female reader, who has attended college, read, or had access to during the undergraduate period? How many black teachers or professors have they had? How many black journalists, of both genders, are there in the main newsrooms of the country, or even in the so-called alternative media? (RIBEIRO, 2020, p. 63, my translation)

Ribeiro reminds us of the historical injustice so evident in the shameful absence of Blacks in dignified living conditions, which have been reserved for the few. In that regard, there has been an ongoing movement toward artistic or academic strategies, educational instruments, and public policies that facilitate agency and protagonism for both Black women and men in Brazil. Such agency must be considered across a broad range of fields, from Biosciences and Exact Sciences to the Humanities, naturally including Translation Studies and the translation of literature.

As human beings, we have historically been prone to see ourselves within a logic of duality, which is probably derived from our conflicting social, economic, and personal relationships. The forms of exclusion and violence that have historically shaped different civilizations, as well as the pervasive injustice still prevalent through war, poverty, misogyny, race, and gender inequalities, and violence against ethnic minorities and minoritized majorities (as the case of people of African descent in Brazil) and LGBTQIA+ communities. Such conflicts must be confronted with collective action toward new public policies and national and international discussion, resulting in changes in legal and governmental procedures and an inclusive educational agenda that values peace, justice, and the urgent need for a multicentric world. In other words, a world beyond imperialism that is inclusive of non-hegemonic thoughts, epistemologies, and ancestries rooted outside the Global North.

Thus, there is certainly a need for action grounded in education, public policy, and international agreements to enable living conditions in a framework of multilateral dialogue, which will guarantee, over time, the end of wars, famine, sexism, and all inequalities that have led to so many forms of suffering. Along those lines, Brazilian translators should ponder how translating poetry by women of the African diaspora could better encompass the voices of Black women and other subalterns. Of course, Translation Studies scholars should support academic engagement of Black students in translation projects in a variety of languages on both an undergraduate and graduate level to encourage future translators of African descent. Of course, this can only be possible in Brazil if the university admission system provides more openings for socially and racially vulnerable populations. Congress should create legislation to ensure the participation of Black translators in the publishing market, which, for obvious reasons, should never preclude their participation in translation projects of literary or nonliterary texts by authors of other backgrounds.

All these considerations have been described here because I believe that, beyond translation itself, there is a solid political agenda that can promote social equality and justice towards Brazilians of African descent. But what is translation's role in such a context of unresolved inequality? What might be the function of a White male translator who translates poetry by African American women if he cannot speak from a position of blackness? Is his translation less authentic? Is it a less truthful representation of the Other if he speaks from a different place of speech? I would not argue in favor of authenticity or truthful representation, but another less debated viewpoint in

Translation Studies: the notion of interbeing, as it has been historically developed in Buddhism in resonance with the Sanskrit concept of *sunyata* (or *shunyata*), which I will describe below.

In line with this, I believe that, despite the many disconnections arising from the ethical challenges that translators have to face, particularly White men who set about to translate the writings of Black women, they should be open enough to be affected by the affection of translation, both as a point of departure (intent) and as a primordial connection that can awaken during the translation process. This awakening speaks intimately, seemingly paradoxically, to the fact that the translator can indeed be a White man. And, perhaps, the possibility of connection *within* disconnection exists therein.

## TRANSLATION, INTERBEING, SUNYATA: THE INTERWEAVING TISSUE OF EXISTENCE

The “connection” within apparently undisputable “disconnection” speaks, I believe, to the Buddhist notion of “interbeing,” developed by the late Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk and pacifist Thich Nhat Hanh (1991), whose work has been known worldwide since the Vietnam War, when he and Martin Luther King Jr. joined forces in a loving, exemplary humanitarian exchange during the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. According to Hanh, interbeing supposes an essential connection between all living beings and the environment. According to the words of the Zen Buddhist master, which I quote here at length,

If you are poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are. “Interbeing” is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix “inter-” with the verb “to be,” we have a new verb, inter-be. Without a cloud and the sheet of paper inter-are. If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger’s father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist.

Looking even more deeply, we can see we are in it too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also. So we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. You cannot point out one thing that is not here – time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word inter-be should be in the dictionary. “To be” is to inter-be. You cannot just be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is. Suppose we try to return one of the elements to its source. Suppose we return the sunshine to the sun. Do you think that this sheet of paper will be possible? No, without sunshine nothing can be. And if we return the logger to his mother, then we have no sheet of paper either. The fact is that this sheet of paper is made up only of “non-paper elements.” And if we return these non-paper elements to their sources, then there can be no paper at all. Without “non-paper elements,” like mind, logger, sunshine and so on, there will be no paper. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it. (HANH, 1991, p. 95)

How could we even perceive a relationship of interbeing between clouds and paper if they are so different and distant? One is palpable materiality while the other is diffused in the heavens. If there is conflict, it lies in the dualistic classification of different life experiences conditioned by racial, social, sexual, and gender differences, e.g., between a White male translator and a Black female author. It is perhaps within such a blunt disconnection of irreducible differences that one can find a seed of connection, dialogue, learning, and awakening to those parts of the Other that dwell in the I. Setting about to translate African American women poets allowed me to create a space of affective connection by awakening my consciousness beyond a purely rational posture couched in supposed objective detachment. It is there, in contact with such affective matter, that I can understand myself as part of a history from which I cannot be absent as a White man, as if that affective matter could never touch me, or because I am unfit to discuss such subjects.

Hanh’s concept of “interbeing” was derived from *sunyata*, defined as follows in the Britannica Encyclopedia:

**Sunyata**, in Buddhist philosophy, [means] the voidness that constitutes ultimate reality; sunyata is seen not as a negation of existence but rather as the undifferentiation out of which all apparent entities, distinctions, and dualities arise. Although the concept is encountered occasionally in early Pāli texts, its full implications were developed by the 2nd-century Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna. The school of philosophy founded by him, the Mādhyamika (Middle Way), is sometimes called the Śūnyavāda, or Doctrine That All Is Void. The term sunyata may also be used as a recognition of anattā, or the absence of any self apart from the five skandhas (mental and physical elements of existence).

It must be reiterated that *sunyata* should not be taken as a nihilistic stance of mere “emptiness”, which makes no sense since “emptiness” would paradoxically become an independent entity. As Carlucci (2022) quite aptly explains, *sunyata* may be more appropriately translated as “the emptiness of inherent existence”:

Mostly from the diffusion of the *Prajñāpāramitā* Sutras in the century I BCE onwards, texts with focus on the perfection (*pāramitā*) of wisdom (*prajñā*), and the writings by Nagarjuna (SKILTON, 2013, p. 93), one of the founders of the Middle Way School, or *Madhyamika*, the *Mahāyāna* comes to place great emphasis on the concept of the emptiness of inherent existence, that is, the *śūnyatā* perspective. The notion that not only does the self lack an essential separateness, but that it is also empty; it arises in the midst of causes and conditions. Not only is the self void of inherent existence, but all phenomena (i.e., the entire phenomenal world) lack an inherent existence (DALAI LAMA, 2000, p. 175). All things arise in dependence on each other, and it is not possible to assert the existence of a single indivisible particle. Things exist in a relative way. Therefore, one arrives at the middle way, which avoids the extreme regarding eternalism, that is, the claim that there is an individual and eternal essence or particle in things, and the extreme of nihilism as well, that is, the complete denial of the existence of things (BRUM, 1992, p. 33). (CARLUCCI, 2022) p. 12-13, my translation)

Within the Buddhist framework, the condition of “emptiness of inherent existence” means that we are all connected to one another and to other living creatures, as well as to the planet and cosmos in an interrelating existence. In other words, from that perspective – for more than 2500 years now, since the inception of Shakyamuni Buddha (born as Siddhartha Gautama)’s ideas and practices – as a subject, “I” does not consist of an essential, inherent, independently formed “core” or “unit” that is mutually exclusive from the Other, even when the “Other” is an opponent.

But, as a matter of fact, most of us are unaware of our connectedness or interexistence, which, according to Buddhism, is mainly hindered by the dualistic thinking so prevalent in society. Dualism has prevented us from understanding that every form of violence, injustice, and inequality is derived from greed, racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and the overall exploitation of powerless peoples, nations, and communities by the powerful through war and countless methods of exclusion and marginalization. Such violence has caused pain and sorrow, both individually and collectively, although it ultimately *returns upon the perpetrators themselves*, in detriment to their humanity. Through dualism, the Other is conceived as what “I” never want to become, i.e., a menace to be dominated and marginalized to the maximum distance from “me and my kind”. The effects of this are evident in gratuitous racial profiling and widespread urban violence, even in developed countries, the harmful effects of which have been spread to rural populations, leading to a sense of insecurity for most people, including the middle class, and an increased prevalence of famine and poverty. Unbridled degradation of the environment and climate change are another unfortunate result of such disconnection.

In her 2020 essay “On being and belonging,” Sara L. Weber draws interesting connections between interbeing/*sunyata* and how an awareness of interconnectedness is crucial for a sense of belonging to the “existence tissue” in which we are immersed:

Everything is connected. Imagine each of us— each tree, each raccoon, each cockroach, each political party, Donald Trump, each molecule, atom, mountain, planet, you name it— is a miraculous form that reflects and is interwoven with all other forms that arise into and out of existence. For Thich Nhat Hanh, the responsibility inherent in this aspect of *shunyata* is a guiding principle. Everything you do matters. Getting angry or greedy, killing, treating others badly, all affect the existence tissue, now and in the future. He created the *Order of Interbeing* in the mid-1960s when the Vietnam War and its inherent hatred, violence, and divisiveness were escalating around him. He felt that it was crucial that each person do their part to live with compassion and equanimity so as not to feed the existence tissue with hate and violence of any sort (WEBER, 2020, 136-7).

A key word in this citation is “compassion”, which has to do with affection and the rising awareness of our connectedness within translation. Perhaps my most remarkable experience in that regard, which I can barely render into words, was translating Dominique Christina’s poem “Star Gazer” as subtitles for a video of her strikingly beautiful and heartbreaking recitation at a slam poetry event.<sup>4</sup> Her website provides a brief introduction to her artistry:

Dominique Christina is an award-winning poet, author, curator, conceptual installation artist, and Arts Envoy to Cyprus through the U.S. Department of State. She holds five national poetry slam titles in four years, including the 2014 & 2012 Women of the World Slam Champion and 2011 National Poetry Slam Champion. Her work is greatly influenced by her family’s legacy in the Civil Rights Movement. Her aunt Carlotta was one of nine students to desegregate Central High School in Little Rock Arkansas and is a Congressional Medal of Honor recipient. Dominique is the author of four books. Her third book, “This Is Woman’s Work,” published by SoundsTrue Publishing, is the radical exploration of 20 archetypal incarnations of womanness and the creative

4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PmLyumKQr4M>

process. Her fourth book “Anarcha Speaks” won the National Poetry Series award in 2017. She is a writer and actor for the HBO series *High Maintenance*, does branding and marketing for *Under Armour*, was a featured performer at the Tribeca Film Festival NYC 2021.<sup>5</sup>

I present below the poem in English alongside my translation into Brazilian Portuguese:

Star Gazer  
by **Dominique Christina**<sup>7</sup>

It is the year of living dangerously.  
I'm 16 and trying to lose my virginity quickly to somebody with soft hands and eyes for kissing.

Eager to let go of makeshift piety, I look for psalms and slow dances tell my nerve endings to be patient, mark my calendar to watch for the subterranean dance of bloodletting and brown skin bending willfully under cotton sheets.

Hoping this boy has not grown his bones into tools for bludgeoning the few bits of girlishness left in me that have not forgotten what tenderness can feel like in the inevitable cruelty that is adolescence.

I'm stargazing.

There's an unfamiliar tremor in my hip. My navel is male-made lake. What it cannot hold runs over and collects beneath me.

I'm glad for the distraction. My hymen applauds the first consensual contact she has ever known. She will begin the arduous ritual of disremembering the one who came before.

I'm stargazing.

He is smiling in my ear. I can hear those pretty white teeth. He did not know redemption could quiver so pink. I did not know redemption could quiver so pink. It's dawn now and there are a thousand poems waiting in the space between my cheek and his collarbone.

I'll write them down later. They are mine for the rest of my life. The soft refrains that chase memories of pedophiles to dust. Come back moon. You and I share the same story. Glory be to the girl who goes back for her body. Now he, he, he will sleep through all my epiphanies and hallelujahs. I will forgive that.

**Mirante de Estrelas**  
por **Dominique Christina**<sup>8</sup>

Translation by **Lauro Maia Amorim**

É a idade de se viver perigosamente.

Tenho dezesseis e quero perder minha virgindade, com alguém de mãos macias e olhos de beijar.

Ansiosa em deixar pra lá devoções provisórias, busco salmos em danças de música lenta que peçam paciência às minhas terminações nervosas e que deixem meu calendário atento à dança subterrânea de sangria e de pele negra se dobrando voluntariamente sob lençóis de algodão.

Torcendo pra esse moço não usar os ossos como instrumento para espancar o pouquinho da meninidade que ainda resta em mim, e que não esqueceu o que é sentir ternura na inevitável crueldade que é a adolescência.

Sou estrelasmirante.

Sinto um tremor desconhecido no quadril. Meu umbigo é um lago feito por homem. O que ele não retém transborda e se acumula abaixo de mim.

Fico contente com essa distração. Minha película, meu hímen, aplaude o primeiro contato consensual que ela já teve. Ela começará o árduo ritual de se deslembrar daquele que veio antes...

Sou estrelasmirante.

Ele está sorrindo em meu ouvido. Dá pra ouvir aqueles dentes brancos lindos. Ele não sabia que a redenção podia estremecer de um jeito tão rosa. Eu não sabia que a redenção podia estremecer de um jeito tão rosa. É de manhãzinha agora. E há milhares de poemas esperando no espaço entre a minha bochecha e a clavícula dele.

Eu vou escrever esses poemas depois. São meus para o resto de minha vida. Refrões suaves que reduzem a pó as memórias dos pedófilos. Vem lua, retorna, vai! Você e eu compartilhamos a mesma história! Gloriosa seja a menina que retorna para retomar seu corpo. Agora, ele vai dormir durante minhas epifanias e aleluias. Eu vou perdoar isso.

<sup>5</sup> Available at: <https://www.dominiquechristina.com/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.dominiquechristina.com/>

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Pamela Berton Costa, Luís Nepomuceno, and Humberto Rossilho for their kind remarks and suggestions on this translation.

Unaccustomed to bones being so loose, my knees are waiting for instructions. They have not been told to fight back or fend off.

I will stroke them into silence. Tell them they're relieved of that duty. This boy is different. A day walker who laughs in his sleep. My forehead is red from his kiss. Only molested children love so well or forget so quickly. He's dreaming now.

Left hand pinning me against him safe. He does not know how often I bled in the arms of another. How the scratch and pull of no kept daylight from coming. Too short a word for men to hear. It moves through the mouth too quickly to be considered. But I have not uttered that with him.

I'm stargazing.

I will watch him sleep to the sound of yesterday dying in the bend of his elbow. When he wakes, he will catch me staring.

I am a stargazing.

Desacostumada com ossos assim tão relaxados, meus joelhos ainda estão aguardando minhas instruções. Eles não tiveram que contra-atacar, nem que se defender.

Eu faço um carinho neles em silêncio. Digo que estão livres desse dever. Esse rapaz é diferente. É um day walker que sorri enquanto dorme. Minha testa está vermelha com o beijo dele. Só as crianças violentadas amam tanto. Ou esquecem tão rápido. Ele está sonhando agora.

A mão esquerda me prende segura a ele. Ele não sabe quantas vezes eu sangrei nos braços de um outro. Nem como arranhões e empurrões de "não" adiaram o nascer do sol. Palavra curta demais pra homens ouvirem. Sai rápida demais da boca para que seja levada em consideração. Mas eu não disse não pra ele.

Sou estrelasmirante.

Vou observar ele dormir ao som do dia de ontem morrer, na curva do seu cotovelo. Ao acordar, ele vai me pegar assim.... mirando....

Eu sou uma estrelamirante.

The translation itself had had a huge emotional impact on me when I first translated it for "Women in Plural" event in 2017, and in a literary event (VII SERNEGRA: Week of Reflections on Blackness, Gender, and Race) at the Federal Institute of Brasilia in 2018. I could not help shedding tears continuously as I watched her performance first and then listened to her in the background while translating it. So many feelings were unraveled as affections were brought to the fore, interwoven with layers of unknown awareness that I had been keeping so silently controlled, tamed, or dormant while, on a daily basis, we White men tend to be aloof and isolated from the hardships that women of African descent go through, given that our place of speech, in which the risk of being raped is remote, is completely different.

At that first moment of "listening-to-translate," despite being an indirect observer who on no level participated in the poem's autobiographical testimony, I could not help but be reminded that my own 4-year-old daughter (now 9) could suffer such violence. There was so much dignity in the persona's suffering, a sense of reclaiming her body and hope in care and love, which had been kept imprisoned in her until that moment. I urgently searched for an affective, careful re-presentation of her pain, which required an attentive mindfulness to translating her girliness without losing track of the linguistic obstacles to translating her verses. In that regard, for example, I prefaced *himen* (hymen), a masculine-gendered word, with the synonym *película* (pellicle) to allow the use of feminine pronouns, *minha...ela* rather than *meu...ele*.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the pop culture reference "day walker" from vampire lore: "a day walker is a type of vampire or half-vampire who can walk in the daylight without harm."<sup>8</sup> Through e-mail contact, Dominique Christina, who has kindly allowed me to translate her poem, explained that: "The term "Day Walker" is really a colloquial way of describing someone who isn't hiding their behaviors under cover of darkness. He walks in the light."

Given that the term is so culturally embedded and has different shades of meaning, I decided that retaining it as a loanword in the translation (along with a footnote) would highlight its significant role in the poem. On this subject, I am also grateful to the Afro-Brazilian scholar Samuel Pinheiro (University of Sao Paulo) who had provided me with a helpful interpretation of "day walker" as someone who is an "illuminating, gleaming presence," purified from the shadows of fear, anxiety, and violence that had been haunting the girl (the poetic persona) of the poem since her previously terrifying experiences with a pedophile.

8 Source: <https://blade.fandom.com/wiki/Daywalker>

## TRANSLATAFFECTION AS A FORM OF INTERBEING: CONCLUDING REMARKS

The poem as a whole and the excerpts/phrases discussed above suggest a sense of connection to her enlightening, liberating, and touching encounter with real love for someone whose inner light could never be disguised behind darkness and who has ultimately connected with her own inner light. Her vulnerability and past traumas gave way to a feeling of real love for the first time. Thus, incredibly, translating the poem produced an inner connection through an interconnected sense of pain and compassion. This goes far beyond the normal aesthetic and linguistic considerations employed when translating poetic language. I was slowly but surely getting into deep waters muddied by sorrow but accompanied by a sense of affectionate *acolhimento* (roughly, “embracing” as well as “welcoming”), with her words interwoven in mine. The girl’s sorrow and her desperate, unbearable memories emanated from every word and phrase, infused in her painful body and soul. Therefore, in which sense does an act of translation by a White man, with affectively mindful attention to the components of a poetic narrative originally told by an African American woman, produce a form of transformative awareness of self?

Besner (2020) explores the similarities and differences between psychoanalysis and Buddhism, focusing on mindfulness and the different states of consciousness or awareness accessible through meditation. He characterizes meditation as openness to and immersion in experience as it arises in every moment:

this quality of mind is one in which each new moment bursts upon us, emerges before us in fullness and freshness, its contours and textures palpable. Beginner’s Mind refers to being attuned to the evanescence of each instant without hope or expectation preloading the experiential moment (BESNER, 2020, p. 120).

In other words, mindfulness achieved through a meditative gaze would give us a more vivid experience of the present moment as it is, without being overshadowed by projected frustrations, desires, and wishful thinking. Besner quotes Stern (2004) that “the present moment is the felt experience of what happens during a short stretch of consciousness” (p. 32), as well as that unfolding with mounting intensity over only a few seconds, [the present moment] then trails off into the next moment. Stern finds the foundation of subjective experience in the micro-moments of interaction that underlie the telling of the narrative. [Stern] further suggests that these two classes of events, the present moment and the narrative, have a potentially contradictory nature. This is because there is a distinction between the present moment of experience and how it is later reshaped by words. The inherent contradiction is that “the present moment, while lived, cannot be seized by language, which reconstitutes it after the fact” (p. 8). The present moment is the experiential referent that language builds upon. “It is hard to grasp and tends to remain subliminal because we so often jump out of the present ongoing experience to take the reflexive, objectified third person viewpoint” (STERN, 2004, p. 33 qtd in BESNER, 2020, p. 120).

Stern (2004) claims that there is a kind of an unavoidably delayed access to the present moment in psychoanalysis, since one’s perceptions cannot fully grasp it without resorting to a perceptual apprehension that language, as a form of “after effect,” generates a narrative through which one can understand one’s experiences. In line with this, Besner (2020) states that

as the Present Moment becomes more alive and accessible to awareness, our experience may shift away from being located in a substantial self to which an attribute “belongs” to one in which our experience of ourselves, of our very be-ing, is constituted in our raw experience, not narratively constructed, but immediate. It is not so much that “I am seeing” something, but instead that through this act of seeing I am created as I am at that moment. Through an act of seeing, I am created as seeing in that moment. Through an act of hearing, the hearing is creating me as hearing at that instant; the act of thinking is creating me as thinking; as I think, I am. Those experiences are not only attributes of a centralized self; they actually create us in their happening. To the extent to which we grasp and fixate upon these arising mental events, we are creating a reified, narrative self. In these psychoanalytic examples, we can see Stern, Bion, and Lacan, each in his own way, approximating the idea of consciousness fixating on its own objects to create an egomorphic, reflexive subjectivity, with the ensuing loss of freshness in the moment and the alienating sense of separateness it creates in us all. To become attuned to Stern’s Present Moment or to be in Bion’s “never-ending getting to know,” “without memory, desire, or understanding,” requires equanimity and forbearance, both formidable developmental achievements in themselves in both psychoanalytic and Buddhist idioms. Both are evocative of Beginner’s Mind. Similarly, Lacan’s description of a fundamentally alienated psychic posture captures the flavor of the dualistic fixation. **Regarding the Buddhist model, however, sometimes these factors can be taken for the sum total of meditative effects when they lie in a spectrum of possible constructive outcomes.** Buddhism is more than the system of subjective psychology it includes; it can be a path to mystical, even subjectless, experience. How can that aspect of Buddhism be excluded from the conversation? What links are there between psychoanalytic thinking and the further reaches of Buddhism? Do these further reaches belong in a discussion of psychoanalysis, and if so, where? (BESNER, 2020, p. 121-22, emphasis added)

Due to space constraints, further discussion of the parallels between psychoanalysis and Buddhism is not possible, except for a passing mention of Weber's (2020) argument that our reading of the Other could benefit from mindful attention unfettered by our expectations and presuppositions. Thus, when translating the painful, historically experienced violence so often expressed in poetry by American, Brazilian, and Caribbean women of African descent:

Freud (1912/1958) advised patients and therapists to adopt evenly suspended attention, allowing one's mind to run free, unfettered, uncensored by expectation and presuppositions. He recommended the therapist pay "impartial attention to everything there is to observe" (pp. 111–112). Buddhism trains and practices this state of mind in which one is unfettered by rigid concepts and free of hope and fear. As with physicality, in quantum theory, mental content is also seen to be a fluctuating illusion, mediated more or less by our biased senses and individual or group identifications. The capacity for unformed awareness is the healing, if somewhat terrifying, gift. (WEBER, 2020, p. 135)

Nevertheless, it is virtually impossible for translators to achieve an absolutely neutral condition of mindful attention that erases them as human beings from the object of "translataffection." We cannot allow ourselves to think that the Other's wounded existence does not also hurt us just because we are from a different background. It is precisely in view of this condition that, as a White male translator, I must be able to feel, with the words of these women, the sensation embodied *in my words*, however limited and imperfect it turns out to be. Thus, translating can entail a form of reparation, deepening and broadening transformative affections that can renew and strengthen the translator's (and perhaps the reader's) sense of humanity and love, as boldly pointed out by bell hooks (2018). Such reparation can embrace, welcome, and nourish what had formerly been broken in those who have participated or benefitted from, even unconsciously, the process of exclusion and overcome justifications, on racial or socioeconomic grounds, of remaining aloof from the drama of translation.

If, on the one hand, being a White male translator is a disconnection in the process of translating the poetry of Black women, on the other, to be affected by the affection that underscores interbeing is to conceive of oneself as a structure that binds to the affections of those who are subjected to suffering and exclusion, even when one is neither a direct or indirect participant of that suffering. Due to the affection triggered in the translator through such contact, awareness arises that one's happiness or fulfillment, whether as a translator, professor, researcher, or a human being, can never be complete until one has truly been touched by the pain of the Other.

I hope that the possible disconnections of a White man translating the stunningly beautiful and remarkably touching poetry of Dominique Christina, Harryette Mullen, and Gwendolyn Brooks transforms into a silently rewarding, yet deeply urgent connection rendered as a unique translational experience seasoned by the delicate, transforming force of affection. May the consciousness of us all fully awaken to our unacknowledged interexistential "translateaffection".

#### CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Lauro Maia Amorim declares to be the sole author of the manuscript

#### DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that he has no conflict of interest

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