Rachelle Okawa
University of California, Los Angeles

Translating Maryse Condé’s Célanire cou-coupé: Dislocations of the Caribbean Self in Richard Philcox’s Who Slashed Celanire’s Throat? A Fantastical Tale

As the professional translator of many of his wife’s novels, Richard Philcox routinely faces the challenge of translating Maryse Condé’s “opaque” poetics. Through close readings of elements both in and outside of the actual translation, this study examines how Philcox’s interpretation of Condé’s Célanire cou-coupé is ultimately attuned to both the difficulty of translating her writing’s complexity and to the linguistic and cultural aspects that often mark a Caribbean text. Read together, Condé’s Célanire cou-coupé and Philcox’s Who Slashed Celanire’s Throat? A Fantastical Tale, exemplify how the trope of “dislocation” regarding the representation of Caribbean cultural identities evokes a parallel or mirroring discourse in the act of translation itself.

When considering translation’s potential for committing violence against the original text, Gayatri Spivak, in “The Politics of Translation,” informs readers of the ethical necessity of “translating well and with difficulty” (181): that is, she emphasizes the translator’s need to be attuned to the specificity of the language he/she is translating. If, for example, a translator fails to account for untranslatable proverbs or concepts, or if he/she does not consider the particularities of the historical moment and language in which the author is writing, then the possibility for the misfiring of meaning abounds. Spivak’s warnings are particularly relevant to the challenges that Richard Philcox
undoubtedly encounters when translating Maryse Condé’s novels. As the now-established professional translator of his wife’s work, Philcox would have to keep in mind the “opaque” poetics that characterizes Condé’s writing, the recent translation debates and trends occurring in Caribbean literature, Translation Studies, and the publishing market at large, and most importantly, the “double bind” embedded in the task of translation itself: both to remain faithful to the original and to make the translation accessible to its intended readership.

In this article, I examine Philcox’s difficult task of translating well Célanire cou-coupé from the framework of Condé’s “opaque” poetics: a poetics that asks the reader to labor at understanding her texts due to the intentional “opacity” that characterizes both her writing style and her characters’ identities. In Condé’s fantastic tale, Célanire Pinceau’s “opaque” or unreadable identity emerges from her many geographical displacements, as well as her bodily dismemberment. Célanire wanders from one geographical location to another, moving to, from, and between Guadeloupe, France, Ivory Coast, and Peru. A part of her also resides in the hazy division between the natural and the supernatural, the known and the unknown, with the beginning of her life overshadowed by the presence of her own near-death. As a newborn infant, Célanire had her throat sliced open in the name of a local political figure in a government election in Guadeloupe. Miraculously, she was stitched back together by Dr. Jean Pinceau, the Caribbean counterpart to Mary Shelley’s Dr. Frankenstein (Fulton

1 Philcox has translated almost all of Condé’s novels except for Ségou I (translated by Barbara Bray), Ségou II (translated by Linda Coverdale), and La vie scélérate (translated by Victoria Reiter). When Condé’s work was first being translated into English, Philcox had not yet established himself in the field of literary translation. Since then, however, his personal experiences of living in West Africa, and also his in-depth knowledge of the region, have helped him to understand and thus to translate better his wife’s work (“Traduire Maryse Condé” 750).

2 What Philcox finds most difficult in translating his wife’s novels is their lack of transparency. In an interview with Kadish and Massardier-Kenney, Philcox comments on why Condé’s writing is so complex: “[Condé] demande beaucoup au lecteur. Enormément. Elle pense que le lecteur devrait être assez intelligent pour lire entre les lignes. Que ce n’est pas la peine de tout lui expliquer, noir sur blanc. Pour elle, le lecteur est un homme ou une femme extrêmement intelligent. Il y a donc beaucoup de choses cachées dans le texte et aussi une intertextualité énorme. Elle est constamment en train de faire référence à d’autres livres, à du cinéma, à des films” (759).