An Interview with Susan Pickford

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The blog series *Haiti in Translation* on H-Haiti, the H-Network dedicated to Haitian studies, evolved from a need to address the importance of translation in a multilingual field. This is a conundrum all too familiar to Caribbeanist scholars, since any given Caribbean nation features the daily ebb and flow of numerous languages, dialects, and registers through various social spheres. Thus the blog series sought to recognize the exceptional work being done by translators of Haitian writing. Three interviews have been published — *Stella, with Lesley S. Curtis and Christen Mucher; Dance on the Volcano, with Kaiama Glover,* and a conversation with Carrol Coates about *General Sun, My Brother and In the Flicker of an Eye* by Jacques Stephen Alexis — and are currently available on H-Haiti.

This interview with Susan Pickford considers her translation of Jean Métellus’s 1986 play *Anacaona.* Susan contacted me via the University of Liverpool’s *Francofil* Listserv, where she first heard of the blog series. She informed me of her translation of *Anacaona,* and I leaped at the opportunity to interview her via e-mail about a Haitian author who has been seldom translated into English and whose work is growing increasingly out of print in France.

Jean Métellus (1937–2014), was a novelist, poet, playwright, and practicing neurolinguist. He was the author of five plays, ten novels, and more than a dozen volumes of poetry. While Métellus’s oeuvre is extensive, his work has been sparsely translated. A translated excerpt of Métellus’s *Anacaona* by Carrol F. Coates appeared in *Callaloo* in 1992 as part of the double issue “Haitian Literature and Culture,” which featured original English translations and writing in French and in Kreyol, as well as interviews with the authors. When asked about *Anacaona,* Métellus remarked that this was the most well known of his plays, since it was performed at the famous Théâtre de Chaillot in Paris: “[Anacaona] is essentially a political play which shows how the countries of the South have been dispossessed and how their history can be resumed to show the Old World’s indebtedness to them as well as to the Third World, poor countries, in general.” Susan Pickford and I discussed these themes as they relate to the translation of *Anacaona* from French into English as well as more general issues concerning translation and the market for literary translation in English.

Nathan H. Dize: Briefly put, *Anacaona* is a play about the Spanish colonization of the Americas. Could you
Susan Pickford: *Anacaona* is a four-act historical drama in highly poetic free verse, akin to classical tragedy, with a structure of long monologues, brief dialogues, and songs. It recounts the genocide of the Indians at the hands of Spanish troops brought to Jaragua by Christopher Columbus in 1492, in search of Ayiti’s fabled wealth. It is also a heroic narrative of the Indians and maroons who chose freedom over slavery, heralding the long struggle that would eventually lead to Haitian independence in 1804. The eponymous Anacaona is queen of Jaragua—the wife, and then widow, of the heroic Caonabo, who dies a captive after a failed attack on the settlement of La Navidad. Anacaona agrees to negotiate with Spanish representatives but is betrayed by them and ultimately hanged. The play closes with her vice king, Yaquimex, fleeing for the mountains, swearing to avenge her death and lead the escaped slaves hiding there in resisting the invaders.

NHD: You allude to the historical setting of fifteenth-century Haiti. Is this time and space difficult to navigate as a translator? What kind of research did you have to do or translation techniques did you employ to help clarify this for readers?

SP: Perhaps surprisingly, I would say I didn’t find that to be a major difficulty in translating this text for a couple of reasons. First, its themes are so much broader than the specific historical context that I didn’t feel that it was a particularly alien space in which to navigate such universal human emotions, values, and experiences. Similarly, in formal terms, the play is heavily influenced by French classical tragedy, which is a genre familiar to me as a scholar with a traditional grounding in canonical French literature. This in turn shaped its use of language, which is very rich, evocative, highly schooled French with relatively little in the way of local color. The few references to Haitian foodstuffs, traditions, religious beliefs, and so on were footnoted in the original French edition, published in Hatier’s *Monde noir* collection and paratextually packaged for a French readership, which was not so far removed from my own target readership for the translation (which was itself published in France). As a result, my research was largely background reading on Anacaona as a historical figure and on translating for the stage. There also happens to be a large Haitian community in the town where I live, so I was able to call on the local Haitian cultural association to shed light on a couple of cultural references. In terms of translation technique, I tend to lean toward domestication in my own translation practice. I was cognizant of how loaded that term is in the context of such a play, however, and as a result I did lean rather more toward foreignization for this project. There are a number of explanatory footnotes in the printed edition, though of course these are apparent only to a reader, not to an audience if the play were to be staged.

The vast majority of my translations have been in nonfiction, so this was a new departure for me. I wondered how a foreignizing strategy would work on stage: Can the visual presence of props or the use of music be considered equivalent of a footnote explaining a given cultural reference? However, the sheer dominance of the character of Anacaona, who has numerous lengthy soliloquies and is on stage in almost every scene,
means it is not a particularly easy play to put on. It has in fact been staged only three times that I’m aware of, most notably by Antoine Vitez at the Théâtre National du Chaillot in 1988. Funnily enough, one of the other stagings was in the theatre in the banlieue where I live, five minutes’ walk from home. As such, while I did bear in mind issues of speakability and especially singability, given the thematic importance of song in the play—it is a tool of revolution uniting the islanders, while the Spanish governor Ovando convinces Anacaona to come to talks with the invaders by praising her talent—I felt it was important to create a work in English that reflected the rich linguistic style of the original. I’d love to see it staged, or at least as a read-through, in English, though.

NHD: Jean Métellus often wrote plays about moments of historical or national importance, such as the assassination of Jean-Jacques Dessalines in Le Pont Rouge, so what drew you to translating Anacaona specifically?

SP: To be perfectly honest, I was asked to. I got a phone call out of the blue from Jean-Michel Martial, the actor and theater director who in 1997 founded the company L’Autre Souffle, which specializes in theater from the Caribbean. Jean-Michel wanted to publish the play as part of the company’s expanding repertoire of Caribbean theater. I still don’t know who gave him my number. I wish I did, so I could thank them. I leaped at the chance, of course. Francophone literature has been an interest of mine since I started my former teaching post at Université Paris–Nord, where the majority of my students had family backgrounds in the Maghreb, francophone Africa, and the DOM-TOMs [French overseas departments and territories]. This was the first real opportunity I had to explore it from a translation perspective.

NHD: Speaking of translation as a medium, can you talk about how you translated the violence—there are genocidal plots, threats of war, mass conversion, and the allusions to the African slave trade throughout—portrayed in this play? Was this difficult?

SP: Yes, it was hard, especially because my son was a newborn while I was working on the translation. So it was a time of heightened emotion for me anyway. The fate of Anacaona as wife and mother, her strength in those ties, really resonated with me. I tried to focus on the highly elaborate language, almost like something out of [Jean] Racine, as a way of distancing myself from the brutality of her fate.

NHD: It seems strange after reading your translation of Anacaona that there has been only one other translation of Jean Métellus into English—Michael Richardson’s 1995 translation of La Famille Vortex (The Vortex Family). Why do you think Métellus has remained nearly untranslated?

SP: There have been other fragmentary translations—an excerpt of Anacaona translated by Carrol F. Coates was published in the journal Callaloo in 1992, for instance—but you’re right, he is largely unavailable in English. From a sociological viewpoint, it’s not that surprising, since the field of francophone to English literary translation is still pretty weak in structure and depends on the initiative of individual agents to promote translation projects, which remain sporadic rather than systematic. I also wonder whether his highly elaborate
style, very much influenced by the French classical tradition, is not rather at odds with the expectations of the (largely academic) English-language readership interested in postcolonial Caribbean literature. Perhaps there is strikingly little research on Métellus also because his career in medicine (he worked in a clinic near Paris specializing in speech disorders) had relatively little overlap with literary academic circles.

NHD: Since Anacaona appears in a quad-lingual volume—French, English, Spanish, and Kreyol—can you tell us more about the series in which your translation appears at Éditions de l’Amandier? In terms of access, do you think that we need more translations like these?

SP: As a professional translator and translator trainer, I can only say yes to more translations. The Éditions de l’Amandier was founded in 1988 to specialize in scripts and theater studies. In 2013, in collaboration with Jean-Michel Martial and L’Autre Souffle, it launched a new series to showcase Caribbean repertoire, including plays written originally in languages other than French—the Cuban playwright José Triana’s Medea en el espejo, for instance. Each play was published in the four languages of the collection, placing all the works on a shared linguistic footing that challenges the traditional hierarchy between the original, usually written in the language of the colonizer, and its translations, usually seen as a subaltern form of authorship but here physically surrounding and numerically outweighing the original. I found it an interesting example of another way the empire can write back. The other works in the series so far are Simone Schwartz-Bart’s Ton Beau Capitaine, Maryse Condé’s An tan revolisyon, and Théodora by Syto Cavé, another Haitian author (I translated the latter but not the two former plays). Unfortunately, the original publisher has been having some financial difficulties, so the project was temporarily on hold. It is now going ahead under L’Autre Souffle’s own imprint, set up specially to publish its Caribbean theater list.

NHD: What has been your greatest challenge in a francophone market translating into English, particularly for those of us located in the United States, where there is access to a wider readership and more publishing venues in English?

SP: I think that the oft-quoted 3 percent of literature in translation into English is an underestimate, since it fails to take into account into-English translation published outside the anglosphere, of which there is a surprising amount. I have a good fifteen or twenty friends in France who are professional into-English translators working exclusively with French publishers and institutions. Working as a nonfiction translator has not been a problem at all. What has been a challenge has been moving into the more literary side of translation because that calls for US/UK contacts that I simply don’t have, since I’ve been living in France for twenty years now. The other difficulty I regularly face is a purely practical one—getting hold of quotes from English books when I need them. Fortunately, Google Books and the judicious use of the Ask a Librarian offered by many major libraries means even that has become much easier nowadays.

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Julia Gaffield, who have provided useful feedback and have granted their unwavering support to this project from its inception.

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1 Since the first interview on *Haiti in Translation* was published, I have collaborated with Siobhan Marie Meï on the blog series. Meï found out about the series and was eager to help bring more recognition to translators of Haitian writing. She and I edit each other’s work on the translation series. An interview by Meï with Carrol Coates will also be published in a forthcoming issue of *Callaloo*.

2 Susan Pickford completed a PhD in comparative literature at the University of Toulouse. Since 2007, she has been an associate professor of translation studies, first at the Université Paris–Nord, and beginning in 2013, at the Université Paris–Sorbonne, where her principal research focus is on the sociology of the translation profession. She remains an active professional translator, working from French and German into English. *Anacaona* was her first translated play. Pickford has since worked on two other plays by Caribbean playwrights; her translation of Syto Cavé’s *Théodora* is forthcoming.


5 *Ayiti* is the Taino Arawak name for the island of Hispaniola, the western part of which was named renamed Haiti when the country declared its independence from France on 1 January 1804.


7 *Domestication* and *foreignization* are strategies used in translation studies. Domestication is the process of translating to conform to the culture of the language of the translation (e.g., US English translation and US American cultural references), and foreignization aims to retain the cultural references of the original text in translation (e.g., English translation and Haitian cultural references). Foreignization frequently involves the use of glossaries, cultural notes, and critical introductions that seek to clarify the text for readers.


9 *The Vortex Family* was reviewed by Bob Corbett, the creator and moderator of the influential *Corbett List*,...
which was an important electronic source of information on current political and cultural affairs in Haiti. See Bob Corbett, “The Vortex Family: A Family Saga Set in Haiti,” review of The Vortex Family, by Jean Métellus, translated by Michael Richardson, Corbett List, October 1996, faculty.webster.edu/corbetre/haiti/bookreviews/metellus.htm.

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