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Dialogues: anthropology and literature

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The relationship between anthropology and literature has attracted renewed theoretical energy in recent years (Brandel 2020; Debaene 2014; Fassin 2014; Reed 2018; Wulff 2016), developing and deepening connections with, for example, anthropological theories of art (Reed 2011), religion (Furani 2012), subjectivity (Olszewska 2015), and ethics (Bush 2017), as well as with allied fields and traditions, including postcolonial theory (Sadana 2012), Bourdieuan sociology (Dalsgård 2021), media theory (Rosen 2022), and ordinary language philosophy (Brandel 2023). Among the most fruitful

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trends in current research has been a revitalized emphasis on the possibilities for collaboration between writers and anthropologists, which has generated critical debate on the ethical and political limits of conventional methodologies (Schielke & Shehata 2021). The following set of conversations reflect and refract these trends in different ways, while proposing further openings for future work, particularly around questions of translation, creativity, care, and particularity. Each of these dialogues took place between anthropologists and writers with long-standing relationships, as members of collaborative research teams, co-authors, companions, mentors, and fieldwork interlocutors. Their differences in form reflect their range of commitments and approaches to the study of creative language practices. Participants were provided with an initial set of orienting questions and provocations, including about what brought the groups together, about the basis for the comparisons they draw between their work, and a reflection on whom they write for and why. They were edited and assembled with the help of one of the editors, Adam Reed.

'Telling stories and eventually becoming a story is an intrinsic part of being human'

This series of conversations took place over the phone and voice messages between fiction writer Siddratul Muntaha Jillani, from the village Noora I Sharif in Sindh, and Kiran Nazir Ahmed, an anthropologist, from the city of Islamabad, Pakistan. They became friends when Kiran was doing her fieldwork in 2013, thus they know each other well. This conversation explores questions such as what are the parallels and contrasts between fiction writing and ethnographic writing? Who does each write for and why? Ahmed translated this series of conversations from Urdu into English and edited it for clarity of thought, checking the final product for Jillani's approval.

Contributors

Siddratul Muntaha Jillani (SMJ)
Kiran Nazir Ahmed (KNA)

Conversation

(SMJ) When you asked me to ponder these questions, my first thought was I'd take a week or so, and respond. But then I realized that when we do that, we end up doing everything else, and not that thing that we're supposed to do. We unconsciously push it aside, thinking we'll do it later in a much better way. But the questions and answers have their own dynamic; the more spontaneous thoughts are, the better it is. It is messy, of course, but there is a beauty in it and we can clean it up later. So, I'm going to give you *bayhungam* [disorderly] answers [laughing].

(KNA) Let's start with how you compare anthropologists and fiction writers? What do you see as the parallels or contrasts?

(SMJ) Anthropologists study people, the knowledge of humans, and so do fiction writers, because fiction writers write stories about people. So fiction writers are half-anthropologists too, because they are writing about humans and anthropologists are half-fiction writers, because they are a witness, they witness stories. So, while anthropologists are not *kahani nigaar* [story writers], they

are *naazirs* [witness or observers]. Like you noted (in one of our earlier conversations) that an anthropologist writes what he sees but the fiction writer is free. So the fiction writer writes about the inner (landscape), while the anthropologist is limited in a way. The anthropologist will write about the facial expressions, etc., but the bonds of feelings (and affect) – that is the domain of the fiction writer, which is something the writer has with her characters.

In other words, you can divide *zaahir* [apparent, outer, visible] and *baathin* [internal, inner]. The first one is *zaahir* and the other is *baathin*. This is why these two disciplines can have very strong connections with each other.

(KNA) I remember, during my fieldwork, when we went to the shrine of Lal Shehbaz Qalandar [a Sufi saint], we both saw a man dancing the *dhamaal* [a form of dance particular to South Asian Sufis]. Looking back, that moment showcases what you've brought out. To me it was captivating as I witnessed his joyful self-abandon. You, on the other hand, weaved this into your character and wrote about how he must be feeling as he danced with such abandon. To me that's a good example of the anthropologist as *naazir* and writer as the *kahani nigaar*.

In this context, the anthropologist Didier Fassin comes to mind. He delineates between truth and reality as 'concepts in profound and permanent tension' rather than interchangeable or equivalent notions.[1] The real is essentially what has happened or exists in actual life, whereas the true is that which has to be retrieved and reclaimed from convention. Thus, reality is horizontal because it exists on 'the surface of facts', and truth is vertical because it can only be discovered 'in the depths of inquiry'.[2] So, while there is a gulf between the two – fiction writers have creative licence to create whatever story they want; anthropologists are limited to what they witness – the gulf is not that wide. Even anthropologists assemble, create from what they see. Some interviews are given more space to highlight certain aspects; others never make it past the transcription file. So in this sense this is an assembling too, a subjective telling of what you witness.

(SMJ) An anthropologist's creativity is definitely a part of their work. Like with a doctor, the medicine they give is usually the same but some are better healers than others. So the anthropologist also looks at things through their own lens. Like one time I had to write about a city in America. And I was told that Tarar [an Urdu fiction and travelogue writer] has written about that area in his travelogue, and I said Tarar might have looked at it, but he would have looked at it through his own vantage point, his favourite corner. Maybe I would have been more attentive to the market, and maybe he to the park. So each writer and creator may be writing about the same thing, but their vision and their *khayal* [imagination/thought] are always a little different, and the vantage point you choose, that is through your creativity. So for anthropologists, we've already decided that an anthropologist is half-fiction writer too: the information they gather is stories about lives, and that's a part of fiction, so this is why anthropologists are half-creators too. A fiction writer also is sometimes not a complete creator.

(KNA) Let's talk about our own work now.

(SMJ) I'll start with the first meeting, our first encounter. You know the first stage of any relationship is through words, and in the second stage you start to feel and sense, and you talk through what you are sensing and words can't really encompass that. Your emotions and feelings are far beyond words, so you can express them through words but those words are just the beginning, it's just the entry way, like a doorway has opened but the home inside that door, you can't express that through words, you can only sense and feel. If you develop an understanding with a person, so that you feel you can be an open book in front of them, this way you can let them enter with ease. So I let you enter my story, and not just enter it, but also open the entire book before you.

(KNA) That means a lot to me. When I began my fieldwork with fiction writers, I was very unsure. There was no particular place or space where I could approach them collectively. But the first phone conversation with you and the playfulness of it acted as a gravitational anchoring of sorts. I just followed the path as it appeared and somehow all of our conversations became a book.

(SMJ) Once before too, I said that your work has a story, it doesn't read like a research but like a story. So for me, as a writer, it's a big thing.

One thing I really liked about you as an anthropologist is that when people conduct interviews, they'll usually ask predetermined questions. But you went with the flow that the respondents wanted to go with. It was almost like you invited them and said, come, let's sit together. I'll give you your favourite chair and then you answer my questions. Because you knew that if you force them into your favourite chair, they would not respond freely. So you gave people that flexibility, that space. So sometimes, when I saw you having those conversations with writers, it seemed to me like you were asking people, run in any direction you want and let me see where you go. I think this is something intrinsic within anthropology as a discipline, and the credit goes to you as a person too. In a sense, the question is the mother and the responses are the children, and you as a mother did it very naturally.

(KNA) In the context of your own work, I was wondering how you convey its esoteric aspect and the alternative realities it addresses.

(SMJ) When a person is writing something, like the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said once, the first decision is that of the heart, and it's the right decision. Because the writer knows what they're writing, is it complete fantasy or is it not. So the creator knows this, but because they don't have sensory evidence for it, they get confused. Like with some things, the creator may say, this just can't be, it's not possible. Like if I say that the sky has a certain chair above it. The sky is not my ground, it's not my base, so I'm not in a position to say this, a scientist is. So the creator knows, and when I was writing this novel [*Ik Jahan Aur Hai*], there were some events that I had experienced myself or had been experienced by the people around me. But there were some events for which I wanted evidence, but yet, at another level, I knew this can happen on this earth, in this existence. Because when you believe in a person's power and you know physics, etc., Hawking and Einstein, they are all from this world,

this earth. And when a human has all the minerals, they have this power, the biggest one is that they can contradict (and critically examine) their own view. So there are always possibilities, like if our spirit leaves the body during sleep and if your body and spirit are different, like we have examples of Hindu sadhus who could fly. So there were events whose evidence I wanted, but I knew it's possible, rare and not common but possible.

(KNA) Let's move on to what anthropology can learn from creative writing, as a form of writing and as a form of knowledge making about the world. And what can creative writing learn from anthropology?

(SMJ) See, anthropologists can learn from fiction writers, because anthropologists look at things that they observe, what they can see, how this community lives by the sea, what kinds of clothes do they wear, what is the colour of the earth over there, their ways of living, language, ways of looking at the world, it's all fine. But there are other aspects that only a fiction *nigaar* can understand. Like their desires – anthologists don't write about desires, they'll write about the ways of living and being but not the inner desires. Fiction writers relate to what people dream of, how they feel their *hasrathain* [deprivations]. The sensitivity to their past, the hopes they have for their future, so all this is written through stories by fiction *nigaar*. Fiction *nigaar* have a different way of relating to humans: they try to go within them. The fiction *nigaar* tries to enter that inner door.

Fiction writers can learn about the outer from anthropologists, culture, language, ways of living, ways of being, past, present, how changes have affected them, how they passed through something. So these *zameeni haqaaiq* [earthly facts], this is something that fiction *nigaar* can borrow from anthropologists.

The human mind is such that whichever work or profession you adopt, it starts to flow and focus on that direction/path. Just this morning, I was telling someone, you know, the human body it's under your control; if you don't use it, it will stay still. But the human mind is not in your control; if you don't use it (focus it), it will go in the direction it wants. And usually it's the direction that is your weakness or what you fear. And it will become a problem for you. So it's best if you give work to your mind (to focus on). So when a human wants to write, to write a story, the mind helps you write it and slowly the person starts to accept that, yes, I am a writer, and I think and write about people, so that's the first chapter or first stage. But then you have to move to the second stage, which is beyond words.

See, we forget that language is not just the one you learn from hearing other people around you who speak it, but there is also another one that you learn from your observation – the one you learn by reading faces with your eyes – and both these languages give you the ability to express yourself.

Reading and writing can be very beneficial in this. Reading and seeing/observing. Your eyes will find new people, new stories, they grasp at them, and then the second thing is your own *parhath* [reading, learning]. This *parhath* introduces you to new entry points, new doorways, and as your vocabulary increases, your expression grows richer. This *parhath* is the same as anthropologists' research to observe and work. *Parhath* is a kind of research,

and writing is the expression of that research. This way characters emerge, they open up before you. The deeper you go into them, the more *meherbaan* [generous/beneficent] they become for you. On the other hand, if you ignore them, or are not attentive, characters can fade like old memories. They don't disclose their aspects and you can lose them. So writing stories is a matter of great attunement and sensitivity; and requires a great commitment.

(KNA) You said once, if you try to trick the story, manipulate it or contrive it, the story will trick you back. So it's important to attune to the rhythm of the story and where it wants to go. This really resonated with me in my work as an anthropologist. To let the ethnographic 'story' go where it wanted to and take the form it wanted to take. And once you let go, and stop trying to follow a framework or a predetermined pathway, it really does take you in an authentic direction. In a sense, it changes from 'my work' to 'work coming through me', but then there is the question of audience. I mean, at one level, we write for personal reasons. Each quest, whether its ethnographic or fictional, is about some personal question or quandary. So it is a personal trajectory, but at the same time we create to share these stories with others. So, why do we write these stories, and whom do we write them for? In other words, how do you see the role of the audience? Do you have that in mind when you're writing?

(SMJ) When I write for digests, I do have the digest reader in mind, and I think that this reader will like this story or not relate to that one. Or that there is a readership that will like this character or not the other one. So when I am writing I do have it in mind, and it's actually a lot of fun to go against it. So I'll be thinking to myself, they are going to hate this character of mine, but I'm still writing it. But when I write for the literary magazine, I have the literary circle in mind. Similarly, when you're writing a television script, you have that viewership in mind, the content department will say this, or the channel will try to bring this in, but the viewer will like this part, so, it's true we write stories for ourselves, but we show and tell them to others. But I would add that we also write them for others too, and we want that attention, that our story should be read and heard, the character we are presenting should be 'seen'. Basically, that the way we see the world should be seen by others too, this is our wish. Someone once asked me, can you write a scene in your story about a certain place, if you were to read a travelogue about it? I said, yes, I could write it, but the problem is that the side of the building that the travelogue writer liked may not be the one I would like. I might be more focused on how it feels to be inside that building, or I might be more absorbed in the fencing outside and the travelogue writer on the furniture, so each set of eyes is drawn to a different aspect (of the same thing). So each person has a particular way of looking at things and describing them.

Like when someone comes to my village, they each look at it differently. Like when Shagufta (another writer) came to Islamabad, she said, but what's there in this city. It's just rocks and hills, don't we have this in Hyderabad already? I laughed so much. I said I've never been to Islamabad, but I like it for different reasons. And she said, I don't know why you like it, even the weather is as miserable as it was in Hyderabad. I'm going off on a tangent, but each person

looks at things in their own way and each person wants to show their lens, their vantage point, to others.

This question is always in the mind of the creator, that what will the readers think of this, will they be able to relate themselves to this or not. This is often, but a lot of times we write things that people most people may not relate to. But each character has at least one reader who can establish a relationship with that character. Of course the number varies, some characters have more and some less, but no character is without any relatability.

I think the biggest test for a writer is to not think if the reader will want to read it or not. The thing is for the writer to say, come with me, let me tell you about this too, this can also happen. It's not bad to write what the reader wants to read sometimes, but if you get stuck in this, then you can only write what will become popular – you have to write without the pressure of how it will be received.

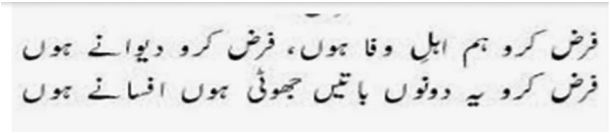
(KNA) For me, at its simplest level, I keep my 20-year-old self in mind when I write. But at another level, there are three different orbits that you have to cater to also. As a Pakistani anthropologist writing in English, there is the Western academic audience, the one in Pakistan or the South Asian region, and then the community itself that you have tried to represent. As you stated, each audience has its own dynamics and its own expectations. Perhaps the task here is to 'translate' the story in terms you feel would be understandable in the orbits you are writing for, but to not let go of the rhythm and flow of the story itself.

(SMJ) Yes, you have to be true to your story. See one truth is that which you see as truth. You try to polish your work, and keep polishing it, but you should only polish it to a certain extent. I believe that creation that is spontaneous is the best. Any creation has its strengths as well as weaknesses, but even the weaknesses have their own beauty, so you have to understand your story, which way does it want to go. Keep your ideology to yourself, and if the story is going in its own direction by itself, then let it go. And this can only happen when we listen to the rhythm of the story, and its result is always good and takes us seriously. If we want to exploit our story in a sense, take undue advantage of it, and are only worried about of what benefit it will be for us, how it will increase our status in a certain orbit – in other words, if we are trying to use the story as a means to an end, exploit it in a way – then we will not get anywhere. You need to love your story unconditionally; the relationship has to be unconditional.

(KNA) Overall, I think both anthropologists and fiction writers try to bring about myriad ways of being human, diverse ways of articulating the experience of being human and alternative realities that exist for each of us. This is partly what drew me to work on women fiction writers who write for digests. Each seemed to be articulating a different expression of both what it means to be a Pakistani woman, lived realities if you will, and the imagined possibilities of this being. Overall, then, I think both anthropology and fiction writers have the same path, of wanting to bring forth myriad ways of being human.

(SMJ) Yes, and when you look at it, as humans we live our lives telling stories, and eventually when we die we ourselves become a story.

(KNA) And maybe all of human existence is simply a story. Let's end with that Urdu verse that states it beautifully


فرض کرو ہم اہلِ وفا ہوں، فرض کرو دیوانے ہوں
فرض کرو یہ دونوں باتیں جھوٹی ہوں افسانے ہوں

farz karo ham ahl-e-wafaa hon, farz karo divane hon
farz karo ye donon baaten jhuti hon afsaane hon

Let's suppose we come from a place of true connection/let's suppose we're mad.
Let's suppose these are both false suppositions, let's suppose all this is just fiction.[3]

Inventing the tongue of a monstrous angel: a speculative dialogue around *Eisejuaz*

This dialogue between literature and anthropology focuses on translated fictions that expand what is meant by both translation and fiction. First, they require cultural as well as, or instead of, literary translation to represent and communicate between linguistic worlds. Second, while they transform real people, places, and events into fictional counterparts, rendering them meaningful by giving them the shape of a story, they also re-create the speech of those individuals with such accuracy that they cannot be strictly considered works of the imagination.

An example of such a defiant translated fiction is *Eisejuaz*, which tells the story of a Mataco prophet called upon by the Lord to nurse a Criollo wig-salesman, Paqui, back to health. Originally published in Buenos Aires by Sudamericana Press in 1971, this is one of the first Argentine novels written by a non-Indigenous author, Sara Gallardo, from the perspective of an Indigenous first-person narrator, Lisandro Vega, his Spanish name, or Eisejuaz, his Wichi name. The verisimilitude of the narrator's vernacular continues to spawn investigations (like this dialogue) into the boundaries between writing, translation, and ethnography. Gallardo listened to and refracted a life led in a linguistic world other to her own into a fiction that renders the ways of being in, and understanding, that realm able to transform its readers.

The real person that inspired the fictional narrator of the novel can be identified from Gallardo's non-fiction oeuvre. The article 'La historia de Lisandro Vega' (The story of Lisandro Vega), was published on June 27, 1968 in *Confirmado Magazine*, prior to the novel. The events, people, and places detailed in the former match the plot, characters, and settings in the latter. Gallardo leaves her profile of the Mataco chief of a Norwegian mission in Embarcación, Argentina, open to further elaboration: 'Esta es la historia de Vega, de su lucha por levantarse y por levantar a su pueblo, y de cómo "todo mi plan ha fracasado y me he quedado solo" No cabe entera en esta página' (This is the story of Vega, of his struggle to rise up and raise up his people, of how 'my entire plan failed and I was left alone'. It doesn't fit whole on this page (Gallardo 1968 [2015]: 275)) Comparing the fictional to the non-fictional versions, with a focus on Vega's quoted speech, offers a glimpse at the collaborative process through which the author and her

narrator shaped his life into a narrative structure, and rendered his language and the cosmology it references through word choice.

Sara Gallardo and Lisandro Vega have passed away. Speculating how they wrote this novel remains a means through which we (Liliana Colanzi, Jessica Sequeira, and Elisa Taber) developed our writing, translation, and ethnography practices. This dialogue therefore sets off from a discussion of the novel and its invitation to think anew about the politics of voice, colonialism, and decolonial futures.

Sequeira is the English translator of Gallardo's *El país del humo* (*Land of smoke*, Gallardo 2018) and Colanzi's *Nuestro mundo muerto* (*Our dead world*, 2017) that was influenced by *Eisejuaz*, which Colanzi edited in Bolivia and Taber is co-translating with Mercedes Villalba into English. We will discuss our methods and the theory that informs them to trace the adjoining limits between these disciplines and the shared influence of *Eisejuaz* on our work. As we are caught between English and Spanish linguistic worlds, we began speaking in Spanish on Zoom, continued emailing in Spanish and English, and concluded by translating the Spanish texts into English. The absent presences of our fourth and fifth interlocutors, Gallardo and Vega, mirror that of their novel's English translation, as of yet in process.

Contributors

Liliana Colanzi (LC)
Jessica Sequeira (JS)
Elisa Taber (ET)

Conversation

(ET) *Eisejuaz* was written in a Golden Age Spanish, which dates back to the Spanish missions, semantically and grammatically altered by a Wichi, with references to Mataco cosmology. Thus, Gallardo denounces the role of linguistic and religious conversion in colonial processes while reproducing the decolonial possibilities this Spanish-Mataco still holds. She also posits an alternate model for sociability as the aim of Lisandro Vega's prophetic mission. The prophecy is not actualized between the fictional characters but between the real author and interlocutor. Gallardo attuned to and was transformed by Vega's worldview, language, and technique for producing narrative to the extent that they are reproduced in *Eisejuaz*. Because this novel fits uncomfortably within indigenista literature, it does not contribute to this cyclical movement's assimilation of the Indigenous as component and foundation of a culturally heterogeneous yet singular Latin American canon. *I ask us to speculate: How did Gallardo transform this real person and place, as well as the events that marked their life, into a fictional character, setting, and plot?* Perhaps we can pay special attention to how she reproduced their way of speaking.

(JS) Before answering, perhaps I might briefly reflect on this roundtable. It seems to me something marvellous and strange, which exists at the confluence of our interests in writing, translating, and editing. The boundary between literature and anthropology dissolves so easily, perhaps because the study of the human which exists at the heart of both disciplines is so nebulous. There is something like a negative theology about them: just as the divine is only noticed in its absence, maybe we appreciate the human only where it becomes an object or action. Only

where it ceases to reflect and abstract and starts a tangible creation. This is where the wavering, shimmering, destabilized lines of definition become something concrete or real. In other words, let's get to the conversation…

Coming to Elisa's question, the Indigenous person in the book refers to their own self in multiple ways, and also hears voices from things we might think of as nonliving beings. Hearing voices is often associated with schizophrenia or psychosis, and indeed the voice calls for violence beyond the bounds of the law, outside of what civilized behaviour would expect; of course, the civilization at this time is linked to the colonial reality. So, reading, one starts to ask – What are these voices in the mind? How far should one trust or believe in them, in the protagonist, in oneself? How much stake to put in the reality outside, how much in the world inside one's brain? As a writer and translator, I am familiar with being alone for long periods in my own thoughts, and find pleasure in speaking with the voices of others through the written word, transforming their music into other symbols. Sometimes, however, I have to admit that the fluidity between the internal and external worlds begins to scare me.

How did Sara Gallardo, who was fascinated by the ethnographic world of the protagonist, yet seemingly far removed from it by her own socioeconomic background, come up with the particular voice of her disturbed protagonist? I don't know the answer, and can only speculate. (Speculum, mirror, bouncing rays of light.) For all that it was grounded in reality, the character was also a chimera of her mind. The introduction to the edition of *Eisejuaz* by Elena Vinelli compares the voice of the Mataco Indigenous person to the voices of the modernist novels of Faulkner and Joyce. Maybe the voice was a product of Gallardo's readings and conversations. But maybe (or also?) it was an extension of her own thoughts, her unconscious.

The hero is 'un héroe mitad ángel y mitad monstruo'[4] (a hero half angel and half monster), wrote Manuel Mujica Lainez in a letter to Gallardo, which also appears in the introduction. The protagonist, always moving between first and third person, confused about the distance he should take from his own self and from the man he is caring for, seems to me the mirror of the artistic creator – forever travelling between their own ego and those of other people, animals, plants, and objects, in a wavering relationship between the 'I' and the apparently 'non-I', which in reality forms part of the same great plane of being.

'Getting into the head' of another being than oneself, whether through translation, transcription, interview, mediumistic channelling, or the imagination, is at the heart of literary activity, but it is so easy to lose oneself along the way – or realize there was never an essential 'self' to begin with. What to do with this terror, I don't know. Speak with others about it, I suppose. Gallardo is fascinating to me because she picks up all of these concerns through a character who speaks in a clipped, staccato, repetitive voice that achieves the hard diamond clarity of mysticism in its relation to the Lord, and avoids some of the pitfalls of indigenismo costumbrista[5] that one might find in Rosario Castellanos, a parallel of Sara Gallardo's in some respects. I find echoes of this same voice in *El país del humo* (*Land of smoke*) published years later, so it's hard for me to separate what is Gallardo's literary voice from the voice and concerns of her character.

(LC) Sara Gallardo wrote *Eisejuaz* in an invented tongue. What could this mean? With this gesture she reclaims the freedom of fiction to distance itself from reality and to create an autonomous world of one's own. This is an important point of divergence from the classical indigenista literature – Alcides Arguedas, Icaza, Alegría – which sought to portray and explain the Indigenous reality – or 'the problem of the Indian', as it was referred to, for example, in Bolivia – from a realist perspective. These novels, with the pretence of searching for veracity, in many cases ended up confirming the racist stereotypes of the Indigenous from the optic of the Latin American elites. The educated class only saw ignorance, backwardness, and barbarism in the Indigenous peoples, and it was this 'reality' that they denounced, along with the exploitation and abuses they were subjected to. Between these indigenistas and Sara Gallardo there are writers like José María Arguedas, who portrayed the Indigenous world from within and explored different representations of a literary language to convey this world, from a very radical one in *Yawar fiesta*[6] in which Spanish is heavily influenced by Quechua words and syntax, to a more accessible fusion of Spanish and Quechua in *Deep rivers*.[7] Sara Gallardo avoids the danger of falling into the early indigenistas' categorization by building her literary artifact like José María Arguedas atop an 'invented language' whose altered syntax 'stains' and perturbs hegemonic Spanish (and the patrimony of the lettered city). This language immerses us in a world unlike the Christian one: there are lizards that bring divine messages, communication with trees by consuming sacred plants, prophetic manifestations brought about by dreams, spells, malignant, top-shaped creatures that attack at night. The novel shows us a cosmology unlike that of the West, in no way a pure one, but one being transformed by, and in contact with, the White world.

I really like what Jessica says about the first person in *Eisejuaz*, a first person that contains many others: Lisandro Vega's world always exists in relation to various alterities, divine and animal in kind. And so, another, who Eisejuaz calls 'el que me habita'[8] (one that inhabits me), also speaks when he speaks. This is not a minor issue: the twilight of the Indigenous world that the novel portrays is related to the advance of the modern world into the forest, knocking down vegetation and spooking animals. Lisandro Vega does not conceive his humanity from the exceptionalist perspective of Western culture, but in profound relation with other creatures, animal and vegetal, that are being cornered by progress. Though Sara Gallardo was careful not to say that her novel was a reliable representation of the Wichi world, it is very interesting that various people who knew the real Lisandro Vega corroborated various facts that appear in the novel: not only are the names of the characters the same, but also the emergence of Lisandro from the forest fleeing violence and the subsequent life he led in the religious missions. But above all, in a book by Enrique Flores, *Eisejuaz, chamán* (Eisejuaz, shaman),[9] Lisandro Vega's daughter, Cristina, and his friend, the Indigenous Evangelical pastor Marcos Delgado, signalled that Lisandro was a shaman and that the representation of Indigenous spirituality and ritual that appear in the novel corresponds to the Wichi worldview. *Eisejuaz* shows us the point of view of the shaman, the mediator between the human, the divine, and the animal, and this is why the world is presented as new, strange, and at times supernatural. At

the same time, Gallardo did not speak the language of Eisejuaz, and that is why she had to invent a grammar to narrate that world which did not belong to her.

(ET) Your approaches to how reality and fiction converge and diverge in the novel – with a focus on the blurring between self (the narrator) and other (the author, the interviewee, and the secondary characters), Jessica, and on the invention of a tongue, Liliana – brought me to reflect on a language beyond the human. The messenger angels of the Lord range from lizards and trees to running water. Thus, perhaps the nature/culture dichotomy is transcended by the supernatural in the novel. The prophetic mission of Eisejuaz is to establish an ideal cohabitation among humans and with nonhumans. The Lord metamorphoses to deliver his prophecy, while the narrator, to actualize it, changes his name from Eisejuaz to Lisandro Vega and 'Éste También, el del camino largo, el comprado por el Señor'[10] (This One Too, the one on the long road, the one bought by the Lord). These monikers signal that an alternate sociality can only be enacted through translation between cultures as well as natures. Though Lisandro Vega delivers the divine message to Paqui, it falls on deaf ears, confirming that only a unilateral transformative communication is possible between the Wichi cosmovision and the Western cosmovision represented.

The value of both fiction and ethnography is to render us briefly other, and return us to ourselves, still familiar but somewhat stranger, transformed. Yet interdisciplinarity hinges on the perspective from which it is engaged. Maybe anthropologists understand the relationship between the work they do, and the work done by writers and performers of literature in the following ways. The compilation and translation of informants' interviews, the juxtaposition of fieldwork and theory, and the narrativity of the structure and lyricism of concepts make the production of anthropological knowledge a writerly labour and the product a literary as well as scientific artefact. In addition, works of literature are often the object of ethnographic attention and the companions of anthropologists. The literary labour, product, object, and companion of anthropology are four central ways these two disciplines are intertwined. By sharing how you, Liliana and Jessica, enact your own practices and the theory that informs them, I hope that anthropologists will come to see this relationship from the complementary perspective of writers and performers of literature, and the mediating perspective of translators, understanding these as both literary and cultural practices.

(JS) Translation, for me, is a mystic process of nearness, one of the many ways to the divine. A form of travel into the self through intimate connection with other beings, a meticulous precision of attention. Working with language in a sustained way can be a form of approaching the unnameable through intensity, luminosity, rhythm. Reading today, I was taken by these lines by the Argentine poet Olga Orozco, whose gnostic vision is very particular, but has threads that connect to the work of Sara Gallardo in *Eisejuaz*. Here are the lines:

> Yo velaba incrustada en el ardiente hielo, en la hoguera escarchada, / traduciendo relámpagos, desenhebrando dinastías de voces, / bajo un código tan indescifrable como el de las estrellas o el de las hormigas. / Miraba las palabras al trasluz. / Veía desfilar sus oscuras progenies hasta el final del verbo. / Quería descubrir a Dios por transparencia.[11]

Which I might render:

> I kept vigil in burning ice, frozen in bonfires, / translating lightning, unravelling dynasties of voices, / following a code as indecipherable as stars' or ants'. / I looked at words against light. / Saw their dark progenies file past, until verb's end. / I sought God in transparency.

Much of the lyric poetry that I love reads as a kind of monologue, but also a dialogue with the reader, who remains invisible and silent as their eyes move over the page, and embarks on a journey of inner work that could result in something new. This authorial mode of speaking to somebody who answers back after a lapse of time, or might 'answer' by writing something themselves – or translating – fascinates me. Lisandro Vega in *Eisejuaz* hears and interprets the divine; in this sense he is a translator.

The question here about the relation between ethnography and literature is interesting to me because the practices share this attention to listening and interpreting. In a similar vein, I think often of the testimonio genre, that of Rigoberta Menchú, for instance, telling her experiences of the Maya Quiché Indigenous people about the civil war in Guatemala to Venezuelan reporter Elizabeth Burgos in a book called *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (*I, Rigoberta Menchú*),[12] or the true tale of Luis Alejandro Belasco told to Gabriel García Márquez, a crónica whose fantastic title is *Relato de un náufrago que estuvo diez días a la deriva en una balsa sin comer ni beber, que fue proclamado héroe de la patria, besado por las reinas de la belleza y hecho rico por la publicidad, y luego aborrecido por el gobierno y olvidado para siempre* (*The story of a shipwrecked sailor: who drifted on a life raft for ten days without food or water, was proclaimed a national hero, kissed by beauty queens, made rich through publicity, and then spurned by the government and forgotten for all time*).[13]

The line between author and transcriber, between 'subject' and 'ethnographer', between source and translator in the amplest sense, transforms. The book is no longer by just one person but becomes more collaborative. At the moment, I am creating an oral history with somebody I know very well about a certain time and place in Chilean history. With the 'subject' and 'subject matter' so close, and the creation of the book involving an interview process based in mutual trust, what exactly is this work? Anthropology has ceased, it seems to me, to take the other as an irredeemably foreign, strange, or exotic being. Which does not mean losing the rich particularity of detail to specific places and contexts, just as can be found in lyric poetry.

To come back to *Eisejuaz*, I love this book so much in part because of its poetic density, its colloquialisms and also its mantras of the ordinary, for instance, in the names of woods:

> Al otro día entraron los camiones en el aserradero. Traían cedro, quebracho, lapacho, palosanto, algarrobo, pacará, mora, palo amarillo, palo blanco, incienso. Cargaron las tablas y se fueron para Salta.[14]

> The next day the trucks entered the sawmill. They brought cedar, quebracho, lapacho, palosanto, carob, pacará, blackberry, palo amarillo, palo blanco, incense. They loaded the beams and left for Salta.

This list strikes me as beautiful; it is also a metaphor for the movement behind the process of translation. (Not to mention a good example of the richness

of botanical language, which does not always find exact equivalents in other languages.)

On the same page, Lisandro Vega goes to fetch water from the river and gets tired of speaking to the women there. He says: 'Yo me tapé las orejas y me fui con el agua'.[15] (I covered my ears and went with the water). Recently in Santiago, at the Museo del Sonido, I listened to an amazing performance by some poet-musicians who had recorded the sounds of water and wind with powerful microphones, and improvised live with a jazz flute, double bass with clothes pins attached to the strings, and Chinese gong, to make totally new sounds. The flautist said: 'I'm used to improvising with musicians, but have never improvised before with the sounds of fish!'

Keeping in mind the influence of *Eisejuaz* and the adjoining limits of our disciplines, and thinking about the always provisional definitions behind the methods we enact and the ever modifiable theories that inform our writing, translation, and anthropology practices, I might ask (or return to) these simple questions: *What to listen to? How to listen? Where to listen?*

(ET) I listen ethnographically by attending to, and being remade by, other linguistic worlds. Before elaborating this practice, the mantra of the ordinary demands pause. The kinds of trees are introduced by the mechanism of their destruction. The dark lyricism of this passage encrypts cohabitation as an alternate to exploitation. *Eisejuaz*'s arboreal list implies what *La Pensée sauvage*'s (*The savage mind*) makes explicit: 'Les mots chêne, hêtre, bouleau, etc. ne sont pas moins des mots abstraits que le mot arbre.'[16] (Words like 'oak', 'beech', 'birch', etc., are no less entitled to be considered as abstract words than the word 'tree.') The baroqueness of the particular and the cannibalizing intent of the abstraction might offer an entry point into the fraught place where language, myth, and spirit meet reducción.

Language was central to the reducción programme carried out by Spanish missionaries and recruits to subordinate Amerindian peoples to the rule of law and hierarchical relations of colonial society. The meaning and arrangement of words in Amerindian languages were altered to match their equivalents in colonial languages. In addition, Christian themes were incorporated in Amerindian conceptions of language tied to creation myths. To alter the creation myths and conceptions of spirit that render languages distinct from each other is to eradicate those languages and, with them, the ways of being and understanding the world that they constitute. Yet Indigenous languages that remain in circulation may hold decolonizing possibilities. This potential is actualized by bringing the precolonial past into the postcolonial present through the myths of creation associated with Indigenous conceptions of language.

The unique linguistic context of Paraguay lends itself to tracing these decolonizing possibilities because most of the population speaks in an unusual form called Jopara that mixes an Indigenous language, Guaraní, and a colonial language, Spanish – not unlike Eisejuaz's Spanish-Mataco. This Guaraní, which is altered by and used alternatingly with Spanish, still conceives of words as having souls. The Guaraní concept of language and soul, posited as indivisible in the pre-Hispanic *Ayvu Rapyta* (Foundation of human language) creation myth, remains somewhat intact. I seek to understand the colonizing processes and decolonizing

possibilities that constitute that unique linguistic context of Paraguay through an ethnography of contemporary Jopara literature through literature.

To represent and communicate between the Spanish and Guaraní linguistic worlds, Jopara authors practise writing, translation, and ethnography. Paraguayan authors turn into translators to write in Spanish. However, they refuse to translate some Guaraní words. These ñe'ẽs (word-souls), are untranslatable because they invoke mythical beings. For example, tuñe (whistle) references the myth of the Pombero, a whistling elf. Guaraní word-souls are woven into their Spanish prose. This hybrid representational form is inspired by ñandutí (spider's web), a Spanish unweaving technique whose weblike pattern represents Guaraní symbols. These writers/translators turn into anthropologists to culturally translate the literarily untranslatable terms in footnotes. They describe these mythical spirits in the context of a Guaraní cosmology. Mythopoesis, the recreation of myths born out of mestizaje, unlike poesis, is a re-creative force which offers a different way of being within the existing world.

The writing, translation, and anthropology theories and methods I take up are born out of existing between linguistic worlds and having the skills to represent and communicate between them. Perhaps a better term for this practice is audición entre lenguas (auditioning meanings and attuning between tongues). Sites of discomfort and incoherence in a text guide me to how the meanings or order of words have been altered by another language. Though Jopara writers exist between Spanish and Guarani, while I exist between Spanish and English, we share this audición entre lenguas. Encircling the Guaraní sphere as I do, in the landlocked country where I was born and return to without ever fully experiencing homecoming, I dip in and out of lacunas of misunderstanding. Beyond language-learning, I also approach the process through which Jopara literature is produced by mapping their practice in isomorphic reverse: beginning with ethnography, moving on to translation, and ending by writing a novel. I seek to understand how each phase in its interdisciplinary practice renders knowable, or potentiates, the decolonizing possibilities that Guaraní word-souls hold, and how.

(LC) Anthropology and ethnography must be capable of suspending a priori judgements to welcome the perspective of the other, and this is something they share with literature and translation. In other words, all these are communal practices that involve an openness to others. Our practices have also served – and keep serving – as practices of capture and domination, which is why it is important to delve into their potential for decolonization, as Elisa so wonderfully notes. Writers, translators, and anthropologists share the experience of inhabiting multiple worlds, of placing ourselves in a border state. The border, living between worlds, is not only a vital circumstance but also a psychic state and a condition of writing, as Gloria Anzaldúa points out. Eisejuaz is the character who walks among many worlds, sacred and secular: I find Jessica's insight very interesting when she characterizes him as a translator. To translate is to let the other manifest through us. I think that when I write, I am an antenna picking up alien music, or a channel through which spectres appear. These ghosts are from a colonial past that still marks us: we think of the past as something closed, yet it continues to haunt the present. To pay attention to what the dominant culture considers residual,

marginal, or unimportant is to activate a disruptive potential. Sara Gallardo travelled to Salta in search of stories to write about in her newspaper column, and in a small-town hotel, she met a Wichi Indigenous man working as a kitchen assistant. The extraordinary story this unknown person told Sara Gallardo will continue to exist, imbued with fiction, in the imagination of others. Writing is keeping the antenna alert. It is a disposition towards others, a way of looking, listening, and being in the world. Guimarães Rosa wrote, 'Quando nada acontece, há um milagre que não estamos vendo.'[17] (When nothing is happening, there is a miracle that we are not seeing.)

(ET) Moving past *Eisejuaz*, perhaps we can discuss other texts that evade the fixed category of literature, translation, or ethnography, and delve deeper into our own practices. Jessica, you have translated over twenty books from Spanish into English, including Colanzi's *Our dead world* and Gallardo's *Land of smoke*, and written the bilingual poetry collection *Golden jackal/Chacal dorado*, which was translated or edited (the boundary is porous) by Diego Alegría.[18] With reference to the novel by Liliana we mentioned earlier, the short story collection by Sara, and your own collections, *What does thinking alongside a work of literature mean for its translator?*

(JS) It occurs to me that what is particular about the kind of writing we have been talking about – translation, journalism, oral history, interview, writing that borders on ethnography – is that the problem of the blank page does not exist. You are always interacting with somebody in a kind of dialogue, although the work itself remains solitary. There is something beautiful about this to me, in its conviction that the process and final result are creative and unique, but come out of something beyond the individual. In some sense, every person is a kind of luminous emptiness that only takes on meaning through interactions with others.

You asked about the book *Golden jackal/Chacal dorado*, which reflects on the figure of a woman-jackal at the ruins of history which seems to her an archive to scavenge, on the mythology of the jackal in the cultures of Chile and India, where half my family is from, and on music as a way of giving form to experience; here I'll quote something I wrote about it for the Chilean website *Lector*:

> The process of writing, translation and editing, at some point, became blurred or hybrid. In fact, I can't really tell the steps apart. I wrote a lot, or all of, the poems in Spanish first, then self-translated them into English. I did a lot of what I could call 'simultaneous writing', with the Spanish and English in columns side by side, mutually correcting them. Diego helped with the precision of the Spanish, in many detail-oriented conversations. My brain of a translator never turns off when writing. Everything was a very long process, that took place over years. Time went by, and we had several conversations with Chilean publishers; for a while the book was even going to be called *Diversión y reposo (Diversion and Repose)*, which I like because it suggests the cyclical, but ultimately that became a line in the book. All of this was a sedimentation that involved substitution and rewriting. In fact, I think that no poem remains from the original, which I started to write in Buenos Aires, even if they are there as secret layers, like a painting behind a painting. Everything remains inside of experience, like the boat in which every part is replaced.[19]

In English, the word 'ship' is in 'authorship', which is perhaps not arbitrary. Writing and translating are a journey. Yet maybe something of the self does remain constant. At one point, Liliana wrote a short text for the back cover of

the book, and several years later I wrote to her again to ask what she would like to change, since the book was now so different. She said that after reading it again, she thought the ideas in her initial text still held true! So we kept it intact.

An 'original' piece of writing, or whatever else, may be created with initial emotions and impulses. But each new version takes on a particular rhythm, a music. I believe the translator is, in many ways, also a musical interpreter and editor. This morning in Santiago over coffee and croissants with the Turkish translator Banu Karakaş, we discussed some of these topics. After a meandering chat talking about Baldomero Lillo and the beauty of the Georgian script, among other things, we ended up discussing the idea of the interview as an art form: the importance of asking good questions, the ways we consciously listen to what the other is saying. Style has to do with pulses and omissions, the decision of what to include or cut out. The breath of the text.

On this topic of material and style, Liliana, given that *Our dead world* includes Ayoreo testimonies excerpted from the ethnography *Behold the black caiman* by Lucas Bessire,[20] I might ask you, *What does thinking alongside an ethnography mean for a novelist? And how might we consider speculative or fantastic elements as a part of this work?*

(LC) As an author and reader of science fiction, the trope of the end of the world, the threat of destruction set in the future, is not unfamiliar to me. In this era of climate emergency and mass extinction, the idea that the end of times is approaching is more present than ever. But what if the end of the world is not a future horizon, but has already happened? Colonization has been an apocalyptic event for Indigenous peoples. However, not everyone conceives of time in a linear way, as in Western thought. The Guaraní, for example, believe that time is cyclical, and the world 'turns over' periodically. Eisejuaz shows us that, for the Wichi and other Indigenous peoples, the apocalypse is happening with the destruction of the forest and the end of an Indigenous way of life. But at the same time, another kind of process is taking place: in contact with the people from the city, a new way of life, a new religion, a new language is being created. Eisejuaz is proof of this: his religion is syncretic, and he can navigate between various worlds.

Lucas Bessire's beautiful and brilliant book, *Behold the black caiman,* also addresses this issue in relation to the Ayoreo people, who are threatened by wildfires, the invasion of their territory, and deforestation. The theme of the end of the world is very present in this ethnographic work. I was deeply impressed by an Ayoreo song that Bessire includes in his work (and which I turned into the epigraph of my own book), which concludes: 'This is the trunk of all stories (cuchade erode udi) / it tells about yocuneone togode, our dead world.'[21] Many of the Indigenous people he interviewed had converted to Christianity and no longer remembered the traditions of their ancestors. Bessire's ethnographic work refuses to fix the Ayoreo people in a melancholic past of cultural purity, and instead explores the ways they have managed to survive extractivist and neocolonial violence and create a new future. For me, this has also meant a reconsideration in recent years of the type of science fiction I want to write: depicting not only the devastation of the world but also the processes of resistance, the fabrics that allow lives to continue in precarious and violent

situations, the possible futures. The fictions we tell not only serve to portray realities but also create reality: it's a two-way journey. The relationship between literature and anthropology is also reciprocal. Elisa, given that you're working on an ethnography of contemporary Jopara literature, *What does thinking alongside a work of literature mean for an ethnographer?*

(ET) I think ethnographically alongside literature by tracing the stain the overflown contents of a piece of writing leave behind. Karin Barber suggests substituting literature with text, a broader and less-historically specific concept.[22] What exceeds the value-laden term is both more ordinary and otherworldly. Ethnographers of literature study the skills and practices required to produce and disseminate texts, as well as the history of the material form in question. This method renders how social relations weave spoken or written words into a form embedded with commentary, detachable from its local context, and reproducible over time and space. Though text shifts the focus to the artisanal, its neutrality is reminiscent of a printed font made to resemble handwriting. Historias, both retellings of history and other ways of telling a story, may orbit closer to the beauty of the artefacts I work with.

Circling around the divine, we traced the trail of the messenger angels. What is the message? Eisejuaz sings it, 'Eh, eh, eh. Digan. Eh, eh, eh' (Oh, oh, oh. Say. Oh, oh, oh).[23] It is language turned into sound. What is silence? It is the end of the novel. The spirit animating language leaves Eisejuaz's deceased body to become mud and grass. The meaning in those words in that order lasts while you read or hear them. Writing gives them a false sense of permanence. The words can be cited or translated. Yet any attempt to retain their essence rings untrue. They exude a light that does not blind but illuminates a path, which leads to writing your own historia.

We now know how the story ends. But how does it begin? How is the real made into fiction? Perhaps writing implies recreating our social and material worlds by accessing how language creates meaning. This leads to an exploration into conceptions of language tied to creation myths, such as the Christian Genesis myth, which posits that 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'.[24] In some creation myths, words are indivisible from the spirits that utter them and what they bring into being through naming. This leads to exploring other ways of being human, perceiving places, and ordering events. Thus, fiction creatively transforms reality by invoking myths that detail the origin of the material universe. This time of creation is not linear, historical time. The Jopara historias I think alongside recreate the contemporary reality of Paraguay by accessing how words came to have souls and actualizing the Guaraní mythological time of creation in the present. Untranslatable word-souls are the medium through which that mythological world enters reality.

Their plots may be born out of the mythical Land-without-Evil, which offers an alternative to society. Because the Land-without-Evil is an earthly paradise, it is accessible through religious migration, without losing human form, according to the eponymous tome by Hélène Clastres.[25] Whether it was a pre-Hispanic feature of Tupí-Guaraní religion or a messianic cult's response to the Spanish conquest is debated. Nevertheless, Guaraní messianism was radicalized by the conquest and the myth captured settler colonialists' imaginations. The Guaraní Land-without-

Evil myth has merged with the colonial El Dorado myth to possess Paraguay. According to Augusto Roa Bastos,[26] the national imaginary is of 'una isla rodeada de tierra en el corazón del continente' (an island surrounded by land in the heart of the continent).

And how is fiction made into the real? The bodily desire to inhabit one's imagination frightens me. To turn fiction real too literally produces a grotesque over-forming. I am reminded of sculpture parks like Edward James's Las Pozas. Perhaps the afterlife of a work of fiction is simply this, a digital, blank page filling with our chirographic voices, Eisejuaz, Elisa, Jessica, Liliana, and Sara.

It depends

The following is a transcript of a conversation between Rex Lee Jim and Anthony K. Webster. It is a part of an ongoing dialogue between the two of them. The conversation began in March 2000 when Webster was trying to find a dissertation topic. It was Rex Lee Jim who first suggested that Webster look at Navajo poetry (see Webster 2009; 2015). At that time, Jim had published a number of books of poetry – primarily in Navajo (see Jim 1989; 1995; 1998). The conversation has continued off and on for the last twenty-plus years. Transcripts of previous conversations can be found in Webster (2016) and Jim and Webster (2022). The conversations have taken place in the Navajo Nation, in Charleston, South Carolina, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in Austin, Texas, and, most recently, via Zoom. This transcript is only a fragment of a series of conversations, a series of dialogues that Jim and Webster have been having on poetry, anthropology, ethnopoetics, ritual language, healing, and justice. Almost every week since mid-March 2023, Jim and Webster have met via Zoom to talk with each other. The formatting of the transcription follows the conventions described in Jim and Webster (2022).[27] We see this as building, as well, on that effort in dialogical ethnopoetics – a making visible of how we (both anthropologists and verbal artists) come to know something about verbal art through situated talk (Jim & Webster 2022). As noted at the beginning, this is a fragment of a longer dialogue and as such it references previous conversations and looks forward to future ones.

Contributors

Rex Lee Jim (RLJ)
Anthony K. Webster (AKW)

Conversation

(RLJ) perhaps we can start off by talking about
what do you think anthropology does and how is it related to creative writing

(AKW) yeah

(RLJ) especially the Native writers focusing on Navajo

[20 second pause]

(AKW) I think
what does anthropology do

I mean I think it's a good question and anthropologists spend a lot of time thinking about that
too much time sometimes
in many ways what anthropologists do is that they talk to people
and

and they try to understand a little bit about how other people at least talk about or think about the world
and you know my own background in that comes out of

linguistic anthropology and what was
the discourse-centred approach to the language and culture which is a view that sees
language and culture as things that people do through discourse
through talking and other ways of communicating
and the key site to that
the key place where that become most interesting for people who came out of that discourse-centred approach
which was the approach my adviser was very much a proponent of was
was in speech play and verbal art
in the ways that people use language in creative interesting ways
because he argued
and I would agree with this
that's where people work out their
their cultures
their ways of being
who they are
the possibilities for the future
the ways one orients to the past
the way one plays
plays with language for all kinds of reasons
and so
in the kind of anthropology I've always done
and because anthropologists do lots of things
a:h
the anthropology that I
I was most interested in was anthropology that
was concerned with creativity
and with forms of
verbal art and the like
and I think
you know one of the things about

working with Indigenous peoples in the United States and with Navajos is
so much is being done right now creatively
I think back
to: when we first met
and then I thought that at that time

that it was a kind of a golden moment right
of lots and lots of Navajo writers
and I was wrong
in the sense that there are even more now
more Navajo than when I first started um:
talking with people out there
and it
it's been useful I think for ME to see the ways that

Navajos use language use English use Navajo
in creative kinds of ways
for all kinds of purpose to share something about themselves but also
to comment on
on the world as it is or as it might be
as it were
and you know part of what I always tried to do
or at least

I hope I've done is
to promote that
to promote
Navajo

literature I mean
and to
to celebrate it and
to draw positive attention to it

(RLJ) so what do you think of the
role of ritual languages in all of this
the formulaic prayers and songs
and storytelling
and how does that interrelate with
contemporary ideas of poetry writing

(AKW) that's a big question
I mean I think I think it depends
I think it depends on the
the poet
I think it depends on what they are trying to do
on what their background is
what their knowledge is about certain kinds of things
a:h
so I you know
I think it would be
I think it would be difficult to
to speak
too generally about it because I think

what you do may be different than what somebody else does
and I think that the ways that you
connect with ritual language
the way that you use certain kinds of poetic forms
forms of parallelisms and the like
may be different than somebody else does
who may be tapped into a slightly different kind of tradition
and the like
I mean you
you make connections with ritual language and I think some other
poets I think they don't do
that kind that's not what they're doing
and so I it would depend I think on
and the poet and you know I mean

(RLJ) [clears throat]

what do you mean by depend on the poet

(AKW) well I

(RLJ) [laugh]

(AKW) [laugh]
I think
I think what you do may be different say than what a different Navajo poet does
who might not be trying to make the same kinds of connections and the like
so I
I don't think that
and this is you know this comes out of that kind of discourse-centred approach I think
one wants to be careful about overgeneralizing
because
what one of the goals of anthropology
is to
look at how particular people do particular kinds of things and what they say about what they are doing
and so when I say it depends
it depends because I don't think every poet approaches poetry the same way
I mean if I've learned anything
it is that poets have different views about these kinds of things
and to make some kind of sweeping claim
I think can be misleading

(RLJ) well not only that but what do you think of translations
because many Navajo poets don't speak the language
they do it in English

therefore they don't really have access to the formal
poems the songs and the prayers I'm talking about

(AKW) I mean yeah
I think that's one of the things that it depends on right
what kinds of knowledge do people have
what kinds of stocks of knowledge and things like that
that people can tap into
and some
some poets obviously don't speak Navajo don't have that sensibility
or they do speak Navajo and they haven't been to ceremony or something like that
and so they don't have that same kind of experience
and
and so in that sense I think those are the kinds of things that depend
what do I think of translation
I mean
to use a word I've just used before
it depends right
I think there's a kind of scale of translatability
I think certain kinds of things can be slightly more translatable
than other kinds of things
you know languages are
all translations are exuberant and are deficient
exuberant that you put too much in and deficient that you leave stuff out
I think the range of exuberances and the range of deficiencies
differ
I think certain words lexical items like nouns verbs and things like that
sometimes the exuberances and deficiencies
while still there
may not be substantial
but I think that when you get into poetic language and things like that
and this was one of
the things that
Joel Sherzer my adviser always said
that when you get into poetic language that's where language is really showing off and it's really the most heightened in kind of
interesting kind of ways
and it is precisely there where
translation is the hardest
because the ways that different languages have of showing off
that people showing off with their language
in putting it on display really
uh:
differs
so I think translation in that sense is always
I again
it fluctuates between these realms of deficiency and exuberance

but I also think that translation can also be a kind of
kindness
in that
if you can try to bring something from one language into another in a way that
is attentive to the language from which it comes
the language and culture in which it comes
I think there's a kindness that can be done there as well
through translation
I think translation is incredibly complicated and difficult
and then you have the whole context of the thing right
so the ritual language occurs in ritual
and that context becomes difficult to translate as well

(RLJ) are you saying the poet himself or herself is the best translator
or is somebody else better qualified to do that
and to what degree are people
limited to whatever by the languages that are being translated into that plays a
role in all of this

(AKW) again I will begin by saying it depends [laugh]

(RLJ) [laugh]

(AKW) uh

(RLJ) should we title this work 'It depends'

(AKW) *it depends* I think so

I think in some ways right
having the person the poet translate is an interesting thing
and it says something
and
and that's a very useful kind of and interesting kind of thing
I mean there is the sense though
that sometimes poets aren't translating in a kind of linguistic sense
they're translating in a kind of aesthetic sense
there's the poem is
you know if it's in Navajo
and then the poem's in English
in the poem inspired by the poem in Navajo
but is not necessarily identical with it
in that sense right it's not a kind of translation in a linguistic sense
of the kind narrowness
it might not be
it might be
it might not do the same kind of thing
but it does something rather interesting in and of itself

and not it's not like it's the worst kind of translation
it's just that is a different kind of translation
you know I think multiple translations
are a good thing I mean
you take Homer and the Odyssey
u:m and I think the fact that that's been translated goodness knows in so many different ways and by so many different people

but never by Homer

I think
each translation allows you a sense of what was in the ancient Greek that
that I don't have access to
so if it is Emily Wilson's book recent translation or Samuel Butler's translation
which is the one I read
each one kind of layers and gives you a sense of the thing
so I the more translation in a sense
allow more glimpses o:f
of what is going on
in the poem
you know in the language of the poem for instance

(RLJ) one of the reasons I'm asking you is because I
realize from my own experience that once I let go of a poem
that's in English or Navajo
it takes on its own life
people bring to it their own experiences and so on
and their own interpretations and
and then the Navajos also believe that language has its own
life
its own breath and once you let go it is all there
with the people's interaction
between an active interaction
between the reader and the language itself
so once I let go I have to let go
I can't say 'No-no-no this is what I mean but you're wrong' [laugh]
so that's why I am asking though
the role of translation and the role it plays in it
so I think there's just part of being part of a human dynamics
it's hard work
so no
even as I write and am the author of certain forms and certain pieces
I find myself being extremely limited in
how I express certain concepts and ideas
but when certain people have similar experiences they might add to it
and therefore add to the meaning or depth of the poem I am already writing about
and which makes it all the more exciting for me as a writer

just like your interpretation of the na'ashchxiidí[28] [laughs]
redneck mouse na'ashchxiidí a badger

(AKW) did that add something

(RLJ) [laugh] it certainly did
it added a whole new world to it

(AKW) [laugh]

. . . . .

(AKW) so I have I have a question on what you said
and so I actually have two questions but
one is
I mean
it's interesting that you said that you had to let the poem go
and that and in letting it go and letting other people interpret it and translate it
it can bring things to life that maybe you couldn't express
and the other things is you talk about
is it just Navajo or does English also have a life to it
I'm and that's the other question
so can it also do those kinds of things

(RLJ) I don't know you're the English-speaker

it depends [laugh]

(AKW) [laugh]
touché [laugh]

(RLJ) I think it it's based on how you were raised
because for me I was taught that languages are alive
and that they exist externally
away from human beings
there's a universal thing that's out there
and that we just have to be born into that
and because of that background
I believe any language is like that
for there's English or Navajo
o:r Japanese whatever
that these languages like us are different and exist on their own
and so if you are open to that
I think that's always the case for me
and sometimes we limit ourselves to
a capacity of language to express

all kinds of things
because our limited views we're limited to that degree
that expression of that language to express certain fields
so if we approach it from a group point of view and we all add to it
and so that way the language is alive it's flexible it's fluid
and it can go in any direction

and so for me
and I say this because in Navajo when you tell learn to tell a story
let's say a coyote story
grandpa would repeat the story
the same story
tell the same story
but then she would turn around and say now you tell the story
and sometimes we forget certain passages
or
we emphasize certain passages
sort of in our own way of saying this is what this story means to me
other than you know 'I forgot this part' [laugh]
but

(AKW) [laugh]

(RLJ) that's just the variations of the story
and eventually we you get to where telling the story sounds natural to you and good to you
but the story will never be the same in terms of having the same emphasis
having the same intonation
having it in the same place
or the frowning or the chuckle or whatever
they're different
and that's what's teaching you
the basic outline and the core of story
but
some of the details around it vary
and
one thing that I learn is that when people recite my poetry
in Navajo
I've seen young people struggle with it
not because they don't understand
well one because they don't know the vocabulary because I
tend to use phrases like na'ashchxiidí
and some people translate it as badger

(AKW) [laugh]

(RLJ) but the fact is that they're where they're at
and the poem will speak to them at that level

and so it's constantly changing
constantly moving
and
and so the language itself the stories themselves
they all change
the rhythms themselves
the music of the language moves and so on
so even the same poem there's several parts of it
there's music
there's intonation
there's tones
there's so on
and they all interact and all change
there's that flexibility and fluency as well

(AKW) and so they struggle
they struggle with when they recite the poems
because of the vocabulary
but also because of the music of the poetry

(RLJ) yeah the music of the poetry
because even though they have their own musical rhythm as well
the readers
sometimes they'll add into it
it's just like when you are singing a song
like me out of tune and so on
but you are still enjoying it and you get sort of the meaning out of it
and I think poetry works the same way
the creative expression works the same way
so when young people recite my own poems I don't mind if they use their own words
to express what I am saying in old Navajo because they might add something new to it

like one of my brothers was talking with one of my nephews
and they were saying doo nítáá bíłtł'óoh da[29]
'this is not tied to your forehead' is the expression and what that means is when you have a Navajo ceremony
they tie a certain feather
right here [points to top of head]
they take off your hair and tie it there
in that way they sort of
what do they call it
endow you with it or ordain you with it
or they
maybe you become one with that ceremony
but if that is just never done to you don't have any authority over the expression of it

but that could also be used in other ceremonies
and that's how he used it with his nephew
they don't see doo nítáá bíltł'óoh da
oh he was talking about him eating chilli
they said you're not blessed to eat chilli
in other words
I know you don't eat chilli so I don't want you to eat chilli
this hot food
and so just expression like that
it has a ritual um
phrase to it
it's connected to ritual activity
but it could be taken out of context put into different forms
to more or less mean the same thing
saying that to
um
doo bee nidiszį́į' da[30]
you're not right for this
you're not fit for this yet

(AKW) yet

(RLJ) mhm
so that's how I use ceremonially
but for my nephew eating chilli he needs to just take the time until the day he can snack on
jalapeno for that morning's meal

(AKW) so I mean
how do you
to take the question that you asked me earlier
how do you see poetry in ritual language

(RLJ) I don't see it
I just do it
I think
that exchange we just had
is an interestin:g
exchange you said 'how do you see it'
and I said 'I don't see it I do it'
because in Navajo you would never say how do you see it
that's a silly expression in Navajo
and there's a disconnect there
in terms of what we're talking about and how we're talking about it
because for me:
formulaic language
in the forms of songs and prayers is not a seen
as an actually doing

you apply it to heal to restore harmony to do certain things
and when I do poetry
with a pattern similar to formulaic poetry poems
it's the same thing
it's the actual doing
it's the restoration of harmony or peace whatever it is
it's that actual doing
as opposed to just seeing it

(AKW) mhm

(RLJ) I understand your concept when you say how do you see this
I understand that expression but it's
the language we use to talk about it that makes the big difference
and so sometimes I wonder about
when I look at anthropology and their works
especially those just written in
English
that exchange we just had
how much of that is missing in conversation
how much of the actual meanings
is not actually there because it's only in English
and because it's only in English the concept is being narrowed
or restricted to the one sense English is capable of

I was rereading some of the things that you have written about
the poetry
the Navajo poetry
and I was thinking about similar things and
some of the Navajo
I would add this
or to talk about it in English I would have to add quite a bit of explanation
and the process of explanation that
I would lose a lot of the poetic work
the conceptual
the fluency
the fluidity of it and so on
and I'm thinking maybe that case of translating from English to Navajo
because English as the original language in expressing whatever it is we are talking about
is so much more capable because of it comes from particular experience
but to translate that
and to a certain degree
force it into the Navajo language
we have a different way of looking at things
a similar thing would occur
and I always think of this in terms of my own works

especially my multilingual works
because I'd be saying something
I'd say it in Japanese
'Oh this sounds good'
and then I translate it doesn't work so I just leave it there
and then add Navajo to it
and just leave it there
and then leave it in Spanish when it sounds better in Spanish than the other language I know so
it becomes a multilingual poem

(AKW) mhm

(RLJ) and that's there where I am experimenting with languages as well
creating more poems
but in the original in the different languages where I feel comfortable
where it sounds good to me

(AKW) and so the differences in the languages
aren't to be resolved
but are meant to be alongside each other

(RLJ) not alongside
alongside
it speaks to
comparing the languages
but interwoven
woven together

I guess I'm at that level where
certain things sound natural to me in different languages
and I'm just bringing that together in a poetic form

and then there's some poems where I say things in English and it stays that way
like that word that it's not formal English
but I like that phrase
'That just doesn't jive with me'
and how do you translate that into Navajo or Spanish or Japanese or other languages
I think I just like the sound of the word 'jive'
and especially if left in English
I don't even know if the word jive is an English word or not [laugh]
but
so I have similar poems where I say 'Oh that doesn't jive'
and then I move on and add Navajo

(AKW) and it's the you like the sound of it
you like the feeling of saying it

(RLJ) yeah and another example is the common phrase
'my love'
in English it just sounds awful
but if you say it in Spanish
'mi amor'
it sounds much more natural
it's much better
it's suave softer and
it really sounds like you really love someone
mi amor
my love my L-L-L
that harsh sound it is like you just
like you don't really mean it or I don't know

(AKW) what about shiheart[31]

(RLJ) shiheart is a better word than
my love
works for me
something similar to mi amor or shiheart is
babe
hi babe
that's when
that has a more intimate sound to it as my love that sound it's that 'L::'
that's sort of harsh and
distancing
so the thing when you speak several languages you begin to
find to FIND phrases here and there that sound good in their languages and
it's better in their languages
so sometimes you try to bring those things together

(AKW) and then to translate that would be in fact
to lose all of that

(RLJ) oh yeah
so I'm certain that someone will say
'Oh you're just mixing languages and you don't make any sense'
of course it doesn't make any sense
because you're American you only speak one language [laugh]

(AKW) well I mean that's the thing with your poem 'Spring' Tó Hááłį́[32]
that the switch into English is meant to be
abrupt
it's meant to do something
and if everything is in English
then that switch it's not there
you lose that abruptness

(RLJ) 'Fuck you'[33]

(AKW) exactly [laugh]

(RLJ) you know what you're talking about
that's what you're talking about right

(AKW) [laughing] yes that's what I'm talking about

(RLJ) and that's one of those things you know
fuck you
has certain connotations and associations and this history to it
and the social context in how you use it and when you use it
but if you translate it into Navajo
it doesn't make sense
if you translate it into Navajo directly
it's like saying let me have intercourse with you
of course that's just way off
and so
some phrases you need to keep in Navajo
or some phrases keep in English
and some phrases you need to keep Spanish and Japanese and so on

so the
I guess one of my
main concerns with anthropology is that
a lot of the time it's only done in English or in one language
and that whole process
this one interaction between languages being alive and the ability to
interact and communicate and
help and support one another
is lost
as well

and when you talk about language being on their own
as externally alive and well
that's a very different approach to how we look at language
because we tend to
say language is only alive when spoken by an individual
by a person
and it's that individual that makes
that thinks about things
and give that language a
a breath to come alive
whereas in Navajo it's not
it's a part of the universe
and that the universe

that language out there they have their own ways of thinking and doing things
and so
sometimes when we say yábiiłti'
it means it's allowing you to talk
or it's giving you *permission* to talk
and so

we allow language to enter us
and so allow us to speak about certain issues as well
and so you got to have a relationship between yourself and the languages as well

and this way of thinking forces you out of that
that *logical* way of looking at things from the English perspective
but I think in the *past*
English-speakers
probably thought similar thoughts
somewhere along the way they just
narrowed it to they had to be logical
that it had to be this and that and
by doing that they deprived the language from so many different expressions
and the other thing too is that I think English is another great example of
borrowing phrases from other languages
from Latin from Greek
Italian
and so on
that's why you have a huge English dictionary
if you got rid of all of the foreign words you would have a very thin dictionary

(AKW) right

(RLJ) but I think the English speakers tend to forget that
the make-up these languages and multiple languages
different parts of different worlds coming together
they forget that
and then try to say let's be logical
and just make it narrow-minded feel way of looking at
the world
but the make-up of the English language speaks otherwise

. . . . .

(RLJ) and like I said before I don't know much about anthropology
to really critique it in terms of how it should be improved
and how it interacts with
creative writing
is there such a thing as creative anthropology

or creative writing in anthropology

(AKW) yes
so there have been a number of anthropologists who also wrote poetry
and tried to experiment in their own kinds of writing
to kind of use poetry in a way that

(RLJ) [cough]

(AKW) to do anthropology as against simply the
the academic article
so there has been a tradition over time
to do that I mean
some of the anthropology of verbal art and things like that
has tried to and there's value in this and I don't want to say there's not value in it
has been to try to look at the language structures
the poetics
the things like to get a grasp of how the mechanics of it work
of how things are done
and there's value in that
but there's also value in trying to understand it in the whole life
of a community as well and you don't see that as much
and I think poetry and verbal art suffers the same fate in anthropology as it does in the larger society
in that it's not something that is seen as
particularly urgent
or important
and that is anthropology being like
much of the rest of society in certain kinds of ways

(RLJ) so what should we think
about for next meeting

(AKW) well I you know
I will always defer to you in what you want to do
that's unfortunately the nature of my way of doing anthropology
is to try and understand what somebody
let you set the agenda in that sense

(RLJ) that's not what the assignment is
it's for both of us to do

(AKW) I know
I know [laugh]

(RLJ) this is not on the interview and subject approach
this is a conversation between the two of us

so you need to get off that
seat of
anthropological power [laugh]

(AKW) see and here I am
I'm trying to cede that to you see
I mean you make a good point
in my attempt to
not have power
I in essence try to claim the power in a certain kind of way

(RLJ) [laugh]

. . . . .

(RLJ) all I can say for now is that
I haven't read much anthropology and of those that I have read
is ill informed
they're not well researched
not in the sense of Western research but in the sense that
they will just tend to take one person and take the rest for granted
saying 'oh this is what so and so said'
which means that's it

(AKW) mhm

(RLJ) instead of going to several sources and comparing so on
I'm just thinking about thinking about Navajo

(AKW) right

(RLJ) because in Navajo there's
several traditions
there's
several perspectives
they have their own perspectives
most of the time anthropologists only go to one and say 'Oh there was an old tradition'
said no that was just one in the traditions out of a hundred or so
so anthropology to me in that sense is very limited
it's like when you use anthropological work
there's a language
barriers
there's
translation barriers
there's only one source and so on
and I cannot do creative writing based on that because

that medicine man may not be related to me and therefore it comes from a different clan
at a different time period when I should be writing out of
that same ceremony but from a different practitioner
which has his own languages and own stories and so on
and I would like to talk a little more about that next time

(AKW) yeah I would just say
I think
briefly
anthropologists have a tendency to talk to one person
or small groups of people
and then make very large claims

(RLJ) mhmm

(AKW) and that's a mistake
and I
I often do things the exact opposite
I mean I talk to one person and I make very small particular claims
about what that person told me
because I feel like what you told me is true
because so often when you would
I mean
Laura Tohe is the person who taught me 'it depends'
because and I would ask her stuff and she would say
it depends
it depends on who you talk to
it depends on when you talk to them
it depends on all these kinds of things
and I took that lesson you know

(RLJ) it depends on what you feed them too

(AKW) [laugh] exactly
how they feel
exactly
so I think that's right
I think
and I think that's a problem or can be a problem in anthropology
that it wants people to make really big claims
an:d
and if you are going to make really big claims
you actually have to talk with a really big number of people
and that's just not how anthropology does stuff

(RLJ) time is up

I gotta go home and do some work

(AKW) stay warm

(RLJ) I will see you next week the same time

(AKW) yes
6:30 Wednesday

(RLJ) your time 6:30
5:30 my time

(AKW) 5:30 your time yes that's exactly right [laugh]
okay

(RLJ) sounds good
take care
enjoy your evening

(AKW) you too
bye

(RLJ) bye

Voice, description, and a life in language

This conversation between the writer Najet Adouani and anthropologist Andrew Brandel took place over several weeks between December 2022 and February 2023; Najet was in Berlin, Germany, and Andrew in Philadelphia and later Chicago, USA. They came to know each other first in 2013, while Andrew was conducting fieldwork in Berlin and Najet was part of the Writers-in-Exile Programme at the PEN-Zentrum Deutschland. Andrew has written on his conversations with Najet and on her poetry, and they have been working together on editing and publishing her more recent writings, including two English language novels and a recent set of diaries. They have been sharing favourite books, critical essays, and stories on a regular basis in the years since Andrew's fieldwork. This dialogue builds on many of their earlier conversations about shared concerns with translation, neighbourhoods of language, and memory. The transcript was put together from a series of conversations online and on the phone and was lightly edited for clarity by Andrew in consultation with Najet.

Contributors

Najet Adouani (NA)
Andrew Brandel (AB)

Conversation

(AB) Perhaps the first time we met, or at least very early on, you told me that you liked anthropology because it went deeply into things and burst them open from the

inside. But this also seems like an apt description of your work. Your writing seems to travel into things and then finds a form that responds to that pressure. You'd been talking to a lot of journalists and scholars at the time about what you'd been through in your life, how you came to Germany. But you described to me feeling, at least at that time, there were people who didn't really want to hear what you wanted to say.

(NA) Yes. This is what I like about anthropology. Like that, we are the same.

(AB) Whenever we've spoken about your work in the past, you have often said how important it is to you that you say true things. Occasionally, you have spoken of 'the real things'. To me, this has always seemed the central theme of your work. I wonder how would you describe what you mean by true things and the importance of writing them? And how does this relate to how you think about the forms your writing takes? You've written poems, you write novels, articles, diaries …

(NA) … short stories [laughter]

(AB) …memoirs! [laughter]

(NA) I merge the imaginary and the truth together. I write about the truth. All what I write about is truth. It is reality. I imagine it as I want it to be. I transform it. I work it to make from the – I don't know, to create something from – I forgot the name when you make a statue or something like that. For me, that moment the word has come is like a product which I make a castle, or I make freedom as I see it, I make the pain as I see it. Yes, I think, for example, in my diary, I wanted *not* to be creative, but despite that, I find myself creating.

(AB) This touches on something that has been very much central for anthropologists working on literature. So much seems to rest on our picture of what is real and what imagined. There are anthropologists for whom anthropological texts, because they are creations, they are things people fashion in language, they are 'fictioned', that this poses a certain question about what sort of fidelity we have (or should have) to the 'real' world. As if, in a sense, our words were 'outside' the real world and are relatively unattached to it. There are some who feel that the difference between literature and anthropology can be totally dissolved. And there are some who feel that the difference is precisely in how much the real world dictates to us when we write. My own approach is somewhat different, as you know. I have tried to argue, and I am still arguing, that literature, fiction, creation, imagination – these are things that are part of (for lack of a better word) real life, they are part of our everyday experience. What I imagine, what I read, what I dream. Even characters, places, in literature, these are things we live with.

(NA) Yes, it is like that for me.

I have my way when I write too. I can't write in a place where there is – I don't know, for example, in this small room, I can't write too much now. So I go outside, sit in a restaurant or in a place that I like, say a regular café with a lot of people,

something like that. In my neighbourhood, [for example] on a corner there is a Russian restaurant here, now I've stopped going because it became expensive, and I haven't the money, but I always stay there to write, it is beautiful, there are green trees, I can see birds, I can see things, I can see the street, and I write. From this corner, I can see the people who sit at the other corner. My corner is small and alone. The lady keeps it reserved for me, always. [laughter] That's why I like that restaurant because this place it is like here the restaurant, the other part there is for the people, this one corner is for me.

(AB) And then those characters show up in what you're writing?

(NA) Yes. That can be a problem too. In my diaries, you will find my neighbours. You will find some people that I know. You will find a lot of places in Berlin. You will find even places in my country because I remember while I'm writing about something here, I remember something there or something there. Yes, always writing, it is something like prayer for me, like I'm praying or like I'm in a temple. I free myself from everything. Sometimes when I start writing I forget to eat. Yesterday, I started writing, then I didn't eat all day, only in the morning. I remember that I finished that, I'm hungry, but I can't cook because it is late.

In the diary, people will find themselves there. [chuckles] They will be angry, of course, but I don't care. Of course, I didn't put their names, but they will know themselves.

(AB) This comes up for ethnographers too. It's something many anthropologists struggle with, how to navigate our responsibility to description, to the people with whom we're working. People I meet know that I am also writing, I want my work to be read. And that carries a risk someone could be hurt, they may disagree. But then one also feels they have to be able to say what needs to be said. It's something about the public quality of writing and literature perhaps. But public not opposed to private. There's something very personal in what you are saying, about your memories, your location when you are writing. It goes back to literature, writing, being part of life. Even what language you are writing in – you are not writing much in Arabic these days.

(NA) Yes. Now what I write is in English, and I have to find my way and to start a new life. That is what I'm trying, but I stopped to try by myself because I wanted you to try for the novels.

(AB) A new life in language? It's striking that finding your way is also a creative process; taking up language, imbibing it, having a life in it, it is something where one doesn't necessarily know where one is going, we try things, we stumble, we get up again, others might pick it up, or they might not. I remember your telling me about some publishers, editors, translators you have worked with who told you they wanted you to make your English like this or like that, and that you told them, 'But that's my English'. That's, I think, a very important idea. Anthropologists, especially linguistic anthropologists, have been trying to argue for some time against the ideas that languages are prefabricated things with

definite borders, that are countable, and so on. Can you tell me more about how you think of your English?

(NA) When I write in English, I think in English. I think my way. My Arabic, it is my own Arabic, it is not like the other Arabic. I think my way and I write my way, not the way that I saw in other books of other writers or all writers or something like that. In English, it's the same thing. When I start writing, I think in English, but my English it goes with my thoughts. Because the word of my writings, it needs special atmospheres, special words, special metaphors, special – That is what I make. I make the English, which is mine, *is* English but with something from me.

(AB) It comes from your life, from life.

(NA) Yes, from life, from culture. From – I don't know what.

(AB) Your world?

(NA) Yes, exactly. From my world. This is something [laughs] about how I see it. Because language for me is not only, it is not only a tool to use; it becomes a part of me when I use it in my text. That's why it is interesting for me to behave with my English differently, not to make it like the English of the others. Or the Arabic too. It is not only the English, it is the Arabic too. My Arabic is different from the other Arabic. I choose my words. Sometimes there are words people don't use in their writing. Me, I make them in my writings but I put them in the – I make them, the people like them. It is like something new in Arabic. For example, a word may be something from French, but I make it, place it in in Arabic, and after that people started to put in their texts.

(AB) This is really interesting. So it is both something you claim for yourself and in a sense something you are borrowing? When I think about this connection, I often find myself returning to the work of the philosopher Sandra Laugier. She would think about this as a question of voice. 'In voice', she writes, 'there is the idea of a claim … [I]t must be found so as to speak in the name of others and to let others speak in one's name. For if others do not accept my words, I lose more than language: I lose my voice'.[34] Voice is always a tricky thing to pin down. How would you think about it?

(NA) My voice in my poetry is not only – it is me, like magic, at first. After that, it becomes all the voices that I heard. Because me, I believe always there are voices inside my voice. As I'm responsible for the big voice and the small voice, and I'm responsible for them, to protect them, to make them better, to make them angry, to make them proud, to make them look for their owner. To look for themselves, for their freedom, to fight.

(AB) Is this tied, then, to how your life is now, has always been, lived in multiple languages? Something I continue to think about is how to describe something, a place, a context, in a way that gets out of the idea that languages, contexts, are

fixed. I think one thing you've alluded to here is that it is not so easy to map language to location, social or geographical. Where you are can press on what you are saying in different ways.

(NA) Yes. When I write about here, it is clear, I'm writing about here. Now, writing in Arabic is hard for me. Everything makes me *not* think in Arabic now. I have to change my way because I have had to change a lot of things in me. Now, I'm over 60 and everything changed in me. My life changed. Ten years outside the country, the things that touched me with my country all disappeared. The first was my mother. There, it is not like before. I had something that I was yearning for, and now I have nothing, really nothing.

(AB) I've often thought about your telling me once that it's not your Tunisia any more.

(NA) Not, not mine. Mine I left. I left with my childhood and my beautiful memories. The beautiful era of my life is when I was child. Despite that, it was not easy for me, and it was not all good. My father was very dominating and my mother was weak. Not weak, she was a strong woman, but she was always silent. The presence of my grandmother helped me a lot.

She died when I was 14, but at that time my mother became a little bit nearer to me. There are things I wrote about them and that day. Because I remember them when I'm writing about something. Sometimes I'm writing about something here, I remember something that I forgot, and I put it because I remembered it that moment, and I forget it again. Maybe because my memory now is not really good. I register it and I put it.

As a writer, my role is to capture these small things, even to save them. Sometimes that means not to let them pass, like normal. In a soft way. I copy and I start to write out a text completely, and I forget about it.

(AB) It reminds me of those lines from Emerson; I have a friend who quotes them all the time:

> The lords of life, the lords of life,—
> I saw them pass,
> Like and unlike,
> Portly and grim,—
> Use and Surprise,
> Surface and Dream[35]

How do we *have* an experience? What do we claim and what do we let pass by?

(NA) Yes, beautiful! I love that one.

(AB) So, would you say, forgetting is also part of the process?

(NA) Yes. Sometimes it is many things that are forgotten. For example, when I was writing my diary, one day in the café beside the park, small café, I saw a lady with her daughter. I don't know, I remembered something that was from my past, maybe that girl made me remember *me*. I caught it and I wrote it. After that, now

I can see it clearly only if I go back to read it. I said I will not read my things. I will leave them like that. Because if I read them, I will correct this and take this away and move this away. I hurt this person a lot or something. Or I will feel shy or something like that. [chuckles]

(AB) Is this different from your approach when working on a novel?

(NA) For a novel, when I finish it, I continue to work on it. I catch a lot. I write too much, but after that, after I catch things, I leave only what I want. I take away lot of things. I throw them away. It is the hardest to throw the things. In diaries, it is not that; you have to leave them like you wrote them. Or else they become a novel or a storage container or something like that. You have to write each day. This day it is finished, throw it out, and write the other. After that, you shouldn't read them for yourself, let somebody else do that.

For the poems, I work on a poem too and I have to cut a lot of things. Sometimes I kill the poem. Not all the poems are really good. Sometimes for me, really always, I have to make it better than what I wrote before. That is my basic rule. If it is the same, it is not good. That's why for me there are some poets, their writing becomes dead now, because they write the same poem since the time I first came to know them. It is always the same. Each time they publish something, I look at it and it is the same. There is nothing new. Writing for me, it is always to search, to discover, to make new things without being afraid of the reader. To try something new, even if it is not successful, it is – That is my way. I have almost to search, to demolish, to make new, to make something not the same. For me, if I don't make something new, it is better I stop writing. I don't like to continue.

(AB) Does this impulse have to do with the way your work is embedded in your life? Life has moments of movement and also of stillness. But you don't step into the same waters twice, even if you are returning to something.

(NA) I think so, yes – don't you think this is what your anthropology is like too? There is a connection between these genres. When I was first sick, you gave me some books to keep me company, and one was from Veena Das.[36] I appreciated it very much, especially at that time. For me, books are my companions. I need to read it again, because I feel I write like that. So I need someone like her. Someone who goes into the depths, to search and to find things. I especially like the way she spoke about the body and writing. It is a bit like what I am trying to do.

(AB) Especially in the diaries?

(NA) Yes, also the novels, but the diaries especially. I started the diary project this autumn, about the time of the war [in Ukraine]. Maybe I will finish it the end of January. I have written my thoughts about what I see, and about what I live, and what I feel, and what is around me, what is happening. How I see things. How I see something, like maybe a particular translation. Actually, there is a whole entry about translation. About refugees, about the price of goods, about the people who live in my building here, about my neighbour, about me. I don't

know if it is literature, but it is something from within myself. I give myself to the text. There is a man I have known a long time, a communist Tunisian, who still writes to me and asks about my health, and I told him I haven't been writing, and he said to me that I have given too much of myself now. I published a lot, it's true. But you don't know how things will be received: sometimes good, sometimes bad, sometimes not at all. I still want to write things that I have not yet.

I want to send them to you just as I made them. As soon as I can. I won't change anything. I don't want to cut. If I cut anything, it's not a diary. You know, I wrote diaries earlier in my life, not to publish, for myself, but I lost them during the war in Baghdad. And if I rewrite it now, it won't be the same. Then it will be memories, and not a diary. It is the details of the everyday. There is specific texture to that; you know this very well. We look at things in the face. So, I like anthropology of that kind. Do you agree?

(AB) I do. My picture of anthropology, it's quite close to what you're describing. It comes down to the way we receive the words people offer us. It has to do with the way you go looking, you don't know where you will go, what you will find, you don't know your way about (as one philosopher I admire very much puts it[37]). It doesn't always work out. Sometimes you find your footing, sometimes you find that your words have friction – as you say, you catch an experience, or I might say, you stake a claim – and sometimes you let go. This doesn't happen because something strikes you from the outside, the way anthropologists used to talk about the field as 'out there'.

(NA) Couldn't we – shall we say that of poetry too? This is also a sensation of writing criticism for me. Some writers, they touch you very deeply. There are things I like because they are very near to me. I have to write about things that touch me. Something very near to you, then you feel you must write.

(AB) I am struck by what you were saying earlier about newness and discovery. You connected this to a worry about the deadening of our words. Of course, that's a real threat that shadows us. I can't help but think of a line where Das writes that as ethnographers, we are 'haunted by the thought that our texts might just have words whose touch with life has been lost or numbed'.[38] This seems to me rather different from the usual drive, the idea we find all the time among writers and anthropologists, that newness is something like a total rupture, a shiny new commodity, without which we'd be lost, something that helps us to get a grip on reality. They think, I suppose, I am not in its grip already. I wrote something with a friend recently where we talk about it in that way. The kind of newness you are talking about, one finds it returning to things, very ordinary kinds of experiences. What you also said about details in the everyday, that seems to me what is important. Many anthropologists talk about the everyday. But they think they know what it is. They lose sight of the fact that it is something we continue to discover.

(NA) And what else can we do? Here I am, after all. I am not the master. Some things have to be said.

NOTES

[1] Fassin (2014: 42).
[2] Fassin (2014: 41).
[3] Extract from a ghazal titled 'Farz karo' (Let's suppose) by Urdu poet Ibn Insha (1927-78). Translation by the author.
[4] Mujica Lainez in Vinelli (2000: 7).
[5] A literary style of portraying Amerindian customs focused on romanticized external attributes.
[6] Arguedas (1941).
[7] Arguedas (1958).
[8] Gallardo (1971: 157).
[9] Flores (2022).
[10] Gallardo (1971: 22).
[11] Orozco (2000: 231).
[12] Burgos (1984).
[13] García Márquez (1986 [1955]).
[14] Gallardo (1971: 14).
[15] Gallardo (1971: 12).
[16] Lévi-Strauss (1966: 2).
[17] Rosa (1967: 71).
[18] Colanzi (2017); Gallardo (2018); Sequeira (2022).
[19] *https://www.lector.cl/jessica-sequeira-el-chacal-como-cantante-o-carronero/*.
[20] Bessire (2014).
[21] Bessire (2014: 78).
[22] Barber (2007).
[23] Gallardo (1971: 128).
[24] John 1:1.
[25] Clastres (1995).
[26] Roa Bastos (1977: 56).
[27] A few brief comments seem warranted. First, lines are based on pauses in the audio recording. This gives a sense of the cadence and rhythm of our talk. Italics indicates emphasis and a colon indicates lengthening. Contextual features are indicated in brackets. The use of <. . . . .> indicates material has been left out for space considerations. We thank Joseph Gaskill for the initial transcription of the conversation. Webster and Jim then went in and further edited the transcript based on the recording. The transcript has since been edited for clarity.
[28] Here Jim is referencing Mitchell & Webster (2011). The poem is from Jim (1995).
[29] The reference here is to not being ritually initiated or ordained; it is being used to suggest that the nephew is not ready for eating chilii.
[30] Roughly, 'you're not initiated into this'.
[31] *Shiheart* is a combination of Navajo *shi-* 'my' and English 'heart' and means something akin to 'my love'.
[32] The poem can be found in Jim (2019: 2-3); see also Belin, Berglund, Jacobs & Webster (2021: 140-2).
[33] Jim is quoting from the poem here.
[34] Laugier (2021: 38, 57).
[35] An excerpt from Ralph Waldo Emerson's 'Experience' (1844).
[36] Das (2006).
[37] Referring to Stanley Cavell.
[38] Das (2006: 93)

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