

Others: On Translation, Guillermo Parra

written by Felipe W.Martinez | May 1, 2014



The following is the first of what will be a recurring feature, *Others: On Translation*, in which I ask various translators a few brief and in most instances similar questions regarding translation and their own work. This is an effort to gather and highlight the myriad perspectives and practices that constitute the ever-expanding field of literary translation today.



Guillermo Parra Pittsburgh, PA

When did you first become aware of Translation? How did that realization impact your understanding of literature?

During the late 1990s, I'd been slowly discovering the work of contemporary Venezuelan writers and whenever I'd tell friends here in the U.S. about those writers, there were no translations available. I began to make little photocopied pamphlets of my crude translations of some of those writers into English. At the time, I didn't think of myself as a translator.

Then, in 1998 I attended Boston University for an M.A. in Creative Writing. There, I had the good fortune of studying with the poet and translator David Ferry. Although he didn't teach translation at BU, I began to gravitate toward the topic in our conversations both in and out of class.

Becoming aware of Translation made me realize that, to a degree, I've been a translator since I learned how to speak. My mother is from Connecticut and my father is from Caracas, Venezuela. I was born in Cambridge, MA and my parents always spoke to me in both English and Spanish, so that from the time I learned how to talk I moved back and forth between both languages, feeling at home in both of them. I've been translating between the United States and Venezuela since birth.

When I gained this awareness of Translation, in the late 1990s, I don't think it had much of an impact on how I viewed literature. But it did open up this entire new realm for me as a writer. In 2003, I started my blog *Venepoetics*, with the specific purpose of translating certain Venezuelan poets I admire. Writing the blog, I became keenly aware of Translation as an extension of my work as a poet.

Who or what inspired you to translate?

David Ferry's classes at BU, the conversations I had with him, the times I saw him read. Also, in a translation seminar I took at BU, the English poet and translator Michael Hofmann gave a lecture in our class. On the day Hofmann visited he was disheveled, self-deprecating, ironic, he occasionally mumbled or trailed off at the end of his sentences, and he was utterly brilliant. I started reading his poetry and loved it, and that eventually led me to his translations. His translations of the German poet Durs Grünbein, in particular, are models for me.

I was also inspired by Allen Ginsberg, with whom I studied briefly in 1993 at Naropa University's Summer Writing and Poetics Program. Many of the poets Ginsberg mentioned in his class were in translation. And one of the first things he asked me when I spoke with him was if I could recommend any Venezuelan poets. I didn't know any at the time. He told me about friends of his in the radical Caracas writers collective El Techo de la Ballena (The Roof of the Whale), with whom he had been in correspondence during the 1960s. Ginsberg made me realize there was a vast universe of poetry to be explored and that translation is part of that necessary exploration.

Finally, I was inspired to translate because I felt there was a need for Venezuelan literature to be known among readers in the United States.

Do you have a guiding principle (a mantra) when you translate?

Not really, though for the most part I translate writers whose work I connect with in some manner. Michael Hofmann mentions that when he writes his translation drafts he works very quickly, without stopping to think too much, waiting for the revision process to begin fine-tuning. In other words, a translation, like any other literary text, emerges out of the speed and chaos of our age, from the mundane interruptions of daily life.

Both Michael Hofmann and David Ferry stamp their translations with very contemporary words and expressions that don't necessarily fit with the time-period of the work they're translating. I've followed this method as well, trying to respect the original while molding it to the English that my contemporaries speak.

Although I love theory, I'm not a very theoretical translator. I don't have a theory of translation. Not yet, at least. Perhaps an epigram from my beloved José Antonio Ramos Sucre could serve as my mantra as a translator: "A language is the universe translated into that language."

What is the translator's relationship to the authorship of a translated text?

I think this varies with the translator and the text. I often feel like I'm an actor, playing certain roles when I'm translating a particular text. There's a certain vibration that emerges between the text and myself, a tension. I'm trying to be "faithful" to the text, while dissolving it and bringing it into a new form. I can't help but feel like a collaborator with the writer whose work I'm translating. I like how translation confuses people

sometimes. Who wrote this? I love the blurring of identities that can occur in translation. The translator is like this phantom that hovers beside the reader. Just like the author of the text hovers beside the translator. I feel just as close to the texts I translate as I do to my own poems and essays.



You previously translated the poems of José Antonio Ramos Sucre, and your next translation is of [The Conspiracy by Venezuelan novelist, Israel Centeno](#). How was it to translate fiction rather than poetry, and how is it for you to be the first English translator of Centeno, a writer who's published more than fifteen works in Venezuela?

I first met Israel in Caracas in 2007. I was down there visiting my father and I e-mailed Israel, whose work I had discovered in the early 2000s and whose blog I had been reading for several years. On subsequent visits to Venezuela I would always hang out with Israel and his wife Graciela. Israel used to go hiking regularly in the Mount Ávila state park that overlooks Caracas, and I accompanied him on these hikes whenever I could. When the opportunity to translate one of his novels arose, I was thrilled.

Probably the biggest difference with translating *The Conspiracy* is that I had a deadline. Previously, with my Ramos Sucre translations, I spent about three years posting my translations as I wrote them on *Venepoetics*, becoming more and more obsessed with Ramos Sucre. But it wasn't for anyone, other than friends and readers of my blog.

With *The Conspiracy*, I was definitely overwhelmed by the pace imposed by a deadline. I was intimidated by the length of the manuscript, and by the variety of characters and situations I had to render in English.

Israel began as a poet and his work is often imbued with poetic elements. He was one of the people in Venezuela who helped me, for instance, during my research on José Antonio Ramos Sucre. This made the shift between poetry and fiction less abrupt.

Now I'm really looking forward to seeing what happens when the book is officially published, in the late spring or early summer. With my role as Israel's translator, I'm nearly invisible, and I like that. With the Ramos Sucre translation, I'm constantly speaking *for* him at talks or readings. I'm here in 2014, alive, more or less representing Ramos Sucre. With Israel's book, on the other hand, he's around to present and discuss his own work, so I get to sit backstage and watch. This is what I love about translation, that I get to be a type of actor, I have the chance to become other people, other voices.



Guillermo Parra (Cambridge, MA, 1970) is a poet and translator. He has published *José Antonio Ramos Sucre: Selected Works* (University of New Orleans

Press, 2012), which was included by *World Literature Today* in its list of “75 Notable Translations 2012.” He writes the translation blog [Venepoetics](#) and lives in Pittsburgh.