The Traffic in Meaning: Translation, Contagion, Infiltration

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Es la traducción un esfuerzo de alteridad. Alteridad del cuerpo respirando la música de otra lengua en la estricta particularidad de una voz que habla.
—Diana Bellessi, *Lo propio y lo ajeno*

Translation is an effort of alterity, alterity of the body, breathing the music of another language in the strict particularity of a voice that is speaking.

Some of the important advances in humanistic knowledge in the last three decades have been the result of what Diana Bellessi so felicitously calls efforts of alterity (qtd. in Masiello 14). As specialists in what my title refers to as the traffic in meaning, literary scholars have appropriately taken on the task of defining and conceptualizing such efforts, as well as carrying them out. One result has been a renaissance of translation studies and the use of translation as a point of departure or metaphor for analyzing intercultural interactions and transactions. The pages that follow are a brief reflection on the idea of cultural translation. I begin by examining a scene from the history of the Americas, a history rich in high-contrast, high-stakes dramas of alterity. I then illuminate the scene through the work of two eminent thinkers about translation, Eliot Weinberger and Clifford Geertz, and end with some speculations about what analytic work the idea of cultural translation can and cannot do.

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Cuzco, May 1781

Early in 1780, in the interior of the Viceroyalty of Peru, a large-scale indigenous rebellion almost overthrew the Spanish colonial regime in the Andes. After years of secret planning, coordinated revolts took place in towns and villages across the Andean regions of what are now the republics of Peru and Bolivia. In Peru the rebellion was led by a man named José Gabriel Condorcanqui, who took on the name Túpac Amaru, after the last Inca ruler, who had fallen to the Spaniards in 1571. His spouse, Micaela Bastidas, was his militant and fearless coleader.[1] The rebels' demands included an end to the ruthless extractive regime of Spanish colonialism, a restoration of the Inca dynasty, and an end to slavery. The rebellion lasted until 1782, but Amaru and Bastidas were captured a year earlier and executed in the plaza of the city of Cuzco, along with numerous family members and supporters. He was drawn and quartered, and she was garroted, technologies of execution that eyewitnesses said "we had never before seen here" (Lewin 107).[2]

The rebellion shocked Spanish authorities. Secure in their domination, they had fostered the development of a neo-Inca indigenous elite as partners in their exploitation of the masses. The rebellion rose out of symbolic and political terrain they thought they shared with that co-opted elite and thought they controlled. One of the documents that fascinates people who study this extraordinary episode is the sentencing report issued on 15 May 1781 from the royal court of Lima by the Spanish judge José Antonio de Areche, giving the official Spanish response to the revolt. The report specifies in gruesome detail how the captured rebel leaders are to be executed and what is to be done, limb by limb, with their dismembered bodies. It then goes on to prescribe a wholesale repression of indigenous symbolic practices. The targets are dress, emblems, rituals, and artistic forms such as music, drama, and portraiture—what we now might sum up as expressive culture. The intent, apparently, is to destroy the indigenous power structure by suppressing its ability to produce meaning, feeling, identity.

Areche is addressing the Spanish crown. In proposing the campaign of cultural destruction, he has to name the Andean practices, objects, and meanings to be destroyed and explain their function and force. His sentencing document doesn't just name the things to be condemned, it evokes them, offering a vivid example of what some scholars have lately proposed calling cultural translation. Here is an excerpt (the translation is mine):

> Se prohibe que usen los indios los trages de la gentilidad, especialmente los de la noble raza de ella, que solo sirve de representarles los que usaban sus antíguos incas, recordándoles memorias que nada otra cosa influyen, que en conciliarles más y más odio a la nación dominante: fuera de

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> ser su aspecto ridículo, y poco conforma a la pureza de nuestras reliquias, pues colocan en varias partes el sol, que fue su primera deidad: estendiéndose esta resolución á todas las provincias de esta Améria meridional, dejando del todo extinguidos tales trages, tanto los que directamente representan las bestiduras de sus gentiles reyes, con sus insignias, cuales son el *unco*, que es una especia de camiseta; *yacollas*, que son unas mantas muy ricas de terciopelo negro o tafetán, *mascapacjcha*, que es un círculo a manera de corona, de que hacen descender cierta insigna de noblesa antígua, significada en una mota ó borla de lana de alpaca colorada, y cualesquiera otros de esta especie o significación. (Lewin 166)

> It is prohibited for the Indians to wear heathen clothes, especially those of their nobility, since these only serve to symbolize those worn by their Inca ancestors, reminding them of memories that serve no other end than to increase their hatred toward the dominant nation. Not to mention that their appearance is ridiculous and very little in accordance with the purity of our relics, since they place in different parts images of the sun, which was their primary deity. This prohibition is extended to all the provinces of this Southern America in order to completely eliminate such clothing, especially those items that represent the accoutrements of their heathen kings, through emblems such as the *unco*, which is a kind of vest; *yacollas*, which are very rich blankets or shawls of black velvet or taffeta; the *mascapacjcha*, which is a circle in the shape of a crown from which they hang a certain emblem of ancient nobility signified by a tuft or tassel of red colored alpaca wool; as well as many other things of this kind and signification.

Look at how Areche's text translates the logic of indigenous identity and its symbolism. Like a good translator, Areche seeks to capture faithfully the meaning of things to those who use them and communicate these meanings to his audience in a language they will understand. Andean clothing, he explains, reminds people of their ancestors and lost rulers; the sun was their primary deity; the Spaniards are the dominant nation; the Indians hate them and aim never to forget why. Key symbolic items are named in Quechua—the *unco*, the *yacollas*, the *mascapacjcha*—and defined in vivid, even glowing terms that their wearers themselves might use. Alongside a rhetoric of cultural and religious superiority, one finds a language of explanation; where the colonial script dictated condemnation or mockery, there is also recognition and even respect. Indigenous values and language seem to be speaking through the voice of colonial power—even though the whole point of invoking the meaningfulness, significance, and force of indigenous symbols is to justify a campaign of destruction against them, precisely because of their meaningfulness, significance, and force. So the sentencing report tacks back and forth across the colonial divide. It is fractured by that divide and at the same time entangled in it, trafficking in its meanings.

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The document goes on to prescribe the annihilation of Andean community culture. Again the translator's attempt to render original meaning goes side by side with a judgmental recoding that assigns meaning from elsewhere. Ministers and magistrates, we read, should ensure that

> en ningún pueblo de sus respectivas provincias comedias u otras funciones públicas, de las que suelen usar los indios para memoria de sus dichos antíguos Incas. [. . .] Del propio modo se prohiben y quiten las trompetas o clarines que usan los indios en sus funciones, á las que llaman *pututos* y son unos caracoles marinos de un sonido extraño y lúgubre con que anuncian el duelo, y lamentable memoria que hacen de su antigüedad; y también el que usen y traigan vestidos negros en señal de luto, que arrastran en algunas provincias como recuerdo de sus difuntos monarcas, y del día o tiempo de la conquista, que ellos tienen por fatal y nosotros por feliz, pues se unieron al gremio de la Iglesia Católica: y a la amabilísima y dulcísima dominación de nuestros reyes. (167)

> in no town of their respective provinces be performed plays or other public functions that commemorate the former Incas. [. . .] In like manner the trumpets or bugles that the Indians use for their ceremonies shall be prohibited and confiscated, those they call *pututos*, being seashells with a strange and lugubrious sound that celebrate the mourning and pitiful memorial they make for their antiquity. Also prohibited is the custom of wearing black robes as a sign of mourning, which they drag around in some provinces in memory of their deceased monarchs, and of the day or time of the conquest, which they consider disastrous and we consider fortunate, since it brought them into the company of the Catholic Church and the most kind and gentle domination of our kings.

The customs being condemned are simultaneously honored with explanations that acknowledge (translate?) their meaningfulness, their historical logic, specificity, and force. The power of the *pututos* ("strange and lugubrious sound") is evoked with a desire at odds with the will to suppress them. When Areche speaks of the wearing of black for mourning, he evokes a point of intersection of Spanish and Andean values. In the very next sentence he codifies their absolute opposition—"which they [the Indians] consider disastrous and we consider fortunate." The crisis of the confrontation, it seems, brings to the surface a fractured, entangled world of imperial power and desire, whose textual symptoms include the impossibility of coherence, the imperative of translation, the starkest of face-offs, and at the same time the infiltration and contagion of each side by the other.

Through the Looking Gloss

Areche's report is a manifesto of colonial violence and repression. How disconcerting then, to note that it also seems to demonstrate what are seen to

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be translation's most precious creative powers. Let me refer to two magnificent reflections on the subject: a recently published lecture by Eliot Weinberger, the brilliant translator of Octavio Paz, titled "Anonymous Sources: A Talk on Translators and Translation" and Clifford Geertz's classic essay "Found in Translation: On the Social History of the Moral Imagination." For Weinberger, translation is a necessity "for the obvious reason that one's own language has only created, and is creating, a small fraction of the world's most vital books" (4). His utopian site of translation is of course poetry. "The purpose of, say, poetry translation," Weinberger says,

> is not, as it is usually said, to give the foreign poet a voice in the translation-language. It is to allow the poem to be *heard* in the translation-language, *ideally in many of the same ways it is heard in the original language*. [. . . I]t means that the primary task of a translator is not merely to get the dictionary meanings right—which is the easiest part—but rather to *invent a new music for the text in the translation-language, one that is mandated by the original* though not a technical replication of the original. (8; emphasis mine)

How intriguing that Areche's sentencing report should correspond as fully as it does to this compelling ideal—making the original heard in the translation language ("a strange and lugubrious sound"). It's probably not a correspondence Weinberger would have predicted, or wished: to make a music heard in order to justify snuffing it out. Yet, we can see, cultural repression requires a moment of translation, a scene in which the original's power to mandate is displayed. "Translation," Weinberger says, "flourishes when writers feel that their language or society needs liberating. One of the great spurs to translation is a cultural inferiority complex or a national self-loathing" (4–5). Curiously, that statement illuminates the legitimation crisis Spain was facing in Peru in 1781, in which Areche's text is enmeshed. Certainly, Areche does not feel entitled to claim a monopoly on meaning.

While Weinberger speaks of translation in the strictly linguistic sense, Geertz works with a broader idea of it, as a name for the processes by which a human subject tries to comprehend a distant culture. Geertz locates this exercise in the realm of the moral imagination. Like Weinberger, he sees "imaginative productions" as the privileged sites for the translator's work. For Geertz, what is "found in translation," in the effort of alterity, is growth, "the growth in range a powerful sensibility gains from an encounter with another one as powerful or more" (45). The mystery of intercultural understanding is that it is possible at all—but it is, Geertz insists, possible. The thing to be studied is how cultures can at one and the same time be so deeply, utterly, and particularly distinctive and yet be comprehensible to those outside them, "how the massive fact of cross-cultural and

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cross-historical particularity comports with the equally massive fact of cross-cultural and cross-historical accessibility" (48).

> The truth of the doctrine of cultural (or historical—it is the same thing) relativism is that we can never apprehend another people's or another period's imagination neatly, as though it were our own. The falsity of it is that we can therefore never genuinely apprehend it at all. We can apprehend it well enough, at least as well as we apprehend anything else not properly ours; but we do so not by looking *behind* the interfering glosses that connect us to it, but *through* them. (44)

If for Weinberger the utopian site of translation is poetry, for Geertz there are two sites. One is literary criticism, a scene of translation of the past into the present (the iconic figure is Lionel Trilling, from whom Geertz takes the category of the moral imagination). The other is the ethnographic encounter in its deepest, most potent possibility—though not necessarily in its professional form. (The model text in Geertz's essay is a long excerpt from a Danish traveler's "superbly observed" account of a widow burning in Bali in the 1880s.) The sentencing document from Cuzco is neither of these, and yet at intriguing points it seems to bear out Geertz's vision. It registers the encounter of "a powerful sensibility [. . .] with another one as powerful or more." It confirms that cross-cultural particularity coexists with cross-cultural accessibility—the Andeans in Areche's text remain irremediably alien yet comprehensible and present. Areche would in all likelihood have affirmed Geertz's crucial caveat: "Whatever use the imaginative productions of other peoples—predecessors, ancestors, or distant cousins—can have for our moral lives, then, it cannot be to simplify them" (44). Rather, one sensibility's encounter with another "comes only at the expense of its inward ease" (45). The fractures and entanglements in Areche's text suggest exactly this unease.

But perhaps Geertz's account too provides a way to distinguish between Areche's translation project and his own. The path to apprehending the cultural imagination of another people, Geertz says, runs not "*behind* the interfering glosses that connect us to it, but *through* them." "The interfering glosses that connect us to it"—what an essential point! The translator is always already in some way connected to the imaginative production to be translated; some relation across (historical or cultural) distance has brought the original into the translator's purview, into the space of the translator's desire. The scene of translation already possesses a meaning or meanings (glosses) in the translator's world. According to Geertz, such meanings—like "heathen" in Areche's text—can be expected to interfere with apprehension, and yet they are the very things that the connection is made of

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(heathen vs. Christian, for example). For this reason they cannot simply be set aside. They must be looked through—that is, the learning and understanding, the successful translation, will occur when translators place their own cultural imagination into question ("What does heathen mean anyway?"). Perhaps this is what Areche's text does not do. And perhaps it is what Areche could not do if he was to enforce the interests of the Spanish crown.

Getting beyond one's glosses seems to happen, or nearly happen, in another text from this same violent episode. It is an eyewitness account of the execution of Túpac Amaru and his supporters in the plaza at Cuzco on 18 May 1781, recorded by a local official. Although the interpreter is a *criollo* (a person of European descent born in the Americas), the symbolic force of the execution is apprehended mainly in indigenous terms. This apprehension happens, as Geertz predicts, at the cost of the interpreter's "inward ease." It is a gruesome passage:

> Cerró la función José Gabriel, a quien se le sacó a media plaza; allí le cortó la lengua el verdugo y despojado de los grillos y esposas lo pusieron en el suelo; atáronle las manos y pies cuatro lazos, y asidos éstos a la cincha de cuatro caballos, tiraban cuatro mestizos a cuatro distintas partes; espectáculo que jamás se había visto en esta ciudad. No sé si porque los caballos no fuesen muy fuertes o el indio en realidad fuese de fierro, no pudieron absolutamente dividirlo, después que un large rato lo tuvieron tironeando, de modo que lo tenían en el aire en un estado que parecía una araña. Tanto que el Visitador, movido de compasión, porque no padeciere más aquel infeliz, despachó de la Companía una orden mandando le cortase el verdugo la cabeza, como se ejecutó [. . .]. (Lewin 107–08)

> The rebel José Gabriel ended the event. He was taken out into the middle of the square, where the executioner cut out his tongue, and then freed of his shackles and handcuffs, he was laid on the ground, to his hands and feet were tied four ropes the ends of which were fastened to the saddle straps of four horses, which four mestizos were pulling in four different directions, a spectacle that had never before been seen in this city. *I don't know if it was because the horses were not very strong, or if the Indian really was made of iron*, but they were absolutely unable to completely split him apart, even after they had been tugging at him for some time, so he was held up in the air looking like a spider. So much was the inspector moved to compassion, that he sent an order for the executioner to cut off his head so the poor man might not suffer anymore, and so it was done. (emphasis mine)

The operation of multiple meaning systems (the horses were not strong or the rebel was made of iron) produces uncertainty for this *criollo* observer. The scene is indeed costing him his inward ease. Yet he has no choice but to translate, for the whole scene has already been shaped by the indigenous

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glosses—their belief that Túpac Amaru is the reincarnated Inca, that he cannot be killed by execution. Everyone is entangled in these glosses. They are what give the spectacle its meaning and its very form. The drawing and quartering was aimed at demonstrating once and for all that the rebel was human and could not rise again.[3] This semantic power is of course no consolation for those on the receiving end of the violence.

By the end of his account, we find the observer translating indigenous glosses back into his own Christian imagination. Here is the closing paragraph:

> Suceden algunas cosas que parece que el diablo los trama y dispone, para confirmar a estos indios en sus abusos agueros y supersticiones. Dígolo, porque habiendo hecho un tiempo muy seco y días muy serenos, aquél amaneció tan toldado que no se le vio la cara al sol, amenazando por todas partes a llover; y a hora de las doce, en que estaban los caballos estirando al indio, se levantó un fuerte refregón de viento y tras éste un aguacero, que hizo que toda la gente, y aun los guardias se retirasen a toda prisa. Esto ha sido causa de que los indios se hayan puesto a decir que los cielos y los elementos sintieron la muerte del inca, que los espanoles inhumanos e impíos estaban matando con tanta crueldad. (108)

> It seems that the devil schemes and arranges certain things to confirm these Indians in their abuses, omens, and superstitions. I mention this because after a period of dryness and very quiet days this particular day dawned so overcast that the sun's face was hidden and it was threatening to rain everywhere, and around twelve o'clock, when the horses were pulling on the Indian, there arose a strong gust of wind, and after it a downpour that forced all the people, even the guards, to withdraw in haste. This has resulted in the Indians saying that *the sky and the elements all felt the death of the Inca, whom the inhumane and ungodly Spaniards were killing with such cruelty.* (emphasis mine)

Read through the indigenous glosses, the account translates back into Christianity, into the scene of the Crucifixion, coding Túpac Amaru as a Christ figure, the Spanish as cruel and pagan Romans. The speaker offers no alternative account. In a social formation evolved out of more than two hundred years of colonial relations, a fractured, entangled world exists that neither side can make sense of, or act in, without drawing on the cosmic vision of the other. This scenario differs from the ones translation theorists usually imagine, yet there is much to be learned from it.

Queries

What are the strengths and limits of translation, as both referent and metaphor, for characterizing cultural transactions, the appropriations, negotiations, migrations, mediations, recodings, and transposings that are now so

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much in the purview of us scholars who traffic in meaning? Can the idea of translation sustain or contain all those things? What is lost and gained if it is asked to do so? Where does the metaphor succeed and fail as it mutates into theorizing? What questions does such an approach have to ask? What distinctions have to be made?

As the Andean texts suggest, in talking about cross-cultural meaning making, it's essential to attend to fractures and entanglements, their makeup, asymmetries, ethics, histories, interdependencies, distributions of power and accountability. This necessity does not mean giving up or giving up on the intense distilled moments of poetic or ethnographic encounter, the epiphanies of illumination and unease that Geertz, Weinberger, and Bellessi celebrate. The call to translation in these writers' accounts is the call to surpass fractures and entanglements, not by rising above them or going around them or trying to erase them but by entering them and working through toward a place "mandated by the original" (Weinberger).

Translation in its normative, linguistic sense seeks some form of equivalence. How helpful is it, then, to treat as translation those processes that involve the purposeful creation of nonequivalence, of new musics not mandated by the original? musics that capture aspects of the original by being parodic, mimetic, resistant, caricaturesque, or "accurate by exaggeration," as one colleague put it? What about processes that muffle, absorb, appropriate, transpose, conceal?

What are the uses of a translation model for exploring the migrations of art forms, their insertion (grafting?) into new contexts of reception—Indian cinema viewed in Nigeria; Latin American soap operas finding an audience in Egypt; imported American funk displacing nationalized samba in Brazilian slums; or, for that matter, transatlantic surrealism or the spread of the sonnet in Europe? Do new audiences translate these productions into their own imaginations? For contexts like these, ideas of resonance and intersection seem as useful as the idea of translation. Does an idea of cultural translation (Geertz's vision of seeing through the interfering glosses) help clarify how migrating art forms have to enter through what is already there and how they get infiltrated by it?

Is translation the right concept for illuminating what Néstor García Canclini calls cultural reconversion? This term refers to transpositions where knowledges, practices, or symbols of one society or institution get processed into the contents of another—as when vernacular cultural forms are reconverted into lettered high culture art forms (graffiti in galleries); or when vernacular aesthetic categories are appropriated into academic theory; or when community-based lifeways are reconverted into folklore, that is, into cultural capital for nation-states. With reconversion, the translation

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again produces something nonequivalent to the original, yet in some sense it reproduces the original. Here too, entanglements matter. When reconversion happens as part of an intervention such as evangelization or modernization, destroying the original is often part of the process. The Argentine cultural historian Beatriz Sarlo singles out a moment in her country's history following the founding of a national primary school system, when the national government assigned rural schoolteachers the task of collecting local stories and legends and forwarding them to the ministry in written form—folklore. This reconversion signified the preservation of local, oral knowledges and at the same time their substitution by a new canon, the knowledges of modern (national) schooling.

Is it helpful or unhelpful to think of commodification as translation? The World Trade Organization has created something called trade-related intellectual property rights. The term names a process whereby local indigenous knowledge, especially biomedical knowledge, is translated into ownable commodified forms (e.g., pharmaceuticals), which can be sold back to those who created them in the first place. The ethical vacuum in which such processes occur today takes some of the anachronism out of Geertz's call on the moral imagination.

Decolonization produces other forms of reconversion that postcolonial critics have brought to our attention.[4] For example, testimonial and oral history often involve a kind of self-translation, in which subaltern subjects seek to translate their knowledge into terms that make it apprehensible to distant metropolitan subjects. Here reconversion has many facets: the subalterns perhaps speaking in a nonnative second language, metropolitan intellectuals editing a recorded text into writing. Crucial are the intersections and resonances between metropolitan genres and narrative forms that exist in the speech repertoire of the testimonial speaker. Again, in all such instances, the entanglements matter.

The idea of cultural translation bears the unresolvable contradiction that in naming itself it preserves the distances it works to overcome, as in Nikos Papastergiadis's formulation of cultural translation as "the process by which communication occurs across boundaries" or "the means by which people with different cultural histories and practices can form patterns of communication and establish lines of contact across these differences" (127). (Notice how such formulations obliterate the entanglements.) Because it sustains difference, a translation paradigm by definition won't look for the new subjectivities and interfaces that eventually come out of entanglements sustained over time—as they were in Cuzco. Here we need to refer to other linguistic operations and metaphors—pidginization; creolization; and above all multilingualism, translation's mother but

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thus also, in crucial ways, its definitive other. The multilingual person is not someone who translates constantly from one language or cultural system into another, though translation is something multilingual subjects are able to do if needed. To be multilingual is above all to live in more than one language, to be one for whom translation is unnecessary. The image for multilingualism is not translation, perhaps, but *desdoblamiento* ("doubling"), a multiplying of the self.

Translation is a deep but incomplete metaphor for the traffic in meaning. It is probably not in the long run an adequate basis for a theory of cross-cultural meaning making and certainly not a substitute for such a theory. But exploring that metaphor may be a productive way of clarifying what such a theory might look like. Translation can be our constant reminder that the study of cultural mediation will be both a science and a poetics.

NOTES

All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

[1]In what is now Bolivia the leaders were another couple, Túpac Katari and Bartolina Sisa. Both have given their names to prominent political groups in Bolivia. Túpac Amaru's name, in turn, was adopted by a Peruvian guerrilla movement and was also shared by the American rap singer Tupac.

[2]The central plaza of Cuzco was the place where two centuries before (1572) the first Túpac Amaru was also executed after losing the last stand of the Inca dynasty against the Spanish invasion. In many ways the place looks now much as it did in 1781.

[3]This strategy did not succeed. Andean mythology adjusted, and the story spread that the Inca's body was reassembling itself under the ground in order to rise again. Similarly, the prohibition of indigenous clothing resulted, according to some scholars, in the adoption of a set of European elements—the gathered skirt and bowler hat, for example—that today constitutes "authentic, traditional" Andean dress.

[4]One instance is the rewriting of metropolitan texts by colonial, ex-colonial, or anti-colonial subjects. The corpus of such rewrites is large and, from a metropolitan perspective, both overdetermined and strange: there is J. M. Coetzee rewriting *Robinson Crusoe* (*Foe*), V. S. Naipaul rewriting *Heart of Darkness* (*A Bend in the River*), Derek Walcott rewriting *The Iliad* (*Omeros*), Jean Rhys rewriting *Jane Eyre* (*Wide Sargasso Sea*). This practice would seem to fall outside the purview of translation, even in a metaphoric sense.

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