



Black Sapatão Translation Practices: Healing Ourselves a Word Choice at a Time

Bruna Barros

Independent Filmmaker, Poet
Undergraduate Major in English
Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), Brazil

Jess Oliveira

PhD Candidate in Literature and Culture
Federal University of Bahia

Abstract

In the following, we briefly discuss the epistemology of translating lesbian and sapatão texts from Brazilian Portuguese into English. In this article, we bring out and theorise about some of the black sapatão translation strategies we applied while translating, proofreading, and copyediting the texts – articles, essays and a poem – for the Caribbean Review of Gender Studies Special Issue on Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Brazil. Furthermore, we point out the huge gap between the amount – and the production conditions (when, how and by whom) – of texts that are produced in Brazil by LGBTQI+ and/or black authors and the amount that actually gets translated into English. After examining some examples of word choices and translation strategies adopted by us, we intend to demonstrate how working with particular texts, particular themes, and especially with black lesbian and sapatão authors, is part of and produces a black sapatão epistemology. In addition, we intend to contextualise our knowledge production within the politics discussed and practiced by our research group Traduzindo no Atlântico Negro [Translating in the Black Atlantic], coordinated by Professor Denise Carrascosa at the Federal University of Bahia.

Keywords: translation; black sapatão translation; epistemology; internationalism.

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“this one is for black folks esse aqui é pro povo preto
this one is for the snap divas
this one is for the muxoxos, the clickers, the hmmm mms
this one is for the dykes, the greatest tongue masters
(shoutout to the multilingual sapatonas)
this one is for our ancestors who spoke in tongues”
(Barros and Oliveira 2020)

For Paulette Nardal and Jane Nardal

Translating the articles and essays for this special issue of *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* arouses some key topics that pervade our political and intellectual practice. How does theory, and more importantly, how does black lesbian/*sapatão* theory come in and out of Brazil? What is the importance of translating Brazilian lesbian/*sapatão* thought into English? How do our choices influence the way the readers receive the texts, that is, how will the translation make the authors' voices more audible/readable while still keeping them visible, respecting their differences regarding the target/receptor language and context?

It is worth noting that a significant part of the international literature used as reference in the articles in this issue is translated material. In addition to that, the fact that, generally, the authors of the articles do not cite the translators' names in the references implies that they usually ignore or are not aware of this stage, of the crossing these ideas have to go through in order to arrive in their hands.

Therefore, the feeling they have is that they are reading the exact words written by the authors they have as references. However, we, as black *sapatonas* translators, know that we make so many choices throughout the translation process. These choices are more than semantic ones – they involve responsibility, an ethics with the subjects who wrote the texts, the themes, and the messages within the texts.

By adding the translators' names in the references, we noticed that the translations of lesbians such as Monique Wittig and Adrienne Rich, were done by men. And this might begin to answer how theory arrives in Brazil, be it lesbian, black, and/or black LGBTQI+ theory. Black/feminist theory (Fanon 1967; hooks 1992; Morrison 1992, etc.) has largely and deeply demonstrated how the white, heterosexual and male gaze(s) shape(s) visual production, psychiatry and the arts; that is to say, how it/they interfere(s) in the ways society and Black and/or LGBTQI+ people see ourselves. How would it/they disappear in translation – especially when translating lesbians/*sapatonas*?

Concerning the framework permeating our translation work and its specificities, Carrascosa (2017) states:

Translation, thus, emerges in the Black Atlantic as political labour in the Spivakian sense of strong work with language as an identity and subalternity producing agent and, at the same time, in its rhetoric dimension, as a potential generating factor of subversive dissemination. (...) [The translator's] exercise does not imply only an instrumental communicative work to broaden the accessibility and the dialogue between writing and reading in this other imagined time-space; but, additionally, it produces a performativity in language that is capable of displacing, decentering, and rearticulating possibilities of senses that reverse ethnocidal forces.

In this context, our black translation practice is one of healing our transnational community from the isolation colonial languages imposed on us. This practice springs from our Afrodiasporic theoretical roots, guiding, for in our collective

translation work, performing a rupture with the idea of intellectual solitude and the translator's invisibility. As black *sapatão* translators, our work seeks to displace, misplace, rearrange, push, and pull the words and their meanings in order to refabulate history. Sometimes, it is a matter of tending to our scars, for instance: recurrently, we come upon the word "slave," both in old and new works, by black and white authors. This term, as well as the ideologies behind it, were brutally imposed on us. By adding three letters – "enslaved" – and then another word to it – "enslaved person" –, we turn a dehumanising term into one that acknowledges the process of dehumanisation some groups of people were forced through.

Another aspect in terms of how we navigate translation politics – now into Brazilian Portuguese – is how we deal with grammatical genders. In Brazilian Portuguese, there are masculine, feminine nouns/pronouns, neuter nouns, and no neuter pronouns. According to this language's grammar and writing conventions, masculine nouns/pronouns should be used to express neutrality. Therefore, regardless of the ratio, when referring to a group composed of men, women and gender non-conforming/dissident/non-binary people, the plurals, for example, should be masculine. In Brazilian academic writing, some intellectuals (notably gender non-conforming/dissident/non-binary people and feminist women, black and otherwise) have been using alternatives to this issue, hacking grammar, messing with words, decomposing old concepts. In the Brazilian Portuguese version of this essay, for example, in an attempt to provide easily comprehensible neutral plural options in a language that only has masculine/feminine ones, we simply used "pessoas" before the plurals. "Pessoas" is a feminine noun, so the plural form used with it is also feminine, but it stands for "people," which includes gender non-conforming/dissident/non-binary people, women and men. Besides being easy to understand, this alternative is also accessible, because it can be effortlessly read by reading software – unlike other options developed earlier, when neutral language was more of a novelty in Brazil. Through our translation practices, we defy the colonial language by proposing other pronoun guidelines.

Throughout the translation process of the articles, we came across some important terms concerning the Brazilian LGBTQI+ community, e.g.: “*sapatão/sapatona*,” “*travesti*” and “*bicha*.” Each and every one of these terms is deeply related to Brazilian culture and to the LGBTQI+ struggle in this country.

“*Sapatão*” (or *sapatona*) is often translated as lesbian – and sometimes butch or dyke. Both terms – *sapatão* and lesbian – do indeed stand for the same demographic when one considers solely the sexuality aspect. However, when it comes to race, gender and gender expression, there are some specificities about “*sapatão/sapatona*” that the term “lesbian” does not seem to encompass, i.e.: 1) some black *sapatonas* do not use “lesbian” due to its Greek – white – origin, and would rather use a Brazilian term to describe themselves; 2) some *sapatonas* do not feel comfortable being labelled as women and use *sapatão* not only to describe their sexualities but the way they carry themselves in relation to and/or in terms of gender expression; 3) “*sapatão/sapatona*” is usually preferred and more frequently used by those who consider themselves non-feminine; 4) some *sapatonas* do not mind being addressed to with masculine pronouns or even prefer them. Furthermore, “*sapatão/sapatona*” used to be a slur, but the Brazilian *sapatão* community reclaimed it as a symbol of pride and self-love. There is power in our self-naming and a long history of struggle behind how we chose to affectionately call ourselves and each other.

The meaning of “*Bicha*” is somewhat close to faggot, considering that both words are former slurs used to refer to gay men which are now used as pride statement by some of them. In the Brazilian gay community, “*bicha*” – also spelled *bixa* – was formerly and frequently used to refer to highly feminine individuals, who were – and are – deeply persecuted and especially targeted by homophobic violence. Nowadays, besides being used as a self-defining term by some gay men, it also stands for an identity itself, used both by people who identify within the non-binary identities and people who do not engage in the binary/non-binary discussion at all. A *bicha* is a *bicha*.

“*Travesti*” is also very specific for the Brazilian LGBTQI+ culture. Sometimes the term is translated as “trans woman,” because there are many shared experiences between these two categories – which very frequently intertwine, as some people might identify as being both. In fact, in Brazil, the T in LGBTQI+ stands for *travesti* and transgender/transsexual. However, some *travestis* do not wish to be compared to trans women, because there were – and they were – *travestis* until the term “*mulher trans*” [trans woman] came into usage in Brazil. Also, some *travestis* argue that “*mulher trans*” implies the reaffirmation of binary ideas of gender, and, for this reason, place themselves apart from the latter, in a specific category, despite sharing the T in the community. In spite of the common etymology of “*travesti*” and the English word “transvestite,” the latter can never be used as translation to the former. “Transvestite” is frequently offensive when used to refer to trans people, while “*travesti*” is a pride statement for those who identify as such.

Furthermore, sometimes the *bicha* and the *travesti* identities intertwine and meet each other, as there are some individuals that identify as “*bicha travesty*,” an identity that plays and messes even more with square and monolithic ideas of gender. In 2019, the film “*Bixa Travesty*” (2019), directed by Kiko Goifman and Claudia Priscilla, came out in Brazil, starring Linn da Quebrada, an artist that places herself in this category. In her song of the same name, “*Bixa Travesty*,” Linn da Quebrada (2017) sings: “*Bixa travesty de um peito só / O cabelo arrastando no chão / E, na mão, sangrando um coração*” [*Bixa travesty with only one boob / Dragging her hair across the floor / With a heart bleeding on her hand*].

Translating means dealing with the historical contexts of words in more than one language, culture, time and space. Each word used to describe black and/or LGBTQI+ people and our life experiences is a crossroad – being able to choose how to define ourselves and those in our communities is powerful; through this act, we call ourselves by our names with our own voices, on our own terms. That is why we kept the Brazilian terms (discussed above) in the English version.

With this gesture, we try to preserve different identities, gender expressions, mixtures and twists of languages – we prevent the history of gender non-conforming/dissident/non-binary and racial identities from being whitewashed into a universal LGBTQI+ liberal identity, since language is a means of expressing cultural differences. Therefore, answering the third question, we believe that, by keeping the source terms, our translation can endorse the recognition and acknowledgment of these identities in different contexts. Once we can see each other and know how we define ourselves in different cultures, times and spaces, we can then recognize similarities and differences, act aware of what brings us together and sets us apart as well as how we survived different, but hostile environments. We can learn and exercise freedom strategies.

Spivak (2000) argues that “translation is the most intimate act of reading.” We, following this reasoning, look at translating black and/or lesbian/*sapatonas* texts as a source of pleasure, knowledge and power. So when translating subjects who were and still are silenced in certain spaces, who are most of the time invisible or not seen as knowledge producers, who are constantly defined by others, we are aware of what is at stake in our task, mainly because we can relate to the authors and/or to the themes and contexts.

We understand that our academic production is not separate from our poetical creation. Regarding our work as a translation collective, Translating in the Black Atlantic means, among other principles, taking into account the artistic aspects of our theory and the theoretical aspects of our poetry, for both come into being concomitantly, as Carrascosa frequently asserts. Moving forward, to translate a text – be it an article, an essay or a poem – is to write a (new) text, it is the result of our relation with the author and their work, their po-ethics and ours. As black *sapatão* translators who “stand in identity avenues” – or crossroads – (Akotirene 2019), our challenge is to connect the dimensions through which we navigate as we live and as we translate – ourselves and each other –, posing our questions and considerations many times in the details of the translated text, as if ripples through black translation – through black *sapatão* translation.

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