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Interview with Samantha Schnee

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Clara Burghelea: How important is your editorial work at *Words Without Borders* for your own translation practice? Do you see the two informing one another?

Samantha Schnee: Not only do they inform each other; it is hard for me to separate them. There is no doubt that all translators make editorial choices when they choose which words to use, how to transpose punctuation, recreate syntax and so forth. After twenty-plus years of editing, and as many of translating, I do not think I am capable of translating without thinking editorially. And I believe that editing has made me a better writer, ergo a better translator.

Clara Burghelea: What are your strengths as an editor?

Samantha Schnee: I think that over time I have become more sensitive to non-Anglophone aesthetics in literature. What do I mean by that? Anglophone readers are accustomed to a highly refined product – a book that has been edited, sometimes heavily. That is often not the case in works of literature from other cultures, where attitudes toward writers differ and there is often less of an editorial infrastructure. For example, one writer I work with recently told me that she would like to publish her next novel simultaneously in English and Spanish, because when I translate her work I read with such a close eye that I raise questions her home-country editors don't raise – in part because they don't have time, due to the way the publishing business works there, and in part because of a reverence for the writer's work. As a translator I have learned to be a careful, close reader who makes editorial suggestions – not major ones like “could you change the ending?” – but about maintaining consistency and voice.

Clara Burghelea: Your most recent translation of poetry is *The Goddesses of Water* by Mexican poet Jeannette Clariond. How was your working relationship with the author?

Samantha Schnee: Jeannette and I worked very closely together. This was necessitated in part by the fact that the book had not yet been published in Spanish when I embarked upon the translation. Jeannette had continued to revise the manuscript with Spanish poet Antonio Gamoneda while I was translating. When our UK publisher, Tony Frazer, suggested that we publish the Spanish and English *en face*, Jeannette and I had to go back to the beginning and discuss whether we should implement the changes she had made in the English translation and, in the end, we agreed to make some but leave others unchanged. And then there is the fact that, like most poets, Jeannette does not have an agent, so as translator I was the one who pitched the book to English language publishers, acting as her agent. Many translators do that to support their authors' publication in English.

Clara Burghelea: What drew you to translate *The Goddesses of Water*?

Samantha Schnee: It is shocking. In Mexico, eleven women a day are murdered; this has been going on for years, decades, and shows no signs of stopping. Jeannette has sent me photos from the nightly news in Monterrey. CCTV footage of women's naked bodies being loaded into black Suburbans. You can imagine how, as a citizen, this would wear you down – the horror and the grief of the relentless desecration of women's bodies, as if we were disposable goods.

I read *Las diosas del agua* as a *cri du cœur*, Jeannette’s expression of her rage and grief, raising a voice for the parents and families of these women, as well as of the country. The problem of femicide is not confined to Mexico, though; throughout Latin America the numbers of women killed per day differ slightly from country to country but that is the only difference. Women’s bodies still end up brutalized, in plastic bags, strewn across the land. This epidemic of female-centred violence seemed urgent to me, particularly as I read it during the early days of the pandemic, when domestic violence was on the rise around the world.

Then there is the language that Jeannette uses in her poetry; her words of lamentation are so lucid – one critic called it “diamantine” – that they have an otherworldliness. In these poems she is striving to understand what purpose all this carnage has and, in the end, she finds the answer in Aztec mythology. I found it very compelling on both an artistic and a personal level.

Clara Burghilea: What were some of the translation strategies you used in trying to preserve the Spanish flavour of the original text, while making it accessible to the English audience?

Samantha Schnee: Since the poetry is grounded in ancient Mexican mythology, I decided not to translate the Nahuatl words and we agreed to include a glossary at the end to explain what many of those concepts mean. One reviewer said that we should have included a pronunciation guide since poetry has such an important aural component. We will include that in a future edition. In terms of language and the aural component of the collection, Spanish is more melodic than English, full especially of “a” and “o” sounds, which becomes difficult to replicate in English; so instead I employed tools like sibilance and alliteration in an attempt to recreate the aural beauty of the text.

Clara Burghilea: How do you navigate the poetry and prose genres? Your previous translations include Carmen Boullosa’s *The Book of Anna* and *Texas: The Great Theft*, both of which were novels.

Samantha Schnee: I like moving back and forth between the worlds of prose and poetry. Prose tends to be more straightforward but also more limiting, whereas in poetry language can be so compressed that it is necessary to speak with the author to understand their precise meaning, otherwise the translation of the poem would be better described as an interpretation. But in the case of Carmen’s work, she is such an inventive and poetic prose-writer that it is not such a huge leap from prose to poetry – Carmen is a beautiful poet herself.

Clara Burghilea: You recently published a new translated novel of Boullosa’s: *The Book of Eve*. What is it like to collaborate with an author over many years?

Samantha Schnee: I have worked with Carmen since 2006, when I translated an excerpt from her novel *La otra mano de Lepanto*. Since then I have translated her reviews, poetry, essays, and even a screenplay; Carmen has lived in the US part-time for decades now and is perfectly fluent in English so she can share valuable feedback about tone and more nuanced aspects of translation, which enables us to have a dialogue about each text as I’m preparing it for publication. In the case of *Eve*, I shared some chapters with her early on to make sure the translation felt right to her ear, and we discussed things like character names as well. I like to have her input because if I feel strongly about something she will always hear me out, and vice versa. The translator Danny Hahn has described translating as “writing in company” and that is very much true for me; in fact, it is why I prefer translating to writing my own work, which can occasionally feel like drawing blood from a stone in comparison.

Clara Burghilea: What is your advice to emerging translators like me? How does one penetrate the sometimes fickle, inaccessible, publishing world of books in translation?

Samantha Schnee: Number one, get some exercise every day and make sure you have a good desk set-up. I cannot tell you how many translators I know who have developed back problems and/or carpal tunnel syndrome from sitting and typing all day! Second, networking is really important, since many foreign writers are un-agented, and the translator often ends up pitching their work. Go to book fairs where you can meet editors, join the American Literary Translators Association, and take advantage of their Pitch Sessions, join PEN and its translation committee which can help with contract negotiations and such. The community of translators working into English is a rich tapestry of great people who are eager to support their colleagues, even emerging translators, so it is also a wonderful place to find moral support and camaraderie. Translators are definitely the “tribe” I most closely identify with.

Clara Burghilea: Has the perception of translation and translators changed in recent years? Do you notice less of the “translator’s invisibility”?

Samantha Schnee: Undoubtedly. Twenty years ago, it was not uncommon for a translator to be asked to grant copyright to a publisher, handing over their rights in their work in perpetuity. A campaign to change that has been effective, and I know of only one remaining Anglophone publisher that stubbornly persists in demanding translators to hand over copyrights. Similarly, the campaign that Jennifer Croft and Mark Haddon launched in 2021 to “Name the Translator” has gained traction. I think in general translators are becoming more confident and more skilled at defending their cause in negotiations with publishers, and I expect we will see more developments that make translators and their work visible in the future, recognizing its social and artistic value.

Clara Burghilea: What are your current readings?

Samantha Schnee: *Words Without Borders* is always my first stop for literature in translation, of course. It is vital for a translator to read widely in both their source language and their target language, from the classics to contemporary authors. Right now, my book club is reading *David Copperfield*; I am behind but hope to finish by the end of the year. I am also constantly reading in Spanish as a scout – looking for things to translate. Currently I have a collection by Ecuadorian poet Siomara España called *Cuerpo presente* on my nightstand; it covers some of the same ground as *Goddesses of Water* but takes a completely different artistic approach. I am also reading Cervantes’ *Journey to Parnassus* to prepare for a new translation I will start soon.

Clara Burghilea: What is your next translation project?

Samantha Schnee: I am beyond excited about it. I first translated an excerpt from Carmen Boullosa’s novel *Conspiracy of Romantics* in 2014 and although the excerpt won the *Gulf Coast Translation Prize* the next year, I was never able to find a publisher for the book. So, I applied to the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) for a fellowship to complete that translation; now I just need to find a publisher...