

**ELIZABETH BISHOP, DONA ELIZABETCHY, AND
COOKIE: TRANSLATING THE BRAZILIAN
BIOGRAPHY OF AN AMERICAN POET**

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What are some of the forces at play in a translation besides the misplaced, hopeless desire for literal accuracy—cultural forces, political, historical, ideological forces? The field is unquantifiable – but tangible nonetheless. As I have been driving back and forth from Jurere to the University this week, musing over this project, which Carmen and I began in 1997, I have been listening to Bossa Nova on my car's tape player; my Brazilian friends, meanwhile, keep asking me, a North American, whether I like RUSH, or John Lee Hooker, or Eric Clapton, or Supertramp, or Neil Young, or Santana; they keep asking why I listen to that tired, boring bossa nova stuff from the sixties. Both my Brazilian friends' perceptions of rock and roll and blues, and mine of Bossa Nova, are drenched in our larger perceptions of the cultures this music and its lyrics represent for us; and I'd like to open by reflecting for a moment on the North American reception of that most famous of Bossa Nova exports, *The Girl from Ipanema*, or, as it is more commonly known in North America to this day, *the Girl From Ipaneema*. I hope you will see the relevance for what will follow.

The Girl From Ipanema is a product of the sixties, coming earlier in the same decade in which Lota de Macedo Soares, one of the two protagonists of *Flores Raras*, died—she died in New York

in September 1967. In its most popular rendition, sung first by João Gilberto in Portuguese and then by Astrud Gilberto in English, followed by the cool, fluting rhythms of Stan Getz's saxophone that haunted so many bedrooms, so many softly shaded bars of the era, the song created a seductive index of lush and sultry/sexy, but cool, just slightly off-key Latinity—a counterpart for what Herb Alpert did in the same era with Mexico in his Tijuana Brass — both for North American consumption. How? It was not by a translation in any sense literal of the words. Let us remember the lyrics in Portuguese: “Olha que coisa mais linda, mais cheia de graça, é ela menina que vem e que passa, no doce balanço, a caminho do mar” – written by the “branco mais preto do Brazil”, Vinícius de Moraes. Astrud Gilberto's lyrics are not, as we all know, a literal translation: “Tall and tan and young and lovely, the Girl from Ipanema goes walking, and when she passes, each one she passes goes aaah.” The “aaah” is crucial, we remember; as Astrud sings or says it, “aaah” in Portuguese means something totally different from “ah” in English — different register, tone, different context; and part of the song's allure for North Americans, to be sure, is Astrud Gilberto's Brazilian accent in English — a titillating, caressing foreignness, softening the mother tongue.

It would be more than silly to get professorial with Astrud Gilberto or her translator, and chide them for not knowing, or caring, that the object of the preposition in English must always take the objective form, so that a little later she should not sing “she looks straight ahead not at he,” to rhyme with “sea” in the previous line, but “straight at him” to rhyme with – nothing. Context is everything. For better and worse, the magnificent success of *The Girl from Ipanema* has to do, not with literal translation, nor simply with North American perceptions of Brazilian men longing for sultry young Brazilian women on the beach, nor with Astrud Gilberto, a woman, singing of this male longing, nor simply to do with the Brazilian manufacturing, for export, of this interesting constellation of image, desire, and unfulfilled longing. It has to do with more, I

think: the success of the song has to do with *both* culture's constructions of each other – with *both* cultures' needs at that point in time to see the other in certain ways that had little, or perhaps a lot, to do with other realities afoot in both cultures. Let us remember that in 1964 Brazilian political life entered an infamous phase; in fact, that phase of Brazilian cultural and ideological life is an urgent element in *Flores Raras*, set largely in the fifties and sixties in Brazil. North American political and cultural realities in the mid-sixties were turbulent as well. The cross cultural phenomenon of *The Girl From Ipanema* depended less upon verisimilitude than on a tone and a mood, themselves responses to a need for such a tone and mood. Nor is this to say that the tone and mood aren't in many ways "real", or the translation not very effective. It is to say, though, that the literal or in any specific sense accurate translation of the lyrics is perhaps the last place to look for answers; far more important is the reflection and rendition of both cultures in each other's eyes - and ears – conveyed by song. *The Girl From Ipanema* is a musical and lyrical translation of one culture's dream of itself in another's eyes – as if the culture saw itself reflected in North American fantasies, and then gave the fantasy back to us, to them. The song has everything to do with atmosphere; and yet I admit that my first mistake, when I began translating *Flores Raras*, was to think it was my duty and mission to render and conserve, to transport its Brazilian atmosphere into English – its Brazilian feeling, its rhythms, its sense of language, landscape, love, manners, weather, of speaking, of behaviour. This was misguided, and also impossible, often resulting in an English that was not English, and a manuscript that was stilted, straddling two languages. So the first lesson I learned – I might have learned it earlier by lateral association had I thought about *The Girl From Ipanema* – was that literalness will not serve as the ground for a translation. On the contrary.

Then there is the issue of the two cultures' quite different perspectives on the subjects of *Flores Raras*. *Flores Raras* in Portuguese takes us through several parallel narratives: which ones

should become foreground, which ones background for the translator, or, more importantly, for the North American reader; and what might it mean to suggest that the relations among these parallel narratives might shift for North American as distinct from Brazilian readers? Begin with the obvious: in English, the subtitle gets reversed, and “A História de Lota de Macedo Soares e Elizabeth Bishop” becomes “The Story of Elizabeth Bishop and Lota de Macedo Soares.” Let us not become immediately offended and leap to conclusions here. Behind this simple reversal is an American publisher’s sense – they might be quite right – that American interest will be caught first by their Pulitzer-prize winning poet’s sojourn in exotic Brazil, and only second – although this is tricky, the ground might be shifting as we speak – by the fact that Bishop lived with, loved, and was loved by, an extraordinary woman such as Lota de Macedo Soares. In Portuguese, one narrative line in bold follows the path of Lota’s life: her work on the “aterro”, still to this day most often misattributed to Roberto Burle Marx, with whom, as the book shows in detail and for the first time, Lota had a protracted quarrel which eventually and permanently broke a decades-long friendship; the book tells of Lota’s building of her prize-winning house in Samambaia, in Petrópolis, with Sérgio Bernárdes, landscaped by Burle Marx; the book gives us Lota’s Brazilian and American and English circle of friends and acquaintances, artists, politicians, writers, painters, architects: Carlos Lacerda, Rachel de Queiroz, Cândido Portinari, Mário de Andrade, Pedro Nava, Carlos Leão, Hannah Arendt, Aldous Huxley, Alexander Calder, Ashley Brown; and it gives us her famous and notorious family. In Portuguese, Bishop (or “Dona Elizabethy” to Edileusa, the cook and eventual painter of loud and brassy canvasses in Petrópolis; Dona Elizabethy as well to Lota’s and Elizabeth’s patron saint of a cook in Leme, Joana, or Djuana, as Bishop called her) — in Portuguese, Bishop is an American poet, shy, reclusive; apparently, under many Brazilian eyes, nastily critical and dismissive of Brazilian culture; transparently, under North American eyes then and certainly now, the greatest modern North American poet to

write “about” Brazil in her poetry; I quote “about” because her poems create a Brazil, they take as their very subject the representation of Brazil. In Portuguese, Bishop is seen as an American poet in Brazil, through the eyes of a culture that understands the categories “American,” “woman,” and “poet” quite specifically and differently from the North American perceptions of these categories. Underlying the categories are specific cultural constructions of art, gender, and nationality, in other words. Translation should in my view try to recognize these Brazilian categories, and many others, yes; but more importantly, the translator should try to give them to readers in English — not in “accurate” translation — but in English. The translator must remember first and last that he is writing in English. He cannot be a ventriloquist. Better to make “he” and “sea” rhyme like Astrud Gilberto does, than to be correct, and get “sea” clashing with “him.”

But let’s get down to brass tacks. Here are three short excerpts from *Flores Raras* followed by their translations. I have tried to select passages which exemplify the powers and the joys of this book. The first excerpt is from the opening chapter, “Oh Tourist.” Often, *Flores Raras* will quote, or reflect upon a phrase or several lines or more from Bishop’s poems; this opening chapter’s title is a phrase from Bishop’s first published poem about Brazil, “Arrival at Santos”. In this passage, with which the first chapter ends, the first subject is Bishop’s apprehension of the Portuguese language; the passage then modulates into a more wide-ranging mode:

Aliás, o português dos poetas e dos empregados era o que chegava aos ouvidos forasteiros de Bishop, já que Lota e Mary falavam com ela em inglês. Parecia-lhe uma língua cerdosa, difícilíssima. Lota garantia que não, que a língua era dulcíssima e com alguns estudos de botânica em pouco tempo Bishop estaria uma perita em rimas proparoxítonas.

— Quer ver? Lígula. Pétala. Plúmula – demonstrava ela, devagarzinho, marota.

Bishop se encantava com o humor de Lota. Conversar com ela

era um deleite: era invulgarmente culta e articulada. Como americana, Bishop valorizava especialmente a formação européia de Lota. Era desconcertante, naquele fim-de-mundo, encontrar a mesa sempre posta com requinte impecável. Ou, no meio de uma conversa sobre música, vê-la tirar da cartola as *Pièces Froides* de Erik Satie. E comentar o escândalo que fora a encenação de *Parade*, com música de Satie, argumento de Cocteau e cenários de Picasso.

Lota, por sua vez, admirava o fato de Bishop ter estudado em Vassar e ter entre seus amigos celebridades como Marianne Moore e Robert Lowell.

– Vou apresentar você a muita gente interessante, você vai ver, prometia Lota, pressionando convincentemente o braço de Bishop (21-22).

Now you must on one hand remember, and on the other, forget that passage. Here it is as English:

In fact, the Portuguese of the poets and of the maids was what came to Bishop's foreigner's ears, since Lota and Mary spoke to her in English. It seemed a difficult and harsh language to her. Lota assured her it wasn't, that the language was very sweet and that with a little bit of botanical study, Bishop would soon become an expert in internal rhymes.

"Do you want to see? Lígula. Pétała. Plúmula," she pronounced, very slowly, roguishly.

Bishop was enchanted with Lota's humor. Talking to her was a delight; she was uncommonly cultured and articulate. As an American, Bishop especially valued Lota's European education. Miles from nowhere, it was disconcerting to find the table always set with impeccable elegance. Or, in the middle of a discussion about music, to see Lota pull Erik Satie's *Pieces froides* out of her top hat. Or talk about the scandal that attended the staging of *Parade*, with music by Satie, script by Cocteau, and scenery by Picasso.

For her part, Lota was impressed that Bishop had gone to Vassar and had celebrities such as Marianne Moore and Rob-

ert Lowell among her friends.

“I’m going to introduce you to a lot of interesting people, you’ll see,” promised Lota, holding Bishop’s arm.

Now, here is Edileusa, the cook at Samambaia, in crisis: Edileusa is one of the book’s most volatile figures, and, like others in the book, she speaks and behaves in a pungent idiom and manner all her own. Here, quite early in the narrative, Edileusa has missed two days of work, to Lota’s annoyance.

A história rendeu.

Durante dois dias, Edileusa ficou enjoada. Recusou-se a tomar os remédios convencionais, bebendo chá de picão, que ia apanhar no mato. Ficava se lamuriando, minha Nossa Senhora da Boa Morte, valei-me, meu Sagrado Coração de Jesus, socorrei-me, enquanto Bishop cozinhava. Nem sequer foi à festa da cumeeira, um belo churrasco com cervejada, ocasião em que Bishop viu comerem farinha de mandioca crua pela primeira vez.

Bishop se esforçava para estabelecer algum contato lingüístico com Edileusa, mas era difícil. A própria Lota demonstrava dificuldade em traduzir o relato da enferma. Tinha tido uma inlanha com um vizinho, que xingou a irmã de Edileusa de mulé tolerada. Na discursão deu a saracutinga em Edileusa, que ficou nuns nervos que trimilicava. Foi um pá demônio. Quase deu se o danado.

Try to forget Edileusa’s trials in Portuguese. Here they are in English:

The story unfolded.

For two days, Edileusa was ill. She refused to take the usual medicines, drinking tea brewed from quickweed she gathered in the woods. She moaned, My Blessed Lady of a Good Death, help me, my Sacred Heart of Jesus, save me, while Bishop

cooked. She didn't even go to the traditional party celebrating the finishing of the roof, a splendid barbeque with beer, where Bishop saw people eating raw manioc flour for the first time. Bishop tried hard to establish some kind of verbal contact with Edileusa, but it was impossible. Even Lota had difficulty translating the tale of the sick one. She'd had a spat with a neighbor, who'd cursed Edileusa's sister, calling her an easy woman. The heated exchange brought on the jitters in Edileusa, who got so worked up she positively quivered. It was a real blowup, it just about did her in.

As I suggested earlier, the book's most interesting and many-faceted figure is Lota de Macedo Soares. Often, *Flores Raras* quotes from Lota's actual vivid remarks, or sometimes from actual letters. Frequently, Lota, beside herself at yet another bureaucratic snafu, or enraged by what seemed to her to be Lacerda's incomprehensible inaction, would write him passionate denunciations; sometimes, even at the height of exasperation, she was more playful and ironic with her friend the Governor. Here is part of a letter to Lacerda from much later in the book, as the story takes a darker turn. The *aterro* is in jeopardy from stupidly competing forces; Lacerda's career is at peril, and Lota is fed up:

"Senhor Governador

Peco vênia para lhe propor minha candidatura como sua sucessora no governo do Estado.

Não sei se estou me apresentando um pouco tarde, mas como os seus escolhidos já forma muitos, e o seu critério extremamente eclético, e os autocandidatos abundam, nestes meses que ainda temos pode ser que chegue a minha vez.

Permita-me demonstrar-lhe as qualidades que me fazem aspirar a este "posto de sacrifício" etc.

Sou tão bem nascida (ou melhor; não adianta ser modesto a esta hora) quanto o Rafael, e tenho tanto horror às massas quanto ele... e como ele, não dou pelota pra ninguém.

Se a Sandra é mulher... eu também sou. Não tenho infelizmente

a imaginação dela. Não consigo ver no Parque do Flamengo uma obra federal, nem no “trenzinho” a solução para todos os problemas do transporte.

Tenho o mesmo temperamento que o Hélio Beltrão, também sou descrente de chegar a ser governador... e infelizmente não sei tocar violão.

Tenho duas vantagens sobre o Flexa. Tenho horror a ser professora e a minha pinacoteca é melhor do que a dele. (Invejo nele os filhos que ele tem ... mas não creio que isto venha no caso...)

Não entendo de obras quanto o Peixoto. Em compensação, tenho muito mais cabelo...

Permita-me apresentar-lhe a minha maneira de governar. Não farei naturalmente um governo como o seu. Farei muito melhor, isto é, evidentemente, o que nós candidatos pensamos.

Farei um governo austero, isto é, irei à Europa e aos States algumas vezes por ano, por razões de Estado, para buscar dinheiro para pesquisas, estudos, algumas compras, e para de lá trazer o meu sucessor. Mas não farei como V. Excelência fez, que é subir com um e descer com outro, isto criou uma certa confusão entre nós.

Prometo-lhe também não brigar na Assembléia. Política é a arte da conquista. Depois de cinco anos de governo espero ter todos os deputados, senão ao meu lado, ao menos incapacitados e impotentes.

Prometo acabar todas as suas obras, exceto aqueles que não me agradam. Vou estudar este assunto de maneira objetiva e profunda, e depois lhe mandarei um relatório.” Etc etc. (150/51).

Now, Lota speaking another language:

“Sir Governor,

I beg leave to propose my candidacy as your successor in the government of the State.

I don't know if I am presenting myself a bit late, but as your choices have already been many, and your criteria extremely

eclectic, and since self-declared candidates are abundant, in these months that we still have maybe my turn will come.

Permit me to show you the qualities that make me aspire to this 'position of sacrifice' etc.

I am as well born (or better; it's no use being modest at this point) as Rafael, and I am just as terrified of the masses as he is ... and like him, I don't give a damn about anyone.

If Sandra is a woman ... I am too. Unhappily, I don't have her imagination. I can't see a federal case in Flamengo Park, nor in the minitrain a solution to all the problems in transportation.

I have the same temperament as Helio Beltrão; I'm also disbelieving of the prospect of becoming governor ... and unfortunately I don't know how to play guitar.

I have two advantages over Flexa. I have a horror of being a teacher and my art collection is better than his. (I'm jealous of the sons he has ... but I don't think this should enter the discussion....)

I don't know as much about work projects as Peixoto. In compensation, I have much more hair....

Permit me to present you with my manner of governing. Naturally, I won't have a government like yours. I'll do much better; this is, of course, what we candidates think .

I will have an austere government. That is, I'll go to Europe and the States several times a year, for reasons of State, to find money for research, studies, some purchases, and so that I can bring my successor from there. But I won't do as Yr. Excellency did, which was to go up with one and come down with another; that created a certain confusion among us.

I also promise you I won't fight with the Assembly. Politics is the art of conquering. After five years in government I hope to have all the members of the House, if not on my side, then at least incapacitated and impotent.

I promise to finish all your projects, except for those that don't please me. I am going to study this subject in an objective and profound manner, and then I'll send you a report.

Flores Raras ends twice; with Lota's death, and with Bishop, in 1978, a year before her death, sitting in her Boston apartment still trying to finish "Santarém," one of her finest poems. Throughout, *Flores Raras* has explored two mutually exclusive hypotheses; one, that Bishop killed Lota – this is what most of Lota's Brazilian friends believe; the other, Bishop's belief that Brazil has killed Lota. The last line of *Flores Raras* is "Brazil matou Lota, Bishop acusa." "Acusa" should not be translated literally into "accuses": how to translate it, then? I chose "Brazil killed Lota, Bishop says to herself," which makes the "accusation" a more internal one, more solitary, more of Bishop's own reflection to herself, alone in Boston. Regardless, it is not the same sentence, not quite the same feeling. It cannot be. Nor is *Rare and Commonplace Flowers* the same book as *Flores Raras e Banalíssimas*. But I hope the books are closely related, something like fraternal, rather than identical twins. Thank you.

Note

1. This paper was first delivered as a public lecture at the Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina in Florianópolis on May 29, 2001.