

AWP 2023 Event Outline

Event Title: Translating the Poetry of Urgency (75 minutes total)

(2 min.) Nancy welcomes everyone and presents the session's agenda, which includes each panelist's interpretation of what is meant by "poetry of urgency," followed by a short bilingual reading.

[Nancy reads bio of each panelist before they read; Cynthia introduces Nancy]

(12 min.) Cynthia Hogue

(12 min.) Joshua Weiner

(12 min.) Boris Dralyuk

(12 min.) Gabriela Ramirez-Chavez

(12 min.) Nancy Naomi Carlson

(10-15 min.) Q & A

(1 min.) Nancy thanks everyone

Event Description: What are "urgent poems"? Although they arise as responses to critical situations, they know no borders and are essential to our survival, as well as our humanity. This panel of poets and scholars, translating from such languages as French (Canada and Congo-Brazzaville), German, Russian, and Spanish/K'iche' Mayan, will briefly discuss, then read bilingual examples of poems that demand to be heard, then address audience questions.

Event Category: Translation: Reading

Event Organizer: Kelsi Vanada

Event Moderator: Nancy Naomi Carlson

Event Participants & Short Bios:

Cynthia Hogue's new collections are *instead, it is dark* and the co-translation of Nicole Brossard, *Distantly*. Hogue served as Guest Editor for Poem-a-Day for September (2022), sponsored by the Academy of American Poets.

Joshua Weiner's translation of Nelly Sachs's *Flight & Metamorphosis* was published by Farrar Straus Giroux in March 2022. He lives in Washington D.C. and teaches at University of Maryland.

Boris Dralyuk is the author of *My Hollywood and Other Poems* and the translator of Isaac Babel, Andrey Kurkov, and other authors.

Gabriela Ramirez-Chavez is a Seattle-based poet and translator born to Guatemalan immigrants. As a translator, she focuses on indigenous literatures of Latin America, especially from Guatemala and Mexico.

Nancy Naomi Carlson won the 2022 Oxford-Weidenfeld Translation Prize. Twice an NEA translation grantee, her non-translated *An Infusion of Violets* was called “new & noteworthy” by *The New York Times*.

Moderator Welcome:

Welcome to “**Translating the Poetry of Urgency.**” I’m Nancy Naomi Carlson, the moderator. A few reminders before we begin:

- For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.
- Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.
- Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.
- Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
- Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Today I am joined by Cynthia Hogue, Joshua Weiner, Boris Dralyuk, and Gabriela Ramirez-Chavez. I’ll introduce each speaker, and they will briefly discuss what “poetry of urgency” means to them before giving a 10-12 minute bilingual reading of their translated poetry of urgency. Our program will finish with an audience Q & A.

Participant Remarks:

[Cynthia Hogue](#)

“On the Nature of Urgency in the poetry of Nicole Brossard”

The great Québécois poet Nicole Brossard situates her writing and creative process in relation to the language of power (the Patriarchy). Given the damage that patriarchal power has wrought, her poems are “urgent.” It matters that her language is produced by a subject writing as a woman, a lesbian and feminist, a mother and a humanist. Influenced by French poststructuralist and feminist theory,

she defines her poetic as making “a space for the unthought” (*NB*, 190). That is, she is *creating* space in her work for all who have never been accorded it in the arena of “social meaning” (the Symbolic), including populations of the marginalized. She observes in the world so much that has been unseen and inaudible—women’s desires, dreams, experiences, memories—because never *made space for*, thus remaining unarticulated, *unthought*.

Brossard terms this imaginary the *inédit*: literally, the unedited, but conceptually, a neologism for the “not-yet-said.”¹ As Lynette Hunter explains, the process of articulation “breathes the material reality of the *inédit* into sound and resonance”—that is, into poetry—making it “possible for the powerful to hear those erased from or marginal to power” (Hunter, 237). Brossard is concerned to create by means of her writing “a new space” for “new materials to be taken into account about life and its meanings” (*NB*, 188). For Brossard, such writing helps us to expand our knowledge and transform our vision.

Brossard does not write in autobiographical or narrative detail. The poems in *Distantly* are linked through the theme of life in cities. The poems are lyrical in style, the series as a whole based loosely on the observations, emotions, perceptions, and dreams of a female speaking subject. The cities are not realistically described, but the poems are nevertheless full of reality-based details. The poems make up a series of evocative distillations of postmodern urban life, with a sharp sense of urgent awareness, hovering at the edges, of social, cultural and gendered histories of violence as well as beauty, personal and political struggles for survival and intimacy.

Thus, the cities in Brossard’s poems are familiar, but uncanny. They may at first seem simply surreal, but in them dwell survivors of “misfortunes” who respond sorrowfully to the fact of “saris on fire” (with girls tragically still in them), urban landscapes with their “gleaming debris” and “bridges, ghats, / rivers in a time of peace and torture”—words which have clearly been written in the first violent decade of the twenty-first century.

Excerpts from *Distantly*

Trans. By Sylvain Gallais and Cynthia Hogue

¹ Lynette Hunter, “The *Inédit* in Writing by Nicole Brossard: *Breathing the Skin of Language*,” in *Nicole Brossard: Essays on Her Works*, ed. Louise H. Forsyth (Toronto: Guernica, 2005), 209-38. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text as Hunter, followed by the page number.

Villes réellement

dans le vif des gestes
 villes avec uppercuts swings et hijabs
 rap qui nique les mères
 comme on noie les chats
 villes rubans où tu apprends à dire
 je au bon moment quand chacun pour soi
 avec son visage de courte paille
 roule poings serrés entre les métaphores

Cities really

in the heart of gestures
 cities with uppercuts swings and hijabs
 rap that fucks mothers
 like drowning cats
 ribbon cities where you learn to say I
 at a moment when everyone's out for themselves
 with a look of getting the short straw
 clenched fists packed between metaphors

Villes avec leurs fous de dieu

cette fois-ci je compte les mains, les pieds,
 les langues, les tuniques, les cailloux
 les têtes, les barbes
 les calottes, les voiles, les châles,
 je ne compte pas les vertiges
 les ablutions les miracles
 les coups de fouet,
 dans les hauts parleurs
 des dizaines de crachats de mots, un feu si grand
 qu'il faut de l'eau sur le front, les pieds,
 je compte les yeux, les doigts,
 je compte jusqu'à la poussière
 je compte jusqu'à l'enfance

Cities with their fools for God

this time I count the hands, the feet,
 the tongues, the tunics, the pebbles
 the heads, the beards
 the skullcaps, the veils, the scarves,
 I do not count the vertigos
 the ablutions the miracles
 the whiplashes
 in the loudspeakers
 the dozens of spat-out words, such a big fire
 that water must be splashed on brow, on feet,
 I count the eyes, the fingers,
 I count until the dust
 I count until childhood

Villes réellement

quand le froid taille dans les arbres
 de petites agglomérations de sens
 si tu apprends à toucher
 facilement l'épaule de quelqu'un
 pour changer l'avenir
 touche

Cities really

when the cold carves in the trees
 small agglomerations of meaning
 if you learn how to touch
 someone's shoulder easily
 to change the future
 touch

Villes réellement

villes d'abîme avec leurs racines

de jadis au présent
 couteaux longs et cous fins de fillettes
 incendies de saris
 villes sans recommencement de lumière
 avec leurs entassements de femmes et de cailloux
 Cities really

abysmal cities with their roots
 from ages ago to the present
 long knives and slender necks of young girls
 saris on fire
 cities without resumption of light
 with their mounds of women and stones

Villes sans noms

villes parce qu'on est sincère
 avec nos ombres de nouveau monde
 enfoncées dans le temps et le sentiment
 villes pleines de nos odeurs de fin du monde
 avec leurs bûchers, leurs veuves
 leurs ponts passages et fleuves d'encre

Cities without names

cities because we're honest
 with our shadows of a new world
 buried deep in time and feeling
 cities filled with our odors at world's end
 with its pyres, its widows,
 its bridges passages and rivers of ink

villes quand quelqu'un te bouscule
 dit *sorry sorrow* à cause du bruit et de la pluie
 s'empare à bras-le-corps
 d'une mélodie pour soulever le présent

son parfum fort de changement qui fascine
 tous les matins quand même
 tu l'aimes bras ballants l'humanité
 sans oxygène au milieu de ses débris rutilant

cities when someone shoves you
 says *sorry sorrow* because of the din and the rain
 wraps arms around
 a melody to lift up the present
 the strong perfume of change which fascinates
 you every morning anyway
 you love humanity with helpless arms
 without oxygen in the middle of its gleaming debris

Joshua Weiner

The poetry of urgency *presses* into us with a sharpness conveying a need for prompt action, immediate attention, immediate response, to a situation of extremity, at the edge of what we can experience. It is inherently a poetry of hope, of hopefulness, as the hopelessness of despair leaves us enervated, impotent, incapable of responding, spiritually dead. Soon after Nelly Sachs landed in Stockholm as a refugee of Nazi Germany, she felt the urgency to respond to the new information, that the labor camps were in fact death camps, sites of state engineered extermination of the Jews. While she did not experience the camps first hand, as Paul Celan did, and other writers, she was traumatized by personal experiences in Nazi Berlin, some of which literally stole her voice and rendered her temporarily mute. Later, that urgency which found voice in her choral poems of Holocaust witnessing changed, transformed into poems that captured the plight of being a refugee; these weren't poems of death, but poems of life—life on the run, as hers was one; on the run from political persecution, on the run in a movable state of exile, on the run through the sands of the earth, the dust of the cosmos, and the grain of time. Poems of flight; and as flight engenders change, poems of metamorphosis.

from *Flight and Metamorphosis* by Nelly Sachs, translated by Joshua Weiner (with Linda B. Parshall), Farrar Straus Giroux, 2022.

n.b. *Flucht und Verwandlung* is a book-length sequence of 54 untitled poems. The [bracketed numbers] here do not appear in the original text, but are part of the working translation ms. (and give some indication of where each poem is placed in the sequence). The poems come across best (I think) when they are read all

together, or in some kind of grouping; some individual poems have been showcased, however—e.g. Sachs, who won the 1966 Nobel Prize in Literature, read [7] as her signature poem at the ceremony. --jw

[1]

Wer zuletzt
hier stirbt
wird das Samenkorn der Sonne
zwischen seinen Lippen tragen
wird die Nacht gewittern
in der Verwesung Todeskampf.

Alle vom Blut
entzündeten Träume
werden im Zickzack-Blitz
aus seinen Schultern fahren
stigmatisieren die himmlische Haut
mit dem Geheimnis der Qual.
Weil Noahs Arche abwärts fuhr
die Sternbilderstraßen
wird
wer zuletzt hier stirbt
den Schuh mit Wasser angefüllt
am Fuße haben

darin ein Fisch
mit seiner Rückenflosse Heimwehsegel
die schwarz vertropfte Zeit
in ihren Gottesacker zieht.

[1]

Who dies
here last
will carry the grain of sun
between his lips
will thundercrack the night
in death-throe rot.

Blood-
 sparked dreams
 will shoot from his shoulders
 in a jagged flash
 branding empyreal skin
 with the mystery of affliction.

Because Noah's ark went down
 star-figured avenues
 whoever
 dies here last
 will have shoes
 filled with water

where a fish
 with homesick backsail
 draws black dissolving time
 into its tomb

[7]

In der Flucht
 welch großer Empfang
 unterwegs –

Eingehüllt
 in der Winde Tuch
 Füße im Gebet des Sandes
 der niemals Amen sagen kann
 denn er muß
 von der Flosse in den Flügel
 und weiter –

Der kranke Schmetterling
 weiß bald wieder vom Meer –
 Dieser Stein
 mit der Inschrift der Fliege
 hat sich mir in die Hand gegeben –

An Stelle von Heimat
halte ich die Verwandlungen der Welt –

[7]

In flight
what great welcome
along the way—

Shrouded
in the winds' shawl
feet in the sand's prayer
which can never say Amen
because it must move
from fin to wing
and further—

The sick butterfly
soon again knows the sea--
This stone
with the fly's inscription
has dropped into my hand--

In place of home
I hold the metamorphoses of the world—

[9]

Kind
Kind
im Orkan des Abschieds
stoßend mit der Zehen weißflammenden Gischt
gegen den brennenden Horizontenring
suchend den geheimen Ausweg des Todes.

Schon ohne Stimme--ausatmend Rauch--

Liegend wie das Meer
nur mit Tiefe darunter
reißend an der Vertauung

mit den Springwogen der Sehnsucht--

Kind
 Kind
 mit der Grablegung deines Hauptes
 der Träume Samenkapsel
 schwer geworden
 in endlicher Ergebung
 bereit anderes Land zu besäen.

Mit Augen
 umgedreht zum Muttergrund--

Du in der Kerbe des Jahrhunderts gewiegt
 wo Zeit mit gesträubten Flügeln
 fassungslos ertrinkt
 in der Überschwemmung
 deines maßlosen Untergangs.

[9]

Child
 child
 in the whirlwind of departure
 pushing your toes' white flaming foam
 against the burning ring of the horizon
 seeking death's secret way out.

Already voiceless--exhaling smoke--

Lying as the sea lies
 with just depth below
 tearing at the mooring
 with waves of longing.

Child
 child
 your head buried now
 the seed pod of your dreams
 grown heavy

in final surrender
ready to sow other land.

With eyes
turned back toward the motherground--

You, cradled in the century's rut
where time with ruffled wings
drowns, stunned
in the great flood
of your end
without end.

[31]

Kommt einer
von ferne
mit einer Sprache
die vielleicht die Laute
verschließt
mit dem Wiehern der Stute
oder
dem Piepen
junger Schwarzamseln
oder
auch wie eine knirschende Säge
die alle Nähe zerschneidet--

Kommt einer
von ferne
mit Bewegungen des Hundes
oder
vielleicht der Ratte
und es ist Winter
so kleide ihn warm
kann auch sein
er hat Feuer unter den Sohlen
(vielleicht ritt er
auf einem Meteor)

so schilt ihn nicht
falls dein Teppich durchlöchert schreit--

Ein Fremder hat immer
seine Heimat im Arm
wie eine Waise
für die er vielleicht nichts
als ein Grab sucht.

[31]

If someone comes
from afar
with a language
that maybe seals off
its sounds
with a mare's whinny
or
the chirping
of young blackbirds
or
like a gnashing saw that chews up
everything in reach--

If someone comes
from afar
moving like a dog
or
maybe a rat
and it's winter
dress him warmly
for who knows
his feet may be on fire
(perhaps he rode in
on a meteor)
so don't scold him
if your rug, riddled with holes,
screams--

A stranger always has

his homeland in his arms
 like an orphan
 for whom he may be seeking nothing
 but a grave.

[37]

Der Schlafwandler
 kreisend auf seinem Stern
 an der weißen Feder des Morgens
 erwacht--
 der Blutfleck darauf erinnerte ihn--
 läßt den Mond
 erschrocken fallen--
 die Schneebeere zerbricht
 am schwarzen Achat der Nacht--
 traumbesudelt--

Kein reines Weiß auf Erden--

[37]

The sleepwalker
 circling on his star
 awakens
 to the dawn's white feather--
 the blood stain there reminding him--
 he lets the moon
 drop, appalled--
 the snowberry bursts
 on the night's black agate--
 dreamstained--

No pure white on earth—

[38]

Weisse Schlange
 Polarkreis
 Flügel im Granit

rosa Wehmut im Eisblock
 Sperrzonen um das Geheimnis
 Herzklopfenmeilen aus Entfernung
 Windketten hängend am Heimweh
 flammende Granate aus Zorn--

Und die Schnecke
 mit dem tickenden Gepäck der Gottzeit.

[38]

White serpent
 polar circle
 wings in granite
 pink sorrow in the iceblock
 forbidden zones around the mystery
 heartpounding miles from distance
 wind chains hanging on homesickness
 flaming shell of fury--

And the snail
 with the ticking pack of God-time.

[46]

Ach dass man so wenig begreift
 solange die Augen nur Abend wissen.
 Fenster und Türen öffnen sich wie entgleist
 vor dem Aufbruchbereiten.

Unruhe flammt
 Verstecke für Falter
 die Heimat zu beten beginnen.

Bis endlich dein Herz
 die schreckliche Angelwunde
 in ihre Heilung gerissen wurde
 Himmel und Erde
 als Asche sich küßten in deinem Blick--

O Seele--verzeih
 daß ich zurück dich führen gewollt
 an so viele Herde der Ruhe

Ruhe
 die doch nur ein totes Oasenwort ist--

[46]

O that one understands so little
 as long as the eyes know only evening.
 Windows and doors open as if knocked off track
 before you ready for departure.

Unrest inflames
 hiding places for night moths
 beginning to pray for home.

Until at length your heart
 dreadful hooked wound
 was torn *into* healing,
 heaven and earth
 as cinders kissing in your gaze--

O Soul--forgive
 my wanting to lead you back
 to so many hearths of rest

Rest
 which is only a dead oasis-word--

[Boris Dralyuk](#)

Since the launch of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, my translations of Ukrainian authors past and present have gained new urgency. It's my hope that my versions of the stories of Isaac Babel, the novels of Andrey Kurkov, and the poems of Boris Khersonsky, Lina Kostenko, Yuri Izdryk, and others, have helped Anglophone readers not only to appreciate the richness of Ukrainian culture but also to keep the humanity of Ukrainians firmly in view as this dehumanizing conflict unfolds.

Ukrainian Poets at AWP: Boris Khersonsky, Lina Kostenko, and Yuri Izdryk
Translated by Boris Dralyuk

Boris Khersonsky

When victory is ours — the postwar executions start.
The hasty meetings, the tribunals passing sentence.
We need to thin the ranks of all these prisoners of war.
Why should we feed the generals we've vanquished?

They've got as much blood on their hands as all the rest.
We have the orders that they gave their men.
The urge to murder is a form of sexual lust.
You just can't stop — you want to, but you can't.

And so it's up the ladder, hands behind their backs,
with pastors — priests, if they should happen to be Catholics —
bags on their heads, nooses around their necks.
Die, scum. In seven decades, you'll get YouTube clicks.

Five minutes — and a man is a dead body.
Another five — the coffin is nailed shut.
War criminals deserve no hint of pity.
A strong rope is enough, or a sure shot.

The executioner — his skill — is our great hope.
Prison's expensive — killing simply costs less.
The only justice is the bullet and the rope.
The postwar era knows no other justice.

2015

* * *

this morning's rain overpowers the dim morning light
a paper boat floats on the current it was at one point
the head-of-state's portrait but folded just right
it's a boat that knows not where it floats

a peculiar summer no sunlight no warmth

been pouring all day and life wouldn't stay
 thoughts and cigarette filters also drift off
 a boat once a portrait is floating away

2015

Lina Kostenko

The river's gone, the name remains.
 The willows and the moats are dry,
 as is the bog. Above the plains,
 a wild duck mournfully flies by.

Only the steppe and heat — that heat —
 only rare glints of dried-out lakes,
 a tired stork trailing his feet,
 and, high up on a pole, his nest...

Where are you, rivulet? Arise!
 Your banks cry out through their chapped lips.
 Your springtimes miss their colored bows.
 Heat blazes on your bridge's ribs.

Over dead rivers, bridges stand.
 Storks circle, do their daily chores.
 Reeds with black candles in their hands
 solemnly walk the former shores...

* * *

Look for the censor within you.
 He dwells there, languid and grey.
 He sits there, a household demon,
 stealing your conscience away.

Not all at once. Slow and steady.
 He knows where your icons are kept.
 He scoops you out from your body,
 till only the shell is left.

Yuri Izdryk

Darkness Invisible

evil has melted away in our world, as ice turns to water
 diffused invisibly, like mist in air
 grope in the deepest, darkest of pits, your search will be futile
 you cannot say evil is here, evil is there

for its spores are dispersed in the pores of the earth, even and smooth
 you can meet it at any old time, any old place
 for evil is not a big lie, but small shards, resembling truth
 its metastases glitter like crystals in each one of us

for evil inheres in the reader — not the Vedas, the Bible, or the Koran
 evil can't lead, it lures — and each of us must decide
 whether to go into battle, called by the beat of a drum
 whether to head for the shimmering, coarse, bloody fraud

evil pleads for compassion, though it knows no compassionate ways
 asks for a sacrifice, but won't give a penny to anyone
 for evil delights at the sight of the littlest tear on your face
 though it really regards others' tears as meaningless fun

just as black and white merge in a dance instead of a fray
 just as prayer and profanity mingle within a gray din
 evil can't be discerned — like death seeded in you and in me
 evil has merged with the world — it's as if it were gone

while we two are together, I keep faith in light, love, and warmth
 and in mercy, which conquers invisible darkness
 the shadows will fade, evil will surface – pathetic, a thing of no worth
 and we two will laugh, we'll laugh right in its face

Gabriela Ramirez-Chavez

Rosa Chávez is a leading indigenous voice in Latin America and the most prominent Mayan poet writing in Guatemala today. Her poems are urgent as they denounce Guatemalan state violence, recast history from indigenous perspectives, and speak to the political demands of her community. She was born in Guatemala

in 1980 at the height of a dictatorship that systematically targeted Mayan communities. Her family didn't teach her K'iche' Mayan, her father's language, to protect her from discrimination, so she writes primarily in Spanish. Chávez often incorporates K'iche' words into her poems, works closely with indigenous translators to render her poems into K'iche', and is in the process of learning the language. Reading K'iche' translations of her work aloud during literary performances is one of the ways she continues to reclaim her paternal language and assert the importance of indigenous languages that have been historically suppressed.

In her words, poetry and translation have the power to “show that indigenous languages are alive...that we indigenous peoples are living cultures, organic, in constant transformation, not some object to be observed...[Poetry and translation] have the power to show that we are creators.”

From *Ri uk'u'x ri ab'aj / El corazón de la piedra* (Heart of the Stone)

Awech at we alaj b'e noya
tojtal rumal ri nuximilik,
ri q'ij ri xqaj lo ri qatat q'ij
xintaq che wulin ab'aj,
k'a k'o na retal ri ch'ich' ximib'al chi uqul waqan,
kamik maj chi jun kna'tajisanik
ka ak'al na ri anan
kopan che uya'ik sin nuwa
are ri' ksachan ta chech are'.

Esta carretera también es tuya hija
la pago mi esclavitud
el tiempo que bajo el padre sol
me obligaron a picar piedra
la seña de las cadenas en mis tobillos
ahora nadie se acuerda,
tu mama estaba patojita
me llegaba a dejar la comida
eso a ella no se le olvida.

This highway is also yours, my daughter,
my slave labor paid for it,
the time I spent under Father Sun
forced to break stones,

chains marking my ankles,
 now no one remembers,
 your mother was a child,
 she would bring me food,
 this she does not forget.

K'iche' translation by Manuel Raxulew

English translation by Gabriela Ramirez-Chavez

Nancy Naomi Carlson

The voices of Francophone poets of color—many hailing from the Caribbean or Africa—are often marginalized in France, and usually don't get the opportunity to be heard by English-speaking audiences. One such exception is Alain Mabanckou, from Congo-Brazzaville, who has been very successful in getting readers to pay attention to his prose, having twice been shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize and having been translated into close to twenty languages. The *Guardian* described him as “one of Africa’s greatest writers.” Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio said of him, “what captures our attention and moves us is his perspective on the madness and contradictions of postcolonial society.”

Indeed, Mabanckou's poetry is particularly urgent as he takes aim at corrupt African dictators, including his own, who revise their constitutions in order to stay in power for decades, as well as the civil wars that have plagued postcolonial Africa. Because of his outspokenness, Mabanckou has become persona non grata in his own country. An ardent believer in the regenerative power of nature, Mabanckou uses his poetic voice to rally others to save both our humanity and our planet.

Excerpts from *As Long as Trees Take Root in the Earth and Other Poems* (Seagull Books, 2021).

[long is the distance]

long is the distance
 that's the only way
 people can value
 the path

don't forget
 without birds

without trees
 without rivers
 no forest exists

longue est la distance
 ce n'est qu'ainsi
 que l'homme apprécie
 le chemin

ne pas oublier
 sans oiseaux
 sans arbres
 sans rivières
 il n'y a pas de forêt

[god turns his back on us/night]

god turns his back on us
 night plunges us into the whirlwind
 the hand that strikes
 belongs to a brother

we share
 forebears
 the Kingdom
 and funeral rites

dieu nous tourne le dos
 la nuit nous plonge dans le tourbillon
 la main qui frappe
 est celle d'un frère

nous avons en commun
 l'ancêtre
 le Royaume
 et les rites funéraires

[I'm not to blame]

I'm not to blame
 said the migratory bird
 I was gone for the winter
 my only crime
 is to sport the same
 plumage as those in my branch

nonetheless
 the birds of your kind
 have sinned in your name

je suis innocent
 dit l'oiseau migrateur
 j'étais en hivernage
 je n'ai pour grief
 que de porter le plumage
 de mon embranchement

qu'à cela ne tienne
 les oiseaux de ton espèce
 ont péché en ton nom

[shame on you]

shame on you for restricting me
 to this plot of land
 and handing me a tom-tom to beat

so take your hollowed-out Negritude
 carry it like a viaticum
 make sure you don't forget your assegai
 let alone your woven mat
 they expect you like this

clad in leopard skin

my only bonds
are the sum of all intersections
the echoes of Babel

honte à toi qui me cantonne
à ce lopin de terre
et me donne le tam-tam à battre

prends donc ta Négritude creuse
porte-la comme viatique
surtout n'oublie pas ta sagaie
encore moins ta natte
on t'attend ainsi
vêtu de peau de léopard

je n'ai pour attaches
que la somme des intersections
les échos de Babel

[there's more to say]

there's more to say about a grain of sand
than an elephant

freedom is on this side
make no mistake about it

the other world is the last of utopias
standing amidst the winds
here Paradise reaches its end

life's a contingency

il y a plus à dire sur un grain de sable
que sur un éléphant

la liberté est de ce côté
qu'on ne s'y trompe pas

l'autre monde est la dernière des utopies
dressées au milieu des vents
le Paradis s'achève ici

vivre est une contingence

[that day will come]

that day will come
when we'll finally know
that angels have no wings
except those hoisting human imagination toward manic heights

eyes open to everyday glow
it will be up to us to construct tomorrow's tale
the one we'll tell those who believe that angels have wings

viendra ce jour
où nous saurons enfin
que les anges n'ont pas d'ailes
sinon celles qui hissent l'imagination de l'homme vers les hauteurs de son
[égarement]

les yeux ouverts à la lueur diurne
ce sera à nous de bâtir la fable de demain
celle que nous conterons à ceux qui pensent que les anges ont des ailes

[the false prophets]

the false prophets summon Diop
whom they haven't read

the false prophets summon Fanon
who they haven't read

the false prophets summon Césaire
who they haven't read

les faux prophètes convoquent Diop
qui reste à lire

les faux prophètes convoquent Fanon
qui reste à lire

les faux prophètes convoquent Césaire
qui reste à lire

[and Humankind has claimed to be]

and Humankind has claimed to be the superior species
since time began
while day after day the tree laughs at this belief

extracts its wisdom's nectar
from the depths of the earth
swings its branches to signal Victory

remain human right until the end
as long as trees take root in the earth

et l'Homme se dit espèce supérieure
depuis la nuit des temps
pendant que l'arbre en rit à longueur de journée
soutire des profondeurs de la terre
le nectar de sa sagesse

balance ses branches en signe de Victoire

rester homme jusqu'au bout
tant que les arbres s'enracineront dans la terre

Suggested Questions:

1. How does translation intensify or mitigate poetry's urgency?
2. How do poets convey a sense of urgency or the theme of urgency formally?
3. Does translating “poems of urgency” alter your translation process?
4. What is your translation process when working on a poem when the author has produced/published two versions of it—say, one in Spanish and another in an Indigenous language—do you translate from both or one language?