EVENT TITLE: My Feet, Whose Shoes? Writing and Translating “The Other”

Event Description: Writers and translators of fiction often put themselves in the shoes of some "other"—someone of a different culture, gender, time period. How do we understand this "other" and represent them with sincerity and respect, balancing artistic expression against a risk of cultural appropriation? The Armenian author and translators from French and Yiddish of three books with cross-cultural themes, all newly released in English, explore the line between "writing what you know" and depicting "the other."

EVENT CATEGORY: Nonfiction Craft & Criticism

Event Organizer & Moderator
Alison M. Lewis: Alison M. Lewis has been a publishing professional for more than a dozen years, focusing on academic and independent press. She is currently the publisher and editor-in-chief at Frayed Edge Press, a small independent press located in Philadelphia.

Event Participants
Areg Azatyan: Areg Azatyan is an Armenian author of 6 works of fiction, all of which have been published by leading publishing houses in Armenia. He received the Presidential Youth Prize for Literature (2004), as well as Best Writer of the Year (2010) and several other international and national awards. As a filmmaker he has participated in a number of festivals, including Berlinale, Toronto, and Cannes. His novel, The Flying African has been translated into English by Nazareth Seferian and was recently published by Frayed Edge Press.

Laura Nagle: Laura Nagle is a freelance writer and translator based in Indiana. She is a 2020 ALTA Travel Fellow and the translator of Prosper Mérimée’s notorious 1827 hoax, Songs for the Gusle, published in 2023 by Frayed Edge Press. Her translations of short prose and poetry from French, Spanish, and Irish have appeared in numerous journals.

Yermiyahu Ahron Taub: Yermiyahu Ahron Taub is a poet, writer, and Yiddish literary translator. His most recent translations from the Yiddish are Dineh: An Autobiographical Novel by Ida Maze and Blessed Hands: Stories by Frume Halpern, the latter of which was published in 2023 by Frayed Edge Press. Taub

Opening Remarks and Housekeeping Announcements
[Approximately 4 minutes]

Welcome to “My Feet, Whose Shoes? Writing and Translating ‘The Other’.” A few reminders before we begin:

• For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let me [Alison] know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you. Please understand that our actual remarks and questions may deviate somewhat from the text prepared in advance.

• 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.

Welcome again to our session, “My Feet, Whose Shoes? Writing and Translating ‘The Other’.” I’m Alison Lewis, the publisher and editor-in-chief at Frayed Edge Press, a small independent press located in Philadelphia. I’d also like to introduce our panelists [see bio statements above].

Frayed Edge Press doesn’t have any limits on who we publish, we do particularly seek to publish marginalized voices of all kinds as well as translated works of literary merit, including those from minority languages, which have been overlooked or forgotten. We wanted to present this panel because a common theme emerged in all three of these recent works published by the press: writing and translating “the other” – those who are unlike ourselves, who differ from us in significant ways. In a broad sense, can authorial empathy be practiced without the ability to put oneself in someone else's shoes, regardless of who they are?
This dynamic becomes even more problematic when there is a power differential between the person writing and the person depicted (e.g., whites writing Black or Indigenous characters, men writing about women), but also comes into play when writing or translating a work set in a different time period or unfamiliar location.

**Participants will introduce their own work and state how they have approached the panel’s theme:**
[7-10 minutes each]

**Areg Azatyan:**
Good afternoon, everyone!

Before we embark on the adventure within the pages of *The Flying African*, a quick note: English isn't my first language, so you might catch a bit of an accent. Please bear with me, and feel free to ask if anything needs clarification.

Today's topic is "My Feet, Whose Shoes? Writing and Translating 'The Other.'" For writers and translators, the challenge often lies in stepping into the shoes of someone much different—whether it's a different culture, gender, or era. It's like weaving through a complex fabric of understanding and telling the story of someone beyond our usual circle. How do we do this without the risk of getting things wrong or misrepresenting the culture?

This challenge holds particular significance for me as an Armenian writer, and for translators working with French and Yiddish. The books we're talking about today, just translated into English, deal with a tricky balance—telling familiar stories while venturing into new and diverse experiences.

Several years ago, I began a journey that became the heart of *The Flying African*. It wasn't just a trip through Africa; it was about discovering untold stories, questioning common tales, and connecting seemingly different worlds.

For eight years, I remotely explored Africa—its landscapes, traditions, and varied communities. It wasn't just about geography; it was about diving into cultures, appreciating variety, and understanding the complexity of our world and existence.

Now, let me take you back to a particular moment that became the catalyst for this exploration. Several years ago, I was watching a football (soccer) match with
my dad on TV. It was the FIFA Confederations Cup game, Cameroon versus Colombia—a regular match or at least we thought so.

During the game, a Cameroonian player collapsed on the field. The situation got serious, and sadly, the player passed away.

It was my first time witnessing someone's death, and the shock stayed with me. My dad’s reaction was "Poor African guy, I believe he had a tough childhood and struggled a lot."

Those words, "Poor African guy," hit me hard. It wasn't just an explanation; it was a challenge. Little did my dad know that this response would kickstart an eight-year journey—a journey that went beyond continents and cultures.

This incident motivated me to write *The Flying African*, an attempt to share untold stories, challenge biases, and invite readers to explore the shared human experience beyond borders.

As I wrote, I struggled with balancing "writing what I know" and accurately describing experiences different from my own. It's not just about avoiding clichés; it's about creating stories that connect with truth and empathy. Writing this book, my goal was to connect my Armenian background with the rich colors of African cultures.

The book unfolds through fifty-four chapters, each serving as a vignette, enfolding the traveler's experiences in every country. Titled by the country's name, each perspective enriches the mosaic of our collective human journey.

To understand the reality that I wanted to show, I didn't stick to traditional research. I dove into the details of everyday life. It wasn't just about historical facts; it was about knowing the best ice cream spot, understanding train travel quirks, recognizing food differences, money exchange rates, and even being aware of specific hospitals. This hands-on method wasn't just a research trick; it was a dedication to being real, involving both physical and cultural exploration.

The essence of understanding others lies not just in reading or writing about them but in walking in their shoes. *The Flying African* became a journey through the ideas of people, the maps they drew in their minds, the conversations overheard in cafes, and the stories whispered in the corners of restaurants. It was a
commitment to not only learning about different cultures but living within them, experiencing the joys and challenges that shape daily life.

I found something new and wonderful in Africa. Despite struggles, there was a lot of joy. I saw smiles and hopes, proving that my dad's view of poverty was just one side of the story.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect was navigating the political landscape, especially in Africa. It's a continent rich in diversity, not only in its cultures but also in its political histories. The challenge was to stay true to the narratives while delving into the complexities of political issues, such as those in Somalia or Sudan. I didn't just avoid difficult topics; I faced them directly, recognized the details, and seamlessly integrated them into the story.

"The Other" walked alongside me as I delved into cultures, confronted biases, and explored the multifaceted stories that make up *The Flying African*. It symbolized the duality within—a foreigner who, through imagination, embraced the unfamiliar with a sense of belonging. In a way, it was the embodiment of the perpetual question: Can we truly understand "the other" without becoming "the other"?

I encourage you not just to read the words but to think about the teamwork in translating, the cultural insight of the translator, and the symbolic role of "The Other." Together, they create a rich collection of stories, prompting you to consider the delicate balance between reality and imagination, the known and the unknown.

Writing a book is a deeply personal endeavor, and when it comes to translating that work, the relationship with the translator is akin to a partnership. In Nazareth Seferian, I found not just a translator but a confidant—a person whom I trusted with the soul of my work.

Nazareth's journey, much like the narrative of *The Flying African*, is a story of diverse experiences and cultural intersections. Armenian born in India, he later made his home in the UK, journeyed through various countries in South and North America including Brazil and USA and eventually settled in Armenia. This unique travel trajectory mirrors our collaborative spirit, creating a synergy that goes beyond linguistic nuances.
Translating a work involves more than just converting words from one language to another. It's an intricate process of understanding the author's voice, capturing the nuances, and preserving the essence that makes the work unique. Nazareth was not just a translator; he became a confessor—a person with whom I could be 100% transparent about the intricacies of my narrative.

Our collaboration was a dynamic exchange—an interplay of ideas, perspectives, and a shared commitment to presenting the narrative in its truest form. Nazareth had the remarkable ability to infuse the right focus, the perfect blend of salt and pepper, making the narrative sharper and more to the point.

Today, as we explore The Flying African, I want to acknowledge the significant role Nazareth Seferian played in bringing this work to an English-speaking reader.

In conclusion, thanks for being here and listening. I look forward to hearing your thoughts in the Q&A. Please feel free to ask any question regarding my book and my journey. We're all part of this global picture we're creating together.

Laura Nagle:
In 1827, a strange little book was published anonymously in Strasbourg, France, under the title La Guzla. According to the preface, this was a collection of folk narratives gathered in “the former Illyrian Provinces”—parts of modern-day Croatia, Slovenia, Austria, Montenegro, and Italy—and translated into French by a returning traveler. The supposed translator peppered these folktales with copious footnotes for the benefit of his Western European readers, who would surely be unfamiliar with the region’s customs and language. He also included accounts of his own misadventures and his encounters with itinerant bards who accompanied their sung recitations of folklore on a single-stringed instrument, the gusle.

Almost none of that is true. La Guzla is a notorious literary hoax and an early work of Prosper Mérimée, the French author who is best known as a pioneer of the novella. Many of his works are still widely read by French speakers, and his novella Carmen is internationally famous as the basis for Bizet’s opera of the same name. As the author later explained, he wrote La Guzla when he was in his early twenties and could not afford to travel internationally. He once claimed that a friend had suggested writing books set in the countries they hoped to visit, then using any proceeds from publication to travel to those destinations and find out whether they had gotten anything right. One of the tales that appears in La Guzla
is an authentic (and frequently translated) folktale from the region; the rest are examples of fakelore—works of fiction designed in imitation of folklore and passed off as the real thing.

La Guzla did not sell enough copies to fund Mérimée’s longed-for journey to Croatia, but as a hoax, the book was wildly successful. Pushkin, apparently convinced that the tales were authentic, translated some of them into Russian. Worse still, a German scholar of South Slavic literature was so thoroughly fooled that he translated the tales back into what he assumed was the original language. He even claimed he could detect and reproduce the original meter and rhyme underlying the French “translations,” which read a bit like prose poetry.

The reason so many otherwise discerning readers were taken in by La Guzla is that the book’s content conforms to their preconceived notions about the region in which it is set. Mary Shelley, for example, wrote a glowing review praising its supposed authenticity even though she knew it to be a hoax. She wrote: “By a strong effort of the imagination, the young Parisian writes as if the mountains of Illyria had been the home of his childhood; the rustic and barbarous manners are not softened, nor the wild energy of the people tamed; and, if we trace any vestige of civilization, it merely arises from the absence of all that would shock our tastes or prejudices.”

Given this strange history, it’s worth asking why La Guzla is worth translating into English for the first time, nearly two centuries after its first publication. If the purpose of a translation were to spread dated stereotypes about the people of modern-day Croatia, this project would not have captured my interest. But I believe there is something far more complex happening in this book. At first glance, much of La Guzla would appear to be “punching down” at a culture that was perceived as less prestigious than the author’s. If someone were to read nothing but the main text of the fakelore, that reader might walk away from this book with the impression that it mocks people of religions and nationalities different from the author’s or that it uncritically presents a stereotyped, exoticized portrait of Eastern Europe from a Western European viewpoint.

To my mind, however, the heart of the book—and the best reason for introducing Méricée’s early work to a new audience today—is not the text of the fakelore but the subtext provided through the character of the “translator.” In his
supposed travel narratives and in the abundant, unhelpful, and glaringly inaccurate footnotes with which he continually interrupts his fakelore translations, he emerges as a recognizable archetype. This is a self-important Western European narrator so convinced of his inherent intellectual superiority that he compulsively undermines his own project. In the end, this book isn’t about its setting. It’s about the stories the early nineteenth-century French were telling themselves about their own cultural supremacy; it’s a portrait of chauvinism.

On the surface, then, it may seem as though Mérimée was “punching down” at the putative subjects of the book, but on a deeper level, he consistently “punched sideways” at his own ignorance about the languages and cultures of the region in question and “punched up” at his gullible readership. In fact, thirteen years after the initial publication of *La Guzla*, Mérimée wrote the foreword to a new edition, in which he acknowledged his authorship and expressed disappointment in how quick prominent writers and academics had been to fall for what he considered an obvious hoax.

While working on my translation, titled *Songs for the Gusle*, I did not worry about today’s readers pulling a Pushkin and taking these stories at face value. For one thing, this book’s reputation precedes it; *La Guzla* is better known today, even among French speakers, for its bizarre history than for its content. I also provide context in a translator’s note, and further context is readily available online; factual information about faraway places that would have required effortful research two centuries ago is readily available to us today. But most of all, I am trusting readers to use their critical thinking skills, to discern between the narrator’s and the author’s viewpoints, and to recognize that a fictional character’s attitudes and behaviors, whether good or bad, are not intended to be prescriptive.

What lessons might a book like this hold for writers today? Some of our terminology may be new—I doubt Mérimée thought of himself as “punching” in any particular direction—but the questions we ask ourselves about how to represent people whose identities are different from ours are fundamentally the same questions that writers and translators have been exploring for centuries. We have a great deal to learn from the ways previous generations have written about “the other,” whether they conceived of their writings as realism or satire,
and whether or not they approached their projects with self-awareness, kindness, curiosity, and empathy.

We can, of course, read narratives from the past with an eye to the elements we’d like to emulate and the pitfalls we hope to avoid. I’d argue, too, that we gain a better understanding of our own concerns about appropriation and respectful representation when we view those concerns as part of a conversation that has been ongoing throughout the history of literature rather than as a reckoning unique to our moment.

Yermiyahu Ahron Taub: 
In today’s politically charged climate, writing about "the other", or rather "another other" if one is oneself an “other” (or “others”), can be a fraught, perhaps even dangerous, move. One misplaced step can result in scorn or derision or, worse, charges of insensitivity, inaccuracy, or appropriation. Such sentiments can be rapidly amplified on social media with a speed never before experienced in human history. For a writer, someone for whom the very acts of writing and then bringing that writing out into the world may already elicit vulnerability, the added risk of entering today’s high-stakes public sphere can be potentially debilitating.

And yet it goes without saying to this audience but nonetheless bears repeating, art is born of risk, and all writers, regardless of time period, have had to move forward with their art, after weighing the risks involved. When has writing been without peril? Today, here, castigation, or worse, book bans. In other times and places, book burnings, imprisonment, torture, sham trials, death. It is perhaps that very element of risk that makes art into art. And there is something in the very act of imagining that heralds the path to, that nurtures the flame of, the inexplicable, the unpredictable force that is art.

In Blessed Hands: Stories, Frume Halpern offers a compelling approach, perhaps influenced by the Communist movement of the early to mid-twentieth century yet ultimately uniquely her own, in representing the other. These stories were chiefly published in Yiddish-language publications associated with that movement and assembled in book form by admirers and advocates of her writing. The Yiddish-language original, Gebenshte hent: dersteylungen, was published by IKUF
farlag in 1963. Halpern's lens was focused on the plights of the marginalized in the broadest sense. Hers was not a narrow lens.

Simply put, her protagonists are quite varied. We meet Bashe who believed "she was fated to be one of the forgotten ones" in life and Pietro, who is enchanted by a building in the process of rising up to the heavens, and who never despairs of finding the right girl, the one who will allow him to experience true happiness as he’s seen portrayed onscreen at the movies. In “In the Stillness of the Night,” Halpern writes about a man losing his hearing, and in “They Came to See Each Other,” about two blind folks who fall in love. Long before the term "anorexia nervosa" entered the mainstream lexicon, Halpern was writing in “Clara and Mary” about two girls, one Jewish and one (non-Jewish) Puerto Rican, forming a cross-cultural bond in a public hospital ward, while at risk of starving themselves to death. A number of Halpern's stories such as “Christopher, Seated Until the End” and “Three Apples, Rolling” feature the life struggles of African-American protagonists. An extraordinarily powerful story toward the end of the collection, “The Last Breakfast,” is about lynching in which that word is never mentioned. What in lesser hands might easily have become "a gallery of unfortunates" is lifted, indeed transformed, here by freshness of detail, compelling back stories, and an exquisite sense of empathy and love for her characters.

In the ethos of 20th-century proletarian literature, workers, broadly defined, were the focus of the artistic eye, indeed of an entire artistic movement. Halpern’s protagonists were not only the proletariat in a strictly Marxist formulation. To be sure, there are those who work in workshops (what some might call sweatshops) and factories, but there is also a hairdresser, a shoemaker, an elevator man, and a maid. All work with their hands. Placed in an expansive leftist framework, Halpern's choices of setting for her protagonists make absolute sense. This is the literature of solidarity, of reaching beyond oneself and across the barriers of difference, to form connection, to build support, to find possibility in bridgebuilding.

Yet, Halpern's portrayal of those whose identities differed from her own were not born solely out of ideological commitment. They also appear to have been anchored in her work in the workshops of her day and then later as a masseuse in the Bronx Hospital. Indeed, it is in stories set in hospital wards that we see
Halpern's life experience put to powerful use. Reb Leyzer, in "In the Garden of Eden," hovers between life and death as Halpern charts his disintegrating hold on the present ... and on his sense of his own body. “The Punishment” charts the circuitous life path of one Miss Murray, a nurse equally vehement in her hatred of African-Americans and Jews.

Similarly, nurses and nursing play a key role in this collection. For example, we learn that Clara, one of the aforementioned title protagonists of “Clara and Mary” starving herself to death, had always wanted to be a nurse only to be thwarted from her life goal by antisemitism, and in “The Graduation,” a nurse arrives to the home of unwanted baby Thelma to instruct her bitterly unhappy parents on the raising of a child. The work of healing is never uncomplicated, and Halpern is adept at teasing out the power dynamics of those who have made it their life’s work.

This connection to nursing may extend farther back than her work in the Bronx Hospital. Halpern’s granddaughter-in-law, Judith Linn, recalls hearing that Halpern had studied to be a nurse in Europe but couldn’t practice in the United States due to the educational requirements and language barrier. As a result, she moved into massage therapy.

Importantly, Halpern infuses her social consciousness—her awareness of class, gender, and race constructs, “intersectionality” before the term was in usage—in eloquent, sometimes unexpected, ways. Ber Green, in a 1966 appreciation of Halpern published the year after her death, noted that she worked in the workshops when she first immigrated to the United States. That work experience is also present in the book. Work stoppage in the factories plays a pivotal role in “The Mute Mother” in a story not otherwise centered around factories. On the other side of the class struggle, the scathingly portrayed “Big Boss” owns a network of factories that funnel his philanthropic endeavors ... and the self-glorification of his own colossal ego. The challenges facing girls and women laboring in workshops figures in several stories such as “Comrade Bashe” and “Thrice Encountered.” Thus, while Halpern reached beyond the framework of her identity and indeed presented characters doing the same, her portrayals have the texture of veritas and the power of emotional truth.
Reading, translating, and immersing oneself in a work of another era always brings its own challenges. Indeed, for a translator, selecting an earlier text to which to devote so much time and energy is the first (and one of the largest) concerns. Given the distance and space, will the text grab and sustain the reader’s attention? An earlier text’s sensibilities, expectations, politics, and mores can seem different, sometimes, jarringly so, from one’s own. For example, could the extremely intimate conversation between a convalescent home nurse, Miss Gold, and a patient, Gdaleyh, both survivors of unspeakable atrocity, have been mapped in quite the same way in contemporary writing or society with its emphasis on “maintaining boundaries,” if it even happened at all? Perhaps. Still, one notices. Even if one cannot entirely suspend the tropes of one’s own time, one can engage and connect and find meaning in the texts of another one.

Frume Halpern’s only book, written with what the writer Rhea Tregebov, in a blurb on the book’s behalf, called “radical compassion,” has much to say about exploring the lives of others beyond a narrowly constructed, readily-identifiable self. Far from shying away from writing about others, Halpern embraced it. And in that embrace, she created nuanced, deeply moving portraits for a Yiddish-language readership. She wrote with clarity and lyricism and sometimes with a sense of experimentation, exploring pain, but also beauty and humor and valiancy in lives not often seen, especially by her readers. And Halpern brought her own experiences of privation and suffering, yes, but also, and perhaps principally, those as a healer, one with a gaze and a lens that was both clinical and compassionate, clear-eyed and tender, and not always bound by the strictures of narrative naturalism or even (socialist) realism.

While anchored in artistic traditions of a bygone era, Frume Halpern’s restorative vision and voice were uniquely her own, and it is my hope that they will reverberate across the decades to resonate now with new English-language readers today in these dark and troubled times. Even if the particular movement that nurtured and inspired her is largely, if not entirely, gone from the country, the progressive values of empowerment, coalition-building, and collective struggles for, as it is said in Yiddish, a shenere un besere velt, a better and more beautiful world, certainly are not. Perhaps Halpern’s authorial courage and determination, her insistence on social commitment coupled with artistic freedom, can inspire new writers today anchored in progressive literary praxis to
brave and withstand the potential castigations of new media. Perhaps her authorial strategies can offer a path toward a sphere of writerly examination that is both rooted in self and community and also looks to, and does not shy away from, worlds that are beyond them.

**Moderator Questions**
[Approximately 30 minutes]
[DRAFT questions below; these can be adjusted as needed.]

1) A common piece of advice given to creative writers is to “write what you know.” But I’m sure we can all give examples of how this focus can quickly descend into solipsism, which frankly is not very interesting. Fiction, by definition, is not autobiography or reportage. Good, interesting fiction often presents something that is both familiar and foreign at the same time – something that we can both relate to personally while also gaining insight into people, places, and situations which are outside of our own experiences. How do you manage this tightrope in your own work – balancing what you know/who you are with depicting “the other”?

2) Are there genres that lend themselves especially well (or poorly) to thoughtful and respectful writing about “the other”?

3) Currently some critics have been saying that it is never appropriate for a writer to depict “others”, especially those who suffer forms of oppression that the author/translator does not. This may make sense on some level, but what might be lost when we limit ourselves to depicting only those who are similar to us? How can we respectfully represent the other, and avoid the risks of cultural appropriation or furthering oppressions?

4) What differences and commonalities do you see between writing about an “other” who is geographically distant from the author vs. writing about people of different identities living in the author’s own country or community?

5) When writing or translating about the past, we may find that our desire to avoid doing harm in the present is in conflict with our desire to represent the past faithfully. How do we balance these two competing priorities? Do we handle these questions differently depending on our role (as writer or translator), or are we consistent in our approach?
Q&A:
[Questions from the audience – 10-15 minutes]

Before we open up to audience questions, I’d like to invite everyone to come to our author/translator meet & greets at FEP table T1635 in the exhibits area, immediately following this session.