**Event Title**

**From the French but not from France: A Bilingual Reading of Francophone Poems, Sponsored by ALTA**

**Event Description**

Many of the poets who claim the French language and handle it in expansive ways come from non-French cultural backgrounds. Five translators of francophone poetry will read and discuss their translations of poets from Syria, Haiti, Algeria, Palestine, and Côte d’Ivoire who use French (and, through translation, English) and inflect it with a wider diversity of non-French cultural, exilic, and decolonial concerns, among others.

**Participants**

**Kareem James Abu-Zeid** (joining remotely) is an award-winning translator of texts in Arabic, French, and German into English, most recently Olivia Elías’s *Chaos, Crossing*, and Najwan Darwish’s *Exhausted on the Cross*, which was a finalist for the 2022 PEN America Award for Poetry in Translation.

**Conor Bracken** (moderator) is a US-born and -based poet and translator. He is the author, most recently, of *The Enemy of My Enemy is Me*, and the translator of Jean D’Amérique’s *No way in the Skin without this Bloody Embrace*, which was a finalist for the 2023 PEN America Award for Poetry in Translation.

**Hélène Cardona** (joining remotely), poet, translator, actor, and linguist, has authored 8 titles (5 translated). Her collection *Life in Suspension* won the Independent Press Award. Her translation *The Abduction* by Maram Al-Masri won an Albertine and FACE Foundation Prize and *Beyond Elsewhere* by Gabriel Arnou-Laujeac won a Hemingway Grant.

**Nancy Naomi Carlson**, twice an NEA translation grantee, has authored fourteen titles (nine translated). Her collection *An Infusion of Violets* was named “New & Noteworthy” by *The New York Times* in 2019 and her translation of Khal Torabully’s *Cargo Hold of Stars* won the 2022 Oxford-Weidenfeld Translation Prize.

**Todd Fredson** is a poet, a critic, and a translator of Afro-francophone and West African literature. His first collection, *The Crucifix-Blocks*, won the Patricia Bibby First Book Award, and his most recent translation, *Zakwato & Loglédou’s Peril* by Bété poet Azo Vauguy, is longlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Barrios Translation Prize.
Outline
Opening remarks from moderator (2min)
Reading by Todd Fredson (10min)
Reading by Kareem James Abu-Zeid (10min)
Reading by Nancy Naomi Carlson (10min)
Reading by Hélène Cardona (10min)
Reading by Conor Bracken (10min)
Q&A (10-20min)
Wrap-up/thank you (1min)
Moderator Opening Remarks
Hi everyone, and welcome to our reading, entitled From the French but not from France: A Bilingual Reading of Francophone Poems. Thanks to the American Literary Translators’ Association for sponsoring us, and for y’all to being here. 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.

It’s an honor to be up here with Kareem James Abu Zeid and Hélène Cardona, who are both joining us via Zoom, as well as Nancy Naomi Carlson, and Todd Fredson. I’m Conor Bracken, and I’m the moderator as well as a reader. Each of us will start by introducing the poet or poets we’ve translated and their work, making a particular point of how the inflect the French language with their own intellectual and cultural viewpoints; then, we’ll read a few poems in the original French and in translation. Before each translator reads, I’ll introduce them with a brief bio, and at the end we’ll finish with an audience Q & A. We’ll begin with Kareem.

Participant Remarks

Todd Fredson is a poet, a critic, and a translator of Afro-francophone and West African literature. His first collection, The Crucifix-Blocks, won the Patricia Bibby First Book Award, and his most recent translation, Zakwato & Loglédou’s Peril by Bété poet Azo Vauguy, is longlisted for the National Book Critics Circle Barrios Translation Prize.

I’m excited for all the work that we get to see and hear today, and for the opportunity to share alongside these other language workers. I’m going to share work from two West African poets that I’ve worked with.
Both poets are Ivorian—from Cote d’Ivoire—(take the value of nationality however you will)—but the poets represent very different aesthetic, conceptual, and even ideological backgrounds.

First, Tanella Boni. The author of over 30 books, including 14 poetry collections, she is one of the most prominent figures in modern African literature.

Her first collection translated into English was *The future has an appointment with the dawn*, which I published in 2018 with the African Poetry Book Series from the University of Nebraska. The poems I will read today are from her 2017 collection *Là où il fait si clair en moi*, which won the Prix Theophile Gautier from the French Academy. I published the translation, *There where it’s so bright in me*, in 2022, also as part of the African Poetry Book Series.

*There where it’s so bright in me* includes 7 sections or long poems, each of which is individually titled. Each long poem is made of a series of untitled lyrics. Nowhere is there punctuation, save for the period that concludes the last line of each long poem.

Here, Boni reads three poems. I’ll follow each with the translation.

The first two are from late in the book’s first long poem, “Words Are My Preferred Weapons.”

J’ai emprunté un autre quart de chemin
C’est ici que dorment les miens
Dans leur demeure éternelle
Devant la maison où résonnent encore
Leurs paroles qui défient le temps
Un manguier cinquantenaire
Préserve les trésors de ma mémoire

Ici je reconnais le moindre parfum
Le moindre gazouillis d’oiseau
Quand le soleil est au zénith
Et la petite musique qui m’ouvre l’esprit
Comme eau de source à laquelle je m’abreuve
Quand s’annoncent les tempêtes
Et les grands changements climatiques
I borrowed a quarter of the pathway
And this is where my own take their rest
Dwelling eternally
In front of the house where their words
Resonate in defiance of time
A fifty-year old mango tree
Preserves the treasures of my memory

Here I recognize the subtlest perfume
The slightest chirping
When the sun is at its high point
The tiny music opens me to the spirit
I drink from it as if from spring water
As the storms announce themselves
And the dramatically shifting climate

This second concludes that first long poem.

À que cette voix
Si ce n’est à moi
Qui arpente
Un monde muet
Qui ne m’a jamais rien dit de vrai
Sauf la leçon que j’ai apprise de la vie

Partager les maux et les joies
De ceux qui n’auraient pas de voix

Je n’ai pas la chance d’être un porte-voix
Il aurait fallu que ma voix porte si loin
Du soleil levant
Jusqu’aux ombres crépusculaires
Couchées sur le rebord de la nuit à venir.
Whose voice is that
But mine
Slinking through
A mute world
Voice that has never told me anything more true
Than what living itself has taught me

To share the joy and pain
Of those whose voices go unheard

I don’t have the chance to be a mouthpiece
My voice should have carried so far
From the rising sun
To the shadows deepening
On the edge of the night to come.

This final excerpt is from the second long poem, “The Path of Ephemeral Lives.”

Je découvre la vérité du monde
Inégal
Fissuré fêlé lézardé
Le monde que je n’ai jamais imaginé
À mes risques et périls
Ni plus beau ni plus laid
J’aurais eu si peu de choses à dire
J’aurais écrit des poèmes d’amour
Pour chanter la joie de vivre

Parfois se désagrège la joie
Comme ailes d’un papillon
Pris au piège de la vie
La joie de vivre butée
Contre les cloisons
Les prisons et autres barbelés
Qui taisent leurs noms
Jusqu’à ce que la mort
Entende des cris
I discover the truth of the world
Unequal
Fractured broken-down cracked
The world that I
Would never have imagined
No beauty or ugliness just transaction
I would have had so little to say
I would have written love poems
Sang the joys of living

But sometimes joy falls apart
Like butterfly wings
Gaffled in life’s schemes
The joy of living batters
Against the walls
The prisons the barbed wires
That hold the names under
Until their cries
Hail death

Prying at the complexities of difference, Boni honors a fairly cosmopolitan point of view.
The other poet here, Azo Vauguy, offers his vision through a more local lens.
Considered a neo-oralist by Ivorian peers, Vauguy regarded himself a Bété poet.
The Bété are an “ethnic group” in the south of Côte d’Ivoire. In his work, Vauguy uses a figure from Bété mythology, Zakwato, to address the neocolonial rupture—civil wars and political violence—that both writers lived through in the first decade of the millennium.

The video of Vauguy comes from our visit at an ice cream shop in Yopougon, a quartier of Abidjan, the country’s largest city. The district is Vauguy’s home in Abidjan, and it saw some of the city’s most intense fighting.

You’ll hear a lot of ambient noise. You’ll also hear the term Bagnon, which is Bété for “the most beautiful man.” It refers to Zakwato.

ZAKWATO!
Les temps, à cause de la fourberie des hommes, ont enterré mon nom au cimetière des gueux. Les temps, à cause de la méchanceté des hommes, ont enfoui mes exploits dans l’abîme de l’oubli. Les temps, à cause de l’ingratitude des hommes, ont terni l’éclat de l’écrin qui couve ma célébrité.

ZAKWATO !


ZAKWATO !

Je suis l’éternité !!!
Peuple d’Éburnie : Wooya !
Voici le Bagnon
Gens de mon pays : Wooya !
Voici l’homme du refus
Voici l’homme de la rupture
Voici l’homme qui porte, depuis le berceau, les guirlandes de la vérité
Peuple d’Éburnie : Wooa !
Voici le Bagnon

Ce jour-là, il pleuvait. Il pleuvait, pleuvait, pleuvait. Il pleuvait comme cela n’avait jamais été il y a des milliers de gerbes de soleils. Il pleuvait, pleuvait, pleuvait jusqu’à crever l’œil du ver de terre ! Il pleuvait. Le ciel ayant long-temps humé tous les péchés de la terre pleurait. Le ciel pleurait.

When Vauguy addresses the Peuple d’Éburnie, he is using an alternative name for Côte d’Ivoire, or the Ivory Coast, which is of course a French Colonial designation. Really, Éburnie is a little more specific, though; it is meant to invoke a cultural representation of the south, specifically, and can be understood to exclude the north of the country from the national imaginary.

ZAKWATO!
Time, because of deceitful men, has buried my name in the beggar’s cemetery. Time, because of the wickedness of men, has buried my exploits in oblivion’s abyss. Time, because of the ingratitude of men, has tarnished the splendor of the shell from which my renown hatches.

ZAKWATO!

I am Zakwato, father of courage. Even reduced to ash, I rediscover myself in the waves of the oceans. Metamorphosis! Me-ta-mor-phose, scab-moth of the oceans! It is in these tests of modesty that I show my bravery, that my genius expresses itself valiantly. I am valor.

ZAKWATO!

I am eternity!!!
People of Éburnie: Woooo!
Here is Bagnon
People of my country: Woooo!
Here is the man of refusal
Here is the man at odds
Here is the man who carries, since
the cradle, the garlands of truth
People of Éburnie: Wooo!
Here is Bagnon

On this day, it rained. It rained, rained, rained. It rained like there had never been the thousand sheaves of sun. It rained, rained, rained until it had blinded the eye of the earthworm! It rained. The sky having long inhaled all the sins the earth had cried. The sky wept.

This begins the long poem Zakwato: So that my Land never sleeps again, published in the wake of the first Ivorian civil war. The character of Zakwato carries on, transforming and flying into the land of the dead with the sun on his back, becoming the speaker in Loglêdou’s Peril: Journey through the country of lost sight, which is a lyric outburst, a collection that followed further political violence. Action Books published this double-translation, Zakwato & Logledou’s Peril, in 2023.

And we’ll leave it there for now. Thank you for your time…
Kareem James Abu-Zeid is an award-winning translator of texts in Arabic, French, and German into English, most recently Olivia Elias’s *Chaos, Crossing*, and Najwan Darwish’s *Exhausted on the Cross*, which was a finalist for the 2022 PEN America Award for Poetry in Translation.

I’ll begin by briefly introducing Olivia Elias, keeping it to under 2 minutes. I’ll start with her biography (how she was exiled from Palestine at age 4 to Lebanon and then moved to Quebec and then to France), and link that to her relationship with the French language, and also connect her not only to Francophone writers but Palestinian diaspora writers.

After that, I’ll read the poems. The first one (“Call”) will be in French and English, the remaining only in English. The poems are below.
Appel

18 ans la mer pour horizon
si longtemps a rêvé de déployer son feuillage
de prendre la mesure de ses pas
de même que la terre ne peut contenir
la sève chaque printemps grandit l’appel

18 ans la mer pour horizon
enfin obéir au commandement
lancer les dés du destin
et traverser le mur liquide

Call

18 years old the sea for horizon
for so long dreaming of unfurling his foliage
taking stock of his steps

and just as the earth cannot contain
the sap each spring the call keeps growing

18 years old the sea for horizon

finally to obey the command
roll the dice
and cross the liquid wall
Barca Nostra, 19 December 2019

Their report cards pinned to their chests will not have saved them pathetic passports barely good enough for paper balls

loaded dice error message this world is not their home the white border closed to the children of the rusty trawler the words are absent

only want to pray & bow down before the fallen children in the field of honor of the struggle for a good life their report cards pinned to their chests posthumous decorations night after night in the Mediterranean Sea in the middle of a tablecloth of paper funeral flowers a boat wanders off course and sinks this world is not their home forever closed the white border
Flame of Fire

I was born
in this
eruptive time
when my country’s
name was changed

I was born
in this
seismic time
that engulfed
even the name
of my father
and his father’s father

the land
is still shaking
and the prison’s shadow
grows longer

I grew up
on the volcano
of a land of atonement
a land chosen
by a God who emerged
from a burning bush
eruptions of blood
still light up the savage night

how much longer
must body and soul
remain
in the flame of fire?
A Scientific Approach

The adieus goodbyes see-you-soons they’re not for me don’t
know what will happen once
the Gate’s walked through & closes again
some were away a few days & never could see the orange trees
their mothers again suddenly declared aliens on their own land

some fell asleep & never woke up look for those who were asleep their whole lives it doesn’t make much difference better therefore to take a scientific approach & remain vigilant
Such Slow Birth

Two cycles intersect
cycle of twilight deepening
toward the black moon
cycle of transformations ripening

I opened *The Book of the Way and its Virtue*
“To attain complete emptiness is to settle firmly in rest”

as a child I had this knowledge
& didn’t know how precious it was
handed down by village elders

sitting on their doorsteps
surrounded by beauty they offered
their faces like old cats in the sun

time now to drag my chair out
in front of the door
Nancy Naomi Carlson, twice an NEA translation grantee, has authored fourteen titles (nine translated). Her collection *An Infusion of Violets* was named “New & Noteworthy” by *The New York Times* in 2019 and her translation of Khal Torabully’s *Cargo Hold of Stars* won the 2022 Oxford-Weidenfeld Translation Prize.

Unlike some of the authors we’re featuring today who write in French, Samira Negrouche, born in Algeria, stands out because she still lives and works in Algeria. Hers is not a poetry of geographical exile, but one might say hers is a poetry of personal exile, as she is not free to truly express who she is while still calling Algiers her home. She tends to use ambiguous, gender-free pronouns, which create, of course, a challenge for the translator, which might be something we can talk about later, though I don’t really have good answers. Hers is definitely a poetry of decolonialization, as she represents a new generation of Maghrebin francophone poets who have chosen to write in French, even though many have been schooled in Arabic. (She is an exception, as French is still the language of higher education for the sciences, and she has a degree in medicine, but has privileged her writing over practicing as a doctor.) How does she justify writing in French, the language of the colonizer? She compares the trauma inflicted on Algeria to a rape, and just like rape victims carry foreign DNA in their bodies, French is still a part of her. She is adamant that her French is an *Algerian* French—a French that has expanded to included influences from earlier dynasties that have come and gone in this region. In the poem I’ll be reading, she introduces the enigmatic word “Solio,” which isn’t French and carries multiple meanings. In Esperanto it means “threshold.” It is reminiscent of the Spanish “sol,” meaning “sun” and “solium” in Latin, meaning “seat” and “throne.” It’s also a word used by the griots of West Africa and their oral tradition, when they ask for the audience’s attention.
I’ll read one section from Negrouche’s *Traces/ Traces*, actually called “#11.” *Traces* represents a collaboration between Negrouche and a choreographer, Fatou Cissé, and is based around the theme of movement. The “I” of the poems is universal and contains multitudes, crisscrossing time and space.

In the space between us, there’s so much.
There’s what’s said and never will be said.
There’s what’s written and never will be written.
There’s what’s thought, there’s also what’s ignored.

In the space between us, there’s a flock of impossibles like birdsong we can’t transcribe.

There’s the weight of time, there’s the weight of histories we don’t share.

*Dans l’espace entre nous, il y a beaucoup.*
*Il y a ce qui est dit et ce qui ne le sera jamais.*
*Il y a ce qui est écrit et ce qui ne le sera jamais.*
*Il y a ce qui est pensé, il y a aussi ce qui est négligé.*

*Dans l’espace entre nous, il y a une nuée d’impossibles comme chants d’oiseaux que nous ne savons pas retranscrire.*

*Il y a le poids du temps, il y a le poids des histoires, que nous ne partageons pas.*
In the space between us, there are also the accidents overwhelming us, those that sometimes open a door. We sometimes see this door and sometimes choose to pass through.

If I speak to you, I speak through what we lack. This lack is our chance, the only true excuse for venturing out on the road. The impulse comes from what we call instinct, virus, inner voice… But wouldn’t we most want to bring to life what we lack?

We draw lines where they weigh us down.

Dans l’espace entre nous, il y a aussi les accidents qui nous submergent, ceux qui ouvrent parfois une porte. Cette porte, nous la voyons parfois, nous choisissons parfois de l’emprunter.

Si je te parle, c’est à partir de ce qui nous manque que je te parle. Ce manque est notre chance, le seul véritable prétexte pour se risquer à la route. L’impulsion vient de ce que nous appelons : l’instinct, le virus, la passion, la petite voix.... Mais, n’est-ce pas ce qui nous manque que nous aimerions surtout faire exister ?
Nous dessinons des lignes là où elles nous pèsent.

And because we drew them, now we can erase them, letting the sea return to its swaying.

I came from an earlier time to remind you of the promise of dawn. Every child is the child of the renewed dawn who will teach us again the profound Song the intimate rhythm of our cells.

I came from that time that amasses horizons and sifts through them, one by one, with care giving each its measure.

Et parce que nous les avons dessinées, nous pouvons à présent les effacer et rendre à la mer son balancement paisible.

Je suis venue d’un temps précoce te rappeler la promesse de l’aube. Tout enfant est l’enfant de l’aube renouvelée celui qui nous réapprendra le Chant profond le rythme intime de nos cellules.
Je suis venue de ce temps qui accumule les horizons et les tamise, un à un, avec soin qui donne à chacun sa mesure.

I came from the Algiers door to reach the peak of Toubkal.
I came from the manuscripts of Timbuktu bringing the word to the sages of Kilimanjaro.
I came from the N’Djamena door I almost got sunstroke in Cotonou.
I was madly in love in Zanzibar.
I came through the Cape Town door unable to read the meaning of stars
I dreamt of crossing that triangle that could take me from Cairo to Saguia el Hamra.

I entered through the Gorée door one hundred times where I left a rosary of tears.

Je suis venue de la porte d’Alger pour rejoindre le sommet du Toubkal.
Je suis venue des écritures de Tombouctou pour apporter la parole aux sages du Kilimandjaro.
Je suis venue de la porte de N’Ndjamena
j’ai frôlé l’insolation à Cotonou.
J’ai aimé follement à Zanzibar.
Je suis venue par la porte de Cape Town
ne sachant lire le sens des étoiles
j’ai rêvé de traverser ce triangle
qui puisse me porter du Caire
à la Seguia el Hamra.

Je suis entrée cent fois par la porte de Gorée
où j’ai laissé un chapelet de larmes.

I entered through Gorée where I tried to come back to life.

Solio…
I entered through so many doors
passed through so much of myself.

Solio…
Everywhere I was told about wounds
and pardons
those we no longer wait for
those that one day will come
those we’ll pretend not to owe.

People often spoke to me straight in the eyes.
Je suis entrée par Gorée où j’ai cherché à reprendre vie.

Solio...
Je suis entrée par tant de portes
ai traversé tant de moi-même.

Solio...
Partout, on m’a parlé de blessures
et de pardons
ceux qu’on n’attend plus
ceux qui viendront un jour
ceux qu’on fera semblant de ne pas devoir.

On m’a beaucoup parlé dans les yeux.

Solio…
I came back from my crossing to share my last prayer
with you
Solio…
God is a black woman with legs covered in soot
Solio…
make sure to honor these soot-covered legs
Solio…
and so, you will be.

Solio...
Je suis revenue de ma traversée pour te dire ma dernière
Hélène Cardona poet, translator, actor, and linguist, has authored 8 titles (5 translated). Her collection *Life in Suspension* won the Independent Press Award. Her translation *The Abduction* by Maram Al-Masri won an Albertine and FACE Foundation Prize and *Beyond Elsewhere* by Gabriel Arnou-Laujeac won a Hemingway Grant.

Hélène Cardona will read from her translation from French of the work of one of poetry’s most innovative voices: Franco-Syrian poet Maram Al-Masri and introduce Maram and *The Abduction.*

She will share poems expressing a diverse range of perspectives, from feminist to humanistic, mystical, political, war, exile and freedom. She will discuss Al-Masri’s *The Abduction* (White Pine Press 2023, winner of an Albertine and FACE Foundation Prize) as well as working directly with the poet. *The Abduction,* Maram Al-Masri’s unflinching, heartbreaking collection, was published in 2015 (*Le Rapt*) by Bruno Doucey in Paris in a bilingual edition with Al-Masri writing both the Arabic and French. *The Abduction* refers to an autobiographical event in Al-Masri’s life. When, as a young Arab woman living in France, she decides to separate from her husband with whom she has a child, the father kidnaps the baby and returns to Syria. This is the story of a woman denied the basic right to raise her child. Al-Masri won’t see her son again for thirteen years.

These are haunting poems of love, despair, and hope. It is a delicate and powerful book on intimacy, a mother’s rights, war, exile, and freedom. A personal tragedy, it also encompasses the global rights of women and children as well as the fate of immigrants and refugees in exile.

Hélène will read the following poems:

“With these two hands”
“I sent you:
“At my door, two suitcases”
“The world is hard, my son”
“To love”
“The Bread of Letters”

The poems are in full below.

With these two hands

With these two hands
I prepare your suitcase
your father tells me
he’s going to take you on a short trip
to a city by the sea

in your suitcase I pack
your finest clothes
for my little one goes for a walk by the sea

I also pack
cakes you love
a water bottle
and everything you might need
for my little one goes for a walk by the sea

with these two hands
I place you in your stroller
happy
for my little one goes for a walk by the sea

the first night passed
and to this day
my little one’s stroller has not returned

I sent you
I sent you
my love
by mail
I fashioned it into small toys
so you could play
I fashioned it into a woolen polo shirt
so you’d be warm.

I sent you my love
by mail
I traded it for two boxes of aspirin
toothbrush
cakes, chocolates
a bicycle
Did you receive the package?
At my door, two suitcases
At my door, two suitcases
and a young man
tall and slim
dark brown
hesitant like one who has lost his way

At my door, two worn suitcases
like dock workers’ clothes
in the port of a poor city

they carry the scent of distant lands
memories
histories
like a prisoner’s chains

a young, dark brown man
with black hair
his black eyes
aswim in a white sea

he knocks on the door
of my heart
The world is hard, my son

The world is hard, my son
hard as a machine gun magazine
hard as the walls of a detention center
hard as the look of contempt
I didn’t warn you to wait before coming to join me
I didn’t warn you, little plants
get easily trampled
I didn’t warn you, here you must be strong
here they like diplomas
they like bank accounts
I warn you, the drowned
cannot save
the drowning

Immigrant
you will always be
in the crosshairs of suspicion
I didn’t warn you, immigrants arrive fragile
as infants

To love
To love
is to give another
the possibility of doing without you
To love, it is to prepare yourself
to be abandoned
The Bread of Letters

I
Who will blame the trees
when they lose their leaves?
who will accuse the sea of abandoning shells on the sand?

I, mother-woman, woman-mother
with two breasts for pleasure
and two breasts for maternity
who give the milk of music
tell stories
explain games
light up feelings
and the grammar of thoughts
I, woman of delight
and tenderness
virtuous and sinful
mature and childlike
with my mouth
I feed the bread of letters
consonants and vowels
sentences, synonyms and comparisons.

Who will accuse me
of making a gift of my body
to love?

II

The act of writing
isn’t it a scandalous act in itself?

To write
is learning to know our most intimate thoughts

Yes I am scandalous
because I show my truth and my nakedness of woman

Yes I am scandalous
because I scream my sorrow and my hope
my desire, my hunger and my thirst

To write
is to describe the multiple faces of man
the beautiful and the ugly
the tender and the cruel

To write is to die in front of someone
who looks at you, unmoved

it is to drown in front of a boat passing you by
without seeing you

To write
is to be the boat that saves the drowning

To write
is to live on the cliff’s edge
clinging to a blade
of grass

When I write, my self belongs to the other
With this conviction
I am freed.

Conor Bracken (moderator) is a US-born and -based poet and translator. He is the author, most recently, of The Enemy of My Enemy is Me, and the translator of Jean D’Amérique’s No way in the Skin without this Bloody Embrace, which was a finalist for the 2023 PEN America Award for Poetry in Translation.

Today I’ll be reading a few poems and translations taken from Jean D’Amérique’s third book of poems, Atelier du silence/Workshop of Silence. D’Amérique is a Haitian-born poet, playwright, novelist, and rapper who splits his time between Haiti, Belgium, and France. He’s prolific and adept in many genres, publishing at least one new thing per year if not more than that, but his work is always deeply interested in the musical and ludic aspects of language, and the construction/resurrection of a voice which, to paraphrase Adrienne Rich, tells us
why revolution is or was necessary. I’ll start with a poem titled notes sur un chant/notes on a song that gives us a sense of the voice for this project, and his conscientious assembly of voice and his reasons for doing so.

notes sur un chant

si tu entends une voix
c’est le vidoir qui fait chant
il y a longtemps
que le mât des cœurs s’est couché
pour compléter poussière

fleurs sous orage
vies rêves emplissent les sébiles du néant
comptées ne peuvent être les plaies
pour une ville élue au bal-charogne
si tu entends une voix
c’est le charnier qui fait chant
bouche-décharge qui mâche
une dernière étoile

le petit point bleu là-bas
on veut bien encore l’appeler ciel
le petit point bleu là-bas
c’est espoir
nom vaillant que porte cette lumière
à venir par les barbelés
météo où performe l’aube

à sortir des épines
le petit point bleu là-bas
c’est l’espoir
regarde autour
les balles gravitent

notes on a song

if you hear a voice
it is the utility sink singing
it’s been a long time
since the hearts’ flagpole laid down
to round out the dust

storm-roofed flowers
lives dreams stud the void’s begging bowl
uncountable the wounds
of the city invited to the scavenger’s ball
if you hear a voice
it is the mass grave singing
landfill-mouth gnawing
on a final star

the little blue spot over there
we still want to call sky
the little blue spot over there
is hope
brave name the light wears
as it seeps through the razorwire
forecast dawn vamps in

coming out of the pines
the little blue spot over there
is hope
look around
the bullets converging

As a poet living on both sides of the Atlantic, D’Amérique crafts poems with a transatlantic sensibility. The next poem exhibits his attention to not only the playful possibilities embedded in language, as evidenced in the title and its subtly transformative parenthetical, but also in this kind of play’s ability to offer historical and social critique vis-à-vis the French imperialism that Haiti threw off politically in 1804, and the economic coffle that still constrains it. Though puns and double entendre abound in this poem, the upshot of D’Amérique’s witty wordplay is more than glee and groaners: it shows us his sophisticated and playful grasp of French, and also points out how deeply economic primacy is embedded within the
language. French is the language of romance, D’Amérique winks, though it’s a romance as much with money as much with love.

sous les ponts ce qui (se) passe

courant théâtre
qu’on liquide marges
pour hisser la Seine en seule actrice
démarche à fonds perdu quand déplacé jusqu’au Bassin Bleu
à sonder pierres autour
on côtoie chutes profondes
dire ça rien encore
plus dures ruissellent d’autres ondes
Méditerranée sans ciment
« pays tiers » rivés au naufrage légal
ou notons
loin du pont d’Avignon que survolent voix et hanches
qu’à Port-au-Prince pour sentir vie
il faut couper ponts
entre bouches
et Bois-de-Chêne qui somme chant
entre corps et déchirure élue danse

méfiez-vous de ces ponts
espoirs couchés dans un cantique décharné
bloc humain coulé bas
l’eau dit-on a coulé sous les ponts
sans doute celle douce
vu couteaux sous aube
Sahara près les veines
pupilles à amplifier rivières

sous les ponts ce qui se passe relève
d’un nom plus tragique que l’absence
d’amants dessus

under the bridges what springs (up)

fresh(et) theater
whose banks are liquidated
to hoist the Seine up as the solo player
a scheme whose costs get sunk when run through Bassin Bleu
to plumb surrounding boulders
where chumming up with epic falls
is to say nothing more
durable flows from other watery halls
concrete-free Mediterranean
“third world” lashed to a lawful shipwreck
or let’s insist that
far from the bridge of Avignon that voices and hips vault
that in Port-au-Prince to feel again
it has to snip bridges
between mouths
and Bois-de-Chêne which sums to a song
between body and breakage lifted to dance

be leery of these bridges
hopes coiled in a scrawny psalm
human mass sunk under
the water they say what’s gone under
no doubt as sweetly too
as the knife dawn covers
Sahara nearing each vein
orphans to fatten rivers up

under the bridges what springs up rises
out of a name more tragic than the lack
of lovers above

When I read the poems of Jean D’Amérique, I’m reminded about what Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine said about writers: that they are first and foremost foreigners in the language and culture they write in and out of. So, though D’Amérique may identify/be identified by a particular nation, he is still seeking the place that is more than where he is from, but is also where he is home. This next poem emerges from his attempts to construct a system that respects natural phenomena as much as it privileges political structures.
pays mien

du point je suis
d’où fleurissent plaies
à fracturer l’espace

voix fermée dans la pierre
en attente d’eau fraîche
mon vent se détache de l’arbre
pour ramifier vertiges
comment atteindre d’autres fleuves
de quel temps extraire pluie pour ma terre

nord-grand-entier sud-petit-tiers
bruit-qui-compte voix-sous-bottes
basse moyenne
ai traversé monde que voici taillé en pays
me suis coupé les pattes

pays mien je te cherche en vain
il faut t’inventer
tu secoues mes artères
plus présent que le chanvre à ma lèvre
plus chaud que l’amoureuse contre ma peau
mais le monde mur autour des convulsions
me refuse où te domicilier

ni plus avancé ni moins avancé
à pas égal avec l’humain
mon pays n’ira pas aux sommets des grandes puissances
mais partagera son échelle
oiseau rouge rage-allumette
cel sera bleu ciel pour rive cri frais pour bouche
saison blanche pour les armes
je naîtrai dans ce pays
ministère-roseau
parlement-tourterelle

homeland
the spot I’m from
the lot where wounds bloom
to pry open space

voice clenched inside the stone
and waiting for fresh water
my wind slinks out of the tree
to delta into vertigos
how can I arrive at different rivers
what weather can I yank the stitch of rain out of for my land

north-large-whole south-little-hole
noise-that-matters voice-in-tatters
piddling class
crossed this world that’s hacked into nations
have cut my paws to chuck

homeland I’ve looked for you with no luck
I’ll have to invent you
you rattle my arteries
are more present than the spliff at my lip
warmer than the lover against my skin
but the world walls up shudders
won’t raise the gate of your residence for me

neither more nor less advanced
in equal step with humanity
my country won’t reach the heights of the grand powers
but will share its ladder
red bird rage-lark
there will be blue sky for a river fresh cry for a mouth
a white season for weapons
I will be born in this country
bulrush-ministry
parliament-of-mourning-doves
I’ll end on a short poem that I think helps showcase some of Jean’s other key innovations in contemporary franco-Caribbean poetry. With his syntactic inversions, whiplash enjambments, and leather-jacket-clad winks, he stitches together the ecopoetic and the anticolonial, the wry and the honest in shimmering ways.

insolent solaire

rhapsodie mienne
cactus dans le pot nocturne

à vendre sous tropiques
manteau je suis

insolent solaire
l’horizon
me paraît punk

solar sass

my rhapsody
a cactus in the night-song’s pot

up for sale subtropical
jacket that I am

the horizon
sassing the sun
seems punk to me

Thank you.

Suggested Questions for Q&A
How would you characterize the relationship the poet you translate has with the French language? What reasons—historically, personally, aesthetically, politically—might you say influence this relationship?

What kinds of challenges has this particular relationship posed you as a translator when translating the work into English? How did you navigate these challenges/render the particular aspects?

How does translation expand global rights of women and children as well as the fate of immigrants and refugees in exile?