

**“WHAT GHOST ARE YOU GHOULIN’
FOR AROUND HERE?”¹
THE HAUNTED PRESENCES OF THEATRE
AND TRANSLATION**

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Abstract: In this article, I examine the various subjective influences that are at stake when translating for the stage taking into consideration my own translation of Marina Carr’s *By the Bog of Cats...* (1998) into Brazilian Portuguese. What motivates this discussion is a focus on the ir-, anti-, post-rational nature of translation theory and practice, as put forth in Robinson’s *Who Translates?* (2001), but with specific attention paid to theatre, acting and re-enacting. Rather than providing answers, this article intends to raise questions with regard to the “voices” or “forces” that are at stake when translating for the stage.

Key-words: Theatre translation. Subjectivity. Theory and practice.

**QUE FANTASMA VOCÊ PROCURA PARA DEVORAR?
AS PRESENCAS ASSOMBRADAS DO TEATRO E DA
TRADUÇÃO**

Resumo: Neste artigo, examino as diversas influências subjetivas envolvidas no processo de tradução para o palco, levando em consideração a

¹ Carr (266).

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minha própria tradução para o português do Brasil da peça *By the Bog of Cats...* de Marina Carr (1998) (tradução ainda não publicada). O que impulsiona esta discussão são as abordagens ir-, anti- e pós-rationais de teoria e prática da tradução, conforme sugeridas por Robynson em *Who Translates?* (2001). No caso desta discussão em particular, meu foco será o teatro, a encenação e a encenação da tradução. Ao invés de fornecer respostas, este artigo busca levantar questionamentos sobre as “vozes” ou “forças” envolvidas ao traduzir-se para o palco.

Palavras-chave: Tradução teatral. Subjetividade. Teoria e prática.

Haunted presences

By the Bog of Cats..., a play written by contemporary Irish playwright Marina Carr, had its world première at Ireland’s national theatre, the Abbey, in 1998. It opens with a cryptic and pungent dialogue between Hester Swane, the tragic (anti-)heroine, and Ghost Fancier, her grim reaper:

HESTER Who are you? Haven’t seen you around here before. / GHOST FANCIER I’m a ghost fancier. / HESTER A ghost fancier. Never heard tell of the like. / GHOST FANCIER You never seen ghosts? / HESTER Not exactly, felt what I thought were things from some other world betimes, but nothin’ I could grab on to and say, ‘That is a ghost.’ / GHOST FANCIER Well, where there’s ghosts there’s ghost fanciers. / HESTER That so? So what do you do, Mr. Ghost Fancier? Eye up ghosts? Have love affairs with them? (Carr, 265)

Having finally found Hester, mysterious Ghost Fancier introduces himself and later reveals that he has known her and has been “ghosting” her much longer than she could ever have realised. *By the Bog of Cats...* (henceforth *B. B. of Cats*) is a play about haunting. Hester is haunted by death, or “fancied” by a ghost, in an almost erotic hide-and-peek dance of a ghost

infatuated by a living woman. Hester is also haunted by her own memories of a long-gone mother, by the brother she has murdered out of jealousy and resentment, and finally by living characters, who want her to leave the Bog of Cats, the only place where she feels home. Dead characters are made present in the play by way of being remembered in stories and songs. Because they are constantly brought back to life and re-enacted in the living characters' minds, those dead characters are haunted presences in the play. They remind us, rather meta-theatrically, that that is what theatre is made of: memories, reconstructions of past experiences, combined together and re-enacted in a newly created fashion. *B. B. of Cats* is populated by a host of wandering ghost characters who remind both fellow characters and spectators of something they have seen before, henceforth embodying a characteristic so innate to theatrical performances: their eternal return and recycle, narratives of long-gone presences, and remembrances of absences.

The haunted presences in *B. B. of Cats* could thereby be interpreted as a metaphor for the very nature of theatre and, similarly, translation. As Marvin Carlson observed in his acclaimed book *The Haunted Stage*, there is a tantalising relationship among the theatre, haunting, memory and ghosts.² From the theatrical stage to the play-text and body of the actor, each new performance is haunted by performances, character types and actors seen before, play-texts read before, and theatre houses where one has been to before. For Carlson, each new theatrical performance is unbearably familiar; it results from the theatre's constant re-doing of something that has been done before, but under a new light each time. This seeing again is created by both the theatre, a haunted house of shared cultural practices, and personal experiences, which,

² "The retelling of stories already told, the reenactment of events already enacted, the reexperience of emotions already experienced, these are and have always been central concerns of the theatre in all times and places, but closely allied to these concerns are the particular production dynamics of theatre: the stories it chooses to tell, the bodies and other physical materials it utilizes to tell them, and places in which they are told." (Carlson 3)

in turn, travel on a two-way road: they are used both as creative devices on the part of theatre production teams and playwrights, and as a reception device on the part of audiences. Bearing this idea in mind, this paper explores the notion that theatre translation may utilise theatrical techniques of the receiving culture in order to establish further connections between the foreign and the domestic focusing on the translator's experience with the text.

Herbert Blau, in quoting Marcellus in *Hamlet*, "What, has this *thing* appeared again tonight?" (Shakespeare [1601] 1980: 64, emphasis mine), ponders that if the *thing* does not appear, no performance will take place. For Blau,

[t]he thing seems to suggest the almost unnameable form of some ancestral figure, not only the Hamletic ghost, but the Japanese *shite*, the Balinese *patih*, the *shave* of the Shona in East-Central Africa, or the God of Abraham in the Oberammagau Passion Play. (172)

Performance lies essentially in the expectation of seeing something that has not revealed itself yet. In this line of reasoning, there is, thus, something universally ghostly in performance: something that recurs ritualistically, the interplay of life and death as well as of magical appearances and disappearances – as there is in translation alike.

As in the theatre, as in its disappearances and the memories of what spectators have seen before, translation is also an arena for haunted presences. Spanish contemporary writer and translator Javier Marías (2009) once said that a translator translates what s/he remembers of the original text. For him, the task of the translator is an exercise of remembering, a constant dealing with an absence, with the inexistence of the originary text in the receiving context. For that reason, neither can a translation be a copy nor the same as the originary text because the original does not exist in the culture and language the translator translates into. Therefore, it could be

said that a translation is a text haunted by the translator's memories of the text s/he translates.

This put, a comparison between the act of translation to Hester's attempt to remember what Josie Swane, her disappeared mother, was like seems pertinent: the way she used to sing, pose, and speak. Hester's refracted and fragmented memories will never bring the physical, flesh and blood Josie back to her. Rather, her memories will produce a unique version of her, and a representation of what her mother was like. Those memories produce a fragmentary and yet unique representation of the disappeared mother because they are Hester's alone. Similarly, one translates not because of the presence of the originary text, as Mariás suggests, but because of its very absence.³ That is to say that the originary text does not and will never exist in the receiving language; its existence is limited to an idea, a past and haunting experience.

I want to suggest here that the translator, more specifically, the theatre translator is haunted by both the originary text and context as well as by the receiving context. As depicted in the widely used metaphor of Janus, the Roman god of beginnings and transitions, the translator is duplicitous, s/he is enamoured of the originary text, which s/he "ghouls for", but is also committed to the culture s/he translates into. Based on these considerations, how does the translator negotiate the many ghosts that haunt the translation process? Similarly to the audience members' response to a performance, which relies greatly on their previous experiences with and in the theatre, the translator also translates based on his/her own notions of theatricality.

The play-script, therefore, establishes connections between the domestic and the foreign, and between what is known and what is unknown to the audience members of the receiving culture. This could also be described as "ghosting", a concept Carlson uses to

³ "Yo creo, por el contrario, que lo que prima en la actividad de traducir no es la presencia del texto original, sino justamente su ausencia o carencia." (Mariás 344)

define the way we utilise our “memory of previous encounters to understand and interpret encounters with new and somewhat different by apparently similar phenomena” (6).

Is the translator “ghouled” for or is s/he the one who “ghouls” for?

The term “ghoul,” borrowed from a line in *B. B. of Cats*, is a noun used as a verb in the play. The term dates back to the late eighteenth century, from the Arabic *ghul* [gul], which originally meant in Arabian mythology “a desert demon believed to rob graves and devour corpses” (OED). In the play, Ghost Fancier is “ghoulin’ for” the soul of Hester Swane. His being early for her death announces the approach of her tragic fate in a morbidly clumsy and humorous way. Ghost Fancier apologises and leaves, only to enter stage in the final scene, but the idea of his coming remains present throughout. Bearing in mind the metaphorical relationship suggested earlier on, could translation, or more specifically, theatre translation be compared to “ghouling”? The translator primarily “feeds on” the text s/he translates from as well as on memories of his/her previous experiences. Who ghoul for the translator? And who or what does the translator ghoul for?

Douglas Robinson, in *Who Translates?*, inquires about the forces at play in the translation process:

What forces or voices or intentionalities or subjectivities – what “spirits” or “ghosts” or “demons” – does the translator channel? Who (all) is the translator when s/he translates? How does the translator negotiate the different types and conceptions of channelling in translating, and in presenting him/herself as a translator? Just what sorts of channel is the translator allowed to be, encouraged to be, expected to be, required to be? Are any specific forms of channelling expressly off-limits to translators? (7)

To put the citation above into context, in proposing a post-rational model for translation based on cognitive science and neuro-philosophy, Robinson suggests that the human brain does not possess a single decision-making centre, and thus operates in a rather fragmented fashion. In this light, the translator's "pandemonium self" is, for Robinson, populated by a multitude of "word-demons," "thought-demons," and "memory-demons," who all speak concomitantly while the translator performs the translating task. By referring to "demons," he refers to "agents, forces, in the Greek sense of *daimon*." (150)⁴ Robinson's post-rational drive offers, if not a revolutionary approach to translation, a return to classic ideas about a spiritual and transcendental experience enabled through translation, as in St. Jerome's translation of the Bible, which St. Jerome claimed to have let the Bible's source authors speak through him as he translated (op. cit., 6-7).

When translating a play, the translator invariably establishes an affectionate link with that text; s/he *relates* to it, and here there is something hard to pin down, which could be explained with so many names, from Robinson's "demons" to invisible forces and spirit-channelling. And why not take those haunted presences into account in the study, theorisation, and praxis of theatre translation? The attempt here is to bring to light the notion that theatre translation, this doubly haunted space, promotes an interplay of objectivity and subjectivity.

A personal account

When working on a rehearsed reading of my own translation of *B. B. of Cats* in Florianópolis (Brazil) during the Brazilian winter of

⁴ Robinson borrows the term "pandemonium" from Daniel Dennett's *Consciousness Explained* (1991) to explain "the true nature of consciousness," paraphrased by Robinson as "not so much total chaos, as the term seems to suggest in colloquial English, but simply the 'place of all demons,' a place populated and run by hundreds of demons, thousands, perhaps millions." (Robinson 150)

2010,⁵ I realised how much I had appropriated that text for myself even although, at first, my – and this should be read between scare quotes –commitment to the originary text was that of introducing Carr’s visceral dramatic writing style to Brazilian audiences. For that to happen, I had read all possible interviews that had been done with Carr to the point that, in the seclusion of my writing-translation (or spirit-channelling), I dreamt about her characters, conversed with her and confronted her views both in English and Portuguese.

One of the most remarkable characters in the play is Mrs. Kilbride, a jealous, individualistic and domineering mother, grandmother, and mother-in-law. When reflecting upon her absence in Brazilian Portuguese, her voice would buzz into my ears in the voice of (or, at least, my *memory* of) my paternal grandmother. My preoccupation and zeal for understanding and “ghouling” for what Mrs. Kilbride represented in her originary culture led me to, more than anything, relate to the characters based on my own life experience. The play-text haunted me, thus, in a way that the voices I heard were not only those of the originary text, but also those relating to how they could be re-enacted in terms of my own memories as a translator. The more I read the play, the more the characters’ voices echoed inside my head as voices I once heard as a child; times when reality and imagination are not so easily distinguished (or so it seems). It was when hearing those voices that I could see Mrs. Kilbride’s obsessive, possessive, and control-freak character in my mind’s eye: she was to be my paternal grandmother’s incarnation in my translation of the play.

Bearing the host of forces that haunt translation, being one of them the originary context in which the text has been produced, how does the interplay of contexts, originary and receiving ones, affect translation, or haunt the translation process?

⁵ The rehearsed reading referred to here was performed by the acting students of Oficina Permanente de Teatro, Teatro da UFSC, Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, Florianópolis, Brazil. 29 Jun. 2010. For more information on the aforementioned rehearsed reading, see Fernandes (2012) and (2014).

Ghoulin’ for understanding

In order to better understand how a text sits in the context in which it was originally produced, the translator may examine how the play-text s/he translates exists in relation to the ones that were written before it, how it converses with, and/or breaks away from whatever is considered to be canonical or traditional writing for performance in the originary culture. Part and parcel of playwriting is, similarly to Jack Spicer’s view on poetry writing, a palimpsest of previous writings. As in poetry, playwriting is an innately haunted activity. In Spicer’s words,

[p]oems should echo and reecho against each other. They should create resonances. They cannot live alone any more than we can. Things fit together. [...] We knew that – it is the principle of magic. Two inconsequential things can combine together to become a consequence. This is true of poems too. A poem is never to be judged by itself alone. A poem is never by itself alone. (61 as cited in Katz 2012: 84)

That principle, thus, directly affects translation: in uprooting a text, translation roots its new creation in the receiving context.

Carr, who began her career as a playwright in late twentieth-century Ireland, during the Celtic Tiger era, echoes, in her writing, the Yeatsian project for a reflection of the people through the lens of folktale and myth, and yet challenges this reflection by means of presenting the “same” in different clothes. In an interview with theatre critic Lyn Gardner for *The Guardian* in 2004, Carr said that “a writer is a magpie, you take what you need. The whole history of writing is borrowing from the previous generation.” As a playwright, she ghoulis for other writings to find resources of her own, in which she establishes a relationship with an on-going Irish theatre tradition. In that same interview, she further elaborates on the process of finding her own voice: “When you realise that, two things occur: you

become humbled instantly, and you become afraid to write. Because of all the things that have been said, so now how are you going to continue?” In being haunted by what has been done before, previous writings are invariably imprinted in her own writing.

Very much aware of themes that have shaped the various Irish communities’ sense(s) of belonging and not-belonging, Carr uses those devices and, perhaps in the process of finding her voice as an author, plays with those traditional elements. *B. B. of Cats*, more specifically, uses theatrical and literary narrative elements for drawing upon both the Irish canon and Greek mythology. Her explicit and very conscious use of traditionally classic structures represents both a move towards pertaining to and rooting itself in Irish theatre tradition as well as breaking away from them. Her work is a haunting commentary upon the Irish past, or the memories of an Irish past, both “real” and invented.

To a large extent, *B. B. of Cats* relies on narrative structures widely used in Irish drama. To illustrate this, both Carr’s *B. B. of Cats* and Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World*, the latter written in the early nineteen-hundreds, have in their protagonists an urge for understanding their pasts, by way of a constant search for stories to understand and fabricate their past and themselves. Both plays deal with outsiders versus dominant society, moving them from their peripheral position in society to a central position on stage. In doing so, that dramatic device strategically provokes a twist in audience members’ perception as, although settled, audience members actually relate with Hester and become more like her, seeing the world more like her, as an outcast, as the target of social prejudice. This displacement of a peripheral character to a central position, however, *has been done before*; successful plays result from ghosting. In Irish play-writing, that device had also been used, after Synge and before Carr, by Friel (1996 [1965]), in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!*, where protagonist Gar attempts to establish a relationship with his physically present although spiritually absent father by means of reminiscing about things they did together – their memories of the same event are so different

and revealing: reality is nothing but the ways in which we have constructed our pasts. The metatheatricity in those plays lies in the fact that they are commentaries on their very nature and on the nature of theatre itself: they are plays about memories, about attempts to reconstruct their characters’ past, and, at the same time, they are memories of other plays, that is the acknowledgement of absences, haunted presences of what has been done before.

The central though absent character in *B. B. of Cats* is Hester’s mother, big Josie Swane, introduced in the *dramatis personae* list, as a “voice” that we, readers and spectators, never hear. Referred to by other characters in the play as a mysterious woman, always “pausin’ and waitin’” (Carr 2005 [1998]: 275), almost a Beckettian character who waits, forever waiting, until she leaves forever. Big Josie represents, therefore, the very fabric of performance, like *Hamlet*’s ghost, she haunts performance. She is the reason why we, as spectators, sit before the theatre stage, she is the *thing* that we so eagerly expect to see – that Hester (we) expects to see and longs for. How does that haunt the translation process? How can the translator re-enact those “voices” in his/her writing?

The play not only does twist Irish drama thematically but also in terms of its form and structure. There is an emphasis on a sense of placeness, of how the characters, in particular Hester, relate to the Bog. This is brought about by the repetition of the place name “Bog of Cats”, a narrative device that highlights, once again, identity and memory – belonging to that place. This narrative device becomes particularly intriguing if we take into consideration what a bog is: a place that fluctuates between the real and imaginary; a region of spongy and acidic land, where nothing grows but only accumulates dead materials.

With the translator’s two feet on the bog – ghoulin’ for understanding –, one realises that the paradox is in that very fact: one cannot live on what a bog produces as food (because it produces nothing), but what is accumulated in it serves as fertiliser and fuel. To complicate things further, the land of bogs moves and changes the landscape which creates a sense of instability, and yet, Hester

Swane is so attached to a place (or a no-place) that is, in the words of the character Monica Murray, “always shiftin’ and changin’ and coddin’ the eye” (Carr, 267). The bog, thus, could also serve as metaphor of the interplay of the ghost and the host, the familiar and the foreign in theatre translation.

Ghoulin’ for as theatre translation practice

My dramaturgical translation of *B. B. of Cats* utilised ideas that were already available in the Brazilian context – things that had been seen before by Brazilian play-goers and done before by Brazilian directors (or directors based in Brazil) and playwrights. The ghosts and prophet-ghosts of the Bog can be either interpreted as hallucinations of the protagonist’s mind or be seen as other-worldly creatures that co-exist in a parallel dimension. But there should be a distinction in the theatrical representation of the mythical and ghostly creatures and the characters of the “present” or of “this dimension.” This distinction can be obtained semiotically by lighting and perhaps other stage signs that punctuate the scenes.⁶

When translating *B. B. of Cats* for the Brazilian stage, another “voice” that lingers in the translator’s mind is that the play is a deliberate transgression of standard language. The “slight flavour” (Carr, 261) of the Irish Midlands accent imprinted in the text becomes a way to give voice to Irish-English on stage. At the crossroads between that haunting memory of *B. B. of Cats*, its originary context and some understanding of theatre practice in Brazil, one needs to make a creative decision that will most certainly be affected by the translated play’s host context. In Brazil, on-stage portrayal of dialect can be seen in Nelson Rodrigues’s *carioca* plays written in the nineteen-forties, in which the playwright, taking advantage of his journalistic experience, depicted the urban language of Rio de

⁶ For a more detailed discussion about the set design of the rehearsed reading that took place in Florianópolis in 2011, see Fernandes (2014)

Janeiro. Before Rodrigues, however, Oswald de Andrade, one of the precursors of Brazilian Modernism, attempted to write plays in a *paulista* accent, although, due to the censorship of the nineteen-thirties, Andrade never had the chance to have his works staged during his lifetime. In addition to Rodrigues, and enjoying even more popularity and prestige during his lifetime, contemporary playwright Ariano Suassuna has consolidated the use of a form of North-eastern Brazilian dialect on the Brazilian stage writing in a playful style that takes his audience back to the medieval *autos* in a contemporary light combining Catholic imagery, Brazilian folklore, circus and comedy. Even though dialect has been used on the Brazilian stage, dialect is very much neglected on the Brazilian stage (and by society in general), which reveals the prejudice towards class and region and an ethereal conservatism of standard Brazilian Portuguese.

The use of dialect, however, is often loaded and has in itself an implicit meaning and most certainly has an effect different from that of a work of art written or performed in standard language. As previously mentioned, Oswald de Andrade, for instance, attempted to write plays, such as *O Rei da Vela* (1933/1967), so as to depict spoken urban language. Any form of writing, until then, even for the theatre, was confined to standard Portuguese, with a few exceptions in the nineteenth-century, such as Martins Pena's plays⁷. Nonetheless, since Andrade's plays were not staged until the nineteen-sixties,⁸ Nelson Rodrigues was the one who, during

⁷ See, for example, *As Casadas Solteiras* [1847]. For more plays, see: <http://www.dominipublico.gov.br/pesquisa/PesquisaObraForm.do?select_action=&co_autor=81> [consulted on 31 March 2016].

⁸ Brazilian theatre critic and historian said that "Oswald de Andrade é o autor dos primeiros textos brasileiros modernos, mas não foi ele quem provocou a modernização do nosso teatro. [...] E é incrível que *O Rei da Vela*, montado trinta anos depois da edição, demonstrasse possuir a mesma força explosiva de quando foi concebido." (296) Although originally written as part of the Modernist movement in Brazil, *O Rei da Vela* actually took part in the Tropicalist movement when it premiered in São Paulo in 1967 (*O Rei da Vela. Itaú Cultural – Enciclopédias: Teatro*. Web. 10 Jan. 2011).

his lifetime, inaugurated a stylised use of oral language on stage. What does it mean, however, to deliberately make a move from the on-stage use of standard language and opt for dialectical variants? In the nineteenth century, the use of a more Brazilian way of speaking and writing Portuguese, as argued for by Machado de Assis and reflected in Martins Pena's plays, represented Brazil's cultural independence from Portugal, whereas, in the twentieth-century the theatrical portrayal of more colloquial and regional linguistic variants of Brazilian Portuguese represented not only a step further into Brazilian cultural independence depicting the complexity of its linguistic variants but also representing the country's social inequality.

Having said this, the translator sees herself at a crossroads between the play's originary context (the ghost), in which the depiction of dialect is widely employed and celebrated, and the play's receiving context (the host), in which the use of dialect in stage language has proved polemical and contradictory. But couldn't a translation of Irish-English into a regional variant of Brazilian Portuguese (taking into consideration, of course, the contingencies of performance, such as linguistic variant spoken by a putative audience) haunt its audience and invite them for thinking over their established ideas of themselves and the ways they approach social inequality? In that way, in materialising the presence (*a* possible presence, really) of the absent original text, couldn't the translation become the ghost that once haunted the Brazilian stage in the early twentieth-century?

Final Remarks

Translation has the potential for disrupting with the traditions of its receiving context because it is inherently a new text, a re-reading of ideas both those available in the original text's context, the ghost, and those available in the hosting one. In this specific case, it could also be seen as a dialogue with, a ghouling for the theatre

tradition inaugurated in Brazil in the nineteen-forties which was a major break-through at that time? If seen from this perspective, at the same that this translation brings the novelty of the foreign, it blends in with the domestic in an inter-textual dialogue that was practically inexistent before. All in all, in spite of the voices, or thankfully to all voices that haunt the translation process and for which the translator ghoul, theatre translation, at its best, is that *thing* that we all expect to see when sitting before the theatre stage. The *thing* is nothing but an apparition, an illusion of the present, after all. Similarly to Hester Swane, in the tragic act that leads to her unavoidable suicide, theatre and translation draw us back because of the spell they have cast upon us:

Ya won't forget me now, Carthage, and when all of this is over or half remembered and you think you've almost forgotten me again, take a walk along the Bog of Cats and wait for a purlin' wind through your hair or a soft breath be your ear or a rustle behind ya. That'll be me and Josie ghostin' ya. (*She walks towards the Ghost Fancier.*) Take me away, take me away from here. (Carr, 2005: 340).

May the bog that is the theatre stage, that place of nothingness and yet absolute completeness, haunt us with its purling wind, soft breath and rustle... May its ghosts always come back.

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