

Translation and beyond: Machado's Resurrection and Nassar's *Ancient Tillage*

An Interview with Karen Sotelino

Além da tradução: *Ressurreição* de Machado de Assis e *Lavoura Arcaica* de Raduan Nassar

Entrevista com Karen Sotelino

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ABSTRACT: This interview with Karen Sotelino is a gift to readers, who are invited to an inspiring albeit brief journey through translation theory and practice. Sotelino sets out by making us think about the role of translation as food for imagination and empathy by addressing the importance of translation in her life. Then, she shares some of her passion for Machado de Assis' work and her intense – and laborious – search for a publisher for *Resurrection*, in the context of a publishing industry that devotes meagre three percent of publications to translated works. In what follows, she compares the translation process of *Ressurreição* to that of *Lavoura Arcaica*, highlighting the experience of having reading aloud moments with author Raduan Nassar himself. Towards the end, Sotelino, shares some of the translation theories that permeate the work of a seasoned, acknowledged and inspiring translator and scholar.

KEYWORDS: Interview; Translation; Publishing Industry; Resurrection; Ancient Tillage

RESUMO: Esta entrevista com Karen Sotelino é um presente aos leitores, convidados a um verdadeiro passeio pela teoria e pela prática, em idas e voltas. Inicialmente, Sotelino instiga o leitor a pensar sobre o papel da tradução como alimento da imaginação e da empatia, ao falar da importância da tradução em sua vida. Em seguida, compartilha sua paixão pelo trabalho de Machado de Assis e sua busca intensa – e árdua – por uma editora para *Resurrection*, em um mercado editorial que dedica meros três por cento das publicações a obras traduzidas. Sotelino também compara o processo de tradução de *Ressurreição* ao de *Lavoura Arcaica*, com destaque à experiência de ter podido, nesta última, contar com momentos de leitura em voz alta do próprio Raduan Nassar. Ao final, Sotelino, compartilha e percorre algumas das teorias da tradução que permeiam o trabalho de uma acadêmica e tradutora experiente, reconhecida e inspiradora.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Entrevista; Tradução; Mercado Editorial; Ressurreição; Lavoura Arcaica

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Introdução

I met Karen Sherwood Sotelino through a friend and over coffee in the winter of 2015 in Stanford University, where she has been a visiting lecturer and visiting scholar at the Department of Iberian and Latin American Cultures of the Division of Literatures, Cultures and Languages. She is currently a visiting scholar with the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of California Berkeley.

A couple of weeks later, Sotelino was giving a talk on Literary Translation in the Translation Matters series, a number of talks on translation and interpreting put together by Senior Lecturer Cinthia Santana. I followed.

Stanford translation students, Stanford faculty, and faculty from other universities attended the talk, which touched upon her experience as a literary translator and her knowledge of translation and interpreting career opportunities in Brazil, in addition to offering invaluable insight into the literary publishing industry. And I say 'touched upon', for time was not on our side – a talk lasts what a talk lasts. After talk and catering were over, a significant part of the audience felt we had merely scratched surface.

Although it was possible to capture some of Karen's passionate and rich literary translation trajectory through the challenges and insightfulness she shared with the audience as she pinpointed excerpts of her translation of Machado de Assis' first novel, *Resurrection*, and Raduan Nassar's, *Ancient Tillage*, we all wanted more.

In search for more, I came to interview Karen Sherwood Sotelino. When I asked her in person if she would be willing to give an interview to *Letras&Letras*, we talked about what it would focus on – her recent translations and the American publishing industry, her experience as a literary translator, and her use of translation theory. By then I started posing some of the questions which I believed would likely be of interest to the journal's the audience. However, since our schedules did not converge again, the interview *per se* was done over intense email exchange during December, 2015 and January, 2016.

Sotelino holds a B.A. in International Relations from Stanford University, and received her M.A. and PhD in Literature from the University of California Santa Cruz. She has translated a number of Brazilian and Portuguese internationally acclaimed authors into English, including Machado de Assis, Raul Brandão, Álvaro Cardoso Gomes and José Leon Machado, among others. Her most recent published work is *Ancient Tillage*, Raduan Nassar's *Lavoura Arcaica*,

which came out in January 2016 under Penguin Modern Classics. She specializes in literary translation, practice and theory, and is currently working on a book in the field.

Interview

CARVALHO: *We last saw each other during your talk in the Translation Matters series at Stanford. I cannot help but start with a question that draws not only on the name of the series, but also on the title of Edith Grossman's book: 'Why translation matters'. However, the question has a slight twist, because I would like to focus on Karen Sotelino, the translator: Why does translation matter – to you? Or what is – to you – the meaning of translation? How has it shaped your life?*

SOTELINO: Your mention of Edith Grossman's book is, I think, a good departure point. She said, "Where literature exists, translation exists;" another way to think about why translation matters is to think about why reading, and reading fiction in particular matters. There has been a significant amount of recent research in psychology analyzing the question of the role the imagination and empathy play in our society, especially by Alison Gopnik at UC Berkeley. It so happens that ability to imagine, and to empathize has been linked to other forms of intelligence. If we can think of reading fiction as a form of honing our imagination and our ability to empathize, translating literature, and/or comparing works in more than one language is reading at its most complex level.

And, of course the ability to reach into another culture through language has been enormously fulfilling. My Bachelor's degree was in International Relations – political science, economics, French and Italian. It took me several years to realize that the language component of my studies had truly been the most useful, had offered me the most insight. Over the nearly 20 years I lived in Brazil, I had the opportunity to meet people from very different segments of society: business, art, education, and of course, the marginalized. Truthfully, it wasn't my degree in International Relations from Stanford that facilitated so many situations; it was my ability with language. Obviously a translator should have other interests, and every single great translator I have ever known does, in fact, have other passions. But the love of language, the ability to communicate in another language is what makes a translator. I felt extremely fortunate when I was invited to teach translation at Associação Alumni in São Paulo, to be able to share my ideas on the importance of language and communication... because, as I mentioned, my sense is that

language is integral to empathy and imagination. So translation has taken that role in my life, a means through which to express my, shall we say, more philosophical ideas.

CARVALHO: *From your talk in Stanford I learned that the translation of Resurrection was not commissioned but a component of your doctoral dissertation. From what I understood it was as a translator – and as a scholar – extremely committed to Machado's work that you sought a publisher. There is a very appropriate – not to say comforting and realistic – quote by Newt Gingrich, who once said "Perseverance is the hard work you do after you get tired of doing the hard work you already did." What is it about Resurrection that motivated you to so powerfully pursue publishing?*

SOTELINO: When I learned that there was still one more novel written by Machado de Assis that had not yet been translated, I was in a state best described as euphoric disbelief. I was absolutely fascinated by the parallels between *Ressurreição* and *Dom Casmurro*, yet the style of *Ressurreição*, stilted and formal – true to the Romantic period – was at first disconcerting. Like many others, I hadn't realized that Machado de Assis had begun writing in a very different style from the concise, ironic prose of his masterpieces. As I began translating the novel, knowing how his style eventually developed, I felt through my pen – or I should say, keyboard – his struggle to express very complex emotions that were not so frequently included in novels of the period – I'm talking about emotions like projected guilt, anxiety, jealousy. Emotions that, in his mature novels, Machado de Assis managed to suggest with mere "brushstrokes" as Brazilian critic Massaud Moisés described it. In *Ressurreição*, as he did later in *Dom Casmurro*, Machado de Assis attempted to reveal how perspective and personal trauma affect our behavior, not only towards others, but ultimately towards ourselves.

I believed in the novel unreservedly, and it was difficult, and at times sad to hear from publisher after publisher that they were interested and honored to consider an author as important as Machado de Assis, but they were not in an economic position to take on such a novel – a novel whose value is mainly historical, mainly academic. Finding a publisher for Portuguese language novels involves a lot of networking, keeping your ear to the ground. Academics in the United States dealing with Portuguese tend to be very supportive. So you meet people at conferences, you share stories, and you hear about publishers currently interested in Brazilian literature. I ended up publishing my translation of *Ressurreição* with a fairly small publisher, LALRP, Latin

American Literary Review Press. I got some criticism from one of my colleagues for accepting an offer from such a small publisher, but I had exhausted all the sources that had published Machado de Assis's other novels, so I decided to make the novel available to the public, even though it came out with a smaller publisher, less publicity, less distribution. These are the kinds of decisions translators must make... especially translators of Portuguese language literature.

CARVALHO: *And in line with this, in what ways can the role of translators be seen as going beyond translating? You mentioned that translators are becoming today's literary agents. How and why is this taking place? And in your experience, what are the opportunities for students entering the profession?*

SOTELINO: That's another really good question, and one that I ponder a lot. I often recall something Ruth Lanna, a former editor at Companhia das Letras said to me in response to my frustration over the lack of interest in foreign, specifically Brazilian literature. She said, in relation to getting Brazilian literature published, "*Bem... ali se unem a indiferença e a ignorância, uma combinação fatal.*" That is, "Well... it's a terrible combination of indifference with ignorance." And now there is yet another problem, which is the problem of the reading market; novels compete with so many other forms of entertainment. There is a fantastic website from the University of Rochester called "Three percent," an excellent source for information on literary translation in the United States. It is called 'Three percent' because only three percent of all publications in the United States – not just fiction and not just Portuguese – are translated. That's it, that's all. So literary agents work with authors, but not necessarily with translators, because the demand for translations is so small. I've had the experience of authors and their agents asking me to contact publishers, to write the text introducing the author etc. That's fine, but in my mind, a translator has a specific talent, and that is translating, that's what we do. It is a waste to have us working on what I consider the administrative or marketing end of the publishing business.

On the other hand, on a much more positive note, there is so much on-line publishing, students have more opportunities than I did 20 years ago. Back then, you actually sent in your text in hard copy!!! There seems to be more awareness of translation now, fellowships for example can be very helpful to students. This is yet another interesting quirk in publishing translations:

some fellowships come with the caveat that the translator find the publisher; so you get your \$5,000 and, if nothing else, guilt makes you find a publishing house!

CARVALHO: *Let's explore the publishing industry for translations a bit more. There are two translations of Raduan Nassar's books that came out on exactly the same date, January 7, 2016: A Cup of Rage, a translation by Stefan Tobler, and your translation, Ancient Tillage. However, you published a paper about the challenges and specificities in translating Lavoura Arcaica in 2002, suggesting that the translation had been accomplished by then. Was the process of publishing Ancient Tillage more or less the same as with Resurrection? How did these – if they did – two Nassar translations come together? Was this an initiative of the publisher, Penguin Modern Classics, or did it in any way have to do with the translators?*

SOTELINO: I initially translated *Lavoura Arcaica* in 1999. In addition to teaching translation at Associação Alumni in São Paulo, I had been doing a lot of translations of academic articles, technical and economic reports, and I was anxious to transition to literature, to combine my passion for literature with my passion for translation. I read about a prize for translations sponsored by the National Library of Brazil – A Biblioteca Nacional. It was a fantastic, delirious experience. I worked six hours a day for six weeks to meet the deadline. Before starting the project, through my own contacts, I had secured permission from the author to translate his novel; so when I discovered that the prize was strictly for novels that had already been published, I felt I needed to inform Mr. Nassar. Once again, through my contacts, I was able to communicate with him. Much to my surprise, even though I was not to submit the translation to *Biblioteca Nacional*, Mr. Nassar indicated he would like to meet me. I believe he wanted to get a sense of the translation. We sat for hours, and we talked about words and more words. If there was a passage here or there that I had not understood, instead of explaining, he would say, 'Let me read it out loud to you.' And through his tone of voice, I understood the passage. So this was a very, very different experience from translating *Ressurreição*, which was a very academic experience. Translating *Lavoura Arcaica* was an extremely literary, emotional experience.

I actually don't know Mr. Tobler, so I don't know how he came into contact with Penguin, or with Companhia das Letras. I think perhaps the violence of that novella might not have been ideal for me, it would have been difficult emotionally. I tend to get very involved in my work.

As for the two works coming out simultaneously, that has to do with marketing, I believe. It makes sense, Mr. Nassar has a small oeuvre and these are his two most important works.

CARVALHO: *The next questions are ones I cannot refrain from asking because readers are always curious about the hardships of the translation process. And as I mentioned in the previous question, I am aware you have written about the process in *Lavoura Arcaica in Sotelino (2002)*, and you have already described part of the translation process in *Ressurreição*, but if you could pinpoint and maybe offer some examples of the main challenges in translating *Lavoura Arcaica* and *Ressurreição*, maybe readers and I could learn more about Brazilian literature in English. How different or similar were these challenges in both books?*

SOTELINO: These two experiences could not have been more different. I commented a bit about *Ressurreição* already, but let me add something: the stilted language in the novel reflected a peripheral society – that is, a society distant from Lisbon, Madrid or Paris, exquisitely acting out their role of the educated elite. Nonetheless, some of the dialogues are so theatrical, so melodramatic, that I was almost embarrassed by them. I finally had a breakthrough, I simply accepted the novel as an historical document. Then I had fun with it. I only occasionally split longer sentences and toned down some of the vocabulary – when I thought it was going to be far too awkward in English. I mainly tried to maintain the tone of the novel as it was in the original.

Lavoura Arcaica was very different. The writing was concise, not a word wasted. It was challenging at two levels: one was the material itself, which is at times sacrilegious, definitely at odds with even the most liberal of moral codes; the other level was linguistic, the novel is filled with semantic clashes – that is something like ‘cold fire’ – something that the reader stops to think twice about. *Lavoura Arcaica* was a great learning experience, I had learned to accept that this was very different literature, and that I wanted that difference to show through in the translation. I think it is a novel that goes beyond cultural differences – it is shocking in any culture. But I think that is a good thing, I think English language readers should understand that great Brazilian and Portuguese authors are probing the same questions that all authors probe. Again, for me as a translator, there was a breakthrough moment when I embraced the novel in all of its uniqueness.

CARVALHO: *During your talk at Stanford, you actually shared samples of your work in Resurrection and Ancient Tillage, and reflected on them. You even showed a wonderful photograph of one or two of the pages of Lavoura Arcaica full of notes in the margins, the pages were indeed extensively glossed by you. How often do you take notes on the original? What do you usually consider worthy of notes? And when teaching translation, do you share your own process? How else do you foster students' reflectivity?*

SOTELINO: I think each translator has their own system. I usually describe my process as "hearing" the translation. When I start reading a novel, I plan to translate, I spontaneously hear it in English. But that process gets interrupted when there is a word I don't recognize. Or a situation I might be unsure of. In the case of Machado de Assis, something as simple as location can throw one off. Think about this: a conversation that takes place in the garden might have a different tone than one that takes place in the living room. The same conversation might be different if there were someone else present. So as I'm reading or translating, I might create two different versions of the same conversation – later I go back to situate the dialogue. In the case of Raduan Nassar, there were many vocabulary words that he had used in unusual manners, which is of course typical of great authors. They bring language to life. But for the translator it is risky – we have to bring language to life but in a way that readers accept. Otherwise, it's 'kill the messenger.'

I'm somewhat cautious about sharing my own process with students because I know that translating is a very individual exercise, like painting or singing... What I do tell them is to respect the original text, ask themselves why an author has chosen to express an idea in a certain way, to choose one vocabulary word over another, and to keep in mind that the author has had the same choices they, as translators, have. So if the author uses an unusual word, don't use a cliché!

CARVALHO: *Finally, when you are translating, and as an accomplished and seasoned translator, what are the translation theories that most often come to your mind? In what kinds of situations do you feel the need to tap translation theory when you are translating? How eclectic are they? And how significant are they to your work? Will you be sharing some of this in your forthcoming book on literary translation, practice and theory?*

SOTELINO: Well... I sometimes think about the issue of domesticating. It's funny, because I do not consider myself a very innovative translator – in the sense of creating a text in English that will read so foreign that readers will be alienated. But I have found over the years that I do feel strongly that the originality of Portuguese language literature must be recorded in English. I am currently working on a Portuguese author, Raul Brandão, who wrote before Virginia Woolf, and whose stream of consciousness and vague narrative voice are extremely innovative. In the process of copy-editing, I've had to be somewhat stubborn! How can I homogenize such a creative voice? And why should I? To make him conform to some preconceived notion of what a Portuguese language author should sound like? So the timeless question of the *belles infidèles* does come up in my mind. I really try to make my translations both *belles* and *fidèles*. Otherwise, I must admit, I am far more influenced by linguistic theory than translation theory. Saussure's description of sign, signifier and signified seems to me crucial to approaching translation. The translator must understand that each reader will create their own image, or sign. I am very influenced by Voloshinov, who theorized that language is not neutral, that every speech act, every word carries different connotations for different readers/listeners. Umberto Eco describes the "deep story" that the translator must respect, that is, the translator should bear in mind the fundamental message of the author in order to choose the register, vocabulary and atmosphere of the text. Vitor Shklovsky's notion of 'making strange,' that is, re-representing works of art in new environments is another theory I've found useful. And Walter Benjamin, who, in "The Task of the Translator," talks about the importance of translators reading between the lines, has been fundamental. He claimed that translation is the language of philosophers – that the translated text reveals the hidden meanings behind originals. Perhaps that goes too far, but one must look for one's friends while facing the lonely endeavor of literary translation. These theorists in a sense guide me, if only subliminally. My book is based on their work. I look at literary prose in translation, and I study what is missing, where there are differences between the original and the translation. Guess what? It turns out that in most cases, what is missing from a literary translation is crucial to the original text. For example, I translated a novel by a Portuguese author who was very fond of using the indeterminate "-se" structure, which in English, as you know, can be translated as "I," "we," and "one." This is standard fare from Portuguese to English, I mean this sort of difficulty. But what happens when we ask ourselves why a particular author used such a structure? When did they use it, at what point in the work? Such is also the case with Machado de Assis's polysemic usage – difficult to translate

and leading to discrepancies between the several translators of his major works. In my book I look at these discrepancies in the context of language philosophy.

CARVALHO: *Karen, thank you so much for this interview, a true gift to readers, and an exciting tour through translation theory and practice. I believe that, in addition to sharing your experiences as both translator and scholar in the Resurrection and Ancient Tillage fascinating endeavors, you have also touched upon topics not oft talked about, such as the role of translators as literary agents. I'm certain all of these will provide readers with a lot of food for thought. I look forward to meeting you again.*

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