Selections from *Um Exu em Nova York* (2018) by Cidinha da Silva

Translated by Felipe Fanuel Xavier Rodrigues

Translator's Preface

Cidinha da Silva (b. 1967) is a contemporary Afro-Brazilian writer from Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais. As a trained historian, she incorporates her expertise in history into her creative writing. In so doing, her literature historicizes the experiences of Black people in Brazil, offering a novel and wider perspective in her narratives. From a historical standpoint, da Silva has carved a writing career as a chronicler following the artistic tradition established by the 19th-century great Black Brazilian writer Machado de Assis and continued by the Mineiro modernist writers Carlos Drummond de Andrade and Fernando Sabino. Beyond the conventions of a social commentary, da Silva's body of work chronicles an Afro-diasporic, ancestral version of history, positioning herself as the legitimate narrator of her-story. In Benjaminian terms, her short stories "brush history against the grain" with *Os nove pentes d'África* (The nine combs of Africa, 2009)—the title of one of her books—encapsulating the complexities of the intimacy between Black people.[1]

In *Um Exu em Nova York* (An Exu in New York, 2018), da Silva weaves her ancestral, African-derived knowledge into contemporary narration, decolonizing perceptions of racialized spaces that transcend national contexts, as Exu is "the God without boundaries" that connects Africa and its diaspora.[2] By resignifying the narrative of Exu from the Blackest neighborhood in New York, da Silva offers a global and fresh perspective on African heritage. Despite the title of the volume, not all the stories take place in New York, attributing a new meaning to racialized spaces, as if pointing to all the spatial possibilities evident at the crossroads, Exu's territory. As exemplified in five short stories, those spaces include the streets of New York, a dangerous hill, a funeral, an artist's studio, and the crossroads. The encounters between characters in these settings reveal moments of fear and humanity, as a woman navigates an eerie street and meets a mysterious

[1] Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, *1938–1940*, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Harvard University Press, 2003), 392.

[2] Cidinha da Silva, *Um Exu em Nova York* (Pallas, 2019); quotation from Toyin Falola, ed., Èsù: Yoruba God, Power, and the Imaginative Frontiers (Carolina Academic Press, 2013), 3.

man; spiritual retribution, when a nosy drummer faces the consequences for disrespecting a sacred drum; personal empowerment, as a female artist fights against a monstrous preacher's advances; reflections on societal pressures during a funeral, where the narrator recalls a woman's defiance against social norms; and mystical generosity, when a woman offers shoes to a stranger. Thus, in da Silva's fiction, history is a living narrative that shapes and is shaped by the experiences of those who live it, interwoven with the diverse and dynamic cultures of the African diaspora. Here, literature expresses a worldview deeply rooted in ancestral thought, the foundational principle that "interconnects everything that exists in the cosmos."[3]

If the practice of translation is "a continual act of compromise, a continual search, rejection, renewed search, reluctant acceptance of particular decisions, and particular solutions," then translators should underscore the potential of Black literatures in translation as a means of disrupting structural racism.[4] John Keene advocates for the need for more translations of non-Anglophone Black authors into English in order to understand the complexities of the African Diaspora.[5] In her definition of anti-racist translation, Corine Tachtiris proposes "translating into a racialized English that challenges the White mainstream norm" or "selecting texts that undermine racist stereotypes of other cultures, especially racist formulations that are meant to come off as positive."[6] Giving priority to translating modes of Blackness, my translational approach attends to the negotiation of decisions and strategies by the translators of Black literature, whose agency is a political act.

Da Silva's short stories are a powerful intervention in the discursive expression of Black thought. Assuming that "discourses are

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[3] Leda Maria Martins, *Performance do tempo espiralar: poéticas do corpo-tela* (Cobogó, 2021), 42.

[4] Chan Sin-wai, A *Dictionary of Translation Technology* (The Chinese University Press, 2004), 253.

[5] John Keene, "Translating Poetry, Translating Blackness," Poetry Foundation, April 28, 2016, accessed February 7, 2022, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet-books/2016/04/translating-poetry-translating-blackness.

[6] Corine Tachtiris, interview, Project Plume, accessed on January 6, 2021, https://projectplu.me/portfolio/interview-corine-tachtiris/.

historically constituted bodies of knowledge and practice that shape people, giving positions of power to some but not to others" and that discourses "can only exist in social interaction in specific situations," I read da Silva's narratives as disruptive acts in the face of racism.[7] Consequently, my translation respects the speech of a Black woman writer who combines activism and creativity with intellectual production, generating "transformational discourses."[8]

The short stories were rendered into English from Africanized Portuguese, which is "a dominant mark of Brazilian Portuguese."[9] According to Lélia Gonzalez, the influence of African languages on Brazilian Portuguese modified the colonizer's language so significantly that it evolved into what she theorizes as Pretuguês, a portmanteau word that combines Black (*Preto*) and Portuguese (*português*).[10] Da Silva's elegant and ironic language is couched in Pretuguês phrases such as *mais old fashion que o meu*, *meus dreads*, *Harlem roots*, *a comida do homem*, *tocou o dendê*, *na gringa*, *as irmãs da Mérdia*, *o juremeiro*, *nome de preto*, *ebó-fast-food*, *tambor mineiro*, *povo da rua*, *encruzas sagradas*, *ngoma*. Her characters are also named with a Pretuguês style, incorporating references to orishas (Exu and his metonymy Boca do Mundo, *filha de Iansã*), but also an ingenious (re)invention of names, exemplified by Mérdia, Marçulena Mirizante, Mortuária, and Múrcia. As these names are fictional and serve as tropes and narratives, I believe that their recreation in English conveys a similar effect to the reader as da Silva achieves in Portuguese. My translation offers

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[7] Mary Talbot, *Language and Gender*, 3rd ed. (Polity, 2020), 119.

[8] Carole E. Boyce Davies, preface to *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (Africa World Press, 1994), xvi.

[9] G. Nascimento, *Racismo linguístico: os subterrâneos da linguagem e do racismo* (Letramento, 2019), 22.

[10] Lélia Gonzalez, *Por um feminismo afro-latino-americano* (Zahar, 2020). Gonzalez posits that Pretuguês is evident in tonal and rhythmic aspects and the omission of consonants like "L" and "R," for example. Other scholars demonstrate that the African influence in Brazilian Portuguese is visible "in the vowel-rich pronunciation of our speech (ri.ti.mo, pi.néu, a.di.vo.ga.do), our syntax (tendency not to mark plural in noun phrases os menino(s), as casa(s)), double negation (não quero não), and the preference for proclisis (eu lhe disse, me dê)." Yeda Pessoa de Castro, "Marcas de africania no português brasileiro," *Africanias.com*, vol. 1 (2011), 1. Nei Lopes notes thousands of African-origin words in Brazilian Portuguese. Nei Lopes, *Novo dicionário banto do Brasil*, 2nd ed. (Pallas, 2012).

versions of the names in English to reflect da Silva's irony when she originally invented them to make cognitive demands on Lusophone readers. In addition to a vivid Afro-diasporic vocabulary—worthy of its own glossary—da Silva deploys creative syntax that resonates with Pretuguês in double negation, such as *não precisava de outros, não*; ritualistic verb phrases such as *preparar a comida do homem*, *fazer o caminho*, *clamei pelo Boca do Mundo*, *Laroiê!*; gerund verb phrases and their pronunciation by inference exemplified in *Eu querendo* /keˈɾẽnu/ *ir e a família insistindo* /ĩsisˈtʃĩnu/ *para eu ficar*, *E fui ficando* /fiˈkẽ.nu/; the ubiquitous use of the conjunction *e*; the contraction of the second-person singular pronoun, *Cê*; and the resultative construction illustrated by *Deu errado*.

How to translate the potency of such Black expression into English? Faced with the Portuguese language blackened by da Silva's hands, my translation sought, whenever possible, a comparison with another form of Black language, such as African American Vernacular English (AAVE), understood as the US Black communities' signature structured system of meaning and interpretation.[11] Assuming that "translation does not happen in a vacuum but in a continuum" and that "it is not an isolated act, it is part of an ongoing process of intercultural transfer," at the very outset, I had to formulate translational strategies aimed at recreating the rhythm, cultural references, and expressive nuances inherent in da Silva's Pretuguês.[12] This approach included maintaining the double negations, ritualistic verb phrases, and unique syntactical elements that mirror certain linguistic patterns found in AAVE. In incorporating choice turns of phrase associated with AAVE, I aim to racialize da Silva's literary discourse in translation, particularly in the vibrancy and specificity of references to Afro-Brazilian culture, ensuring that the translated text resonated with the same depth and richness as the source text. By employing these techniques, my translation strives to honor the original's Black voice and convey its cultural impact to Anglophone audiences.

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[11] Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford University Press, 1989); and Lisa J. Green, *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[12] Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, eds., *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2002), 2.

Selections from *Um Exu em Nova York*

by Cidinha da Silva

I have shoes for you

She turned up outta nowhere, like they usually do in my world. She stood half a meter away, head down, wrapped in black clothes so that at first all I saw was her straightened hair. Then I thought it might be a wig. Her shoulders were hunched, her arms thin, and her hands—when she stretched 'em out, I noticed—were small and gloved, hidden in her jacket, which was a little more old school than mine.

The woman raised her head slowly. I came across her blazing eyes. I stared at her teeth, which were spaced wide apart. The upper arch in particular, at least half a centimeter between one tooth and the next. I noticed when she asked in a very sweet voice if I had any spare change. I grinned at her and handed over some coins.

When she looked at my feet and thanked me, she said, I have shoes for you. I wasn't sure I'd heard her right. I asked, What? I have shoes for you. She repeated it in that sweet voice I told you she had. Word. I thanked her and assured her that I was good with my shoes, I didn't need no other shoes. She laughed with her red eyes. She went on her way, and I noticed her crooked gait, thick shoes, and feet that seemed to carry twice her 70 kilos.

There I was, standing on the corner of Martin Luther King Jr. and 29th, waiting for my Dominican friend who never showed up on time, cursing her delay because now the cold was piercing. The woman offered me shoes because she thought I'd get cold. And I was still rockin' that old coat from so many winters ago—it kept me warm but was beat-up. There, in middle-class Harlem, she figured I was from the street, from deep Harlem, like her.

I didn't realize all that until later. The moment the woman walked off, I checked out my feet and got chills when I looked up her way and she was gone. I looked around to see if I could find any doors, any holes she might've slipped into. I saw a private security guard on the block smoking and adjusting his beanie. I wanted to ask him where the lady who offered me them shoes went.

A few more minutes passed, and two older ladies showed up. They pressed the buzzer for the same apartment I was headed to. I greeted them warmly, started chatting, and mentioned my friend who was running late. Told them I'd tag along inside with them.

Like a genie in a bottle, the woman popped up again. Damn, she was real! Flesh and blood. She asked the older ladies for money, and they barely looked her in the face to say they didn't have no money. Her kind voice had an attractive, tuneful chant, and my urge to follow her was nearly uncontrollable. This time, she didn't speak to me no more. She headed off in the opposite direction.

I kept my eyes fixed on her back, as if that would help me follow her all the way home, back to the shoes. Then she turned around, smiled, pulled her hand out of her jacket, and waved at me.

I craned my neck curiously. A memory came to me. The daughter of Iansã who won a court battle against powerful men but got her life turned upside down by the reprisals of sorcerers sued by the accused. One time, this woman was crossing from the island of Itaparica to the mainland. Intoxicated by the smoke from the spell, a mournful voice beckoned her to throw herself into the sea. Come on, I'm waitin' for you. Come stay with me. Come home. To save herself, she screamed at them to tie her to the boat, otherwise the mermaid would take her. The delicate voice of the woman with the shoes tried to seduce me in the same way.

You comin' in or what? One of the ladies called out to me while holding the door. Yeah, you bet. Why the hell did that homeless lady wanna give me shoes? That question was bugging me. She figured I was a potential buyer, that's what. She wanted to sell 'em to me. If not, as everything's a gift when dealing with Exu, I gave her something first.

Those days were cold, 'bout 50 degrees. Nothing that required them powerful boots sitting out in the driveway. But cold, it's all about style and showing off for them who can pick what to wear. I learned that lesson from a harsh winter in London.

While I observed the inside of the apartment—nicely divided, with high ceilings and fancy finishes, presenting a whole different

vibe from the building's exterior—a third theory about the shoe-giver crossed my mind.

Considering my dreadlocks, my dated coat, the autumn shoes worn in winter in parallel with her Harlem roots, maybe the shoes were a code or password for using or smuggling things that might interest me.

Nah. That still ain't it.

Exu killed a bird yesterday with the stone he threw today!

Exu killed a bird yesterday with the stone he threw today!

Exu killed a bird yesterday with the stone he threw today!

While fixin' His food, when my hand touched the *dendê*, I found the answer, the key. I got them shoes as a gift to set foot on the road and make my way.

The midnight man

I was walking down the hill all by myself, crossing cars with their brights on. At the end of the street, this man was resting his leg on the rusty fence of a dimly lit garage.

Across the street, there was this empty lot, all overgrown with bushes and trees. The narrow sidewalk was hidden by the trucks of country frat boys or neo-fascist dudes chillin' in the sun like innocent lizards.

Between me and the Black man with a busted leg, wearin' an orange helmet, a thick orange plastic coat, and a black boot on his good leg, there was fear. And also a hole big enough for two people in a violent situation.

I took a deep breath and called out to the Mouth of the World right as I passed the dazed man tryna to light a cigarette against the wind. Without lookin' at him, I thought: *Laroiê!*

Evenin'! He greeted me. I let out a sigh of relief. Before I could say anything back, he moved like a gazelle, tossed the lit cigarette up, spread his arms like a bird to balance his bad leg, and opened his mouth to catch the cigarette.

Have a night of good winds. I finally replied to his greeting.

Have a night of winds that fan the fire. He shot back, chewin' on the lit cigarette, hobblin' up the hill, with smoke comin' outta his ears.

Mary Bell

I couldn't take all that back and forth no more. I wanted to leave, but the family kept insistin' I stay. My heart, dumb as it was, wouldn't obey me. So I stayed, until it finally stopped. Thank God.

Mary Bell came to say goodbye to me. I saw her as a lil' girl, just like I saw her sisters. I remember when her mama, Miss Nina, passed away. Mary Bell was closin' her eyes, I saw it, nobody had to tell me. And Meanie's daddy asked if it was true Bell studied overseas.

That spirit ain't got no compassion, cold-hearted as ice.

Meanie's sisters were decent folks, unlike her. There was Marcelene, Mizanté, Mortaria, and Murciah. The *juremeiro*, or the local clerk, used to joke about their names, 'cause they never gave Black folks' names a break.

Meanie used to lend books to Mary Bell. They were friends 'til Bell got into the best university in the state. Meanie, workin' in a little shop, started sayin' she didn't study 'cause she didn't want to, that gettin' into college wasn't all that hard since Mary Bell got in. Bell wasn't no lil' girl no more. She'd lost her innocence and quickly realized it was just white envy.

I could even say folks were happy at my funeral. Here, in this part of the world, we die young. It's rare to bury someone old who passed away from natural causes. Miss Cece spent all of 2016 waitin' for her chemo meds to come to the hospital.

All my grandchildren are alive, thank God. My children too. Nobody died before me, which is how it should be, but I went to a lot of their friends' funerals.

Dita is lookin' at Mary Bell from afar. I think she's scared she won't be recognized. She's 52 and went to school with Mary Bell but she might look older than me, and I'm already dead.

Suffering wears people down.

She buried both her children, Marlon, 19, and Denzel, 12. Marlon's killer heard Denzel was lookin' to buy a gun and thought it was safer to kill him first.

Mary Bell's black don't crack. She's 50 but don't look a day over 35 and keeps gettin' prettier as time goes by.

A good life keeps you feelin' young.

My time's almost up to take that fire trip. I wanted to become ashes 'cause I ain't got the patience to let no bugs eat me bit by bit.

Folks say I was right on schedule. Here in the hood, everybody dies young.

Valves

I wasn't always like this! When I still believed in love, I didn't need drugs. I replaced that lost spirit with faith in an illusionist. He pretended to clean my soul, but he didn't gather no leaves for the bed, didn't crush no herbs for the bath. He pushed on me a fast-food *ebó*, with friendly fire and darts, all while pretending to be a priest of secrets.

In agony, I bled, dried up. Died slowly.

I was reborn and looked for a preacher. Listened to sermons, swapped my traditional soap for the store-bought kind, and instead of salvation, the savior showed up in my studio. He praised my rock work. Said the sculptures talked, that my despair and pain were still there, especially in the hands. Prophesied human emotions needed feedin' too. That God was magnificent, but He didn't satisfy all the hunger in the world.

He touched my braids, squeezed my shoulders, and whispered that he knew about the fire that burns inside the daughters of Cain. He revealed a distant kinship with Cain, and maybe that's why he felt that connection with me. Said he was the water I needed, pure and thick, reserved only for his wife, but he'd make an exception for me. And he laid me on the table with restrained strength, unbuckled his belt, sweaty and panting like an old, impotent goat.

The stifling air burned my skin. My good ol' friend, the wind, burst the window open and knocked down small, unfinished pieces to the floor. I woke up and stormed out.

The wind swept everything and threw the blade at my feet, which I picked up in shock. I scratched the floor and sent that demon into the deep waters.

I opened my eyes, my head still bowed, and looked around. The world spun and got back on track. I picked up the broken pieces, and peace smiled wide at me. I started to fix what was left of me.

The drum of the mines

Y'all ain't gonna believe this, but that mining drum, it's got four ways of beatin'. It moans with pain, lament, agony, y'know? It's got a beat for celebration, for praising, and for joy. You got a beat of faith. And then you got the warning beat.

The poet told stories he heard 'bout how the owner of the drum was in Esmeraldas. Somebody messed with his drum over in Contagem das Abóboras. He heard it, y'know? Focused his thoughts and made the intruder lose the power to beat the drums.

The nosy drummer thought he was bringin' a party vibe, bringin' joy, but the drum fooled him and gave a danger signal. The owner heard it and took action.

The triflin' dude played at the crossroads, tryna showboat for the girls. Thought he could just call on the folks from the street. It went wrong, y'know? First, his hand started bleedin', and it wasn't from hittin' hard, it was from hittin' wrong, 'cause he struck a splintered piece of wood. He beat it, but his voice didn't match the music.

The drum had its own voice and moaned dangerously. And when the embarrassed fool jumped in his truck and sped off with a car full of women he wanted to impress, two tires blew out at once.

He got the message and, scared of what might still come, he had to put the drum on his head and walk it back to its place, passin' through the sacred crossroads like the river bends and the sandy shores.