



## TRANSLATING MACHADO DE ASSIS: AN INTERVIEW WITH FLORA THOMSON- DEVEAUX ON *THE POSTHUMOUS MEMOIRS OF BRÁS CUBAS* AND OTHER DISCOVERIES

TRADUZINDO MACHADO DE ASSIS:  
 ENTREVISTA COM FLORA THOMSON-DEVEAUX SOBRE  
 MEMÓRIAS PÓSTUMAS DE BRÁS CUBAS E OUTRAS DESCOBERTAS

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### ABSTRACT

Brazilian literature celebrated a milestone in 2020 with two new translations of the novel *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* by Machado de Assis. One of the translators behind this feat is literary scholar and Brazilianist Flora Thomson-DeVeaux, who granted us this interview with insights on her motivation, translation process, the publishing market, and reception of the translation – the latter exceeding both DeVeaux’s and the publisher’s expectations. Thomson-DeVeaux also shared some of her current and burgeoning projects in Brazil, and how she sees translation and research as forms of “discovery”.

**Keywords:** interview; Translation studies; *the posthumous memoirs of Brás Cubas*; Machado de Assis; brazilian literature.

### RESUMO

A literatura brasileira comemorou um marco em 2020 com duas novas traduções do romance *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*, de Machado de Assis. Uma das tradutoras por trás do feito é a tradutora literária e brasilianista Flora Thomson-DeVeaux, que nos concedeu esta entrevista com insights sobre sua motivação, processo de tradução, mercado editorial e recepção da tradução – a qual superou as expectativas de Thomson-DeVeaux e da editora. Thomson-DeVeaux também falou sobre seus atuais projetos no Brasil, e sobre como enxerga a tradução e a pesquisa como formas de “descoberta”.

**Palavras-chave:** estudos da tradução; *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*; Machado de Assis. literatura brasileira.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 was unprecedented on many levels, and one of them was a marked renewed interest in Machado de Assis' *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas* (1881). Machado's *chef-d'oeuvre* had been translated and retranslated into English on three occasions (MACHADO DE ASSIS, 1951[1952], 1955, 1997), with a number of reprints. Twenty-three years after the last retranslation by Gregory Rabassa (MACHADO DE ASSIS, 1997), the month of June, 2020, saw the arrival of not one but two new translations: the first by Flora Thomson-DeVeaux and the second by Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson (MACHADO DE ASSIS, 2020a, 2020b). The translations came out in a turbulent year marked by a global pandemic and amidst the worldwide impact of Black Lives Matter protests in the United States, which had been preceded and accompanied by racists far-right protests. Racism and Machado are words that go together. For many years Machado's black ancestry was obnubilated or outright photoshopped in Brazilian schoolbooks – but no longer. Machado is today considered the greatest black writer in Western literature: “The genius of irony has given us few equals of the African-Brazilian Machado de Assis, who seems to me the supreme black literary artist to date.” (BLOOM, 2002, p. 672).

Flora Thomson-DeVeaux was born in Charlottesville, Virginia, which in line with the far-right protests that have inundated many locations in the last years, she described as “a town that became a byword for hate” due to the conflicts revolving around the removal of the statue of Robert E. Lee (THOMSON-DEVEAUX, 2017). She is a writer, translator, and researcher, with a BA in Spanish and Portuguese from Princeton, 2013. Today, she is based in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Before finally moving to a city ever-so present in Machado's writings, DeVeaux had spent six years living with one foot in each country while immersed in the task of translating *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (1881) as part of her Ph.D. on Brazilian Studies at Brown University. Her dissertation, titled “Toward a New Translation of *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*” was presented in 2018 at Brown University, and has been published recently in a price-friendly scholarly edition under the Penguin Classic series. The edition includes a wealth of fluid paratexts for thirsty readers: a Foreword by Dave Eggers, and, by Thomson-DeVeaux, the Introduction, A Note on the Translation, A Note on the Endnotes, and Suggestions for Further Reading. A translation scholar's delight.

Both Flora Thomson-DeVeaux and Penguin were elated by the reception of the launch. In this interview, she addresses her motivation to translate *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas*, some of the challenges of the process of translating – such as depicting the subtle irony the author – , the resources she utilizes for her extensive research of vocabulary and writing style, and the importance of finding a publisher for a more scholarly translation – one that does not seek to domesticate and oversimplify the text in order to appease the market preference.

Besides her accomplished translation work, Thomson-DeVeaux has had a prolific 2020 and, as a researcher, has been involved in exciting projects, such as the *Rádio Novelo* podcasts series covering a range of pressing issues to Brazilian society and culture, namely, sexism, politics, and racism. Among them, the critically acclaimed *Praia dos Ossos* (RÁDIO NOVELO, 2019), on the murder of Ângela Diniz by Docca Street; *Retrato Narrado* (RÁDIO NOVELO, 2020), on the influence of far-right Olavo de Carvalho on the Bolsonaro Administration, and *Vidas Negras*, which celebrates black lives in Brazil (RADIO NOVELO, 2020).

## 2 INTERVIEW

SYDIO & FONSECA: You once mentioned (THOMSON-DEVEAUX, 2018) that while translating João Cezar de Castro Rocha's book on Machado's body of work (ROCHA, 2015), you were drawn to the idea of retranslating Machado. What in Rocha's book made you feel this way? Was there anything you thought the readership was missing out on?

THOMSON-DEVEAUX: While João Cezar de Castro Rocha's interpretations of Machado's work are certainly illuminating, it wasn't necessarily his hypotheses, but rather the exercise of translation, that opened my eyes. Castro Rocha pays careful attention to the etymology behind Machado's word choices and the allusions that appear in Machado's work, for example, and in more than one case when I was translating his [Castro Rocha's] close readings of a given passage, the translation of that passage didn't reflect the elements he was commenting on. The decision to retranslate, for me, springs much more from the micro – tiny but significant details that wind up falling by the wayside in one translation or another – than a broader, macro understanding of Machado or of this or that novel. That said, I believe that as published – an affordable, mass-distributed paperback with the apparatus of a scholarly edition – my translation represents an important step in the reception of Machado's work in English. Rather than trying to sweep Brazilian history and culture under the rug or make them as unobtrusive as possible, this edition provides the references and tools for readers to better contextualize the novel and familiarize themselves with the society in which it was composed.

SYDIO & FONSECA: *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* was your first direct contact with Machado, during your BA in Spanish and Portuguese at Princeton and you were “blown away” because “the structure is wild, the images are remarkable, and it's as if the book's constantly catching you off guard and thumbing its nose to you” (KALB, 2020). Why *Memórias...* and what makes the novel unique and unsettling?

THOMSON-DEVEAUX: What made me pick up *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* and not another of Machado's novels when I decided to familiarize myself with his work? I can't completely reconstruct the decision, but I believe that what drew me to the book was precisely that which made Capistrano de Abreu scratch his head and wonder<sup>1</sup> if it even could be classified as a novel: the audacious conceit, the confusing dislocation of authorship in the title, the inversion of birth and death and the unabashed surrealism of it all. *Brás Cubas*, with all his love of splendor and glory, may represent Machado at his most exuberant. Once people are hooked by the *Brás Cubas* Plaster, then they can move on to the sardonic tragedy of *Quincas Borba*, the slow-boiling bitterness of *Dom Casmurro*, the quiet melancholy of *Memorial de Aires*, and so on.

SYDIO & FONSECA: According to Antoine Berman's (BERMAN, 1990) *Retranslation Hypothesis*, the first translation of a literary work tends to domesticate and simplify the language of the text, while retranslations tend to be more foreignizing. As part of your doctoral research,

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<sup>1</sup> Thomson-DeVeaux refers to the following excerpt published in the *Gazeta de Notícias* newspaper: “As *Memórias posthumas de Braz Brás Cubas* serão um romance? Em todo o caso são mais alguma coisa. O romance aqui é simples acidente. O que é fundamental e organico é a descrição dos costumes, a filosofia social que está implícita” [Are The Posthumous Memories of Braz Brás Cubas a novel? In any case, they are something else. The novel here is mere accident. What is fundamental and organic is the description of customs, the social philosophy implied.”] (ABREU, 1881).

while examining the previous three translations of *Memórias póstumas de Brás Cubas* (MACHADO DE ASSIS, 1951, 1952, 1955, 1997), were you able to confirm or see patterns that mirrored Berman's hypothesis?

THOMSON-DEVEAUX: William Grossman's [(1951)] translation has clear marks of what might be categorized as domestication, at the level of the text – he expands and expounds on the oblique phrasing of the original – and at the level of editorial interference – with Noonday notoriously changing the title from *The Posthumous Memoirs of Braz Cubas* to *Epitaph of a Small Winner* [(1952)]. Both of these strike me as hallmarks of both a first translation and a translation of a Brazilian work pre-Boom, with all parties enthusiastic about the novel and eager to have it accepted by a translation-averse market, willing to “smooth out” any perceived cultural friction. The subsequent translations are harder to map on that scale. E. Percy Ellis's translation [(MACHADO DE ASSIS, 1955)], while produced within Brazil, is stylistically haphazard, and Gregory Rabassa's [(1997)] translation, while commissioned as part of an academically sponsored series, forwent annotations – while one might call it “more” foreignizing in comparison, I would hesitate to characterize it outright as foreignizing.

SYDIO & FONSECA: When translating Rocha, you mentioned above that sometimes a translation of a “passage didn't reflect the elements he was commenting on”. In what aspects? And, in your own experience translating *Memórias*, could you provide examples of challenges you faced to convey Machado's typical ambiguity and/or subtle irony?

THOMSON-DEVEAUX: I should clarify that it was neither superficiality nor error on the part of the previous translations that led me to retranslate. Rather, with a text as rich as this, we should expect that just as no single reading can embrace all of the nuances and depths it contains, neither can a single translation. Just as there are elements in my translation that fell by the wayside in other translations, I am certain that there are elements in other translations that are less visible or were sacrificed in mine. On the score of Machado's ambiguity and irony, I tried to preserve the consistent nonchalance and understatement that characterizes many of the most famous passages. The difficulty is generally that if you respect the lack of emphasis in the original, you run the risk of the reader missing the point; and if you introduce emphasis in order to ward off that risk, you guarantee that the tone of the original is changed. Selecting a random chapter – LXIX – we find a typical example of a half-baked reflection from the narrator on Romualdos, Prudencios, Tartars, and violence received and passed on, which is never fully explained: “let us leave the Romualdos and Prudencios aside”. Yet another random chapter – XLVII – we find Brás yet again waving information before us, like his parents waving a rattle before him, and coyly withholding it: “But if you should want something besides the aroma, you'll be left wanting”. The challenge is to maintain that obliqueness without letting it become opacity.

SYDIO & FONSECA: It was Helen Caldwell, the first woman to translate *Dom Casmurro* into English, who came up with a different reading of the relationship between Capitu and Bentinho. The previous translations of *Memórias*... had, until 2020, all been carried out by men. Do you think there is nuance in the relationships between Brás Cubas and female characters such as Marcela, Virgília, or Eugenia that you would like to comment on? Nuance that may have come up during your translation or in the translations you have read?

THOMSON-DEVEAUX: While I'm surely not the best judge of my own translation, I can say that my readings of previous, male-authored translations evidenced a number of interesting divergences in their renderings of the descriptions of the female characters – a few of them detailed in “Reading Machado through the Looking-Glass” [(THOMSON-DEVEAUX, 2018)]. What I drew from that was not necessarily that the male translators had missed something, but rather that Machado had constructed character descriptions that rest not on a hidden truth, but rather on veiled ignorance. We, as translators and readers, lack the full range of information we would need to decipher these women because our source of information, despite all boasts to the contrary, is a protagonist who is apparently constitutionally incapable of understanding the women in his life.

SYDIO & FONSECA: You used Linguistic Corpora of other Brazilian authors from the nineteenth century to compare Machado's linguistic choices to that of his contemporary peers. Could you describe this corpus and how you consulted? Was this done electronically?

THOMSON-DEVEAUX: The main linguistic corpus that I consulted was BYU's historical Corpus do Português<sup>2</sup>, which has a database drawn from 19th-century Lusophone literature. I would turn to corpora when I wanted to get a better sense of how common or uncommon Machado's use of a particular word or phrase was, or when I struggled to understand a term and wanted to understand its time-specific connotations. To this end, I used the Corpus do Português to compare Machado's usage to his literary contemporaries and consulted the Biblioteca Nacional's Hemeroteca Digital<sup>3</sup> to compare Machado's usage against wider patterns of written Brazilian Portuguese in the period. All of these searches were done electronically, through keyword searches.

SYDIO: For my MA at the University of São Paulo, I am currently working on building an Electronic Corpus of Machado's translated works into English. In what ways do you think an organized digital corpus of Machado de Assis would help with future translations of other works by Machado into English or even of other Brazilian authors of the time? And what challenges do you anticipate in building such a corpus?

THOMSON-DEVEAUX: A corpus of Machado in translation would be tremendously useful not only for future translators to be able to consult their colleagues' versions. Some, such as E. Percy Ellis's, are long out of print. But also for Machado scholars looking to examine the ways in which the challenges the text poses to the reader are developed on and made visible in translation. I transcribed the three previous translations so as to have a homemade “corpus” to work with for my dissertation, and it was illuminating in both respects. I would imagine that the main challenge with making such a corpus accessible would be copyright restrictions on the newer translations, unfortunately.

SYDIO & FONSECA: It is well known that the Anglo-American editorial world has a tradition of domesticating texts (VENUTI, 1995), and the dominating reason is to widen readership. Were you at any point concerned publishers would attempt to influence some of your translation choices?

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<sup>2</sup> The *Corpus do Português* is available at <https://corpusdoportugues.org> and the historical subcorpus is available at <https://www.corpusdoportugues.org/hist-gen/2008/> (DAVIES, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> The collection of Hemeroteca Digital da Biblioteca Nacional is available at <https://bndigital.bn.gov.br/hemeroteca-digital/>.

THOMSON-DEVEAUX: I didn't know what to expect, precisely, when I began speaking to publishers, but from the start Penguin was both enthusiastic and respectful, and they had an extremely light touch in the editing process.

SYDIO & FONSECA: Not to mention the shower of glowing reviews (GOLDFAJN, 2020; MCLEOD, 2020; PERRONE, 2020; SEHGAL, 2020), your translation achieved remarkable commercial success. It sold out in 24 hours and went into four print runs the very first week of publication. To what extent was this expected and what have been other positive developments of the reception of your work? How have you been impacted by it?

THOMSON-DEVEAUX: Honestly, neither I nor Penguin expected that the translation would be as enthusiastically received as it was. I've given more talks and interviews than I expected to in a lifetime. While I can't complain, the perverse effect of Brás Cubas having made such a big splash is that I keep being asked to talk about it and that makes it even harder to move on to a new project. After I finished my dissertation and sent the translation off to the publisher, I cleared off the shelves above my desk, which were packed with old dictionaries and editions of Machado's works, and filled them with the contemporary works I'd been wanting to read for years. During the first week after the book was launched, I had to banish the contemporaries to another room and bring all of my dissertation books back. Nearly six months later, they're still there...

SYDIO & FONSECA: And do you have any plans to translate other works in Brazilian Portuguese?

THOMSON-DEVEAUX: I have lots of ideas and have been talking to the folks at Penguin, but no firm plans yet. From June to August of 2020 my schedule was dominated by Brás Cubas, and from September to the present I've been swept up in the hurricane of production and publicity around the narrative podcasts that Rádio Novelo launched this year: *Praia dos Ossos*, *Retrato Narrado*, and *Vidas Negras*. I always prided myself on being able to multitask, but literary translation is an activity that brooks no distraction; I may have to pretend I'm doing another PhD in order to devote myself body and soul to my next translation project.

SYDIO & FONSECA: Speaking of other projects, as research director for Rádio Novelo (LIMA, 2020) in three extremely successful podcast series, it is clear that your field of expertise expands beyond translation, since you have been studying, researching and publishing about Brazil in an increased scope. How does your background in translation and research interweave with the work of Thomson-Nouveaux the Brazilianist?

THOMSON-DEVEAUX: Honestly, translation, research, and other forms of "discovery" of Brazil are fairly inseparable for me. I often find myself using metaphors of translation to refer to research and the work of transmuting textual narratives into audio. Every translation conjures up its own crooked research path, and every attempt to communicate the things you've turned up in research, no matter the medium, will be a translation of sorts. Not only are the activities intertwined, but they spring from the same root: an enchantment with an object, a desire to know it better, and the drive to share your findings with others.

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