

Translating Zahia Rahmani: An Interview with Matt Reeck (<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/2019/03/14/translating-zahia-rahmani-an-interview-with-matt-reeck/>)

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“I’m always surprised by how docile American intellectuals are when they enter the public space,” says Matt Reeck, the translator of Zahia Rahmani’s strikingly bold “Muslim”: A Novel. In the course of a wide-ranging interview with Asymptote Assistant Editor Erik Noonan, Reeck aims to challenge that dominant paradigm of always being “on our best behaviour.”

In our most in-depth Book Club (<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/book-club/>) interview to date, Reeck sifts through the “layers of imperial cultural history in Algeria”, makes an eloquent plea for the widening of the capital/cultural space currently allotted to translation, and suggests that “the translation of texts that are already domesticated work[s] against translation in a broader sense.”

Erik Noonan (EN): Discussing the role of the translator in your statement for the National Endowment for the Arts, you say that “In a globalized world, while we know more about many parts of the world that we didn’t have access to previously, often *what we know* seems to get cemented quickly into easy stereotypes. Then, in a way, we don’t know much more at all; we just know what we think we know.” Dealing with the potential of certain texts to expand our knowledge of the world, you also say, in a piece in *The Los Angeles Review*: “While university presses help by publishing some of these [truly exotic] works, they don’t take on others: the manuscript must match a list, and this list consolidates established emphases of teaching and research.” Your work includes research and teaching in the Comparative Literature Department at UCLA, I believe, as well as translation. How is your teaching related to your research and your translating, and has that relationship changed in any way over time?

Matt Reeck (MR): I’m interested in many things, and they don’t all necessarily fit anyone’s idea of a single pursuit, a single trajectory, a single work. But they do for me. They are unified by being the things I’m interested in! It would be nice to be able to teach things that match my translating interests and my research interests, but to date I’ve been able to do that only here and there. Fingers crossed this will change soon.

EN: This is a moment of rapid changes in publishing: increased academic status for translators, changing publishing models, and in the US, where you’re based, an explosion of works by women, LGBTQ+, people of color, immigrants, and first-gen citizens. Given this climate, I don’t want to ask what you think the role of the translator is but rather, what, in your view, is not happening in the world of publishing? And what does the translator know that no one else does?

MR: There just isn’t enough cultural space for publishing all the translations that should be published. To speak in what might seem very conservative terms, I would say that until every major—broadly thought of—world literature has had its canon translated into English, then serious gaps remain in our ability to say that (1) we are knowledgeable about the literatures of the world and (2) we have a commitment to multiculturalism or diversity.

It seems more the case that when you publish one translation/book, you are necessarily, by the fact of the limited capital/cultural space for translation in the US, not publishing another translation/book, which has just as much “right” to being translated.

Lastly, while there may be a way that yet another translation of Proust or Flaubert helps translation in general in the US by adding some easy visibility to the task of translation, at the same time I would say that the translation of texts that are already domesticated do actually work against translation in a broader sense. They may well limit a reader’s ability and interest in being estranged by texts whose style or cultural material is less familiar. I’m thinking of lesser known cultural spaces, whether that’s the French banlieue, French West Africa, or Urdu, or Korean, and so on.

EN: “Muslim”: a Novel is Zahia Rahmani’s second text to be translated into English. The first was *France, Story of a Childhood*, and the remaining part of her trilogy is called *Moze*. *Moze* was the first to be published in French. Having read it, one can imagine why it was not translated first (I would like to return to this text later). The intimacies and childhood reminiscences of *France* give way, in “Muslim”, to narratives about the founding of a world religion, the persecution of a population, and the fabrication of ideologies. When you choose a text to translate, do you have preferences? What is your taste? Do you consider yourself to have an aesthetic of your own, a style that’s evident in what you yourself produce, in a translated verbal product?

MR: I reserve the right to be interested in anything and everything! But seriously, I was attracted to “Muslim” because of its intellectual heft. And I’m generally interested in translating works that have a noticeable intellectual heft—as well as stylistic, or formal, challenges. That probably has something to do with me, though I couldn’t say what exactly.

EN: The prose of *France* is mellifluous, and in “Muslim” it is percussive: « *De la fange du monde capitaliste, le pétrole boueux, sont parvenus les pourvoyeurs de morts, les Instrumentateurs de la planète.* » And yet, with all its protagonist’s bitterness over having been subjected to a vicious stereotype, there is also what must seem to the reader of English a certain elegance in its syntactic inversions. You translate: “From the mire of the capitalist world, the muddy oil flats, came the merchants of death, the Manipulators of the planet.” When you think of this text, do you feel there was something of your own that you had to set aside in order to lend your sensibility to the job of rendering Rahmani into English?

MR: In terms of the actual semantic content of that example, I didn’t have to put anything aside! I’m always surprised by how docile American intellectuals are when they enter public space. That’s my impression at least: asked out of the shadows for a sound bite on TV or the radio, we are for whatever reason always on our best behavior, fearing perhaps that any anti-capitalist outburst will ruin our chances of being invited back! By contrast, the French intellectual tradition seems to allow statements that a nominal “average” American might find apocalyptic, overstated, rhetorically appealing but factually false, or even almost unstable psychologically. As for leaving a part of myself aside to translate, I would say translating allows the translator to find new parts of him/herself, instead of leaving parts behind. This makes translating very appealing.

EN: Zahia Rahmani has a curatorial and research function in her role as Director of the Research Program on Art and Globalization at the Institut nationale de l’histoire de l’art, and her books are deeply affecting in their exposure of an individual person’s private struggles with matters of public import. In *France*, she expresses an enduring love of American literature. From her books, one has a powerful sense of Rahmani as a younger person—the brave bookish girl—but I’m curious about your sense of the author. What is she like, and how was it for you to work with her on her book?

MR: Hopefully in time her work as a research director and art historian will be itself the focus of interest and the fodder of articles. I think your impression of her as a child matches her life as an adult: brave and fearless. Existing at the geographical center of the French artistic and literary world—INHA is right there at Palais Royal—she nevertheless suffers from the pigeonholing that dominates the French literary scene as well as the American one. She said recently in Paris that the French state has made it hard on writers like her over the past ten years, and that’s true: how do you exist as a French writer when you are constantly recategorized in some more limiting and limited fashion? That is identically part of “Muslim” as well, this sort of identity politics that invades literature and imprisons people/writers for identities that they don’t have.

EN: Algerian literature is a vast corpus. Algerian literature in French is also large; literature written in French and in France, by persons of Algerian birth, can also be regarded as a body of work unto itself. Comparisons are odious, but helpful. In *The Sexual Life of an Islamist in Paris*, for example, Algerian-born French novelist Leïla Marouane portrays a successful professional, the devout eldest son of an Algerian immigrant family living in a Paris banlieue, who reaches for freedom by suddenly and totally assimilating with mainstream French culture through hedonism. The psychotic break that he suffers as a result is a plausible outcome, but it strikes one as the simplistic denouement of a novelistic convention. Why is it that, in contrast, Rahmani’s autofictional mode is so open-ended and irresolute? Why does the protagonist end her tale as a desert camp internee? How does Rahmani fit into this large body of Algerian literature? How does she position herself in relation to other French-Algerian writers?

MR: Many interesting questions!

First, I would agree with you that the trope of a psychotic break, while probably relying upon real experiences, is by now a cliché in literature of exile, orphanhood, and the genre of narratives that take place within the milieu of cultural creolization in the present tense. (The narrator’s attempted suicide in *France* is so understated that the reader has to reread the passage to make sure that an attempted suicide just happened.)

While the sections of “Muslim” are not explicitly linked in any sort of chronology or teleology, I do tend to think of the last section as a summarizing allegory, though perhaps that is wrong on my part. But, in one sense, I think you can see that the process of stigmatization would seem to have a natural conclusion in a type of interment camp, whether in a desert or elsewhere.

I would call Zahia Rahmani a French writer. She doesn’t have any necessary place in Algerian literature. Moreover, it remains an open question of whether Algerian literature, as canonized (or not) or as conceptualized (or not) in Algeria, allows French at all, and is not simply Arabic. That is, the question of who is invested in the question of Algerian literature remains fluid and problematic.

So to create the label of French-Algerian is also a form of minoritizing writers within French literature per se that does no writer any good but does effect some bad. As a scholarly gesture, to put her in a category with other French-Algerian writers would create a new category, to be sure, but that hyphen would only seem to make sense in America. Otherwise, I’m tempted to say that Zahia Rahmani is personally and aesthetically more invested in American literature and art than in anything Algerian.

EN: Rahmani addresses the struggles of postcolonial Algerian people with a wide view. In *France*, for example, she touches on the preservation of Algeria's French culture, not only as a part of the nation's heritage, but also as resistance to pan-Arabism: "Rare were those willing to admit to what point the despair voiced by Albert Camus and Kateb Yacine was also their own." This seems an open perspective, considering the indignation of *Moze*, where Rahmani writes of her father, a Harki who served in the French army and was imprisoned by Algeria, and who, when France did not arrange for his release, escaped and moved the family to France, where he later committed suicide. She speaks out against "the system that allows the French state to form an army of dead soldiers without allowing them to be persons." How do the conditions of immigrant Berber and Algerian French people, and the conditions of postcolonial Algeria, enter into the translation process, and into the finished English translation, for you?

MR: It's important to point out that Zahia Rahmani's father was never a combatant—he never held a gun. I think that tends to get overlooked. His is not the normal Harki story.

I would love to read more work that deals with the complex multicultural history of Algeria, including the layers of Berber past. That, for me, would have to take place in French, of course. (I'm entirely ignorant of what takes place in Algerian Arabic literature.) Unfortunately, as far as I know, the layers of imperial cultural history in Algeria—first Arabization, then Frenchification—have made this past all but invisible to the US academy and work that takes place there. I think of Mouloud Feraoun, but I don't recall his writing as being hybridized with Amazigh.

A winner of NEA and PEN-Heim Translation Grants, **Matt Reeck** has translated from the Urdu, the French, the Korean, and the Hindi. "Muslim": a Novel, his translation from the French of Zahia Rahmani, will be published this March by Deep Vellum. French Guiana: Memory Traces of the Penal Colony, his translation from the French of Patrick Chamoiseau, will be published later this year by Wesleyan UP.

Erik Noonan is from Los Angeles, California, USA. He is the author of the poetry collections *Stances* and *Haiku d'Etat*. His writing is featured in a variety of publications, including the anthology *Cross Strokes: Poetry Between Los Angeles and San Francisco*. For more, please visit [eriknoonan.net](http://www.eriknoonan.net/) (<http://www.eriknoonan.net/>).

Read more about the Book Club on the *Asymptote* blog:

- Announcing our February Book Club Selection: "Muslim": A Novel by Zahia Rahmani (<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/2019/02/28/announcing-our-february-book-club-selection-muslim-a-novel-by-zahia-rahmani/>)
- Questions from Night School: An Interview with Jim Tucker (<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/2019/02/21/questions-from-night-school-an-interview-with-jim-tucker/>)
- Announcing our January Book Club Selection: *Night School* by Zsófia Bán (<https://www.asymptotejournal.com/blog/2019/01/31/announcing-our-january-book-club-selection-night-school-by-zsofia-ban/>)

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