

Wendy Call

Interview

Wendy Call writes nonfiction and translates poetry and short fiction from Spanish, in addition to her duties as an editor, teacher, and official translator based in Seattle and Miami. Wendy has become something of an itinerant Writer-in-Residence, serving as Writer-in-Residence in 2010 at the American Antiquarian Society, Everglades National Park, New College of Florida, Harborview Medical Center, Hedgebrook, and Penland School of Crafts.

*Her narrative nonfiction book, **No Word for Welcome**, which explores how economic globalization intersects with village life in southern Mexico, is forthcoming from the University of Nebraska Press in Spring 2011.*

Please tell us a little about your translation efforts, to start. What intrigues you about the pieces you choose?

It's more love than intrigue. I become infatuated with a poem or short story I've read in Spanish and want to share it with my English-speaking, non-Spanish-speaking comrades. What sparks that infatuation? Surprise, being taken somewhere I wasn't expecting to go, or finding a delightful expression of something I've tried (and failed) to express.

How would translation ideally affect your readers, and what relationship do you see between the original and the translation?

Suzanne Jill Levine, one of the best Spanish-to-English translators working today, says that the role of a translated text is to create in the reader the same

emotional and intellectual experience that the original text would create for its intended audience. A very high bar, but an excellent one.

I began translating as an extension of writing nonfiction. In 2003, while working on a book about villagers in a part of Mexico called the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, I started to translate local literature as a way to deepen my understanding of the place. Much of that literature was written in the Zapotec language and then translated into Spanish (most often by the author). I worked from the Spanish translations.

Only in the last year have I begun publishing those translations. I don't read or understand any Zapotec, and I couldn't quite get over the idea of publishing work whose original I could not read. Then, one of the poets I work with, Irma Pineda Santiago, sent me an essay she had written about the process of self-translation from Zapotec to Spanish. She noted:

“You can't think of it as a transfer from one language to another, because we would be left with something horrible in Spanish. You must think of them as parallel poems, a poem created in our language and another poem in Spanish. Both versions uphold their respective literary canons.”

Learning about Irma's process of creating parallel, yet separate, poems was enormously freeing. It allowed me to think of the Spanish version as a new original that stands on its own and therefore, can be translated on its own. That said, I spend a lot of time scrutinizing the original Zapotec versions and thinking about how to replicate some of their dazzling rhythm and sound.

Both your chosen mediums of nonfiction and translation have interesting components of self-expression at play in the background. In more subtle ways than manually

inserting your own insights, the interviewer and translator impose a certain flair of creative personality, so is there a philosophical link between crafting nonfiction and transmitting translated works?

I'm intrigued by your choice of wording: "components of self-expression at play in the background." As I writer – and I say this with no particular pride -- I'm singularly uninterested in self-expression. As the old saying goes, there are two kinds of writers: those who feel they have something to say to the world, and those who feel the world has something to say to them. I seem to have been born into the latter group.

Suzanne Jill Levine writes in her delightful book, *Subversive Scribe*, that when she began working as a translator, she thought of the vocation as that of "language adventurer or experimental writer." That is sometimes true for me, but more often I feel like a bicycle messenger in a large city with terrible traffic. The translator has so many concerns that are invisible to the reader, who wants only to experience a good poem or story.

In much of my nonfiction writing, I strive to create a minimally present narrator, because I want readers to focus on the experience of the people about whom I'm writing, not on me. In this way, I'm wildly out of fashion. The strength of the first-person narrator is a key criterion by which creative nonfiction is judged – at least in this country. By that measure (and others), my writing draws more from the Latin American tradition of *crónica* than from the U.S. tradition of creative nonfiction.

All that said, I'm currently working on a series of personal essays about grief and loss. I've chosen this project in part to force myself to face the complications and challenges of a first-person narrator who is also the narrative's protagonist.

We've been thinking about the idea that writing nonfiction is itself a form of translation, that is, transferring life's events into another "language"/medium.

Precisely. Ilan Stavans, stellar writer and translator both, says: "All nonfiction writers, whether they like it or not, are translators. For me, the translator is the perfect journalist. The best journalism endeavors to convey one essential idea or story to an audience that knows very little about it. That requires translation. To do this successfully, the writer must filter the idea through the prism of his eye, his mind, his writing style."

There are philosophical and practical links between translation and nonfiction writing. When I quote someone or include dialogue in my nonfiction, that is a form of translation – even if the original words were spoken in English. Selecting ten words to print from ten thousand that were spoken requires far more audacity than translation.

In spite of the similarities, I find translation to be less taxing and more consistently enjoyable than writing. When I choose to translate a work, it's because I love it. I am utterly confident of its value and the need for it in the world. It's hard to muster the same confidence about one's own work.

How do you translate lived experience into text?

Ah, that is the challenge and the wonder of it: take our four-dimensional world (space plus time) and represent it as a simple, forward-moving squiggle. Oddly, the easiest thing to represent is the dimension of time. When I'm writing, the first thing I do is fix a chronology. Once I've got that, I'm on my way.

The Mexican villagers in No Word for Welcome contentedly boast about their fishermen's autonomy to work or pee when they like, as opposed to the drudgery of office-hour schedules. Meanwhile a sly omniscience notes the other half of the story: that the season and moon phase set the fishermen's timetable as surely as any foreman. How much do you consider yourself an observer or participant in the stories you collect?

That depends on the story. In the case of No Word for Welcome, I was deeply involved in the events I describe – though (necessarily) as an outsider. But you wouldn't know that from reading the book. I removed myself from most of the narrative, because I wanted readers to engage with the story (at least, my version of it) of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, rather than the story of me in that place.

What biases do you expect from your subjects and how do you handle them?

I'm far more concerned about my own biases and – to be honest – ignorance. Other people's biases are precisely what interest me. As I gather material for my writing, I'm trying to look at the situation through other people's eyes. Once I've tried to look at something from many people's viewpoints, the image finally begins to come into focus. Of course, I can't ever escape my own perspective, but I can try to delve into other people's perspectives (or biases, if you prefer). That is the joy and privilege of writing nonfiction – and of translation.

In your nonfiction writing class at New College of Florida, you state that the only thing a nonfiction author can make up is the narrator. Is this narrator a prism through which the audience views a situation, or do you mean to suggest that the experiences change you, the writer?

Not to dodge the question, but I believe that both are true. I'm the reader's hired representative, and she can fire me at any time by not reading. To keep my job, I need to meet the reader's needs and be someone she wants to spend time with, even if she would find me bossy or boring in real life. That person on the page is not me, though we have quite a bit in common.

Regarding the latter part of your question, most experience changes us. When I was about eleven years old, a friend's father told me, "We are changed by every interaction we have in our lives. Every person you will meet in your life will change you." I sat in the back seat of his huge car, watching a nighttime world pass by through scratched windows, and the magnitude of that idea washed over me. I imagined myself at the age of 30, 40, 50: my identity composed of what I'd received from other people. I felt such liberation: I was no longer entirely responsible for who I became. And I would never be truly alone, because I would carry those bits of other people within me.

So, yes, I write about experiences that have been life-changing for me. The biggest challenge is making clear to the reader not just how one is changed, but why.

Some of the works in this issue of New CollAge involved various methods of unconventional translation or collage work. As an observer with the goal of writing in mind, how do you go about gathering bits of stories, experiences, and places and compile them into a narrative text?

Ah, that is the mystery and alchemy of it all. I'm always saving bits of string and straw and scrap metal. Every writer has her personal ratio of experience to text; mine is extremely high. I have little to say (or, at least, write) about my experiences for a very long time. I'm not sure how I go about it, but here are

some of the things I do:

I always carry a notebook. I spend more time alone than I would prefer. I don't ever watch television. I rarely watch films. I don't even listen to much music. (Although I believe music and film can both inspire and improve one's writing, they distract me from the task of creating meaning from experience – an occupation that in no way comes naturally. I need to reduce the noise-to-signal ratio of what enters my consciousness.) I talk to strangers, though I'm an introvert. After I have spent a lot of time wandering through an experience, following people around, reading books, riffling through archives, and simmering my ideas, I trick myself into writing through elaborate freewriting rituals and bundles of writing prompts. I have a hard time ever considering a piece of writing finished, so I seek deadlines. Something that Rita Dove says of poetry might be true of all writing: "A poem is never done. You just let it go."

Irma Pineda Santiago
Original Zapotec

Biaani'

Ne biaani' zanda gu'yu xhi cá cué' yoo,
zanda gannu' xhi dié' lú binni.

Biaani' riguiñená ni nexhe guidxi layú,
rutie'láadi binni,

rutie' bandá dxaba'

cuxidxi ti nuu xtubi lu gueela'

ti miati da

sucá cué' yoo cadxibi.

Irma Pineda Santiago

Translated to Spanish by the author

La Luz

La luz permite el oficio de mirar paredes,
adivinar colores que llenan rostros.

La luz inunda las formas,
dibuja siluetas,
sombras fantasmales
que se burlan de la soledad nocturna
de una figura frágil
sostenida en la pared del miedo.

Irma Pineda Santiago

Translated to English by Wendy Call

Light

Light allows the vocation of looking at walls,
discerning colors that fill faces.

Light floods bodies,
draws silhouettes,
phantom shadows
that taunt the nighttime solitude
of one fragile figure
held on the wall of fear.