Revisiting the Untranslatable: Comment on Palmié and Taylor

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Plenary: Doubt and Determination in Ethnography

Ashley Lebner

First I want to thank João de Pina-Cabral and the local EASA organizing committee for inviting me to be a part of this plenary. It is a privilege to be commenting on such rich papers. My remarks begin where these two papers meet, though I move them just a touch beyond their stated positions. While Anne-Christine discusses encounters with difference as the translations of translations and Stephan speaks of them as always-potentially passable doors, I want to read Stephan and Anne-Christine as helping us think about untranslatability, impass-ability, indeed impossibility, as a vital part of ethnography, and of relating more generally. This is important especially at this time of new limits, as João described it earlier. Specifically, I want to conceive of limits, impossibility, not as a lament, or indicative of a permanent or new crisis, but instead as way to humbly ground our relations and knowledge. Of course I am unhinging nothing really, to borrow Stephan's language, by saying that passing through doors doesn't mean you will arrive; or to say that ethnography, and relating more generally, is inevitably *hard, partial* and will never end up being what we expect. But while we know that the unpredictability of ethnography is deemed a good thing, there remains a stigma associated with untranslatability and impossibility. So my aim here is to recuperate them a bit; first by emphasizing their presence in our texts today and then by discussing Brazil's most untranslatable novel, which I am reading alongside my own research in settler Amazonia.

"Can we become unhinged?" Stephan asks, and concludes that the spirit Tomás is rather more like a door opened to him, and that he has still not stopped believing that him, or someone like him, "might be able step through this door, even if none of us ever really will succeed in doing so." This phrase of the longer paper immediately brought to mind the impassable door of the law in Kafka's famous parable. Stephan and I subsequently had a lively conversation about it, which became a footnote, where Stephan gives a gloss of the parable and responds. I quote:

A "man from the country" aiming to get "entry into the law" [kafka's terms] confronts a gatekeeper at an open gate who tells him again and again that he cannot step through just now…The gatekeeper [finally] reveals to the dying man that the entrance was assigned to him alone, and…closes the gate. As should be clear, I am not partial to such a fatalistic reading…

Stephan's stated distance from Kafka is why I read him a bit beyond where he puts himself. In fairness, in our conversation Stephan was quick not to think of Kafka as only dark, yet while writing these comments, I recalled the significance of another part of the parable: at the beginning, the man asks the gatekeeper if he will be allowed to enter later. I quote from Kafka (1915):

"It is possible," says the gatekeeper, "but not now."…the gate to the law stands open, as always…so the man bends over…to see through the gate into the inside. [The gatekeeper laughs] and says: "If it tempts you so much, try it in spite of my prohibition. But take note: I am powerful. And I am only the most lowly gatekeeper. But from room to room stand gatekeepers, each more powerful than the other. I can't endure even one glimpse of the third." The man from the country…decides…to wait until he gets permission...

What is remarkable, and does *seem* like the utmost fatalism, is that Kafka sees the law as infinitely protected by doors with gatekeepers; that no matter what, the man, him, us, will never even arrive. But still, as some scholars have concurred (Born 1970), the real tragedy, even for Kafka, may just be that he never even gets through the *first* door, because he never *tries* to get in. This is not a comment on Stephan, he certainly tries and hopes to get through his door. Rather I want to point out the parable's lesson: that of course it might be impossible to ever get fully, exactly, where we want to go, but that shouldn't stop us from trying…

I don't ultimately think my reading of the parable, or of the ethnographic relation, is that far from Stephan's, who has himself elsewhere embraced the conditions of impossibility of historicist knowledge (2014) but here I do land just a bit more on the side of impossibility and untranslatability. And this allows me to swing back to Anne-Christine, whose paper I also push a bit more towards that position, as well.

Anne-Christine sees ethnography as the translation of translations, made possible by a mutual "desire for ethnography" by anthropologist and interlocutor, which is grounded on mutual misunderstanding. To extend this I playfully offer a re-reading of what initiated her reflections, a suggestion she first received in a pre-fieldwork visit with her doctoral advisor, Lévi-Strauss.

"Let yourself be carried by the field," Lévi-Strauss said. While her interpretation led to her reflection on the desire for ethnography, it also inspired her call for a study of the experience of ethnographic

investigation, to understand especially what degree of "unhinging" our interlocutors are aspiring and consenting to.

I actually think that there exists something like such a study, untranslatable though it is. But first, let me turn to Lévi-Strauss' suggestion: could Lévi-Strauss not also be suggesting that we allow ourselves to be carried by the field *right to its very edge—to the limits of classification*? That is, carried to the impossibility of apprehension and the fundamental untranslatability that generates transformation?

Of course I consider this to be just another *version* of Anne-Christine's suggestions precisely because at least one of the edges of the field *is* the other, as she notes…but it is worth acknowledging more generally that in *La Pensée Sauvage* Lévi-Strauss primed anthropologists on the impossibility at the heart of knowledge and life—even of history—when he said that less socially-interested historians tend to model "a confused outline of Gödel's theorem in the clay of 'becoming'" (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 262). Here, Lévi-Strauss was not *opposed* to history as such, as has often been said of him. By recalling Gödel's theorem of incompleteness, which holds that even in complete systems some things will remain impossible to prove, Lévi-Strauss was reminding us that while it is impossible to *know* everything, the very existence of impossibility means that things can change. An encounter with impossibility—an event at the limit of classification—provokes a necessary response: the production of further classifications; the proliferation of differences, resulting in transformation. Before post-structuralism proper, then, impossibilities, perennial encounters with difference, were at the heart of Lévi-Strauss' thinking not only on anthropology, but on history as well (Johnson 2013; Keck 2009; Lebner fc.).

Lévi-Strauss' encounter with the too-different Mundé, to which Anne-Christine also refers, helps concretize Lévi-Strauss' work with impossibility. Boris Wiseman (2001, 8) describes it as a moment when Lévi-Strauss realizes that the ethnographic project is "an impossibility," yet classifies it as a "negative" moment in Lévi-Strauss' work that is nevertheless temporary. Certainly, Lévi-Strauss is feeling deflated, concluding that no-one and no thing—from humans to grass—can be fully apprehended in their otherness; that it is either the relation that transforms the other, or indeed the self who can never really leave home and truly *see* the other. But the sheer negativity associated with impossibility, and scholars like Wiseman's particular aversion to it, comes from perhaps a Euro-American faith in, and desire for, limitlessness, perfection, unity, transparency, translatability, and

sameness, which makes anything that is too dissimilar from those hopes appear negative—and thus *to be opposed*. This fear of the irremediably dissimilar is quite pernicious, including politically, as Marilyn Strathern has long argued and has recently expanded upon in her recent book, *Relations*.

Yet my own path to this persuasion also passes through what I earlier called Brazil's most untranslatable novel, which has not only helped me think through my own research in settler Amazonia, but also approximates what Anne-Christine calls for: a study of the experience of ethnography and how to write about it. This most untranslatable novel, Lusophones will be unsurprised to hear, is João Guimarães Rosa's *Grande Sertão: Veredas* published in 1956. It is also Brazil's and indeed one of the Portuguese language's star contributions to world literature. The problem is that the world doesn't quite know it yet because the book is essentially untranslatable. Gregory Rabassa, the celebrated American translator of One Hundred Years of Solitude, said that *Grande Sertão* "would have to be rewritten, not translated..." (in Krause 2015: 114).

Of course the book *has* been variously translated, and rather flatly in English as *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*. But the translations failed to communicate Rosa's astounding linguistic innovation—from confounding neologisms to cascading rhythms. Precisely *because* of its untranslatability, it should be classified as a classic of anthropological thought. I am certainly not the first anthropologist to think with *Grande Sertão* (e.g. Carlos Rodrigues-Brandão 1998; Ana Claudia Marques 2004; João de Pina-Cabral 2007; 2008). So far as I know, however, the novel has not been taken up as an opportunity to reflect on ethnographic experience and method generally. Therefore it bears mentioning in this forum, where many can or have read it in the original.

Grande Sertão is grounded in Rosa's (admittedly brief) fieldwork in Brazil's arid interior, the *sertão*. It can thus be read as an account of both the results and effects of his ethnographic engagement. The story is built around questions the narrator, Riobaldo, poses to an outsider, though we never actually hear him respond. Riobaldo seems to want his interlocutor to help him decide the undecidables, especially resolving the existence of the devil, but ultimately he cannot decide—because this is what drives him to relate and thus get closer to himself and the divine. And this desire is ultimately what drives the story, too. Riobaldo says (pardon the translation):

"[Sir] you help me talk more with myself. Look see: what is bad, inside us, we always pervert by becoming distant from ourselves. Perhaps this is why people like to talk?

[Your ideas] Sir…give me peace…The confirmation…that the *Thing* doesn't exist. Right, no?..."

But Riobaldo continues to wonder: "who knows…maybe the native badness of man makes him only capable of seeing the approximation of God in the figure of the *Other*? (48-49).

The "Other" Riobaldo refers to here is surely the devil, indeed clearly the devil could be any *others* or *selves*. This is actually exactly what some people told me during my own fieldwork, while many others said: "of course the devil exists, we just don't believe in him!" (see discussion in Lebner 2012; fc.; also Pina-Cabral 2008). But as Riobaldo speculates, perhaps the devil is the only way to the divine? (Here the resonance with Amerindian engagements with enmity would be interesting to contemplate!: Taylor 2015, para: 13).

This brings me to my final point: I don't want us to necessarily champion Christianity, but we could learn with it—first by remembering the role of Christianity in colonization, a tragic process precisely where radical difference, indeterminacy, untranslatability, was deemed a tragedy, an outgrowth of the *fall,* a cause and source of *evil* to be eradicated.[1] This echoes in even contemporary secular Euro-American fears of difference. Yet Riobaldo, my interlocutors, and certainly Rosa, don't always see the untranslatable or unknowable as tragic. They see it as a fact of life, as well as beautiful in its mystery, and we can learn from that, too. Perhaps learning from all the people here discussed, we can also acknowledge that irremediable, ultimately impossible-to-bridge difference—whether in "others" or "selves," at home or away—can be beautiful, humbling, and transformative? Might we conclude, then, that ethnographers should remain determined to transform with the untranslatable truths of others?

Ashley Lebner
Wilfrid Laurier University
EASA, Virtually Lisbon, 2020

[1] It's interesting to note that not all colonialisms have been powered by a drive to obliterate difference. For instance, as Mueggler (2020) argues, during the Ming dynasty's colonization of the Yunnan-Guizhou plateau, native chieftains asserted their own sovereign powers by recognizing and managing untranslatable difference.

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