

Reader's Companion

for

CALAZAZA'S DELICIOUS DERELICTION

by Suzanne Dracius

Translated by Nancy Naomi Carlson

(Tupelo Press, 2015)

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Introduction and Critical Praise

In her polyphonic poems, Suzanne Dracius creates protagonists — usually *calazazas*, light-skinned mulatto women with red or blond hair — who fight like Amazons against racial and gender discrimination. Not yet known to North American readers, Dracius's voice is leaping and exalted, often sexually charged, and infused with allusions to Greek and Roman mythology. Also a fiction writer and playwright, Dracius considers herself a *calazaza gréco-latine* and celebrates her mixed ancestry: African, European, Carib Indian, and Chinese.

Nancy Naomi Carlson has translated Dracius's *Exquise dérélition métisse*, poems written in French yet including some Creole versions, and with Creole expressions throughout. In French, this book was awarded the prestigious Prix Fètkann, whose judges cited the poet's richness of language and varied linguistic registers.



"How can we resist Suzanne Dracius' bewitching book, her sorcerous verses, her gorgeous songs of the Caribbean's painful colonial history, the horror transformed into beauty? . . . French, Creole, and Latin copiously flow in and out of one another, what she might call a poetics of 'independence, cadence, and dance.' [A] fierce griot who celebrates her 'fête of flavors of mixed descent,' a Calibana who sings of her Antilles's 'fervent *métissage*.' We are awed by Dracius's intellectual acuity, the speed with which the mythic collapses into the quotidian then back again, the sonic playfulness. . . . Nancy Naomi Carlson [has] transported these verses into English with verve and piquancy, aural skill and consummate knowledge." — Orlando Ricardo Menes

"In dazzling hybridity, Suzanne Dracius dances with racial, social, sexual, and linguistic identities, bridging flavors and full-bodied figures of speech from the Latin and Greek to French and Creole, addressing friends, challenging categories and -isms, triumphantly celebrating her 'frank Creolity' throughout this jubilant collection of poems. . . . Nancy Naomi Carlson . . . beautifully renders the dense word and sonic play Dracius trades in. The rhetoric here has ancient roots; the figures and issues are contemporary, compelling, and profound."
— Sidney Wade

Translating “Women’s Fantasies”: Commentary by Nancy Naomi Carlson

Adapted from a piece originally posted on the Words Without Borders blog:
www.wordswithoutborders.org/dispatches/article/from-the-translator-nancy-naomi-carlson-on-translating-suzanne-draciuss-wom

Translating Suzanne Dracius’s “Women’s Fantasies,” my first translation of her work, opened a portal to an exotic Caribbean culture surviving . . . no, *thriving* in the shadow of Mount Pelée, one of the deadliest volcanoes on Earth, located in Martinique, in the Lesser Antilles. In 1902 the volcano erupted, destroying the town of Saint-Pierre. In this poem, “Hell’s Road” refers to *rue d’Enfer*, the name of a street in Saint-Pierre destroyed by the volcano. “Rise-to-Heaven Street” refers to the nearby *rue Monte au ciel*. Despite the volcano’s constant threat, Martiniquans celebrate life, whether through riotous Carnival festivities culminating in Mardi Gras, or through their rich culture that includes music, dancing, and storytelling.

While a discussion of “place” is key to understanding this poem, a discussion of language is also vital. In “Women’s Fantasies,” *Krik krak* is part of a Caribbean storyteller’s ritual of warming up the audience by asking “*Krik?*” and encouraging the collective response “*Krak!*” The storyteller then says “*Yé mistikri!*” and the audience responds “*Yé mistikra!*” Finally the storyteller asks “Is the court sleeping?” and the audience responds “No, the court is not sleeping.” Perhaps containing Christian overtones but uniquely bound with Caribbean storytelling traditions, these utterances do not hold universal meanings.

“Women’s Fantasies” highlights some of Dracius’s signature themes, including feminism, negritude, and classic Greek and Roman elements. The last lines of the poem are an example of how Dracius deals with the theme of racial identity in a diverse society: “and running, I escaped / as a chestnut brown / Caribbean gourmet.” In the original French, “*marronne*” is the word used for “chestnut brown” and also refers to “*les marrons*” (Maroons), descendants of escaped slaves living in the mountains and forests of such places as Suriname and the West Indies. Through word play, Dracius echoes the theme of the Maroons by using the verbs “running” and “escaped.”

In the original French, “Women’s Fantasies” is extremely musical, through Dracius’s use of internal and end rhyme, both pure and slant, as well as through alliteration. I attempted to reproduce as much music as possible in my English version, without sacrificing meaning. For example, in the fourth stanza of the original French, most of the lines end with the sound “i”:

*Faut-il vraiment que l’on soit ivre
pour faire exulter nos chairs vives ?*

*Faut-il que longuement l'on dérive
en féerie,
en barbarie,
extrêmes dans nos emportements
autant que dans nos engouements,
en frénésie,
en malcadi?*

In the English version, although I was not able to reproduce the exact French sound of “i” (which is crisper than an American “i,” therefore impossible to imitate exactly), I was able to make generous use of the sound of “ay” (“make,” “away,” “tales,” “ways,” “rage,” “cravings,” “crazed”) in order to maintain the music of the line. Similarly, since most of the original French lines end with a stressed syllable, I tried to reproduce this effect in English. I felt it especially important to focus on the music within this poem due to Dracius’s words of invitation to the “you” of the poem in the fourth stanza, “in melody / in harmony.” Perhaps it might be more accurate to say “in polyphony,” as Dracius smoothly weaves together rhythms and tones from sources as disparate as Pompeii (with its own volcano) and Amazon warrior queens.

Translating “Pointe-des-Nègres” Commentary by Nancy Naomi Carlson

Based on an interview by Ann Bracken,
first published in *Little Patuxent Review* (Summer, 2013)

How did you become interested in Suzanne Dracius' work?

A friend of mine “introduced” me to Suzanne Dracius via Facebook, after I requested names of francophone prize-winning poets whose work was not well-known to an American audience. I immediately was drawn to Suzanne, who creates protagonists, usually *calazaza* women (light-skinned mulatto women with red or blond hair), who struggle to fight racial and gender discrimination. Suzanne’s work addresses such topics as feminism and negritude, and her language and voice are often sexually charged and shocking, while infused with references to Greek and Roman mythology.

I decided to translate *Exquise déréliction métisse*, her first and only collection of poetry. Although most of the poems are written in French, two appear in Creole, and Creole expressions are sprinkled throughout the rest of the work. This book had never been translated into English. In 2009, a year after its French publication, Suzanne had been awarded the prestigious Prix Fetkann for this work. The judges cited the impressive richness of language. Suzanne makes use of all kinds of words — simple, elaborate, rare, French, Creole, Greek, Latin, English, African, and “verlan” (French slang which reverses the order of syllables in many common words) — while also mixing up time (past, present, future), and blending the history of her Creole ancestors with current inhabitants of the Caribbean.

How does translating these poems open a window onto the culture of Martinique?

Most of Suzanne’s work is set in Martinique, informed by its dark history of slavery, movingly portrayed in “Pointe-des-Nègres.” In 1635, Martinique was claimed by France and became a slave colony for over two hundred years. Slavery was not officially abolished until 1848. Indeed, Suzanne’s own last name, derived from a reference to an Epean warrior in Homer’s *Iliad*, was one of the surnames assigned to newly freed slaves.

In 1946, the French National Assembly unanimously voted to transform the colony into an overseas department of France. Martinique today is still a part of France.

Through my translation of these poems, I’ve learned about the finely calibrated racial distinctions on the black/white continuum found in Martinique. References in Suzanne’s poetry include the *calazaza* (mentioned above), the *chabine* (light-

skinned, bi-racial woman with red or blond hair and some black features), and the *capresse* (half-black, half-mulatto woman with darker skin than the *chabine's*, and with black hair).

Two of Suzanne's major themes are *métissage* (which refers to the blending of two distinct elements, in either a biological or cultural sense) and *marronnage* (which refers to the flight of slaves from their masters).

Most of the poems in *Exquise dérélition métisse* explore what it means to be of "mixed descent," including the inherent difficulties of "fitting in."

Since the cadence and the rhythm are so different between French and English, how do you translate so as to maintain the musicality of the original language?

While you are correct in stating that the cadence and rhythm of French and English are very different, I feel it is possible to maintain the musicality of the original language while staying as close as possible to the meaning of the original text. I do not mean to say that I can magically transport the exact French rhyme into my English translation, but rather I attempt to reproduce the rhyming "effect," even though the rhyme may be a different sound and may be located in different lines than those of the original text.

French is inherently musical by virtue of its rhythm and repetition of sound.

Regarding rhythm, the majority of French words stress the last syllable. To preserve their rhythm, I try to end lines with English words that stress the last syllable or are mono-syllabic.

To replicate their rich repetition of sound, I try to reproduce the alliteration and assonance found in Suzanne's poems. When I get lucky, sometimes my English version is quite similar to the original French, as was the case in translating the complex, musical word play found near the end of the first stanza of "Pointe-des-Nègres":

en souffrance
sous France
sous-France

which I translated as:

on sufferance
under France
sub-France

keeping the word play intact.

What are the steps you go through as part of the translation process?

Ahhh . . . my translation secrets. First I line up my two French-English dictionaries, my French-French dictionary, and two online French-English dictionaries, plus a very esoteric French-French online dictionary to which Suzanne introduced me. (Once I started using that dictionary myself, I had fewer questions to ask her!) I also have my English thesaurus and French thesaurus nearby. And chocolate.

I quickly skim the poem to be translated, and then draw a color-coded “sound map” of the major sound patterns. Then, line by line, I begin the tedious process of looking at all options for each word, looking each up in all the dictionaries, and writing down all possibilities. I try to come up with a musical equivalent to reflect the music of the original, drawing from all the possibilities. I do not move past each line until it sounds right to my ear. I read lines aloud in both French and English. Sometimes I have to put the translation aside to give me time to reflect, which may mean overnight. Or a few days. Sometimes I email the author for further clarification to help me open up more word choice possibilities. By the time I reach the last line, the translation is pretty much completed — especially if an end-rhyme pattern has been created. As I do with my own poems, I let each translation sit for several days, then revise as necessary. Once I feel it is done, I send it to the author for approval. (Of course when I was working on *Stone Lyre: Poems of René Char* and the more recent *Hammer with No Master*, this step was impossible, as Char has been gone for over thirty years.)

In what ways do you use English words to create the same tension as in the original poem?

I try to reproduce the syntax of the original, if possible, in order for the images of the translation to unfurl in the same way as the original.

On the other hand, my all-encompassing rule is that *the translation should never read like a translation*, but rather as if it had been originally written in English. In other words, the translation must flow. And must meet the “standards” of outstanding contemporary poetry — must be able to stand on its own without leaning on the original. I try to find English words that match the French as much as possible in terms of voice, diction, tone, sound, and historical context.

Translators are doomed from the start, as they face a multitude of challenges that cannot be met. The Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset considered all translation utopian, which is to say impossible. Yet we persist, as we must.

In “Pointe-des-Nègres,” I was faced with the challenge of conveying the actual location of the title, a quarter in Fort-de-France, Martinique, where slaves, deported from Africa during the slave trade era, had come ashore. I included the other, older words for this place: *Souf*, *Terrou-bi*, and *Lessdi*.

I wrestled with the best way to translate “nègre,” and Suzanne, fluent in English but more comfortable in French, urged me to use the “n-word.” In the end, I felt her English word choice was too emotionally charged in English — more so than the word “nègre” in French — and I decided to keep the French name.

This decision was consistent with my keeping the words that mean “land” (as seen from the sea when one arrives by boat) in various African languages in their original forms: *Mabélé*, *Oto*, *Monkili*, *Hmsé* and *Molongo*.

What is the importance of an American audience reading these poems?

I think we Americans sometimes forget that the very best writing in the world is/was not originally written in English.

In this increasingly global literary community, we have access to work (and translations) from the remotest parts of the world, describing the human condition, something to which all of us can relate. We all know war, but how wonderful to have the opportunity to read poetry about war through the eyes of a nomad from Djibouti. Or in this case, to have the opportunity to read poetry about what it means to be black through the eyes of a *calazaza* from Martinique!

Interview with Nancy Naomi Carlson

Adapted from the Authors & Translators blog

<http://authors-translators.blogspot.com/2016/01/nancy-naomi-carlson-and-her-authors.html>

How did you start translating literature? What are “your” authors and languages?

I came to translation through the convergence of three interests that came together: music, French, and poetry. When I majored in French Language and Literature in college and grad school, I had no interest in creative writing. I could only hear the call of the Muse of Music, and was consumed by playing the piano, flute, and violin. For several years, I worked as a French and Spanish teacher. Years later, when I became a school counselor, I started writing poetry. I took a poetry class at the University of Maryland with Michael Collier, who suggested I try my hand at translating, “because of your background in foreign languages.” However, it wasn’t until attending a few sessions on translation at AWP in Vancouver that I decided to take the translation plunge, choosing source texts infused with music which I tried to bring into my translations. Translation is the link between who I was and who I have become.

I developed a love for poetry from reading French poems . . . not English! . . . especially for the rich sounds of Verlaine, Baudelaire, and Apollinaire. I can still recite lines from these poems by heart, though I can never memorize my translations, nor my original poems. I also enjoyed the simplicity and poignancy of Jacques Prévert; I used his poems to teach the *passé composé* to my high school French students.

What do you like /dislike about your job as a literary translator?

I love, love, love the fact that I never have writer’s block when I translate. Yes, I can be blocked on the best way to translate a particular word or phrase (usually one that fits a particular sound pattern), but it’s just not the same as writing my “own” poems. I also love working with living authors and seeing the world through their eyes. I have gained life-long friends from these relationships.

I’m not especially fond of the bureaucracy that sometimes is involved in obtaining the rights to translate a particular piece of work . . . especially when the rights are owned by big publishing houses which sometimes demand hundreds of dollars in royalties.

What is the most enriching experience you have had?

There have been several, but what stands out is my trip to Martinique on an Arts & Humanities grant from Maryland's Montgomery County to meet with the brilliant **Suzanne Dracius**, as well as to see the physical landscape of her poems, including the infamous volcano that erupted in 1902, destroying the entire town of Saint-Pierre. There it was, still steaming with malice, with people once again living in its foothills, still in harm's way. Suzanne drove me around the entire island, where I got to see beaches, lush forests, Fort-de-France with its decapitated statue of Empress Josephine, and drink "ti-punch" (rum and sugar syrup) at our midday meals. Suzanne took me to a concert where I met the President of Martinique; another day we delivered a two-hour symposium, in French, on her writing and the translation process at the bibliothèque Schoelcher, in Fort-de-France. We even got interviewed for a TV program that aired that day.

What made you feel closest to an author?

I had never heard of **Abdourahman Waberi**, the world-famous writer from Djibouti, until I came across one of his poems on the internet, part of an anthology of francophone literature. I had to look up the location of Djibouti, which turned out to be nestled among Ethiopia, Somalia, and Eritrea, on the east coast of Africa. I sent a Facebook message to Abdou, asking if his collection of poetry had ever been translated into English, and he quickly sent a response. It turned out that he was not living in Djibouti, but was actually teaching at George Washington University, only a few Metro stops from where I teach at the University of the District of Columbia! We met for coffee at the Van Ness metro stop, and the rest is history. Since Abdou is "local," we were able to work together on the manuscript, be interviewed together for an article in *NEA Arts*, enjoy a Thanksgiving Day meal together, and present bilingual readings of *My Brothers*, *the Nomads*, *Go Out to Drink from the Big Dipper*.

What have you found most difficult to translate?

Neologisms are pretty difficult, not to mention word play, the introduction of another language into the mix of English and French (like Creole or Arabic), exact sound patterns (especially difficult when the sound in question doesn't even exist in English!), and slang. Probably the most challenging was translating the dialect of Man Cidalise, a character in Suzanne Dracius's novel *The Dancing Other* who is an uneducated woman from Martinique who slurs together words because she is missing most of her teeth.

What have you enjoyed most translating?

I love translating texts that are knee-deep in music — alliteration, assonance, and rhythm. I create a "sound map" of the source text, highlighting sound patterns, and try to reproduce these patterns in the translation . . . or get as close as possible to these patterns. It's a joy when I am able to get close to the sound patterns without having to sacrifice meaning.

Which author would you love to translate?

I'd love to translate essays of Montaigne, as well as bring to English the voice of a contemporary Spanish-speaking woman poet I've yet to meet!

If you were not a literary translator, what would you do?

Since I only translate part time, I am already doing other things. I am an assistant professor in counselor education at the University of the District of Columbia, where I coordinate the graduate school counseling program. I study voice and practice yoga. If I didn't translate, I'd be writing more non-translated poems, as well as more essays. Maybe join a gym. Maybe join a choir.

Biographical Notes and Links

Author and playwright **Suzanne Dracius** was born in Fort-de-France, Martinique, and grew up in Sceaux, a suburb of Paris. She later returned to Martinique as a professor of classical literature. Her collection of stories *Rue Monte au Ciel* was translated into English as *Climb to the Sky* (Virginia, 2012). In 2005, Dracius published the play *Lumina Sophie dite Surprise*, featuring a protagonist who led a revolt of other women of her class against their white European overseer in 1870. In 2008, Dracius published her first collection of poems, *Exquise dérélition métisse*, for which she won the Prix Fetkann. In 2010 Dracius won a *Prix de la Société des Poètes Français* (Prize of the Society of French Poets) for her body of work, which emphasizes Martinique's complex cultural history and its shaping by Asian, European, and African cultures. Dracius has been a visiting professor at the University of Georgia and Ohio University. She lives in Fort-de-France, Martinique.

Nancy Naomi Carlson has been awarded grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Maryland Arts Council, and the Arts & Humanities Council of Montgomery County. She is author of three poetry collections and translator of *Stone Lyre: Poems of René Char* (Tupelo, 2010) and of Djiboutian poet Abdourahman A. Wabe's *The Nomads, My Brothers, Go Out to Drink from the Big Dipper* (Seagull, 2015). Carlson's translations and original work have appeared in *The American Poetry Review*, *AGNI*, *Crazyhorse*, *Denver Quarterly*, *FIELD*, *Five Points*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Kenyon Review Online*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Shenandoah*, and *Boulevard*. She is a senior translation editor for *Tupelo Quarterly* and translation editor for *Blue Lyra Review*. She directs the CACREP-accredited graduate school counseling program at the University of the District of Columbia, and has earned doctorates in foreign language methodology and counselor education. She lives in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Suzanne Dracius's website, with extensive bibliography:

www.suzannedracius.com/spip.php?article141

Suzanne Dracius's pages on the Tupelo Press website:

www.tupelopress.org/product-category/author/suzanne_dracius/

Nancy Naomi Carlson's website, including additional links and poems:

<http://www.nancynaomicarlson.com>

Nancy Naomi Carlson's pages on the Tupelo Press website:

www.tupelopress.org/product-category/author/nancy-naomi-carlson/

More extensive biographical notes for Nancy Naomi Carlson:

http://ndreview.nd.edu/assets/135852/extended_bio_carlson.pdf

National Endowment for the Arts Translation Award for Nancy Naomi Carlson:

www.arts.gov/writers-corner/bio/nancy-naomi-carlson

POEMS BY SUZANNE DRACIUS:

"Women's Fantasies"

www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/womens-fantasies/