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ANTICOLONIALISM

British sailors hunt for stowaways in a merchant ship's hold in this 19th-century etching.

Stowaways: On Translating Rita Segato

By Ramsey McGlazer

I first came to know the Argentine anthropologist Rita Segato when I had the good fortune to translate a text of hers called “A Manifesto in Four Themes,” written for and published in the inaugural issue of the journal *Critical Times*. The manifesto is short but capacious; in the grand tradition of manifestos, it’s ambitious both intellectually and politically. As the author herself notes, the text condenses two decades’ worth of research. For this reason, it offers an excellent introduction to several key concepts in Segato’s work. Given that these concepts have both responded to and been met with responses from ongoing political struggles and social movements, I felt that I had a responsibility to try to do justice to the concepts as I translated the “Manifesto” into English.

But one thing that any translator learns, I think, is that language is not a transparent medium for the

communication of concepts. It’s not solely and strictly conceptual because it’s also sensuous or sinuous or intertextually allusive or irreverent or performative or playful—or all of these things at once. These are some of the features of a text’s language that we often think of as “lost,” “betrayed,” or at least badly damaged in translation. I found that they also happened to be hallmarks of Segato’s prose, signature elements of her style, which I came to see already in the “Manifesto”—and then even more so in *The Critique of Coloniality*—as inseparable from the substance of her claims.

These claims derive much of their power from what, in “A Manifesto in Four Themes,” Segato calls their “rhetoric” (p. 210). We can also think of this as a matter of musicality or theatricality, as in the original titles of the two texts by Segato that I have translated. Like “Manifesto en cuatro

temas,” *La crítica de la colonialidad en ocho ensayos* names a whole comprised of parts, where to my ear the analogs are, say, *The Symphony in Three Movements* or *A Play in Two Acts*. This emphasis on rhetoric, or on the musicality or the theatricality of language, puts pressure on the work of translation, which really is at risk of diluting or distorting the original, since no rhetoric can be carried over from one language to another and remain intact, leaving no remainder. But this also makes the work of translation more interesting, since it forces the translator to be more resourceful, attentive, and inventive.

Now, there are of course better and worse ways—more and less ethical ways—to be inventive as a translator. As I noted earlier, given the political import of Segato’s work, I felt a deep sense of responsibility. But I came to realize that I still had to take some risks or liberties or both. It wouldn’t make sense, translating prose as daring as Segato’s, to be safe, timid, overly cautious, to try to be altogether inconspicuous.

But this realization led me to another set of problems, and in order to bring these into relief, I’d like to turn to a moment in Segato’s “Manifiesto” that also stands as an example of all I’ve been saying about her writing and the importance of her rhetoric in particular. “Reconstituting community,” Segato writes, “means being enlisted in a historical project that diverges from the historical project of capital” (p. 208). So far, smooth sailing: the sentence is lucid, the claim a conceptual one that clearly advances

an argument the author is making about the meaning of “historical projects” of various kinds. So, too, does the next sentence clearly specify that “religion... plays an important role” in the process that she is describing (p. 208). But, all of a sudden, something else starts happening when Segato swerves away from conceptual claims, turning to an anecdote that embeds these claims in a set of circumstances.

Here Segato says she came to realize that religion might represent a possible alternative to “the historical project of capital” in 1991. She was “teaching on a ship called the *SS Universe*,” which brought together “North American university students from rich families, many of them destined” to later play important roles in public life. College students on a cruise, doing a “semester at sea” (p. 208): The setup is already compelling. It’s as though the manifesto had suddenly become a play, with these its stage directions, or a novel by Henry James or Virginia Woolf. Think of the parties in *The Wings of the Dove* or of *The Voyage Out*. Characters are gathered in a confined space—sometimes a house, hotel, or palazzo, sometimes a ship—where social conflicts are bound to come to the surface.

But the plot of the “Manifiesto” thickens: “due to the dangers presented by the Gulf War,” the ship is forced “to change course,” its rerouting a reminder of the ripple effects caused by the wars waged by the empire that these students are preparing to inherit. Enter Rita Segato, who is “hired to teach... young people... about Afro-Brazilian

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Ramsey McGlazer (left), Rita Segato (right), and Monica Gittleman in a CLAS webinar discussing McGlazer’s new translation.



Image by CLAS staff.

religions” (p. 208). And so the social conflicts staged on this ship, detoured because of a faraway war, aren’t the interpersonal dynamics that we’d find in James or Woolf, after all. Segato boards the ship that you’ll remember is called the SS *Universe*; the detail is so perfect that if it weren’t true, it would have had to be invented. Then this exchange takes place:

During one of my classes, an older man in attendance asked to speak. I called on him, and, turning his back to me, he claimed for himself the authority of the teacher. Addressing the students, he said: “It’s because of these religions that I say that these countries will not be able to progress, because these religions are *dysfunctional for development*.” I was deeply disturbed when I heard him say this [*Inmensa fue mi conmoción al escucharlo*]. But what an invaluable lesson I learned from him—although, of course, I immediately took from what he said the opposite of what the respectable old man had intended: In the spiritual and communal life of *candomblé* were the seeds of resistance to the historical project of capitalism! I left the class wondering who this enigmatic person could be, this man who so zealously cared about the students’ education [*que tanto había celado por la buena formación de los alumnos*]. I found out that he was a politician who had been elected governor of Colorado three times, and who served

as director of the Institute for Public Policy Studies at the University of Denver: left up North, right down South. Ever since hearing his comment in that day’s class, I have understood that certain cosmologies and spiritualities, far from being “the opium of the people,” are *dysfunctional for capital*. (“Manifesto,” p. 208; “Manifesto,” p. 222)

I have quoted this passage at length so that readers can begin to hear my approximations in English of Segato’s wit and of the tone and rhythm of her sentences, because, as often happens, there is a lot going on tonally and rhythmically as well as conceptually in this moment. “But what an invaluable lesson I learned from him” is, for instance, both an earnest statement about the revelation that the man’s obnoxious in-class intervention turned out to be and a joke at his expense, since the lesson teaches “the opposite of what the respectable old man had intended.” That the “respectable señor” is, in fact, unworthy of our respect is just one thing we are meant to hear in an irony that exceeds claims-making, even while it carries on the manifesto’s effort to locate and articulate the value of alternatives to “the historical project of capitalism.”

At this point, readers may be wondering why I have chosen to dwell on this detour, captivating though it undeniably is. What does this white guy, this prototypical Ugly American, this *yanqui*, this *gringo* have to do with

Students aboard the SS *Universe* as part of the Semester at Sea program.



Photo courtesy of the Semester at Sea Program.

The Critique of Coloniality? I have dwelt on this man because the memory of him came to haunt me as I was translating Segato's book. My work on the longer text entailed spending much more time with Segato's prose, but it also meant confronting the risk that I'd stand between the author and her audience, that I'd interrupt and turn my back on her discourse somehow, and that I'd do so without teaching a compensatory, if unwitting, "lesson" or allowing for any revelation of my own.

To be totally honest, in my heart of hearts I feel that I share very little with this mansplaining, moralizing policy person. I am quite a bit younger and am neither a politician nor the director of an institute. I began to translate books because I was adjuncting and needed the money—a fact that I share not to be maudlin, but rather because I take the disclosure to be in keeping with the spirit of Segato's own gestures of self-positioning. I needed the money in a way the distinguished man didn't, and in any case, I would never presume to deliver proclamations about people's ability "to progress." I really do not think I am much like this guy at all, and yet, structurally I share more with him than I would like: I, too, am a white guy from the United States, which is to say from a country that understands itself to be the universe. I was trained and still work in a place whose "scholars," as Segato writes in *The Critique of Coloniality*, "are seen as producers or disseminators of theoretical models to be adopted in the South, as the builders and masters of most knowledge about the world" (p. 209).

The more I translated *The Critique of Coloniality*, the more I thought of the passage in Segato's "Manifesto" as a warning. Even if I could never completely rid myself of the governor within, eliminating all traces of his presence in my psyche, I could at least watch out for and try to work against his interruptions. I could try to get out of the way of Segato's text even while I sought to make it available to audiences in the Anglophone North. I could try to avoid, as much as possible, the lexicon of development, the syntax proper to capitalism's historical project. To this end, I went in search of other figures. If the man from Colorado was the devil who stood on one shoulder while I translated, was there an *angelito* who could offer countervailing advice, who could model another approach and engage in another form of listening?

I found this other figure in *The Critique of Coloniality*, and it is to this figure that I will devote the rest of this essay. Twice in the book's introduction, Segato refers to someone whom I chose to name the "stowaway" (pp. 8, 17). Both times, what's at issue is an ancestry or inheritance that is doubly hidden and thus twice denied in hegemonic accounts of racialization in Latin America: a "sangre... viajera oculta" (literally, an unseen, traveling... blood) that secretly gathers

together those "que escondidos navegan por las mayorías blanqueadas, travestidas de 'Europa'" (literally, those who, hidden, sail through the whitened majorities, dressed in "European" drag) (*La crítica*, pp. 31, 20).

Explaining her effort to reassess the meaning of *mestizaje* in the sixth chapter of her book, "The Deep Rivers of the Latin American Race," Segato invites us "to retrace the paths of stowaways, the bloodlines of travelers hidden within the whitened veins of the creole, the major exponent... of the racist, misogynist, and homophobic gaze on the world" (*Critique*, p. 17). Translating this sentence, I experimented with different idioms and tried out several figurative and syntactical solutions. Segato's original deliberately mixes metaphors; she refers to an effort to "desandar el camino de la sangre" (*La crítica*, p. 31). Blood is liquid, but a *camino* cuts through land. Should the phrase *desandar el camino*, then, be "retrace the steps" or "reverse course"? Were the covert travelers walking or swimming, and where were they now? I settled on a compromise, dividing the single Spanish phrase into two in my English translation, and naming the voyagers twice, first as stowaways, then as hidden travelers, so that the sentence began: "Here it is the racial sign within *mestizaje* that allows us to retrace the paths of stowaways, the bloodlines of travelers within the whitened veins of the creole" (*Critique*, p. 17).

Still, the Spanish lets us hear more clearly than the English that the stowaways are still stowed away, that they didn't just steal onto ships in a remote past but remain furtive and fugitive to this day. Within the veins, the very body, of the creole, the *criollo*, the white settler, are the remnants of the travelers from whom he descends, and these aren't just any travelers. They are stowaways, and this means they are people who were compelled to hide, to travel without a ticket or a visa or a work permit or a job aboard the ship or any other authorization to be there. "Stowaway" is my translation of the word *polizón*, which the Real Academia Española's *Diccionario* notes is from a French word meaning "vagabond" or "thief" and defines as a "person who boards a ship in a clandestine fashion" or an "idle and aimless person, who moves from one group to another [*persona ociosa y sin destino que anda de corrillo en corrillo*]" (*Diccionario*, n.p.). Obviously, I am focused on the first of these definitions, but I like the second definition's reminder that *polizón* carries old associations with vagrancy and social promiscuity as well as with a kind of informal collectivity. These associations are regrettably missing from the more static and more solo figure that is the English "stowaway."

To be clear, I travel with a U.S. passport that prevents me from having to move through the world in a clandestine fashion. I had a contract to complete the translation that

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became *The Critique of Coloniality*, and so I was not in any real sense an unauthorized traveler on Segato's ship, which I came to think of as a vessel smuggling anticolonial thought into the colonial fortress of the Anglophone academy. I was not in fact a stowaway, but the stowaway became an aspirational figure for me, one who stood opposed to the governor whose arrogance and interference I sought to avoid. I tried to travel with and within the text rather than to commandeer it, to learn its language (though working at a remove from its context) rather than making its language one with mine.

I cannot say whether I succeeded or even made it halfway. I can only note that this was what allowed me to make peace with the fact that I was separated from Segato by a gulf or by several: linguistic, cultural, gendered, and colonial. Rather than jump ship, I sought to become a stowaway, to make common cause with stowaways. Or at the very least, I hoped to become stowaway-like, mindful of the fact Segato uses *polizón* adjectivally and not as a noun, catachrestically rather than in the service of substantivization or personification. This was how I responded to the recognition of the gulfs that separated me from the author and how I sought to correct for the presence of the governor within.

This governor, who thinks he's entitled to discount whole forms of life as he loudly deems them "dysfunctional for development," is like the Eurodescendant creole whom Segato calls the bearer "of the racist, misogynist, and homophobic gaze on the world" ("Manifesto," p. 208; *Critique*, p. 17). He denies what Segato asks us to see: that we can "return, reattach ourselves to, recover ties to the historical projects of the peoples enclosed by coloniality and by the compulsory amnesia imposed on populations as a form of genocide" (*Critique*, p. 8). For me, so much of what Segato does in her remarkable book is distilled in these phrases, which mark the place of a different form of enclosure: not the stowaway's concealment within a ship's hold, but the confinement of whole historical projects through a differential distribution of carceral captivity.

To "recover ties" to the historical projects that preceded and opposed this process is not to deny the ongoing history of enclosures, of incarceration. Segato suggests instead that it can be a way of beginning the long process of bringing a different history into being. The suggestion recalls one of the boldest and most astonishing claims made in "A Manifesto in Four Themes": that in fact we have not yet entered history because we still live in "the stationary time of the *patriarchal prehistory of humanity*" (p. 199, emphasis in original).

Throughout *The Critique of Coloniality*, Segato insists that another, nonstationary history, a real history, remains

available, if not always visible because it is often hidden. Calling for a return to and a reconstitution of other historical projects, she invites us to see what continues to be clandestine under conditions of "compulsory amnesia," but she also reminds us that we can take part in an enormous collective effort to remember. It was an honor to receive the invitation, to translate the reminder, and to do what I could to join the effort.

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References for this article are online at clas.berkeley.edu.

The cover of McGlazer's translation.

