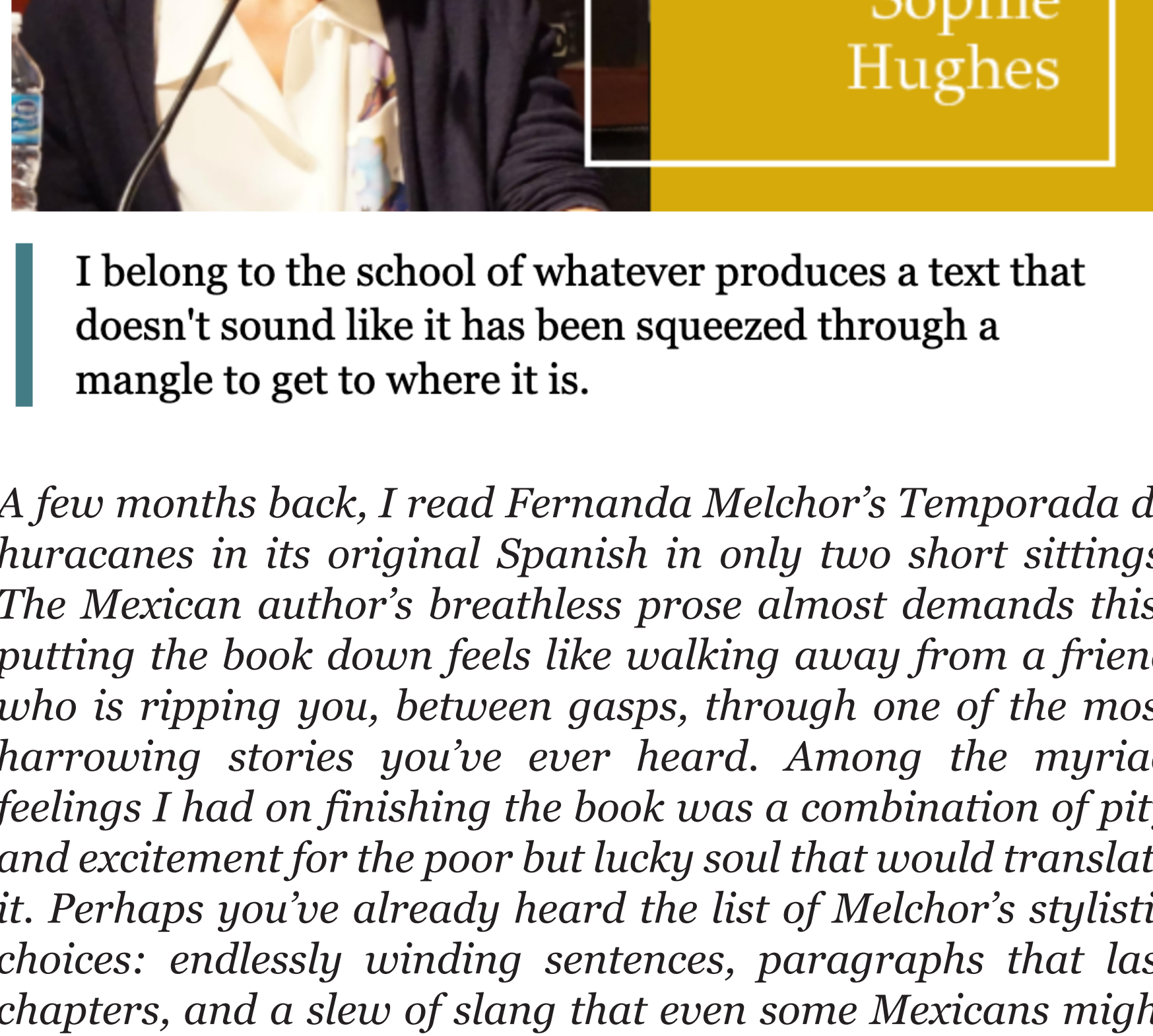


Beauty and Violence: Sophie Hughes on Translating Fernanda Melchor's *Hurricane Season*



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A few months back, I read Fernanda Melchor's Temporada de huracanes in its original Spanish in only two short sittings. The Mexican author's breathless prose almost demands this; putting the book down feels like walking away from a friend who is ripping you, between gasps, through one of the most harrowing stories you've ever heard. Among the myriad feelings I had on finishing the book was a combination of pity and excitement for the poor but lucky soul that would translate it. Perhaps you've already heard the list of Melchor's stylistic choices: endlessly winding sentences, paragraphs that last chapters, and a slew of slang that even some Mexicans might need to ask their filthiest-mouthed friend to translate from Spanish into Spanish. Happily, in the end, it was Sophie Hughes, Fitzcarraldo Editions, and New Directions who brought this torrential narrative downpour to English readers, giving it the carefully considered translation it deserves.

The following interview with Hughes is as much about the practical element and the psychological toll of translating such a dense work (both in technique and in content) as it is about the field of translation and the modern relationship between the Spanish and English languages. For this reason, my questions are a bit scattered, but fortunately, Hughes's answers are not!

—Standish Adair

Standish Adair (SA): Were you met with claims of “untranslatability” when people heard you were translating this work? Did you have this doubt yourself?

Sophie Hughes (SH): Not untranslatability in so many words. There is a tweet floating around somewhere—written in Spanish and sent to Fernanda and me—that I think sums up the general response to the book’s translation:

“How do you translate Hurricane Season? Incredible job by the translator if she managed to even remotely reproduce the feeling of reading the original, especially when she isn’t jarocho [from Veracruz] or Mexican and doesn’t understand half of it.”

Hurricane Season has been something of a literary sensation in Mexico and Latin America, striking cords and hitting nerves with many readers, so it makes sense that some of them should respond emotionally to its translation, even feel protective over it. It’s a difficult book, but I knew what I was getting myself into, and actually, the way the prose is structured, without paragraph breaks and with very long, circumambulatory sentences, made the translation quite a compulsive activity, even when the content was grueling or the slang particularly thick. It is meticulously written in the original, which usually makes a text supremely translatable.

SA: On the subject of doubt, do you ever question whether you’re the right person for the job? Not as a question of skill but rather, sensibility?

SH: I regularly suffer from crises of confidence. In this case, though, I did and still do feel I had the right sensibility for the job: I finished reading Temporada de huracanes with a head full of beautiful images, not just violent ones. I could not shake, for example, the passage describing a group of young men being admired by a lustful onlooker as they worked the sugar cane fields; an image that seems to slip the bonds of the nightmarish reality of the book’s world (pages 18-19 of the New Directions edition). I also found acute moments of catharsis dotted throughout the book, which add light and shade to its otherwise stubbornly miserable action—something like Mrs. Ramsey’s “matches struck unexpectedly in the dark.” Fernanda’s characters moved as much as they shocked me—I felt tenderly towards her monsters. Maybe subliminally I understood these as signs that I had the right sensibility for the job, so at that point I said to my husband: I’ll translate a sample and be honest with myself about whether I have the skill to pull this off. And I could hear Temporada de huracanes in that sample. I knew I could do it. One day I hope someone retranslates it so that I can read it afresh.

SA: How did you deal with the emotional fallout of inhabiting such a dark world for so long? Just reading it was difficult enough for me, and I honestly had a hard time re-reading certain passages for this interview.

SH: I’m not sure I have dealt with it because you can’t unsee those things. The translation process itself was quite grueling. I’d just had my first baby, and there were evenings when I couldn’t really engage with domestic life because I just couldn’t speak. Similarly, I read Fernanda say somewhere that certain chapters (like young, abused Norma’s) took everything out of her and that the writing process and world she was creating entirely abstracted her. For me, the scene with the woman in the green dress remains almost unbearable to read. But it is also keenly felt and understood, and sensitively constructed. If you think of the scene involving the group rape of this poor woman as an image, the punctum—the part which makes you feel acutely with her—is her green dress, this tiny detail that isn’t tiny at all if you follow the human story behind it: When did she buy this green dress? Why? What did her mother think of it? Where did she wear it before this fateful night? You start to build up a picture of her life from one throwaway detail. Just as Barthes’s punctum always “pricks” and “bruises,” this green dress and the emotional investment it inadvertently asks of the reader cannot leave you unscathed. And yet, I am profoundly grateful that I got to work so closely on scenes like this. “Misery porn” claims against the book are unjustified, I think. Isn’t literature that treats the same topics so much grimmer, so much more violent, when it leaves all that despair unseen? Having said this, I respect that this novel is not for everyone. It’s a careful and deep investigation into the psyches of abusers and their abused, written—and translated—with pain. But also, I suspect, capable of opening wounds.

SA: Do you feel a sense of a political or ethical duty about which book you translate, or is the primary goal to find an aesthetic challenge for yourself as translator, and the rest follows?

SH: A well-told story is the most important thing to me, but I naturally gravitate towards “aesthetic challenges,” it seems! I finished translating José Revueltas’s The Hole (with Amanda Hopkinson, for New Directions) and quite soon afterwards moved on to Hurricane Season, and later I said to myself: I really need a break! But then another polyphonic book full of slang and sadness landed on my desk and it was a brilliantly told story, so I said yes. That’s Casas Vacías by Brenda Navarro, forthcoming with Daunt Books in spring 2021.

As for ethics, I keep an eye on how my own bibliography is shaping up. I won’t translate anything I find morally reprehensible, but that doesn’t mean that the characters won’t be morally reprehensible. These are two very different things, right?

SA: Did you have a system for keeping track of the slang you used or was this an intuitive process, according to the voice of each character? There’s just so much of it!

SH: Very unusually for me, I did start Hurricane Season making a sort of glossary of whose “pinche” became which “fucking,” “damn,” “goddamn,” etc. But it didn’t last. You can’t translate by numbers. A lot of the slang here was swearing, and a swear word should roll off the tongue. Of course sometimes your translated swear word won’t always be a semantic equivalent to the original one—but does it roll off the tongue? I’d perform Fernanda’s characters aloud and wait to see what swear word came out. And if a “cabrón” was a “prick” one minute and a “fucker” the next, that really didn’t worry me at all; the best rhythm or sound always triumphed. I also rewatched a lot of movies and series with great swearers in them—a personal favourite: Don Logan from Sexy Beast. Later, during redrafts, I tried to be a bit more methodical about creating consistency between characters. Yesenia is a little less vulgar than Brando and Luismi, for example.

SA: Thanks to everyday social exposure and a long-overdue bending of American popular culture toward its Chicano population and relationship to Mexico, it seems the average English speaker’s Spanish vocabulary is growing. How do you and your editors decide what to italicize, leave in Spanish, etc.? It can be so easy to “other” a language that is already integrating itself into our own.

SH: We very intentionally used as few italics as possible, precisely for the reasons you describe. Personally, I feel lots of italics start to “other,” making reading translated fiction a dangerously anthropological experience. But regarding Spanish becoming more familiar to Americans, some might argue I could have left more Spanish words in, and that North American readers would have understood it. But I find this also has the effect of “othering” or exoticizing. First and foremost, we’re telling a story; I didn’t want readers to think that these characters swear and love and feel like Mexicans, but rather that they swear and love and feel like me, you, anyone. After all, the characters don’t act on Mexican impulses, but human ones. Melchor’s language is very local in some ways, and this is a book reflecting on some aspects of living in Veracruz, but the stories it tells also transcend specific geographies and cultures.

SA: I’m fascinated by the world of idioms, and find that when I translate, sometimes the best option is actually to invent a new one or modify a pre-existing one, such that it feels like an old, known phrase. You slightly modified the phrase “tighter than a nun’s c**t.” I’d seen it employed to describe physical tightness (like that of a screw or a bolt), but you brought it to the definition of “tight” as “tight-fisted” or “cheap” with one’s money. Can you tell me about your process?

SH: With Jacques Testard (Fitzcarraldo Editions) and Tynan Kogane (New Directions), we had lots of really funny conversations about idioms—their judgement stood me in good stead. Jacques pointed out that at one point in my translation, a character describes another as having “a face like a wet weekend,” which he thought sounded off because we were in sultry rural Mexico, not some city under a stubborn drizzle. He was right. But as a rule I didn’t shy away from English idioms, I just refused to let the novel contain the idioms from only one corner of the Anglosphere. I really didn’t have a problem with employing phrasing that, at any given point, a North American or Brit or Australian might not have heard before, because in the original there is plenty of Veracruz slang that would be only vaguely recognizable or intelligible to Central and South Americans, Spaniards, or even Mexican readers from other regions.

As for your example, I’m sure I just asked myself: Would Chabela use “tighter than a nun’s c**t” this way? As Daniel Hahn recently wrote: “We need to be able to use [language] however it’s needed to allow us to be truthful about how our characters talk.”

SA: I found occasional marks of British English in the text, (i.e. “she fell pregnant”) but not nearly as many as there could have been, especially considering the slang. Was there a discussion with your editors about a neutral English, or a “universal” English slang?

SH: I translated the book for Fitzcarraldo Editions with British spelling and grammar and some slightly more British turns of phrase (because that comes naturally to me as a Brit), and then with New Directions we did an Americanization. You don’t want to jar readers too much or too often, but I silently implore all readers to meet translations halfway. As for a universal English slang, well, although I wish someone would write us a definitive dictionary of universal slang, I hope a version of it looks pretty close to what we produced, which are porous English translations, each one slightly more British or American than the other, where occasional strangeness wasn’t shunned.

SA: You are now what one might consider an “in-demand” translator. Has your rate increased to something you would call “fair,” or do you feel that “fair” is still out of reach for translators? What has been your experience on this front, as you become more coveted for your work?

SH: I can’t stress enough how important it is for us to acknowledge and act on our responsibility as individuals to improve pay for translation work. To quote the UK’s awesome Society of Author’s Translation Association: “Remuneration is a matter for negotiation between the translator and publisher.” They go on to state a starting figure that they have observed (because they vet contracts for members), but vitally, they add: “This fee may be considerably higher, depending on various factors including the translator’s experience, the timescale for the translation, the difficulty of the prose, the amount of research required, and the availability of translation funding.”

Negotiation is uncomfortable, it takes time, it is scary, but you will help yourself in the long run by not undercharging because you protect the integrity and worth of your profession. My starting rate isn’t any higher now that I’m a little bit more in demand; I charge on a case-by-case basis. If a translator undercharges, he or she unwittingly undermines all of the negotiation the rest of us do and have done to improve rates. I urge new and emerging translators to consult more experienced translators when negotiating fees. I still regularly consult my colleagues.

Then there are external initiatives that have revolutionised things for translators. For example, English PEN has a grant scheme for publishers, and one of their requisites is that the translators must be paid a minimum amount (set by English PEN). It’s a simple way to protect translators while supporting publishers trying to publish books that save our cultural heritage from terrifying parochialism.

SA: Have you ever experienced unequal pay as a woman, or do you find that translation is fairly egalitarian in this regard?

SH: I can’t know if I get paid less than my male counterparts. Some of them, perhaps, but probably because they are bold enough to ask for more. Why are they bolder? Could be personality. Could be that men don’t get as much pushback as women when negotiating. Whatever the answer, no one is going to solve that problem for me. So, I have to know my worth, then negotiate accordingly. I don’t have to be rude. I don’t have to be unbending. I still get paid late like everyone else. I still have to send reminders to be sent this or that commission or royalties owed to me. But knowledge is power, so it’s important to know what an ideal contract might look like when handling your own. I don’t always get what I want. But I always try.

SA: Obviously, there are many schools of thought in translation, but what would yours be?

SH: I belong to the school of whatever produces a text that doesn’t sound like it has been squeezed through a mangle to get to where it is, even if it has. A school that teaches one how to erase from the page all trace of what Lina Mounzer recently described to me as the “the laboured agony” of translation.

Sophie Hughes is a literary translator of Spanish-language writers such as Alia Trabucco Zerán, Laia Jufresa, Rodrigo Hasbún, and José Revueltas. She has been shortlisted twice for the International Booker Prize, most recently in 2020 for Fernanda Melchor’s Hurricane Season, and was also longlisted in 2020 for her co-translation, with Margaret Julia Costa, of Enrique Vila-Matas’s Mac and His Problem. Sophie currently works with the Stephen Spender Trust promoting translation in schools. She is the co-editor of the anthology Europa28: Writing by Women on the Future of Europe in association with Wom@rts, Hay Festival, and Comma Press.