

Translating Abolitionist Poetry and Theater  
Doris Y. Kadish and Norman R. Shapiro

DK: Let me begin by mentioning your literary experience as a translator. You were a forerunner in the field of Francophone studies, having begun working on Léopold Senghor in the late sixties and having published *Négritude: Black Poetry from Africa and the Caribbean* in 1971. Since then, your translations related to both race and gender have been extensive.<sup>1</sup> Has your previous translating experience informed your treatment of the material that you have translated for *Translating Slavery* and, if so, how?

NS: Yes. Everything one translates "informs" what one does later. In terms of technique at least... In poetry, the more you deal with formal verse the more you develop a "feel" for its demands and how to fulfill them. The essential, of course, is to develop a technique for addressing the problems posed by rhyme and meter... Assuming one chooses to preserve them, that is... Experience teaches... You discover early on that there is no rhyme for "orange", for example!... Or for the common verb "have"... Or, even a more unfortunate lack, for the beautifully poetic word "silver"...! And you learn the strategy of the indispensable run-on line, while, at the same time, trying not to overuse it if the original treats it sparingly.

For theater, the more one translates the more one develops a sense of stagecraft... Especially of keeping the text actable—something all too many theater translators seem to forget in their dogged determination to render perfect, antiseptic equivalents... They forget that words have to fit comfortably into the actors' mouths... Above all, you have to preserve, in the dialogue, the general tone of the period being translated. Anachronisms, backward or forward looking, stick out like a sore thumb, except in an out-and-out adaptation. A case in point: whenever I have a chance to watch a theater translation of mine in rehearsal... Say a nineteenth-century comedy... I cringe when an actor tosses in a gratuitous "OK", which is very definitely not in my text, and that just doesn't fit with the "period" dialogue.

So, "has my previous translating experience informed my treatment of the material for *Translating Slavery*?" Yes, by definition, but I would be hard put to say precisely how or to point to specifics. Except that, in translating the plays it has made me "fussy" about the externals—décor, stage directions, and such... Elements that even the playwrights themselves tended sometimes to treat rather cavalierly.

DK: Could you provide examples of how your understanding of Francophone literature and culture has informed your translation of these texts?

NS: When I began translating Senghor in the sixties, I was attracted by the refreshing directness of his poetry. A far cry from the often forbiddingly arcane puzzles of many another twentieth-century poet... And when I approached his contemporaries and younger followers—Léon Damas, David Diop, René Dépestre, and others—I was struck by the basic oneness of their inspiration... Racial pride, resistance to historical and contemporaneous injustice, positive affirmation in response to negative stereotyping... All the well-known values of the Négritude Movement of the thirties, and its

development... But I was also struck by the variety of styles and artistry that each of them used to express that inspiration.

It was a challenge for me, a non-black, to try to crawl into these poets' skin, as it were, to sense both their feeling as blacks and the French heritage that, ironically—as a language of "the master"—provided them with its only means of expression... As Léon Laleau, the dean of Haitian poets, succinctly put it in the thirties,

. . . sentez-vous cette souffrance  
Et ce désespoir à nul autre égal,  
D'appriivoiser avec des mots de France,  
Ce cœur qui m'est venu du Sénégal...

I hope that my own version of this passage, dating from my beginnings as a translator of Black Francophone verse, transmits the same angst at being a victim of racial schizophrenia:

. . . can you feel that pain  
And that despair—the most intense of all—  
Of using words from France to tame and train  
This heart of mine that came from Senegal?

I say "crawl into their skin" advisedly. I guess that's what a translator does, ideally, with any author... Without being too mystical... A kind of "let's pretend..." And it's certainly what I would find myself doing later on when translating Baudelaire, Verlaine, Ronsard... And above all, La Fontaine... "Today I'll be So-and-so... If he were writing in English how would he say such-and-such?" In verse, no less... I guess what I'm saying is that we translators are phonies of a sort. Always making believe we're someone else... But always maintaining the objectivity of a critical self-observer, always judging our success... Like an actor, always dressed in a different role... Our success depends on how well we can put aside our own selves and be someone else. At least until the end of the poem or the play... Or whatever it is we're translating... As *literary* translators, that is... Because our colleagues who toil in the vineyards of technical translation are a very different breed. One that I respect enormously but that I could never join...

My experience trying to feel the passion of a Senghor, a Damas, a Diop... Even a Césaire, who out-puzzled the puzzlers I was originally happy to avoid!... The list is long... Yes, that passion, that empathy certainly prepared me for confronting the antislavery poets you and I are presenting, even though the literary/poetic quality of ours usually runs a distant second to their impassioned message... As with a number of the twentieth-century poets in my *Négritude*, it is the message that has earned them a place. Ironically, their nineteenth-century predecessors, no less passionate, had proved to be technically more adept, or at least more concerned with traditional verse. Before they knew what "free verse" would be, how "liberating" it would be, they had accepted the figurative "enslavement" of formal metered and rhymed verse to sing their paeans to liberty... Not always flawlessly or with great sophistication, but with undeniable conviction...

DK: Could you give examples of nuances regarding gender that you had to grapple with in translating these texts?

NS: There are several compelling female characters in these texts of ours, in both the poetry and the theater. Besides the ubiquitous, iconic Ourika, who finds herself in both genres, there is the majestic figures of Minora and the pathetic Mila in the poem-cycles of Coriolan Ardouin, and the variety of white and black women in *L'Habitation de Saint-Domingue*, each with her own defined personality. The sensitively romantic Célestine, intelligent and well-lettered, but not overly "liberated"... Not a *femme forte*... Or a *forte femme*, for that matter... Not a heroic Antigone but an emotionally frail victim easily cut down... And Madame de Valombre, devoted mother and dutiful wife, a little naïve, not quite sure what she is doing in the tropics, far from Parisian society, forever fanning herself and keeping up appearances... And then there are the several black women in the drama, the "whitest" among them being Marie-Louise, Célestine's long-time nursemaid... It was essential to differentiate, as Rémusat does, between one of those black women—the strong-willed and admirable Badia ("Hélène"), a main character—and the others of the group, secondary, "atmospheric" characters—Venus, Hermone, Clotilde—and even to keep the latter somewhat nuanced amongst themselves, though in many scenes it would make little difference if a given line was delivered by one of them or another...

As always, the challenge was to make all of Rémusat's women speak an English corresponding to the generally "proper" French that he put into their mouths, without forgetting their occasional lapses. A double suspension of disbelief then... First, that, as blacks, they were speaking "proper" French at all, and, second, that they are now made to speak an English in more or less the same "key"... A delicate balance...

But your question... No, none of our female characters, black or white, really required much "grappling". It was sufficient to follow closely the playwrights' and the poets' own portrayals. The most challenging, and the one who echoed most clearly her own individual angst, was the prototypical Ourika. The twofold Other... Woman and black... But I think that, of the two crosses she has to bear, it is her blackness, not her gender, that defines her and defeats her. Which is ironic in that, despite her native intelligence—or should I say "natural" intelligence!—and despite the education she has received from her white foster mother, it's a blackness that she never seemed even to notice. At least, not until it confronted her love and brought it down... And with it her very reason for living... Once "out of the womb" of ignorance, she "can't go home again..." She can never un-learn that she is black. And that, for her, is far more of an "otherness" than simply being a woman...

DK: Regarding poetry or rhymed verse in the theater, is it fair to say that you find it "tonally unfaithful"?

NS: I have nothing against free verse in the theater, though in English it's not particularly common. Eliot, Christopher Fry... A few others... And cynics might say that it's really only poetic prose with all the lines starting at the margin and ending wherever the author chooses. In French I don't know many examples. The French are so wedded to the alexandrine... Aimé Césaire does write passages in free verse in his theater when he wants to launch into lyrical "arias" of sorts, in contrast to his more "recitative"-like prose

passages... As in *La Tragédie du Roi Christophe*... And no one should accuse his free verse of being unpoetic!...

But in translating a verse play, I would never take the easy way out and render it in English free verse. Or even blank verse, which needs no letters of authenticity in English, surely... This probably came up when we were discussing the two Séjour plays: *Diégarias* in verse and *La Tireuse de cartes* in prose. I must have said something like: "In theater I find it more authentic, more tonally faithful to translate verse by verse and prose by prose..." Each according to the author's intent... And differences between the languages respected, of course... But I, personally, find verse generally easier to work with. And it's not because I think in iambs! It's just that the underlying metrical grid gives the dialogue a substance, a form lacking in the amorphous, total freedom of prose. Not that prose dialogue doesn't have a rhythm... It does—or should. But it's so terribly free... There are so many ways of translating even a character's simplest, most direct statements. Adding a syllable, or deleting one... Indicating a pause, repeating a word for emphasis even if the original doesn't... What is just the "right" way? The slightest change can balance—or unbalance—a line of dialogue and make it more natural—or unnatural—in the actor's mouth. Which is why a theater translation has to be read aloud... And why the translator has to have not only a good knowledge of the source language but also, and especially, a good ear in English. It helps to be a good actor too...

So, as for free verse—prose?—versus formal verse in translating theater, for me it's a matter of fidelity to the author's conception as well as my own predilection. But, strong though the latter is, it would never move me to translate, say, the prose *La Tireuse de cartes* into verse! There are limits...

DK: You have said that you take certain liberties to tighten up a play dramatically. Could you explain?

NS: Basically, there are two extreme philosophies one can adopt when translating a play. You can opt to follow the author as closely as possible and produce an "archival" document that says in English what is said in the original... Said, and also done... Because theater--no surprise!--is words and action... But that's another matter. For the moment let's stick to the language, which is, by definition, more the translator's concern.

According to the "archival" philosophy, then, you say the equivalent of what the original says, as exactly as possible. With some authors no "tightening up": is necessary. Just follow the text... Let me say, parenthetically, that this doesn't mean being slavishly literal and translating word for word, *à la* typical computer translations or those wonderful Japanese instructions included with electronic products... Take a famous line in Racine's *Phèdre*, for example:

C'est Vénus tout entière à sa proie attachée!

A practitioner of the "I-have-a-dictionary-so-I'm-a-translator" school... One of those who assume that all we need to do is look at the original, take it in, turn a crank, and out it comes... Well, such a translator might turn the French alexandrines into iambic pentameter and come up with something literal, like this:

It is all Venus, to her prey attached!

Literal, and even metrical. But poetic? Even so, one can still espouse the philosophy of archival fidelity with taste... One can hew close to the original and still translate quite acceptably. Perhaps something like

Venus it is, entire, clutching her prey!

On the other hand, there is the opposite extreme... The philosophy that, as translator, one has carte blanche, no holds barred, to commit whatever mayhem one chooses in order to leave a personal mark... What results is an adaptation rather than a true translation. Not that there's anything "wrong" in that, unless it becomes a hodgepodge of styles and lexicons... Only that the reader or spectator should know what he or she is getting... Truth in advertising, as it were...

Myself, I try to follow the dictates of good taste--at least my understanding of it. If I were to translate Racine, for example, I would be very sparing in my liberties. None are necessary. No "tightening up" is required. Or Molière, in the comic theater... But comedy presents another problem. The translator is responsible to the original author and the original text. That's a given. But also to the contemporary spectators... Perhaps less so to contemporary readers, who can make do with footnotes... Responsible, that is, to make them laugh... Unless all they want is the "archival document" again... And to do that, to make them laugh, liberties are not only acceptable but often necessary... A genius like Molière is universal enough not to need much "tightening up" for today's audiences. A little tweaking here and there can usually do the trick. But not always so with other comic authors... I think for example of Labiche... I've translated a lot of him... Much of his humor depends on societal mores that would go over our heads today. But he's hilariously funny all the same, and deserves to be translated. What to do? Explanatory footnotes, for the reader, or program notes for the spectator, aren't very funny! So one takes liberties. Not with his basic plots or characterizations, or with his farcical tangles, but with details... Physical action, language, wordplay, for example... An excellent instance of the latter occurs in his one-act *Une Fille bien gardée*, in a silly little poem to be recited by a seven-year-old brat when she presents her mother with a bouquet of flowers for her birthday. The original plays—untranslatably--on the debatable grammar of the verse. In my version, rather than struggle to find equivalences in keeping with the tone of the comedy, I chose to rewrite the verse entirely, keeping that tone but changing the details. The result was this bit of suggestive doggerel, properly... improper:

Accept these rosebuds on this special day,  
Your birthday, if we listen to the rumors.  
May your day be as lovely, bright, and gay,  
Full of the scents that fill your fragrant bloomers.

The characters then proceed to haggle over the meaning of the word "bloomers", arguing whether it can or cannot mean "flowers"... The spirit of the original is maintained even if the details are abandoned. In other words, one collaborates with the author, so to

speak, to produce a comedy that is undeniably his but "tightened up" here and there... Tweaked, to "make it work"... His, but filtered through my or another translator's prism...

I would never presume to "tighten up" the work of a sacrosanct playwright... Any more than I would dream of "improving" on a poet... A Baudelaire, for example... Perhaps perform a little very minor "adjustment" here or there, to clarify an obscure detail or two... Sparingly... But in comedy more is often needed--sometimes even quite a bit more--when the playwright would no longer make *my* audiences or *my* readers laugh, without my modest intervention... And, after all, it's with them, *my* audiences, here and now, that I have to be concerned and to whom I have an obligation no less than to the author... Not with the abstract, eternal "Audience" that may or may not come along in the future... Besides, who can be sure what they would even find funny?

DK: How important to you is the presence or absence of stage directions in translating nineteenth-century plays?

NS: An interesting question... Are stage directions necessary?... I might ask you: Is it enough, in choreographing a ballet, to indicate a *pas de deux* without specifying where on stage it is to take place, or with what nuances of gesture and expression? As I said before, theater is words and action. Action among things as well as people... Words exchanged against a backdrop of objects, of actions, of interactions...

The French romantics appreciated this. They weren't so prejudiced in favor of the strictly literary component that they neglected the visual, the spatial. Far from it... Perhaps thanks, to some extent, to Diderot, for whom facial expression was so paramount in showing the emotions... And they brought to it also their admiration for "local color" as an element in their theater no less than in their poetry. Not only for the spectator actually sitting in the theater, but also for the "armchair spectator" for whom Musset wrote his romantic *proverbes*... Or the reader of, say, Hugo's vast drama *Ruy Blas*, whose imagination could encompass the most complicated, exotic sets called for in the text, or even imagine more elaborate ones...

Compare *Ruy Blas* or any of Hugo's romantic dramas to Racine, for example. The latter is satisfied with a column or two and characters in togas. Even in a play like *Bérénice*, in which Rome is a virtual character in the action, there is nothing externally, visually Roman called for. A director is, free, of course, to fill the set with ornate doors, statues, oil lamps, what have you... Though I think it's a mistake to do so. Nothing should detract from the stark and intentional simplicity of the action. But Racine himself calls for nothing of the sort, no such set against which to specify this direction or that... Compare this, again, to Hugo's ultra-specific demands in *Ruy Blas*... Details that not only establish the local color but that also propel the action... Like the chimney in Act IV!... Could Don César make his melodramatic entrance by simply walking in the door? Or even climbing in a window--if there were one?... Hardly...

Myself, as a theater translator I cut my teeth on comedy. And, specifically, on farce... And more specifically, on Feydeau... Precise stage directions, and lots of them, were part of my theatrical upbringing. Anyone who has seen or read a typical Feydeau farce knows how essential a part of the play the visual action is. Or "the actions", plural.. Because they are legion... And usually minutely detailed.. It's a commonplace to call attention to Feydeau's "geometry"... The elaborately constructed machinery in which

every element depends on, and influences, every other... The doors that fly open at just the right moment... Or just the wrong one, more likely... In this "theater of a thousand slamming doors", as one critic dubbed this genre... With the meshing of gears about to grind down the innocent victim... The "victim"--that common denominator of all true farce, trapped in Feydeau's perverse universe... His "uniperverse"?... At the mercy of individuals and objects, animate and inanimate... This hostile antagonist or that... But antagonists that don't even realize that they too are the victims of their creator... That their hostility, their antagonism is imposed on them by him, by his capricious whimsy, as part of the infernal machine that he sets in motion just for the nasty fun of it, watches run its course, and brings to a halt with a charitable twist of the wrist and flip of the switch, and a last loud guffaw... A final affirmation of his own supreme power...

Clearly, such theater needs stage directions. Often scenic ones dealing with the set's physical demands and intricacies of plot, but also emotional, "characterizational," situational ones that tell the actor how to stand, where to look, how to react to this or that, what gesture to use, what tone of voice... But the latter kind, whether the author's or my own, should ideally be expendable. Devoted to stage directions as I am--part of the "tightening up" that you spoke of, and that some plays really need--they can be ignored by an intuitive and experienced director. Not so, of course, those that directly determine the action, its boundings and reboundings, and that advance the plot... Like "So-and-so lays his umbrella on the armchair..." That sort of direction... Because, as one critic observed in particular reference to Feydeau, when someone puts down an umbrella in one act you can be sure that he'll be back later to pick it up... And with comical, sometimes nightmarish consequences...

A skillful director-friend of mine, H. Stuart (Harry) Shifman, tells me that any time he stages one of my Feydeau translations the first thing he tells his cast is to cross out all the directions of emotions, manner, gesture, and such... "With a wry smile", "Furiously", "Utterly puzzled"... That sort of thing... Not because they are wrong, and not because they are useless... But because he wants his actors to arrive at them organically through their own involvement in their characters... If every director were a Harry Shifman, I, as translator, would leave them out myself. As it is, in the real world of theater performance many directors would be lost without them, and their actors as well.

So, are stage directions all that important? The short answer is "yes". Certainly, for those that are an integral part of the plot... Those that tell us, for example, in the *Rémusat* play, that César Julien lays his gun against a tree... The gun that, conveniently, will later be picked up by Léon to shoot Timur... As well as for those that help avoid confusion... Those that tell us where So-and-so exits, so that, when he or she returns later, the audience doesn't have to wonder how he or she got there... As for those that tell the actor what to think, how to look, what to feel, etc.... Well, ideally, they shouldn't be necessary. But I bend over backwards, assuming that "more is better." In the best of all theater worlds they can always be ignored...

DK: How would you characterize the importance of the works you have translated for *Translating Slavery*?

NS: Their importance?... It depends on how you mean that. Did any of them change the world? Did any of them play a part in finally bringing down the institution of slavery in

the French colonies? Those colonies where, in fact, far more Africans were enslaved to toil in the sugarcane fields than were their kin in the cotton-fields of the American south... Much less visible, of course, because they were tucked away in France's possessions rather than in the *métropole* itself, as in the States... And the blacks who did find their way to France in the 18th and 19th centuries--like Ourika--were treated as exotic curios, not as enslaved *indigènes*...

Curious, isn't it? Today's blacks, impressed by the racial tolerance and artistic freedom of the cosmopolitan Paris of the 1930s, and appalled by the history of American slavery, seldom give a thought to the inhumanity of the French and their role in the slave trade. Or to the inhumanity of African tribesmen themselves... The Bushmen, for example, who were notorious hunters of human bounty... Or to the Arabs who sold what the Africans reaped... Ancestors of the ones who, even today, are enslaving Sudanese Blacks... The barbaric history of slavery raises many ironies, and slavery is still alive and well...

But the question... Were these works that we present "important"? Yes, but re-actively and inter-actively, not pro-actively... To answer my own question, I doubt that they had much direct influence in ending the slave trade, but they were certainly symptomatic of its inevitable demise. A demise that, encouraged by Enlightenment thinkers, by religious humanists and revolutionary idealists, was destined to take place in the historic scheme of things... Perhaps a few works--like the several far-reaching Ourika texts--may have helped a little to prepare the social terrain for the change... Probably not even as much as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, also a re-active rather than a pro-active work, I think...

I really doubt that literary works directly bring about social change, much though they certainly reflect it. But I'm willing to be convinced otherwise...

DK: How do you justify translating works such as long abolitionist poems that may not always meet your standards of aesthetically elevated poetry?

NS: To answer I would probably have to say why I translate in the first place... For money? Ha!... For fame and prestige? Double-"ha!"... Even in these days of greater awareness of the importance of the translator's craft--and art?... Even now, in this era of Translation Studies, "translatology", academic programs in translation and interpretation... No, they're not the same... Even now, most translators, however well respected by "the happy few", tend to remain invisible to the general public and the world at large. Sometimes--shamefully--even unacknowledged... The low men and women on the literary totem pole... As I've said, those who haven't tried their hand at translation think it's easy. Because the more successful a translation, the easier and more convincingly it reads, the easier it looks. The less it calls attention to itself by awkward, contorted syntax or inappropriate tone... And the more transparent it is, like an unblemished pane of glass, the more the translator fades into the background, as if it "just happened"...

So, why do we bother? Do I translate because of some missionary zeal to bring worthwhile literary art before a wider public? Or, as in the particular case of our texts in *Translating Slavery*, to help bring to light forgotten works of social and historic importance?... Works of moral value?... It would be nice to have such a noble

motivation. Perhaps some translators really do... Is that why we lay ourselves open to the scorn of critics, who rub their hands, like Uriah Heep, when they think they've spotted a flaw?... Are we masochists, reveling in criticism?... I remember one critic, who raked me over the coals of his wit years ago, when I first began translating La Fontaine, because I dared choose to translate *cigale* as "cricket" instead of "cicada", for several defensible reasons... He failed to remember that many have been even more entomologically daring by turning her into a grasshopper.

But I haven't answered my own question or even come close to answering yours. Why I translate? Frankly, for myself. For the satisfaction of meeting the challenge... Because that's what all translation is... A challenge... It's like climbing the proverbial mountain "because it's there", if you'll pardon the cliché... The satisfaction is in the ascent. Negotiating the crags and crevasses, the pitfalls... Reaching the summit is important, but would it be satisfying if there were a ready-made trail and a mule to take us up? I doubt it... The accomplishment is in the doing. If others admire the feat, *tant mieux*. It is only human to find satisfaction in that approval as well.

Challenge... But there are many mountains, and the challenge is greatest when one attacks a writer of stature. When I decided to translate Baudelaire, or Verlaine... Or La Fontaine, or Ronsard... The "greats"... Not to mention others... I knew each "climb" would be a challenge. And I knew that the challenge would be all the more demanding because those poets were well known, and they had been translated many times before... And no doubt will be again... As Borges said, the more translations of a work the better. The more one understands it... No translation is "the right one"... Like the cliché about religion, if I may be so bold... Each one is a path that leads its own way up the mountain, to heaven, or whatever...

Not only are there many ways up each mountain, but there are also many mountains. Far more than merely "the greats"... And that very profusion of what you call "less aesthetically elevated poetry" constitutes a challenge in its own right. There are many "elevations" that we can climb if we choose. Works that, by their very less-than-distinguished artistry, throw down the gauntlet... For myself, I have to admit that I take a certain pleasure in confronting such works. Works that ambitious, sincere, little-known authors spent weeks, months, maybe years proudly constructing... Works that eventually saw the light of publication between two covers, brought their "fifteen minutes of glory" to their poets, their playwrights, and then sank back into virtual obscurity, where they have remained until we--you, that is--rescued them from their past... As I say, there is an undeniable satisfaction in translating such escapees from oblivion... Collaborating with their authors over decades and decades of silence... Treating them almost as our own personal property, because no one else had ever ventured to bring them back to life... And all the better if I can find in them as well the humanitarian message that spoke, at least briefly, to their own generation and that I can help make speak a little to ours...

I wouldn't presume to hope that I have "improved on" these works or given them more literary value than they have. I've tried to approach them on their own terms. After all, not every mountain is in the Himalayas. Modest hills and hillocks can present their challenges too. And trudging through their underbrush to the top, sometimes laboriously, is also fulfilling, even if the view isn't very majestic once we get there...

DK: Whom do you picture as the ideal or typical reader of your translations and how do you want him or her to read them?

NS: As I just said, when translating these works I took them on their own terms. And I would hope that those who read them will take my translations on theirs. They shouldn't expect, simply because these texts have been singled out for the "honor" of translation, that they are masterpieces of literature. Of course, their original authors might have thought so, but that's another matter... Be that as it may, surely they must have felt that, whatever the literary merit of their works, the message was one worth transmitting. On that we agree... So I can answer by saying that I would like for the readers to weigh that message and judge the poets' and playwrights' means of expressing it convincingly. And, of course, my own means of following in that effort... Here again challenge rears its head. If I, hopefully, have met the challenge of translating, have the authors themselves met the challenge of convincing? I think the "ideal or typical reader", as you say, is one who is already predisposed to accepting the validity and the vigor of that anti-racist message, and one who needs no convincing that slavery was an abomination, whoever its many culprits were, and that it continues to be so even to this day. No generation has had a monopoly on barbarism, or--thankfully--on those who would fight against it.

As for how I would like these translations to be read... I would hope that they would be read aloud, as all literature should be, ideally. The poems, at least... And that they be read by those sensitive to the flexibility of formal rhymed verse, in which the underlying metrical constraints exist, but must not straitjacket the meaning into nursery-rhyme singsong. Unfortunately, not everyone knows how to read a poem effectively, whether a masterpiece or merely a neatly contrived workaday opus... As for the plays, even when not actually read aloud, I hope they will be read dramatically in the head, to bring out their undeniable strengths.

If texts challenge the translator, they also challenge the potential reader. I hope I have met my challenge well enough so that he or she can successfully meet theirs...

DK: What do you believe is gained or lost for the readers of your translations who are monolingual or only have access to the translation?

NS: I try, of course, to let them lose as little as possible. In the plays, not much at all, I hope... Certainly none of the plot... And, I hope, none of the characterizations, which, as I've said, I even tend to "flesh out" a little here and there... As you know, I keep the essentials of all the dialogues... The tones, the asides, the atmosphere they create and the perspective they give us on the characters and the situations in which they find themselves... I try, too, by "tightening up" the stage directions, as we've said, to let the reader visualize the action without losing any of its dramatic effect. If anything, I think I emphasize the characterizations a little more than the author does. In the *Rémusat*, for example, things like César Julien's absurd pride at being a mulatto, or Monsieur de Tendale's pompous elegance, or Timur's conflicted heroism...

More is bound to be lost in the poetry, by the very nature of the genre. It's not always possible to maintain every nuance of tone between the two languages. But the challenge is to try to compensate... To craft a convincing and faithful whole even where the individual parts vary a little... No translation is expected to be an exact reproduction,

after all. This is the great debate among translators. Should poems simply be translated literally, word for word almost, with glosses and notes where necessary to explain the interesting literary, linguistic, rhetorical points at issue? Does insistence on rhyme and meter--where the original uses them--cause the translator to compromise the meaning? Or should they be retained?

You don't want me to get into that debate, I'm sure. Suffice it to say that I defend the latter position, making formal translations of an author's formal verse. If the meaning is sacrificed, I've done a poor job. The trick is to maintain the author's tone--of which meter and rhyme are parts--and to do so, precisely, without causing the reader to lose the meaning and the poem's important rhetorical devices. Without being cynical, I could suggest that those who champion the other point of view, those who find theoretical reasons for pooh-poohing rhymed and metered translations, are the ones who either haven't troubled to try, or who have found that they can't do it well.

DK: You and I have communicated innumerable times about these translations. Now that we are done (at least with this project), could you summarize what either of us might have learned from the other or how our viewpoints may have differed?

NS: That's an easy one... I can't speak for you or imagine what you may have learned from me. Except that I'm a stickler for stage directions and that I thrive on the challenge of translation... Even the translation of works of dubious "aesthetic elevation", as you put it... But for me, though I've been working in the field of Black French literature for some time, and though many of the works were known to me at least perfunctorily, I certainly know them now a lot better. It's a truism that there is nothing like teaching a work to help you to know it. Well, the same can be said of translating it. And these works, strictly literary qualities aside, are well worth knowing. As for the several that I didn't know at all, and that you brought to light for our readers and for me no less... All of them, as part of the vigorous French abolitionist movement, are welcome revelations of France's "other side of the medal"... A counterpoise to her involvement in "la traite"... The slave trade...

You have expanded my horizon, and for that I thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> Since then the University of Illinois Press has published your two translations of plays by the nineteenth-century mulatto author Victor Séjour—the five-act verse drama *The Jew of Seville* ("Diégarias") and the five-act prose drama *The Fortune-Teller* ("La Tireuse de cartes")— as well as your translations of Louisiana poetry in the bilingual edition *Creole Echoes: the Francophone Poetry of Nineteenth-Century*

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*Louisiana* (2004). Regarding gender, your 700-poem, 56-poet collection *French Women Poets of Nine Centuries: The Distaff and the Pen* is forthcoming with Johns Hopkins UP, **a collection** of the child prodigy Sabine Sicaud **is soon to appear, and another, devoted to the prolific Comtesse de Noailles** is in preparation.