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# Translating the New World in Jean de Léry's *Histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil*

One of the effects of translating a historical text years, even hundreds of years after its initial publication is the continued life given to it by the translation. The work lives on in its translation. The voices contained within the text are revived and returned to circulation. We shall see this occur in Janet Whatley's 1990 translation of a book first published in 1578, Jean de Léry's *Histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil*. The book describes Léry's voyage, part of an early attempt by France to establish a colony in the New World, and his contact with the Tupinamba Indians of Brazil. I shall focus on the chapters relating to the plants and animals of the New World, as they allow us to find traces of indigenous voices within both the original and its translation.

Because the Americas constitute a distinct land mass from Eurasia and Africa, the indigenous plant and animal species had never been seen by Europeans prior to their arrival on the continent. The natural environment — full of unfamiliar flora including tomatoes, chilies, potatoes, manioc, vanilla, tobacco, and chocolate, and fauna such as jaguars,

raccoons and skunks — represented quite literally a new world to them. Travellers commonly collected specimens of exotic flora and fauna from the Americas and brought them back to Europe. Indeed, the ship on which Jean de Léry returned to France was loaded with parrots, monkeys and other items that were rare in Europe; but the voyage was so arduous the sailors were forced to eat everything, including their specimens, to ward off starvation. Names for these native species existed in indigenous but not in European languages. In the literature of explorers and early colonists, we can trace the process by which words for New World species were incorporated into the colonizers' languages.

### The voyage and Léry's account

Jean de Léry's *Histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil* is an account of the French colonizing mission to the New World in 1556–58. After Brazil was discovered by Portuguese explorers in 1500, Portuguese and French traders sailed the Brazilian coast, harvesting forest products such as brazilwood and shipping them back to Europe. They traded with the Tupinamba Indians, who lived along the coast. Whereas the Portuguese sought to subjugate the Tupinamba and put them to work, the French had more cordial relations with them, based on mutual benefit (Whatley 1990, xix). Between 1555 and 1565, France made several attempts to establish permanent colonies in Brazil and Florida; all ended in failure as the colonies fell to the Portuguese and Spanish.

In 1555, Nicolas Durand de Villegagnon led an expedition to Brazil and founded Fort Coligny on a small island at the site of what is now Rio de Janeiro, calling the settlement "France Antarctique" (Lestringant 1996). A second ship arrived a year later, carrying thirteen Huguenots — French Protestants — seeking refuge from religious persecution. One of those was Jean de Léry, who had gone to Geneva to study the Reformed Gospel under Calvin. Although Villegagnon, a Catholic, had allegedly appealed to Calvin to send over the Protestant missionaries and promised them religious freedom, he appears to have been a tyrannical and violent man who plotted against his compatriots. After eight

months, Léry and his fellow Protestants realized they were unsafe on the island base and fled to the mainland, where they lived among the Tupinamba for two months until the next ship, loaded with brazilwood, returned to Europe (Whatley 1990, xv–xxii). Those experiences formed the basis of Léry's account, to which he added his vivid, detailed observations of the Tupinamba and the indigenous flora and fauna.

*Histoire d'un voyage fait en la terre du Brésil* was first published in 1578 in Geneva, twenty years after Léry's return to Europe, based on the memoirs he had kept in America. The period in France following his return was marked by the Religious Wars, and Léry witnessed episodes of violence and inhumanity that went beyond anything he had observed among the Tupinamba, including cannibalism. In 1573, he suffered through the siege of Sancerre by royal Catholic forces; later, he wrote a book on the experience that displays the same ethnographic concern as his travel narrative, treating not only moral questions but also the practicalities of daily life in an extreme situation (Whatley 1990, xvii–xviii).

*Histoire d'un voyage* was an immediate success, with five French and two Latin editions appearing during Léry's lifetime. In Latin, it was part of the *Grands Voyages* collection published by Theodor De Bry and his sons, which was extensively illustrated with copperplate engravings. The collection was widely disseminated in an attempt to generate support for a Protestant colonizing project in the New World that would compete with that of Catholic Spain and Portugal. Subsequent re-publications in French included an annotated edition by Paul Gaffarel (1879), a critical edition and facsimile of the text by Jean-Claude Morisot (1975), and a modernized French version published in 1980 by Sophie Delpech. However, it was through Claude Lévi-Strauss that *Histoire d'un voyage* gained wider attention, even canonization. Calling it a "masterpiece of anthropological literature" (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 88), he carried it with him on his first voyage to Brazil:

Once ashore, I ambled along the Avenida Rio Branco, where once the Tupinamba villages stood; in my pocket was that breviary of the

anthropologist, Jean de Léry. He had arrived in Rio three hundred and seventy-eight years previously, almost to the day (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 85).

In the French-speaking world, interest in *Histoire d'un voyage* grew, particularly after the publication of *Tristes Tropiques* in 1955. Developments in historiography, such as the *Annales* school's focus on everyday life and Michel Foucault's analysis of knowledge and discourse, as well as Michel de Certeau's reflections on the writing of history, led to increased appreciation of Léry's ethnographic contribution. However, it was not until 1990 — over four hundred years after its initial publication — that Léry's account received a full English translation. In the years leading up to the 1992 quincentenary of Christopher Columbus's arrival in the New World, there was renewed scholarly interest in the ethical and ethnographic issues surrounding the colonization of the Americas, evident in the work of Tzvetan Todorov and Stephen Greenblatt, among others. The translation by Janet Whatley, Professor of French at the University of Vermont, grew out of that context.<sup>1</sup>

Prior to Whatley's translation, *Histoire d'un voyage* had been partially translated into English in 1611, and several chapters were translated into English and published in 1625 as part of Samuel Purchas's collection of travel manuscripts entitled *Hakluytis Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes*. England's attempts to establish a presence in the New World lagged behind those of Spain, Portugal and France, and it was not until 1607 that England founded a permanent colony in Virginia, seeking to stake out a claim to the continent's natural resources. The Purchas translation can be seen in the context of early English imperialism and efforts to take possession of North America. It reflects the language of the time: most noticeably, the Tupinamba — whom Léry calls "les sauvages" — are referred to as "the Barbarians" (Purchas 1625 [1965]). Yet even in the seventeenth century, "Barbarians" was not the only word for native people; other English writers contemporary with Purchas referred to them as "the inhabitants" or "the Indians," notes Nancy Senior in a discussion of the difficulties of translating words like *sauvage* in a historical text

(Senior 2004, 466–469). Janet Whatley translates *sauvage* as “savage,” explaining in a footnote that the French word does not have the same primary connotation of cruelty as its English cognate (Whatley 1990, 232). In addition, Léry frequently uses “nos sauvages” and “nos Amériquains,” a familiar form of address that is refused in the 1625 Purchas translation (where only “the Barbarians” and “the Americans” are used) but maintained in Whatley’s 1990 translation (“our savages” and “our Americans”).

### The wonder of the New World

*Histoire d’un voyage* is one of a number of accounts of European voyages to the New World during the early period of contact and colonization. It is viewed by Frank Lestringant, following Marcel Bataillon, as part of a “Huguenot corpus on America,” texts by French Protestants that were characterized by a denunciation of the Spanish Conquest and a defence of the free savage (Lestringant 1991, 200–201). These disparate texts later became the point of departure for the myth of the Noble Savage. But although Léry expressed admiration for the moral virtues of the Tupinamba, he did not idealize them; his view was tinged with pessimism and remorse, for all his attempts to convert them had failed and he believed nothing could be done to save them from eternal damnation.

Many accounts describing early encounters with the New World are characterized by both astonishment at the newness of everything the writers observed and a need to relate the experience to European terms of reference. This is evident as far back as Christopher Columbus’s diaries: he repeatedly uses the words “wonder” and “marvellous” to describe what he saw, from fish to parrots to landscapes (Greenblatt 1991, 72–85). Confronted with the extreme otherness of the lands they were encountering, the explorers may have been attempting to tame that very otherness by describing it with wonder and delight and emphasizing the bountiful natural resources. If nature was marvellous, it could not be formidable, inaccessible, frightening or grotesque. At the

same time, readers of sixteenth-century travel books, influenced by descriptions such as those in Sir John Mandeville's tales of "folk of diverse shape and marvellously disfigured" (Mandeville [1499] 1900, 132), expected them to be populated with marvels and monsters. Whereas accounts by Mandeville and Marco Polo located the wonders in the East, by the sixteenth century their domain had shifted to the Americas (Gagnon 1984, 46).

André Thevet, a chaplain with Villegagnon's expedition who had been in Fort Coligny prior to Léry's arrival and published *Cosmographie universelle* in 1575, speaks of seeing giants and Amazons and is frequently cited in Ambroise Paré's *Des monstres et prodiges* (1579; see Paré 1971). But Léry questions Thevet's accounts — indeed, a heated rivalry set in between the two — and suggests that Thevet filled his book with nonsense to lengthen and exoticize it (Céard 1971, xvi). Léry insists on how utterly unlike what he observes is to anything in Europe ("everything to be seen — the way of life of its inhabitants, the form of the animals, what the earth produces — is so unlike what we have in Europe, Asia, and Africa that it may very well be called a 'New World' with respect to us" [Léry 1990, lx–lxi]), but he is careful to write only of his observations and to remain credible. He insists that the Tupinamba Indians are "not taller, fatter, or smaller in stature than we Europeans are; their bodies are neither monstrous nor prodigious with respect to ours" (Léry 1990, 56).

This insistence on recording only what he himself had experienced, seen, heard and observed, what he had touched, smelled and eaten ("and therefore seen both the inside and the outside" [Léry 1990, 16]) pervades Léry's account. He was scornful of hearsay and preferred first-hand experience to knowledge gained through reading books. In this respect he differed from André Thevet, who spent only about ten weeks in Brazil and supplemented his experience with second-hand sources, for which Léry castigates him roundly. On several occasions, Léry disputes Thevet's claims by giving primacy to his own observations:

Before I finish this discussion of parrots, being reminded of what someone says in his *Cosmography*, that they build their nests hanging from a tree branch so the snakes don't eat their eggs, I will say in passing, having seen the contrary among those in the land of Brazil, all of which build their nests — round in shape, and quite tough — in the hollows of trees, that I judge this to be one of that author's cock-and-bull stories. (Léry 1990, 89)

In this respect Léry was going against the dominant intellectual climate of sixteenth-century France, which revered written authority, especially that of the ancients such as Aristotle and Pliny (Mackenzie 2001). Léry places direct experience above theory or book learning, insisting time and again on the value of what he observed. For example, although at the time porpoises were classified as fish, which reproduce through egg-laying, he noticed that some of the porpoises killed by the sailors had young developing in their uteri, like cows. He states defiantly, "Even though I would not make any decision here, lest anyone would argue the point by citing to me those who have firsthand experience — rather than those who have only read books — no one will meanwhile prevent my believing what I have seen." (Léry 1990, 18)

### Writing and the Tupi language

Despite Léry's insistence on the value of experience, he recognized that knowledge of writing set him and the rest of the colonists apart from the Tupinamba. Like the other indigenous peoples of the Americas, theirs was a "primary oral culture" in that they had no knowledge whatsoever of alphabetic writing (Ong 1982, 11). Léry describes their reaction to seeing the French write:

They know nothing of writing, either sacred or secular; indeed, they have no kind of characters that signify anything at all. When I was first in their country, in order to learn their language I wrote a number of sentences which I then read aloud to them. Thinking that this



was some kind of witchcraft, they said to each other, "Is it not a marvel that this fellow, who yesterday could not have said a single word in our language, can now be understood by us, by virtue of that paper that he is holding and which makes him speak thus?" (Léry 1990, 134–135)

To Léry, the art of writing is an advantage held by the people of Europe, Asia and Africa over those of the fourth part of the world, America. It allows them to learn through books and communicate with people in distant places; it is a gift of God (Léry 1990, 135). As a Protestant and Calvinist, he considers writing to be a medium of retention that allows the truth of Scripture to be preserved and transmitted (Whatley 1990, xxxi). In Michel de Certeau's analysis, writing to Léry is an instrument with the power to both retain the past and conquer distance, whereas speech can neither preserve nor travel from its place of production (Certeau 1988, 216). When Léry hears a Tupi myth that resembles the Deluge, he attributes its different ending to the fact that "being altogether deprived of writing, it is hard for them to retain things in their purity" (Léry 1990, 144). In matters of religious belief, he accepts only Scripture as truth, but when it comes to the natural world, we shall see that Léry is willing to take the Tupinamba's word.

Léry learned the language of the Tupinamba and incorporated some of their words into his text. *Histoire d'un voyage* is one of the early texts containing written forms of Tupi words. Now known as Ancient Tupi, called the *Lingua Brasilica* in the sixteenth century, the language was spoken all along the Brazilian coastline. It was learned by the Portuguese colonists; in fact, for several centuries it was the main language spoken in Brazil, until the Portuguese government decreed in 1758 that Portuguese was to be the national language. Starting around 1548, religious texts were translated from Portuguese into Tupi. The first Tupi grammar was compiled in 1555 by Jesuit missionary José de Anchieta, but not published until 1595 (Navarro 2001, 51–57). Contact between the French and Tupi languages dated back to the early sixteenth century: French *truchements* or interpreters had been living among

the Indians, learning the language and serving as liaison agents to the French colonists and missionaries. One chapter of *Histoire d'un voyage*, which may not have been written entirely by L ry,<sup>2</sup> is a colloquy in Tupi with French translation. It provides vocabulary related to trade and barter, social customs, body parts, household items, and place names, and discusses some of the features of the Tupi language.

### "Foreignization" in travel and ethnographic texts

In *Across the Lines: Travel, Language, Translation*, Michael Cronin suggests that the travel writer can adopt one of two strategies: heteronymous translation, in which the traveller avoids direct contact with the inhabitants of the foreign country and depends on an interpreter for communication, and autonomous translation, in which the traveller learns the language and engages directly with the local people (Cronin 2000, 76). Similarly, the travel writer may opt for a strategy of *domesticating* (privileging fluency and couching the foreign in terms generally familiar to readers) or *foreignizing* (leaving foreign words or concepts in the text, making visible the communication processes with the inhabitants of the foreign land), to use terms developed by Lawrence Venuti that have been widely taken up in translation studies and can be extended to travel writing (Polezzi 2001, 83; Venuti 1994, 20–23).

Jean de L ry, who lived among the Tupinamba and was dependent on them during the months he and his party spent on the mainland, incorporated their language liberally into his text. If we consider Chapters IX to XIII, the chapters that deal with the flora and fauna of Brazil, L ry has included 116 words in Tupi in the space of forty-three pages, an average of nearly three new foreign words per page. We can consider that he employs a strategy of foreignization.

L ry's transcription of oral terms into written form is marked by a simple but powerful technique. Of the 116 Tupinamba words in the chapters on Brazilian flora and fauna, nearly three-quarters are directly preceded by words such as "qu'ils nomment," "que les sauvages appellent," or "laquelle en leur langage ils appellent." This technique is maintained in

Janet Whatley's translation in almost every instance, through words such as "which they call," "which the savages call," and "which they call in their language."

Léry's technique must be seen as a deliberate choice, for it is not the only way to present foreign words in an ethnographic text. For example, in *Tristes Tropiques*, describing the twentieth-century world of descendants of those same Tupi Indians, Lévi-Strauss simply italicizes the foreign words, sometimes adding a translation in brackets — "marshes full of *sapézals* (tall grasses) and *buritizals* (palm trees)" — and occasionally using an impersonal form — "which are called" (Lévi-Strauss 1963, 314). Or if we consider Léry's rival André Thevet in *La Cosmographie universelle*, he does sometimes use "qu'ils nomment" or "qui s'appellent en langue sauvage," but at other times he simply mentions the animal ("As for *Hutiaqua*, it is the size of a small pig . . . [our translation]"). At times, he refers to unfamiliar animals by the names of similar European or Asian species: he uses the word *once* (a central Asian panther also known as the snow leopard) for what Léry calls a *jaguar*, the Tupi word for this wildcat found only in South and Central America, and he calls *pouilles d'Inde* the birds for which Léry uses the Tupi word *jacous* (Thevet 1953, 156–158).

I suggest that Léry's technique, used repeatedly, amounts to giving the Tupinamba a *voice*: they name things in their language, and he records those names in his text. Names of plant and animal species do not simply exist but have been actively given to them by the Tupinamba. Léry has relinquished some degree of authority over the text and acknowledged their authority over their own world, the natural environment that they knew so well and that was so utterly unlike the world of the French missionaries. Following Bakhtin, James Clifford suggests that certain ethnographic texts contain traces of "dialogic" and "polyphonic" authority, calling into question the monophonic authority of those who claim to "represent cultures." In traditional ethnography, one voice was given the authorial function while others were recognized only as sources or "informants." In what Clifford calls a "dialogical portrayal," other voices are present, although they may still be unequally weighted. Such a text does go some way towards resisting "the pull

toward authoritative representation of the other" (Clifford 1986, 15; Clifford 1983, 137–140; Polezzi 2001, 103).

One of the aims of revisiting the literature of discovery and exploration of the sixteenth century is to seek out traces of alternative voices from the past, voices that do not conform to the ideology of the colonialist project. Here we have a case in which such traces are present, in the collective voice of the Tupinamba. We can conceive of *Histoire d'un voyage* as already containing translation, to the extent that transposing from oral to written form is a kind of translation, or rewriting as André Lefevere has described it: an "original," in this case an utterance, is manipulated according to the constraints of another system of communication, producing "refractions" that extend its lifespan and give it meaning in new contexts (Lefevere 1992, 8–9; Polezzi 2001, 88, 108–109). Léry maintains the names of species in their original language, "translating" from speech to writing, but not translating the Tupi names or replacing them with European equivalents. In turn, Janet Whatley maintains the Tupi words in the English translation: despite the distance of time and the movement through two languages, the collective voice comes through intact.

### Naming the New World

In consultation with specialists on Brazilian flora and fauna, Janet Whatley has identified virtually every item Léry mentions. He categorizes plants and animals according to an informal system based roughly on Pliny's *Natural History*, devoting a chapter each to foodstuffs, animals, birds, fish, and trees. He follows the classic sixteenth-century taxonomies of living creatures, such as Pierre Belon's *Histoire de la nature des Oyseayx* (1555). As was usual at the time, he includes whales as fish (things that live in the water) and bees and bats in the chapter on birds (things that fly). His primary concern was with the use humans can make of each item, as food, ornamentation, or shelter — a focus on utility which, again, was common in the sixteenth century. Remember that at the time, scientist and common man alike believed that every living

being was created by God in its current form and was incapable of changing; all animals, even the different species on the unconnected land mass of the Americas, were created in the Garden of Eden. Although the explorers immediately observed that New World flora and fauna, especially those of the Caribbean and South America, were distinct from that of Europe, the concept of endemism — that plants and animals are exclusive to certain geographical areas — had not yet been developed.

The two basic naming strategies in the New World were borrowing and semantic shift (Tuttle 1976). Borrowing involved adopting a word from an indigenous language, whereas semantic shift meant taking a term from the colonizer's language and adapting it to the new environment, drawing analogies with the familiar environment. Columbus first used the term *panizo*, Spanish for "panic grass," for corn (*Zea mays*), before adopting the term *maize* from Arawak, the language of the Tainos on the island of Hispaniola, the people with whom he first made contact. Other early borrowings from Arawak into Spanish include *aje* (sweet potato), *yucca* (cassava or manioc), *manati* (manatee or sea-cow), *iguana* and *huracán* (hurricane).

As a result of contact between French travellers — including Léry and his party — and the Tupinamba of coastal Brazil, a number of Tupi words entered the French language starting in the sixteenth century, particularly to name plants and animals unknown on the European continent. These include *ananas* (pineapple), *manioc*, *jaguar*, *sagouin* (a South American monkey), *caiman* (an alligator-like reptile), *agouti* (a rodent related to the guinea pig), *tapir* (a nocturnal hooved mammal), *toucan* (a brightly coloured tropical bird), *coati* (a raccoon-like carnivorous mammal), and *acajou* (the cashew tree and its fruit). Ancient Tupi had even more influence on Brazilian Portuguese: it is estimated that nearly ten thousand Tupi words are found in Brazilian Portuguese, and some scholars believe Tupi has also affected its syntax and phonology (Navarro 2001, 53–55).

It is important to acknowledge these borrowings from indigenous languages, for in many cases they are all that is left of those languages.

By the mid-sixteenth century, only decades after Columbus's arrival in the New World, the Tainos had been virtually wiped out by war, slave labour, and epidemics. The people and their language are today extinct. Classical Náhuatl and Quechua, the languages of the Aztecs and Incas and the source of many Spanish words such as *tomate*, *chocolate*, and *coyotè*, are considered extinct today, although variants have survived. Algonquin, the source of many English borrowings such as *persimmon*, *chipmunk*, *raccoon*, and *toboggan*, is considered nearly extinct; Huron, the language spoken by French Canadian *truchements*, became extinct in the mid-nineteenth century. And Ancient Tupi, a branch of the Tupi-Guarani family of languages, is now extinct, as are the Tupinamba themselves, so vibrantly portrayed in Léry's text.

Janet Whatley's translation of *Histoire d'un voyage* thus revives the collective voice of an extinct indigenous people in a text that gives them a degree of authority. She has given English-speaking readers access to a classic text of the discovery and exploration of the New World that previously had only been available in a partial translation and in the context of English colonization. Her highly readable, modernized rendering makes the text available to a wide audience. At the same time, with her extensive annotations, she has positioned it in the context of recent scholarship on first contact with the New World.

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### Notes

1. Whatley, "Editions and Reception of Léry," in Léry (1990, 223–224), and e-mail correspondence, March 22, 2004.
2. Janet Whatley discusses the issue of who composed the colloquy (Léry 1990, 253). Whether written wholly or partially by Léry, by Villegagnon as André Thevet claimed, or with the assistance of *truchements*, the colloquy is a valuable record of the Tupi language in the sixteenth century.

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