

INTERVIEW WITH ELISA WOUK ALMINO

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Elisa Wouk Almino is a writer, editor, and literary translator based in Los Angeles. She is the translator of *This House* by Ana Martins Marques (Scrambler Books), editor of *Alice Trumbull Mason: Pioneer of American Abstraction* (Rizzoli), and a senior editor at the online art magazine *Hyperallergic*. Her translations and essays have appeared in the *Paris Review Daily*, *Lit Hub*, *NYR Daily*, *Asymptote Journal*, *Words Without Borders*, and other places.

She teaches literary translation and art writing at Catapult and UCLA Extension. In this interview Elisa Wouk Almino talks about Ana Cristina Cesar and translation.

Cadernos de Tradução [CT]: Could you describe how the project to translate Ana Cristina Cesar came about, how long you have been involved with it, and what are the materials you are currently translating and/or have already translated?

Elisa Wouk Almino [EWA]: It all began in 2018, when I was visiting my mother in Curitiba. She handed me a large stack of letters and said, “Here, these are Ana Cristina’s letters. I don’t have a use for them anymore.” My mother, the visual artist Bia Wouk, was close friends with Ana Cristina when they were in their late twenties and early thirties. I had known of their friendship, and of cour-



se I knew of Ana Cristina Cesar, but I hadn't thought of translating her, mainly because of this familial history—I knew that Ana's death had been quite painful for my mother. But when she gave me the letters, I understood she was giving me permission—perhaps even asking me—to do something with them. I'd been translating various Brazilian poets for a number of years, including poets who were influenced by Ana Cristina (like Ana Martins Marques).

When I started reading through the letters, I wasn't sure yet if I would do anything with them, until I realized that one of the letters, dated to April 1980, was an early draft of Ana Cristina's book *Kid Gloves*. This was a fantastic discovery—a direct illustration of how Ana Cristina often borrowed from letters in her poetry. I'd also discover that she and my mother exchanged ideas around *Kid Gloves*, and, at one point, Ana Cristina asked if my mother would illustrate the book—while that didn't happen, my mother did give a drawing for the cover. The drawing is of a mannequin in a window display—at the time, my mother was making these drawings of window display reflections, which Ana Cristina alludes to many times in *Kid Gloves*.

The more closely I read the other letters my mother gave me, the more I discovered other snippets that Ana Cristina borrowed for her poetry, in particular poems that appear in *At Your Feet*. In many ways, the letters have guided this project, which has gradually grown. In addition to translating *Kid Gloves* and a selection of the letters Ana Cristina sent my mother, I've decided to translate a few of her other works that play with the idea of letter writing and diaries (*Kid Gloves*, in a way, reads like a travel journal or diary). I've translated *The Complete Correspondence* as well as some poems from *April Scenes* and *At Your Feet*.

[CT]: *As uncovered by your translation work, Bia Wouk was a key figure for Ana Cristina Cesar during the composition of Luvas de pelica, and she also created the art that illustrates the book's cover. Wouk also illustrated the cover of Inéditos e dispersos, the*

*first posthumously published volume of Ana C. 's work. The image is titled "É difícil ancorar um navio no espaço"—a nod, it seems, to Ana C. 's opening poem to her first ever published book, *Cenas de abril*: "é sempre mais difícil / ancorar um navio no espaço". I personally found this to be very touching: it consolidates the important role both women played in each other's lives and works, establishing a bond that comes full circle, I think, with your translation project. I also feel that your work is very significant in terms of scholarship, as it can expand our understanding of topics such as Ana Cristina Cesar's creative process, the themes she explored in her writing, and the artists that have influenced her. Would you like to perhaps elaborate on that, and share your thoughts on what seems to have started as a very personal project but can potentially contribute to the field of academic and biographical research?*

[EWA]: *Kid Gloves* is often referenced in scholarship as Ana Cristina's most visual book. It's clear that her friendship with my mother had a big role in that—she was fascinated by my mother's drawings and life as a visual artist. The letters are filled with observations about artists (from Velázquez to Hockney), as well as the differences between writing and drawing. These same types of observations pop up in *Kid Gloves*. This, I think, is quite revelatory and influences how we understand that book.

The project is also another strong example of how Ana Cristina drew from her letters in her poetry and vice versa. As the poet Armando Freitas Filho has observed, if you removed the 'dear' and 'love' from her letters, they would have a striking resemblance to her poetry.

Finally, these letters date to a very formative period in Ana Cristina's career, when she was studying literary translation at the University of Essex and was really honing what mattered to her as a writer and reader. In several of the letters we get a glimpse into the artists and writers who were shaping her way of thinking, from Walt Whitman to Katherine Mansfield. This project, I think, offers many ways of more deeply understanding Ana Cristina's influences and style.

[CT]: *Epistolary writing is a central theme to the composition and narrative style of Luvas de pelica: not only are parts of the book taken from letters Ana C. had written to your mother, but there are passages that do sound like and resemble letters, at least momentarily. This is particularly interesting to note because the book that preceded Luvas de pelica was Correspondência completa—which, contrary to what the title seems to imply, is comprised of just one long letter. Do you think that Correspondência completa functions, in a way, as a first step into the mode of writing Ana C. explored in Luvas de pelica? And what do you make of the prose style of Luvas de pelica?*

[EWA]: Yes, absolutely. In *Correspondência completa* (The Complete Correspondence), Ana Cristina starts playing with this narrative voice that directly addresses the reader, or “the interlocutor,” as she liked to say. *Luvas* is not as obviously framed as a letter but it carries this same voice from *Correspondência completa*. Ana Cristina once said that poetry and letter writing shared a similar purpose: “the desire of mobilizing the other.” You can sense this urge in both works.

In a letter to Bia Wouk on August 18, 1980, Ana Cristina mentions rereading *The Complete Correspondence*, “my little book from exactly 1 year ago.” She’s studying its style, evaluating it as she’s working on her next book, *Kid Gloves*. “Now I think the central technique — winking at the reader — can be taken further, in other words, loosened up more,” she writes. “There the winking is still stiff, and there’s no use because everything is a metaphor really, and everything a letter.”

[CT]: *Another central theme to the book is translation, although this can escape readers that are unaware of Ana C.’s biography and work. The period during which she wrote Luvas de pelica and corresponded with Bia Wouk, after all, coincides with the period she spent in England working on her annotated translation of*

Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss", and the book does contain some hints of Cesar's involvement with this work. Did you consider pursuing an annotated translation of Luvas de pelica? And has Ana Cristina Cesar's writings on translation affected, shaped, or impacted your work somehow?

[EWA]: Oh, I love that idea! I hadn't thought of that, though I do intend on including an essay that shares and reflects on my translation process. Reading Ana Cristina's writings did impact me, and I read them before I really started my translations of her work. I think, more than anything, they helped give me a sense of permission to start translating. I realized that Ana Cristina was quite ahead of the curve in thinking about the art of translation as one of interpretation and creation—in her own translations of Katherine Mansfield, she recognizes that her choices are influenced by her own individual experiences as a reader and writer. At the same time, she was also a very diligent and detail-oriented translator: she paid attention to how the words sounded in English versus Portuguese; she carefully looked for patterns in Mansfield's style. I found myself carrying out some of Ana Cristina's same methods, including writing out many synonyms for the same word to see which might work best in a translation.

[CT]: *You have published some excerpts of your translations in literary magazines such as A Virada, Literary Hub and, more recently, Circumference—but do you intend to publish this material in book form? If you do, how do you envision this book? More specifically: if you could publish your ideal translation, what would that book look like? Would it be a bilingual edition? Would it have an introduction and a preface by the translator? Would it contain reproductions of the original manuscripts?*

[EWA]: I love this question of the “ideal” translation. I would very much like to publish this in book form, as I think all of these ma-

terials — the poems, the letters, the artworks, the photos I have of Ana Cristina — become that much more fascinating when all in dialogue with one another. I envision a book that moves chronologically through these materials, starting with *April Scenes* (1979) and ending with the last letter that Ana Cristina sent to my mother, shortly after publishing *At Your Feet* in 1982. I am also working on writing short introductory essays to each section of the book; I hope they will help to thread together all the material, while also amounting to a kind of mini-biography of Ana Cristina's life and work. For the shorter poems, I would definitely love to include the original Portuguese versions — I really like that this is an option with poetry (as opposed to prose, which makes it more difficult). And I would also love to include scans of the original letters that Ana Cristina sent to my mother, as well as photos that my parents took of her and images of my mother's artworks that inspired Ana C. I can also see another version of this book being published in Brazil, bringing together all this wonderful archival material that I think a Brazilian readership would appreciate. I just need to find the publishers for each of these books!

[CT]: *After reading the excerpt you published in Circumference, which is accompanied by a reproduction of Ana C.'s typescript, I noticed that the published version of the book is reminiscent of a puzzle or a collage—especially because some bits of what was in that typescript, an earlier version of the Epilogue, appear at the start of the book. Did having this untapped archival material at your disposal help, impact, or shape your translation process somehow?*

[EWA]: Yes, definitely! In the case of both the Epilogue and the April 1980 letter that would later be adapted in *Kid Gloves*, it was extremely helpful and influential in my translation. I was able to get a clearer picture of what she was aiming for in those passages. Realizing that she pulled certain phrases from her letters to my mother also gave me context, a new way of interpreting her

poems. For example, the phrase “I’m neither a lady nor a modern woman,” from her poem “Lock and Key” in *At Your Feet*, first appears in a letter to my mom. Finally, having intimate knowledge of my mother’s drawings has also impacted my translation — I can see my mother’s drawings in her descriptions, which then helps me in the translation and writing process.

[CT]: *I would love to hear your views on topics such as the challenges you faced during the translation process, the moments of delight you experienced, and how you dealt with Ana Cristina Cesar’s language—at times very linear, at times fragmentary, alive with pop culture references, and hiding little pieces of poetry inside its prose.*

[EWA]: Ana Cristina Cesar has definitely been one of the most challenging writers I’ve translated. She has also been one of the most rewarding. The trick, I’ve found, is to read her work over and over again—I can’t count the number of times I’ve read *Kid Gloves* and the other works I’ve translated. Each reading has revealed something new, made her writing more interesting, and also given me more and more clarity. It took several drafts of translations for me to start hearing Ana Cristina’s voice in English, but now that I do, it’s such a delight.

You’re right that Ana Cristina loved to slip in pop culture and literary references in her writing. She could be very sneaky about them and sometimes it was only after multiple readings that I caught some of the references. Other ones I would’ve missed entirely if it weren’t for my mother, who was not only the same age as Ana Cristina and therefore is more familiar with some of her references, but also knew what Ana Cristina was reading and looking at. So, for instance, in one passage in *Kid Gloves* Ana Cristina describes a scene of a woman lighting a “dwarf’s cigar” with “a sky drawn with a ruler” in the background—as my mother pointed out to me, it is an allusion to a William Hogarth drawing.

There are still a few sentences and passages that are opaque to me, that I feel uncertain whether I've fully understood her meaning. This has encouraged me to exercise patience and acceptance—to, as a translator, resist the urge of making everything 'clear' and 'neat' by overwriting or explicating.

[CT]: *Translators play a big part in shaping how a writer or poet will be read in another language and another culture. Some of the excerpts you have published so far are accompanied by a brief introduction written by you, and I can see that you always take great care in identifying Ana C. as a well-known and beloved poet in Brazil, and in mentioning the relationship she had with your mother. Considering that the first major translation of her work into English was *At Your Feet*¹, it seems that your work is also a great opportunity to introduce a new side of Ana Cristina Cesar as a writer and expand her image in the United States. Do you agree?*

[EWA]: Yes, I certainly hope so! I'm still afraid that she hasn't gained the recognition she deserves, partly because audiences in the United States aren't super receptive to poetry—much less translated poetry. My project initially began with just *Kid Gloves* and the letters, but I ultimately decided to expand the scope and include other poems and works to give a broader, more comprehensive introduction to Ana Cristina Cesar and to hopefully inspire more and more people to look at the wonderful recent translation of *At Your Feet*.

[CT]: *In her Translator's Afterword to *The Passion According to G.H.* and in the poems that make up *Clarice: The Visitor*, Idra Novey discusses the act of translating an author as a visit of sorts: a visit*

¹ Published in 2018 by Parlor Press, the book was translated by Brenda Hillman, Helen Hillman, and Sebastião Edson Macedo, and edited by Katrina Dodson.

that invades the translator's daily life, scrambling your day-to-day routine. In your "The Translator's Bookshelf", you mentioned—while discussing the translation of Robert Walser's work into English—that you like to imagine translators "living within the walls of his [Walser's] words, learning the twists and turns of the spaces he creates"². And, while writing about John Donne's poetry, its translations into Portuguese, and "Elegia", a Donne poem translated into Portuguese by Augusto de Campos and sung by Caetano Veloso, Ana Cristina Cesar sketches the idea of the "translator as a stuntman"³— someone who replaces the original actor, but that also puts him/herself at risk. Considering these three images—translation as a long, extended visit by the author; the walls of a writer's words; and the translator as a stuntman—how would you describe the experience of translating Ana C., of discovering and exploring the walls of her words? Did you at times felt like a stuntwoman?

[EWA]: Translation is always a kind of performance, but I was perhaps most aware of this when translating Ana Cristina compared to other poets I've translated. I think this is partly because her writing is already quite performative by nature, especially the prose works *Kid Gloves*, *The Complete Correspondence*, and the letters. It's fun to read her work out loud because it lends itself to being 'acted out.' I also found that her voice is very overpowering. More than feeling like a stuntwoman, it can feel like her voice is taking possession of me.

[CT]: *In a couple of his crônicas written after Ana Cristina Cesar's death, Caio Fernando Abreu wrote about how much he missed her and what might Ana C. accomplish had she lived a little bit longer. In one of those texts, he positions Ana C. alongside*

² <https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/dispatches/article/the-translators-bookshelf-elisa-wouk-almينو>.

³ Cesar, Ana Cristina. *Crítica e tradução*. São Paulo: Editora Ática, 1999. Please refer to page 238.

two other women he greatly admired: Sylvia Plath and Zelda Fitzgerald. This coupling of women artists can at first strike the reader as unexpected, but the secret to understanding it lies, it seems, in analysing their lives and their work through the lens of the “unconventional”—a word that Caio F. himself uses when writing about them. Do you view Ana C. inside of, or belonging to, your own trio of women artists? If you do, who are they?

[EWA]: Part of me wonders whether Ana Cristina Cesar would've liked being only compared to other *women* artists. But she was also very aware that women do occupy a particular position in literature for being marginalized. In speaking to a university class⁴ shortly after having published *At Your Feet*, she said that women often put forth “another discourse.” “She [the woman] has something else to say, which is still a little weird. Another way of speaking.” She was also very interested in what she called a “feminine” way of writing, which, in her view, could be authored by either a man or woman. Some of these “feminine” traces, she told that same class, include playing with the “unsaid” and obsessively thinking about “the interlocutor.”

I recently helped organize an event at UCLA with two other Los Angeles-based translators, Magdalena Edwards and Hilary Kaplan. I came up with the idea to invite them because I felt like the three authors that we are translating all have a strong connection: Angélica Freitas (who Kaplan translates), Clarice Lispector (who Edwards translates), and Ana Cristina Cesar. When I recently spoke with the critic Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda, I asked her how she might introduce Ana Cristina Cesar to an American audience. The first thing she said was: “Ela é a filha da Clarice.” “She is the ‘daughter’ of Clarice.” Both women, she observed, had the same impulse, “which is to discover: who am I? What are women?” Both were also fascinated by psychoanalysis; Ana C., like Lispector, had a Lacanian therapist — in both women’s works, we are

⁴ Cesar, Ana Cristina. *Crítica e tradução*. São Paulo: Editora Ática, 1999. See “Depoimento de Ana Cristina Cesar no curso ‘Literatura de mulheres no Brasil’”.

often deep inside the narrator's head, and specifically a woman's mind. Ana Cristina first explored in Brazilian poetry what Clarice Lispector first explored in Brazilian fiction: the everyday life of a woman. And I think Angélica Freitas is pushing this idea further — her funny, audacious poems are explicitly about being a woman, having a woman's body, and being queer. Hollanda is currently organizing a collection of poems called *As 26 Poetas hoje*, an update of the important *26 Poetas hoje* (1970), which featured Ana Cristina Cesar. In the newest version, which features only women poets, Hollanda writes an introduction that firmly establishes Ana Cristina as one of the main influences on this new generation of poets, including Freitas. So, if I were to pick my trio of women, I think it would be these three authors of three different generations who seemed to deeply impact one another.

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