



A World of Words
Interview with Cedilla & Co. Co-founders
Heather Cleary and Julia Sanches

For podcast release
Monday, July 31, 2017

KENNEALLY: The variety of human expression is staggering. According to the Ethnologue which publishes a database of all known global tongues, more than 7000 languages are spoken today.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series, I'm Christopher Kenneally for *Beyond the Book*.

In the ancient myth of the tower of Babel, the multitude of languages were a curse on humanity from God. Translation, though, can rescue us from that predicament, and draw us closer together. Cedilla & Co. is a translators' collective devoted to bringing the world's voices to an English-speaking audience. Julia Sanches and Heather Cleary are among the founders, and they join me now. Welcome to *Beyond the Book*, Julia Sanches.

SANCHES: Hi, Chris, thanks for having us.

KENNEALLY: And Heather Cleary, welcome to *Beyond the Book*, as well.

CLEARY: Hi, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Well will tell briefly about both of your backgrounds, and then we will learn a little more about this very interesting business model you have for Cedilla & Co. Julia Sanches is a translator of Portuguese, Spanish, French, and Catalan. Brazilian by birth, she has lived in the US, Mexico, Switzerland, Scotland, and Catalonia. She obtained her undergraduate degree in philosophy and English literature from the University of Edinburgh, and a graduate degree in comparative literature and literary translation from the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona.

Heather Cleary is a translator from Spanish and a founding editor of the digital bilingual review, *Buenos Aires Review*. She holds a Ph.D. in Latin American



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culture from Columbia University, and currently teaches at Sarah Lawrence College.

I guess we'll start, Julia, with you, and ask about the business model for Çedilla & Co. You make a point that this is a collective. What are you thinking about there? Why a collective?

SANCHES: The idea of the collective was Sean Bye's, actually. He and I were the people who started Çedilla, and then went and recruited other people. He, living in London, had witnessed actors' collectives, which essentially sprung out of a need. Translators fees and advances tend to be too modest to have agents the way that writers do, so we thought that the most valuable thing we could offer each other and the community was our expertise. So that was where the idea of the collective came from, both bringing together a bunch of different areas of expertise and languages and talents, but also trying to work within certain constraints.

KENNEALLY: And your perspective really is beyond the translation activity, because you worked for a time as a literary agent at the Wylie agency. I understood that gave you an inside baseball view of translation as a business for publishers.

SANCHES: Yes. Unfortunately, unless a translation is a roaring best-seller, publishers tend to lose money. The role of the agent is particularly interesting when it comes to translation. At Wylie we actually had a lot of – we represented a lot of international projects. The agent's loyalty is to the author, so when it comes to certain business aspects, like royalties and negotiating fees, if the translator's share comes out of the author's share, that goes against what the agent is trying to do, which is to defend the author's rights and get them – the author and the agency – some income. So that gave me that perspective on the very precarious balancing act that you have to perform while you're being an agent working with translated literature.

KENNEALLY: Heather Cleary, you are a translator from Spanish, but also a founding editor of *Buenos Aires Review*. So you've seen things from the editorial side as well. Not simply working your way through a piece of literature, but really the business end of it, and that's an important part of what Çedilla is trying to do.

CLEARY: Yes, absolutely. Some of the support that we offer the rest of our community is also editorial in nature. We run workshops for each other's proposals. So that editorial side of things does come in within the Çedilla collective, as well.



From the point of view of my work as an editor and understanding what kinds of texts could be of interest to different publishing houses, that has also come in handy. Among our other members, Allison Markin Powell, for example has extensive contracts experience. We each bring a different skill to the table in addition to the coverage of 10 languages among the nine members. We seek that variety in the business model, as well.

KENNEALLY: There are a variety of steps that publishers have to undertake to successfully bring a book from one language into publication in another language. I suppose it starts with knowing the markets, so if you're someone who follows Spanish literature, you have to know not only what are the best sellers, but really what are the works that are coming that are particularly innovative or ground breaking or simply beautiful.

CLEARY: Absolutely, and that can be a real challenge for a publishing house. I specialize in Latin American literature in particular, but if you're an editor at a major publishing house, you have to look globally, and that can be a little bit overwhelming.

One of the services that we offer is the market expertise that you just mentioned. One thing that I've noticed, and I think Julia also can speak to this is that oftentimes international publishers will send publishing houses here in the States translation samples of works that are prepared by non-professionals – I should say non-professional translators. They're professionals, but they're not literary translators. That can really hurt a book's chances for being acquired because just as you said, understanding the market but also understanding what's so special about a given book is really key to communicating its value. Publishing any book is always going to be a little bit of a gamble for a United States publisher, but translations are notoriously difficult to convince the editorial board to pick up a book. The original materials that are seen by the editors are very important. That's one of the things in our advocacy of literature and translation, one of the things that we want to do is make sure that the materials that are being put in front of editors here in the States are as good as they can possibly be and give the most accurate idea of what the book is and what's value is.

KENNEALLY: And Julia Sanches, you don't have to only evaluate the original work, but evaluating the translation is equally important, I assume. There are translations and there are translations. Tell us about that process. What makes for a good



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translation? What works well and what works as a matter of a business proposition?

SANCHES: Well, about what works well for a translation, that could be a whole other podcast. But I think what most people aim for at the moment is a sort of domesticity to it, in that they want the translation to speak to its audience, as if the audience were reading in the original language. Right now, in terms of evaluating translation, there are a bunch of interesting projects going on with classics that were published in fairly poor translations years ago, and that are now being re-translated. For example (speaks Portuguese) by (inaudible) is beautiful and seminal work of Brazilian modernism and was translated, I think by a scientist back in the '50s – I might be getting the dates wrong. But it just didn't capture at all the vigorous language – the vigorous and dynamic and sort of rude, vulgar language of the original, and I think New Directions – Katrina Dodson is retranslating it for New Directions. Alison Entrekin is working on a retranslation of *The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*, which is a book by Guimarães Rosa, another classic of Brazilian literature, where the translation has been found lacking. It's really translators who can – and academics, as well – people whose focus is Brazilian literature in this case, who can really grasp what's lacking and strive to right a wrong that was made a while ago.

KENNEALLY: I imagine, nevertheless, there are partisans for all of those various works. I'm thinking of – if I have the name correct, Constance Garnett and the original translations in English of the Dostoevsky novels, perhaps was not as faithful to the Russian as it could have been, but there are those who really appreciate the book. That's how they came to those novels in the first place. So there may be people nevertheless who can live without the full expression because they happen to just have a romantic attachment to the translation that they read when they were in school.

SANCHES: That's definitely true, and there's something to be said about different versions coexisting. I see it as a sort of layering or a fanning out of different interpretations of a text, and different renderings. Heather has spoken to this point in the past, so I'm sure she has some interesting insight to add.

KENNEALLY: Heather, let's bring you in and ask you about not only the business piece of this collective, but the mission, which is beyond business, and really is about a cultural self-assignment to, as you put it, overcome this narrowing of worldviews



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that we seem to be experiencing today. Why is translation important, and particularly why now?

CLEARY: I think we can all sense the political urgency of refusing to narrow our horizons at this moment. I think one of the ways that this can be achieved in the deepest and most lasting way is by allowing other voices and other perspectives in. These are commonplace, is what I'm saying, but in practice there really is no better way, I think, to avoid the consolidation of limited worldviews than by insisting on a multiplicity of perspectives. So just in the same way that Julia was talking about the fanning out of versions of a text, we can also think about a fanning out of versions of the world, and different spaces, different perspectives. From an artistic and cultural standpoint, we are advocates of translation and translators, but in a broader sense we're advocates of this defense of multiplicity and this defense of listening.

KENNEALLY: I'm certainly sympathetic to that argument, but I wonder whether, Julia Sanches, you have some thoughts around the challenges in translation. Because, for example, the French are known for the intellectual essay, which really is very popular in the French marketplace. But one would think that it perhaps might not be so well received, even in a wonderful translation in the US. Is that true? Are there simply some tastes in forms that don't carry across borders?

SANCHES: I think they carry, but there's a lack of reception. There's a certain resistance in US audience or English readers to read accounts by, for example, an Argentinian author that is not about Argentina. That kind of narrative is, in a way, owned by English language and maybe French language writers, and for all of these other writers who are creating beautiful works about places that are not their own, there's a sort of resistance, as if it weren't authentic – that terrible word.

Every literature comes with its historical baggage or literary baggage, to say tradition, really. That, I think, is one of the greatest challenges to overcome. In Brazil we also have – and I think, in Spanish, as well, the *chronica*, (sp?) which are these short, personal essays that are much more casual the personal essay here, and they're not really available in the US. There's also generally a bit of a resistance towards journalism that isn't produced here.

One of the projects we have, actually, by Sean Bye, again, is a book of nonfiction about Ellis Island by Polish journalists. I think one of our biggest challenges there in finding a house for it is that non-American perspective on an American location



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and an American – that’s up for debate, but an American history. It’s a resistance to, I guess, going somewhere uncomfortable and outside a literary tradition and aesthetic that people have grown up with and been taught at school and in college. That’s not to say there aren’t people out there who are huge defenders of work from around the world.

KENNEALLY: Heather Cleary, I was going to ask you about that, Heather Cleary, because you teach at Sarah Lawrence College. I wonder if you can tell us how receptive the students you have are to these other languages and other forms. Do you notice, perhaps, a kind of evolution of tastes?

CLEARY: Absolutely. I did just want to quickly circle back to your prior question, because I think it’s a really important one, and to mention two things. While it is challenging to bring certain forms that haven’t already established themselves within the literary panorama here yet, it can be a challenge, but I think it’s also precisely that challenge is the reason it’s so important to try to do that, to expand, and in so doing, enrich the English language reader’s understanding of what is possible with the written word and with these different forms. I think one really important shift in the past few years has been the appearance of a number of smaller publishing houses here in the States that are dedicated, if not exclusively, predominantly to publishing literature in translation. Open Letter started this trend, I guess, 10 years ago, if I’m not mistaken, but have – from there we’ve seen Deep Vellum, we’ve seen Transit Books – a number of smaller houses that are interested in pushing the envelope in terms of the preconceptions about what’s possible.

As Julia said very rightly, one of the things that we, as a group of translators, as a collective push against the comfortable narratives. I work primarily with literature from Argentina, though also Mexico and a number of other countries, but I started translating with works from Argentina. There is the comfortable narrative, there are books dealing with the Dirty War over and over again, because that is a framework that is already familiar. That’s just to give one example, but every literature has one or several of these comfortable narratives.

What we’re trying to do is also, being experts in our field, try to open that up a little bit and make a convincing case for other kinds of narratives, other forms that don’t simply reinforce the preconceptions or what an editor thinks they might be looking for, and showing the editors that we work with how much broader the landscape really is.



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KENNEALLY: The students in your classroom, they're open to these other forms and other voices?

CLEARY: Absolutely. Probably my sample size is a bit biased because the students in my classroom are already studying language, they're already curious. But definitely on campus I notice a strong desire to reach beyond the familiar and beyond the local, and also make connections, not as a literary tourist, but also trying to establish a real, lasting dialogue or conceptual connection with these works which I think is really encouraging.

KENNEALLY: We have been speaking today with Julia Sanchez and Heather Cleary who are co-founders of Cedilla & Co, a collective of translators based in New York City, and we appreciate your joining us today on *Beyond the Book*. Julia, thank you. *Obrigado*.

SANCHES: *Muito obrigado*.

KENNEALLY: And Heather, thank you. *Gracias*.

CLEARY: *De nada*, thanks for having us Chris.

SANCHES: Thank you Chris.

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