

Forrest Gander

Poet and Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Brown University

Dr. Sarah Pike, Faculty, CSU, Chico, Comparative Religion & Humanities Department: Welcome everyone and thank you so much for coming. Nice to see you all here for this special event. First of all, I just want to say that this event tonight is part of a series, a year-long series that the Humanities Center is doing a translation. There are other events coming up, so please watch out for those.

Before we introduce our guest, I'd like to say thanks to some of the people who helped make tonight's event possible. The College of Humanities and Fine Arts especially Dean Robert Knight; the Humanities Center board discussion for Jollimore and Laura Nice; the Department of English; the Department of International Languages, Literatures, and Cultures; and two people who work very hard behind the scenes—Heather Altfeld and Diane [inaudible]. After the reading and talk, I'd like to invite everyone--we got a nice reception in the hallway—so please come out and enjoy some of the treats we have for you before you go home.

And at this point also I would like to check to make sure if your phones are off. Thank you. So our guest tonight will be introduced by Troy Jollimore, professor in the Philosophy Department and member of the Humanities Center.

Dr. Troy Jollimore, Faculty, CSU, Chico Philosophy Department: Thanks for coming. Is the mic on? Is it working? It's working? Great. I just wanted to check. I'm really pleased to be able to welcome Forrest Gander here at the Chico State. Well, we say something like that when we introduce people. But in this case, it's actually true, it's not just BS. I just want you to note. It's a real pleasure for me. I've gotten to know Forrest over the years. And even before that, I was a great admirer of his work. And the word “work” here has to do a lot of work because in this case it doesn't only refer to poetry although given how amazing his poetry is, that would be enough. But Forrest is really a quadruple threat at least. He's also an essayist. He has this lovely book of essays called, “A Faithful Existence,” for sale around the corner. I highly recommend it. It's really great. He is a novelist. His novel, “As a Friend,” was published in 2008. The New York Times book review called it a strange and beautiful novel and said that it needs-- and I'm quoting for the review here, “It needs to be read slowly, to be uncovered like a secret or discovered like a treasure.”

And of course, in connection with our theme, Forrest is a very accomplished translator, having translated the work of writers including--and I apologize in advance for any that I mispronounce. I'm sure there will be some. Coral Bracho, Alfonso D'Aquino, Kiwao Nomura, Jaime Saenz, and of course, Pablo Neruda. His own work has also been translated into many languages including French, Spanish, German, Bulgarian, Portuguese, and Dutch. He's gotten to that stage where he has so many awards and prizes that you can't really list them all. It's very inconvenient for people that have to introduce them. So to just mention a couple of the highlights that I hope he stops, you know. To mention a couple of highlights, fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the Library of Congress, the NEA, and the

Rockefeller Foundation, a Pushcart Prize, the Whiting Writer's Award, the Gertrude Stein Award in Innovative American Poetry which he has won twice. And he's been a finalist for both the National Book Critics Circle Award in Poetry and the Pulitzer Prize.

One of the things that makes his work really interesting to me is how interested he is in collaborating with other artists, often not just writers but in various media. Translation itself of course is already a kind of collaboration. You're already working with--in some sense, the writer whose work you're translating. But in addition, Forrest will also work often with another person, a native speaker of the language he is translating from. His most recent full-length collection of poetry, "Core Samples from the World", again, on sale around the corner, probably my favorite book of Forrest, I have to say, really, really wonderful, amazing book. It pairs his poetry with the visual art of three photographers, Raymond Meeks, Graciela Iturbide, and Lucas Foglia. He also worked with Raymond Meeks on an earlier project, the "Sound of Summer Running", and his new chapbook -- which I'm going to show off because I just got my copy today -- "Eiko & Koma", takes as its subject the unique and innovative dance theatre of the Japanese performance duo of that name.

And at dinner, he was telling us a little bit about their collaborative process that he engaged in with them in writing this chapbook. I think it's very telling. It tells you something about Forrest that when you look at his website, you find that one of its sites is--one of its sections is called recommended recent readings. It's where Forrest will recommend books by other people that he's enjoyed and he wants to share. I have to tell you that writers are pretty relentless self-promoters. And so that kind of generous behavior is a little unusual among writers. But it's not unusual for Forrest who is restlessly, endlessly and sometimes even I think recklessly interested in the work of other artists and in the world of art.

As for describing him as a writer, I'm going to let him do the work. I'm going to borrow a paragraph from one of his essays. The essay is called "The Transparency of a Faithful Existence" and he writes the following. He says, "What I want is simple enough. To combine spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and technical elements into a resistant musical form, to summon the social and political meanings of sound and rhythm as well as meanings whose force lies beneath or above our syntax, and for it to have the fillip of implication." As Thelonius Monk put it succinctly, "Just how to use the notes differently." That's it. I think the word "simple" here in the first sentence of that paragraph is both ironic and not ironic at all. Achieving what Forrest here aspires to is no simple matter, which is not to say that he hasn't achieved it. In fact, amazingly, he has repeatedly as the rest of us have watched on in wide-mouthed admiration. But the idea itself really is profoundly simple, isn't it? Isn't it really what everyone is trying to do in their art? That is everyone who's actually trying to make art and not simply follow some formula rather. At any rate, I think the invocation of Thelonius Monk is perfect because just as there was no one else like Thelonius Monk, and he really did use the notes in a way no other musician did. It's like he had his own notes. There's no one else like Forrest Gander, which is part of the reason and as much as I'll say tonight why we're fortunate to share our world with him and why we're fortunate to have him here. So I'm very pleased to welcome to our modest podium, Forrest Gander.

[Applause]

Forrest Gander >> Troy, that was so sweet. Thank you.

[Inaudible Remark]

I'm going to focus on translations tonight, and I'm really happy to be here. This happens to be a little town with some really good poets in it so it's really exciting for me to come. The last of couple of years, I have been largely focused on some translation projects. So I'm going to share those with you--introduce you, I hope, to some people that you'll like—that you haven't heard of before. And maybe talk a little bit about translation and the process also. So I'm going to start with--I think Spain's two greatest living poets right now are Antonio Gamoneda and a woman whose first name is great, her first name is Olvido, you know, her first name means, I forget. Olvido Garcia Valdes are like the two really exceptional poets in Spain right now. Gamoneda is a generation older. He's a pretty old guy right now which means he lived through all the Franco years. And if you did that, it's in your work and you're given a kind of subject matter that you have to deal with. So what you hear, part of the rage in this poem has to do with living in a country where your work is suppressed and where your values are suppressed and replaced by a whole system of kind of malicious falseness.

"Rage", Antonio Gamoneda:

"From violent dampnesses, from places where the residues of torments and whimpers mesh, comes this arterial grief, this shredded memory. They go insane, even the mothers who run through my veins. The tortured shadows near the signs. I think about the day when horses learned to weep. Who shows up shouting, announcing such a summer, lighting black lamps, hissing into the pure blue of knives? They come with lanterns, lugging blind snakes to the albescent sand. There's a blaze of bells. Steel can be heard groaning in the city surrounded by howls. They scream before calcined walls." They note the silhouette of knives, see the sun's circle, the surgery of the animal stuffed with shadow. They hiss in the white fistulas. There was an extraction of men. I saw the root living on the omen. I saw insects sucking up tears, saw blood on the yellow churches. There were scorched flowers and denim draped over a weeping machine. Oil and shrieking in the steel and propellers and bloody numbers in the purity of my rage. I recognized the tenanted shrouds and the candles of pain. Orations boiled up between the lips of frigid women. It was mortal music, the shriek of incessant horses. It was a funeral pavane at the hour of the bloodied cotton ball. It was the drooping of thousands of heads, the gargoyle, its maternal howl, the circles of the tormented hen. It's even, once again, the whitewash, the bone cold in our hands, the policeman's black marrow. I saw bodies along the edge of the cold acequias. Shrouded in light. I saw the ropes and cords, saw the metallic seed and the briars white with hawthorn and light. Enpurpled, the insects gorge themselves. I found mercury in my pupils, tears in the lumber, light on the wall of the dying. Beneath the busyness of ants there were eyelids and there was toxic water in the gutters. Even in my heart there are ants. It's going to dawn over the prisons and tombs. The tortured head eyes me: its ivory blazes like caught lightning."

So his work hasn't been translated much in English. And it's just come out in a book called "Panic Cure," which is a selection of ten contemporary poets from Spain. And I'm going to read you another one from

a younger generation. A woman named Sandra Santana. Most of the interesting poets I think and it's of course, it's my opinion, most of the interesting poets in Spain come from. And I think there's a whole generation of really--of innovative poets in Spain, the younger generation were really influenced by these two older figures, Antonio Gamoneda, and Olvido Garcia Valdes, and Sandra Santana.

So this may be tricky to read because it kind of--you have to float the whole thing in your head for the ending to make sense. OK, the title--her titles are really long, "Actually Erratic Fantasy is the Space we're in with Greatest Clarity, the Paths of Dream and Wakefulness are Revealed as a Two-lane Highway". OK. You're with me so far?

"Unable to suppress the sudden whelm of sweat, his tongue wasn't there but nevertheless, she clearly felt the warm moistness at her neck. It wasn't the iris, not the pupil either that instigated the loss of concentration. His fantasy quickly, quickly had intensified reality and focused itself like a skylight on the invariable and black dot of her eye. She felt a light vertigo when she realized her body was still panting, searching for a place to stop. He seduced her by staring at her and asking for the quickest way to the center. Relying on the enviability of thought, she insisted they go up the stairs of the house together to improvise there and exercise in perfect synchronization where even the lightest pressure on her thigh, the twist of an arm or a sudden jolt to her back was perceived both as relief and as an urgency for the as yet, unknown. Returning to the question, do you have any idea when the next train for Central Station is late? She blushed and shrugged." I'd screwed up that last—"returning to the question, do you have any idea if the next train for the Central Station is late? She blushed and shrugged."

So maybe you have to read it. But--So this whole fantasy is going in her head while she was just asked a stupid question. OK, so Sarah was really kind enough to pass out to you a poem in Spanish and English that I might use to launch into a little talk.

So Coral Bracho is one of the most influential poets in Mexico, in a way. She's younger than--she's my age, so very young. She's younger than John Ashbery but in a way, she's sort of like the--in her--in terms of her influence, her work isn't anything like Ashbery's but in terms of being an American poet now, Ashbery just had such a profound influence on the art that whether you hate him or you really love him, you can't be an American poet without dealing with his work. I mean, you just have to figure out some relationship with it. And in Mexico, Coral Bracho is something like that figure. So I've given you the Spanish and let me read you the English of this poem and then talk maybe a little bit about the translation process. "Firefly Under the Tongue".

So--I mean starting from there could be lightning bug under the tongue. But the Spanish word for firefly, luciernaga, is so pretty that you would never want to replace it with lightning bug. Firefly doesn't--you know, doesn't come close but luciernaga is such a pretty sound. And when you're translating poetry, the sound is so primary. And linguists tell us that before even we have semantic meaning, there is the meaning of sound which is why women in every country talk to their babies with the same sort of lilting uplift. Why in every language, tonal patterns that are [taps], like that mean no. And why in almost every

language, those deep sounds, the U and O sounds are associated with heavier emotions than tweeter sounds. And that's going to come up as a factor in translating this.

"Firefly Under the Tongue":

"I love you from the sharp tang of fermentation in the blissful pulp. Newborn insects, blue. In the unsullied juice, glazed and ductile. A cry that distills the light through the fissures in fruit trees under mossy water clinging to the shadows. The papillae, the grottos. In herbaceous dyes, instilled. From flustered touch. Luster, oozing, bittersweet from feracious pleasures, from play splayed in pulses. Hinge wrapped in the night's aura, in violaceous clamor, refined, the child, with the softened root of his tongue expectant, touches from that smooth, unsustainable, lubricity, that sensitive lily folding into the rocks. If it senses the stigma, the ardor of light, the substance, the arris, fine and vibrant in the ecstatic petal, distended jewel pulsing half-open, udder, the acid juice bland ice, the salt marsh, the delicate sap, Kabbalah, the nectar of the firefly."

It's a weird poem, right? Is this a carnal poem about sex or is it a phenomenological poem about the reciprocal relation between subjectivity in the world? Is it a concert of sound patterns stressing long "Os" and "Oos," love sounds? Or is it an account of semi static perception? Does the poem intimate the hidden centrality of the earth in all human experience because the earth keeps pressing itself into the places where you think the human is supposed to be? Should *lengua* in the title be translated as language or tongue? What happens to those pronominal guides that we started out with at the beginning of the poem? We had an "I" and a "U" and then they're gone.

The last question seems to have the most obvious answer. "I" and "U" are simply swallowed up into the event of the poem and it is shifting points of "U" and the abrupt syntaxes and the telescoping images. Like those classical Chinese poems in which senses are recorded without reference to any kind of "I" or "U", it's just something is heard in the mountain, something is seen, but there's no pronoun that orients that. Bracho's poem dispels a humored--a human centered orientation. So "I love you" ends up bearing no more weight than "newborn insects, blue."

The boy's tongue is not subordinated by analogy to the sensitive lily. The human or animal sound that sudden cry, interacts with the dumb abundance of the world with the very light. The bracketed parenthetical and dash separated words and phrases in Bracho's poems open little rooms in the stanzas. They function something like Shoji screens. Sometimes, the poem moves into those rooms and sometimes, the poem simply offers the reader an inward glance at something else. That expectant tongue in the ecstatic petal distend towards a fulfillment that's delayed erratically by dashes and brackets. By back eddies in the syntax as context and texture are added. It's impossible to carry into the English the sound patterns. Sometimes, I'm lucky is when the long "U" of azules, zumo, and fruitales work out as blue, juice, and fruit. Scored there. Where I lose sound plays--sound play in one place for instance, the slide in the Spanish from grieta to gruta, or from gozes to goznei [phonetic].

I tried to recover it in places where there may not be sound play in the original as where I echo flustered in luster or root and smooth. In Bracho's poem, the musical movement is primary and I let it tune my

translation. In this poem, the most difficult word to me to translate was "kabbalah." And in Spanish, it means both conjecture and kabbalah. Since the bracketed words in her poems often seem to be like keys that unlock hidden connections and connotations to door number two. All right, another poem--oh no, let me move from this Bracho--use it as a copula to something else because when my translation of her book came out, "Firefly Under the Tongue", we gave some readings together and then I gave readings on my own of her work. And then going around doing readings, I started reading across the margins. So the Spanish is on the right. The English is on the right. Spanish is on the left and I would sort of pick up some of the Spanish and include that into my reading of the English. And I really like that. And then I started translating like that. So I just told you that--I developed a strategy for including Spanish lines as part of a performance that allows an audience to hear the original language in conversation with the English. Surprisingly, rather than deforming the music or the poem, the technique seemed to me, to intensify and clarify the music.

So then recently, when I was translating poems from Santo y Sena, which is a nice word in Spanish. Anybody know it? I know some people in here know Spanish. Santo y Sena is like saint and signal. But what it means is a password. So when I translate it as watchword because it's very connected to language in her case. By Pura Lopez-Colome, I began to incorporate Spanish lines into the English translations. Sometimes, preceded or followed by their English translations. And occasionally, what I meant to stress in an ineluctable music into Spanish or what I thought the semantic meaning would be intuitive in context, I didn't translate the Spanish at all.

So it sounds something like this: Three horses came down the hill and sumptuously entered the river's transparency a la diafanidad del rio. One waded out next to me. At times, it paused to drink. A ratos se detenia a beber. At times, it looked me in the eye. A ratis ne nuraba fijamente. And between both of us, y entre ambos, an ancient murmur passed on its sojourn.

So I realized this method, which I don't advocate as this is how to translate, but maybe one way of translating this method which was derived from reading out loud with Coral's work complicated the translation in ways that don't represent the original. But I wonder and this is where Daniel and I started having an interesting conversation this evening, if the goal of "representing the original" is always the goal of translation at all given that the work in translation is necessarily subjected to alteration, transformation, dislocation, displacement, maybe there are times when not representing the original is precisely what permits the creation of something less definitive but more ongoing, a form of translation that amplifies and renews and even multiplies the original poetry's meanings. So I'm thinking here too of how this notion of an original has been complicated historically like in (Martin) Heidegger, in Nazism, this notion of purity. I live in Arkansas where I came to contact with people who distributed KKK literature which is all about purity, the purity of the blood. And, you know, biologists tell us that even our--not only are we not pure as racists, we're not pure as a species that much of our DNA is composed of the DNA of parasites that long ago were incorporated into our system that the whole notion of purity of--you know, of a pure, original I think is a dangerous notion.

I live in Arkansas--where I live in Arkansas, this little town was famous for a passion play, this Christian play where they act out the crucifixion of Christ. Everybody in this little town at one point works for the play. And it was a big production with sheep and all kinds of stuff and the Christ lifted off the cross. But it was advertised for a while throughout the Ozarks, on billboards as more authentic than the original.
[Laughter]

And that idea interested me at something--there's a Borges story also that [inaudible] where he imagines this place where everything is reproduced. And at the 13th level of reproduction--and the thing is called a fronin, and it actually has a higher clarity than the original, this reproduction. I think this is connected to translation. Let me read you--So let me tell you something about the politics then and what happened. So I translated a book like that with the Spanish incorporated with the English. And the press said, "We really love this book. We're going to publish it as soon as you take that Spanish out." And they had--it was a university press so they had readers. All three of the readers said the exact same thing. I had to take it out.

But meanwhile, I had inspired someone who is really someone I'd take a lot of inspiration from, a wonderful Spanish translator named Esther Allen. And she thought wow, that's a cool idea. I'm going to do that. And I happen to be putting together--it's what I'm doing right now really frantically, a big anthology of Latin-American poetry called "Pinholes in the Night: Essential Poems from Latin-America" selected by Raul Zurita, who is this great Chilean poet. And he picked 17 poems, several of them book-length poems to include in this. And he took one--especially a risky chance by including a piece by Juan Rulfo who is a Mexican novelist really like the great. And if you never read another Mexican book, you have to read "Pedro Paramo". It's just essential. So he's a poetic fiction writer and he included--like him, he's one of the great poets of Latin-America, one of the 17 great poets of Latin-America. And I gave that translation to Esther Allen. And Esther Allen said that she was going to translate it and what interested her was to include some Spanish.

So here, listen to these two translations because the exact same thing happened. She translates it this way. I think it's really beautiful. I also think that in America where it is the sort of meeting place of the cultures and languages that this is the future that we have, you know, that our language opens up to make space for other languages. So the one--the people that own the right to Juan Rulfo's work do not think so. So here's two translations.

Esther's, the beginning of "You Don't Hear the Dogs":

[foreign language] Ignacio, you up there [foreign language]. Tell me, you don't hear a sign of light, see any light? There's nothing to see, we must be getting close by now. Yes, but there's nothing to hear. [foreign language]. There's nothing to see. [foreign language]. The men's long black shadow move down the slope clamoring over the rock, shrinking and swelling following the stream bed, a single shadow, unsteady. And then the moon coming out of the earth in a round blaze of light. We must be getting near [foreign language] Ignacio. You've got your ears out in the open--look, and see if you don't hear the dogs." -- So one is being carried on the other shoulder. One's ears are closed-- "The [foreign language],

remember? And how many hours ago did we leave scrubland behind, remember Ignacio, [foreign language]."

OK. That's the one they wouldn't take. They wouldn't give us permission to do it. So we're using this one, which is an adequate translation and by a well-known translator. But I don't think it has the same [inaudible]. "You Don't Hear the Dogs Barking". And this is interesting already in the titles. One is "You Don't Hear the Dogs" and one is "You Don't Hear the Dogs Barking". The more subtle one "You Don't Hear the Dogs", it sort of means barking:

"You up there Ignacio, tell me if you hear some sign or see some light somewhere. I don't see anything, we must be close. Yes, but I can't hear a thing. Look hard. I don't see anything. So much the worse for you, Ignacio. The men's long dark shadow continued moving up and down climbing over the rocks, getting smaller and larger as it went along the edge of the [foreign language]. It was a single shadow, reeling. The moon was emerging from the earth like a round flare. We must be close to the village Ignacio; your ears aren't covered so try to see if you don't hear the dogs barking. Remember they told us [foreign language] was just on the other side of the hills and we left the hills hours ago."... "Try to see if you don't hear dogs barking."

And so a bit of a complicated sentence that might need some revision I think. So this is an interesting problem in this moment of translation which I think is beginning to change. And it's also something about the distrust Latin Americans have for Latino culture in the United States and this mezcla of languages.

OK. Let me return you to a translation of my own. This is by a guy named Federico Garcia Lorca. And this was a poem he came to regret that he had written because so many people--it was an early poem of his. And so many people took him or took the speaker to be Lorca. So they all thought he was this guy.

And the poem is called "The Unfaithful Wife".

"So I took her up to the river assuming she was a virgin but she had a husband. Being the festival of St. James, it was practically my duty. The extinguished discreet lamps and the crickets lit up. At the end of the street, I touched her sleeping breasts which swelled suddenly like hyacinth petals. The starch of her slip crackled in my ears like a pieces of silk torn by ten knives. Without their halos of silver light, the trees loom and the horizon of dogs howls across the river. Past the blackberries, the cattails and thorns beneath her tasseled hair, I made a hollow in the sand. I took off my tie. She took off her dress. I, the belt with my pistol. She her four little corset's, no perfumes, no shimmering shells are as creamy as her skin. And not even moonlight--moonlit crystals compete with its sheen. Her thighs were slipping away from me like startled fish, one-half pure light, one-half pure cold. That night I galloped the truest road on a nacreous mare, no stirrups, no bridle. I will not repeat being a man any of the things she told me. The light of understanding has blessed me with discretion. Smearred with sand and kisses, I carried her from the river. The blades of lilies were clashing with the air. I behaved as what I am, as a true gypsy. I presented her with a big selling basket and a straw-colored satin--and a sewing basket of straw-colored satin. And I didn't want to fall in love although having a husband; she told me she was untouched when I took her to the river."

[chuckles] So that got him in trouble.

[Laughter]

OK. So I'd like to read to you a couple of poems I've never read out loud and there--these are the two hardest things that I've translated. The one hardest thing I've translated, one kind of difficult [inaudible]. So this is a poem by a guy who's almost unknown in the United States, who's very influential in Latin America. He is from Uruguay where actually a lot of really amazing poets have come from Uruguay. His name is Julio Herrera y Reissig. He's born in 1875 and he died at the age of 35 in 1910. So he dies really young. He dies right before his book of poems comes out and creates an incredible sensation. And he writes in kind of neo baroque, very formal. He is like a--what's he like? He is like--like Philip Sidney on acid or something. He has this really formal rigor and then just the wildest stuff comes out. His words that he makes up are just amazing. So here is a poem of his where I tried to keep the form and the rhyme. So I'll read you the first stanza in Spanish. "Alba Triste" by Julio Herrera y Reissig.

[Foreign Language]

[Pause]

"Everything just so, a lilac malaise, stirred an illusion of tomorrow onto its absurd page as a callow heron stroked through choppy waves. An enormous shuddering of Sybils, now and then epilepsied the window. All the while a crackpot myth rolled through the dark behind my eyeballs. 'Bye, bye!' I screamed and into the sky, the grey sarcasm of your svelte glove rose with the red of my jealousy. A jackdaw Wagnered--Wagnered through the wind--Wagnered through the wind. A jackdaw"—and I haven't thought of how to read this out loud. We would say Wagnered--Wagnered through the wind— "A jackdaw Wagnered through the wind, and at that instant, the forest felt an infinite and complex collision," wind collision off rhyme. This is as close as I could get. That was really fun and it's a sonnet.

Here is another sonnet by a little pen name, I used to write under Pablo Neruda. This is--This is from my book "100 Love Sonnets". Pablo Neruda from--this is number 12:

"Full woman, carnal apple, hot moon, rich aroma of algae, mashed mud and light. What dark clarity opens between your columns? What senses lead a man to that primeval night? Yes, love is a journey by water and star with strangled air and sudden tempests of flower. And love is also a lightning flash war, two bodies, one honey overpowers. Kiss by kiss, I cover your small infinity, your images, rivers, towed with no stations. And the genital fire smoldering for release, shoots through a thin lined of blood and marrow until it detonates like a nocturnal carnation until being and not being shimmer in the shadow." Shadow, marrow-- that worked OK.

All right. I think I'm going to finish with a poem by a fantastic Mexican poet named Alfonso D'Aquino. And he's kind of a strange character who's lived a very solitary life outside. He was discovered very early in his 20's, like 22. Octavio Paz praises him as the best young poet in Mexico, gives him the Carlos

Pulitzer prize. And he moves out of the city, he moves into the desert and pretty much stays there and he's very familiar with the stars, with all the native plants, their healing uses, the geology and--what else is interesting? He grew up isolated with--he didn't meet his parents. He didn't meet his mother at all. Met his father only after he was in his 20's, had a really solitary life. And he--his work like Coral Bracho's is often sort of making this integration, breaking down this notion of the eye that presides over our experience. And it has this more communal gesture of the world being so involved in our experience that sometimes we can't tell if we're feeling something or that we're feeling something with the Earth and that is about a dialogue. So, he also is interested in forms and writes in couplets with feminine iambic--feminine iambic rhymes. But I'm going to read you one of his--that has a different form. OK. And we'll finish off with this. And [inaudible] that people want to ask. \

So this poem is written in two columns. And it's written so beautifully in the Spanish that you can read it across or you can read the two columns down and it still make sense both ways. And so I'll read you this--I'll come down one side of the Spanish and I come down a vertical--the less side of the Spanish so you just hear that. And then I'm going to read the English right across.

[Foreign Language]

"Fronde":

"It's formless. From within the leaves I see the leaf in the middle, one brushing another of the leaves that keeps it company. Leaves aren't the alder all the tree a leaf but the air that holds all the alder in its sleeve and more leaves. And trees drink each other in and a frond emerges from one of them tangled in the branches, a singular leaf among the leaves. Gesticulation of the frond from within its patterns I see disclosing in the shadowed bower another flower, the other flower. And each moves into the other and the phylum transfigures like a sky, invisibly woven and between two leaves opening out. Wild, invisible branch, the stalk and the corolla twisting, spirals darkening into one form and digging in. In one leaf and another leaf from the unseen branch, always are to the shade of this leaf, the same leaf falling broken."

Alfonso D'Aquino. So thank you.

[Applause]

[Pause]

So, any comments or questions? Anybody in here also translate? I know some people do.

[Pause]

Yeah?

[Inaudible Remarks]

Yeah, that's a good question. And that's--if those of you in here--if there are people in here who wanted to start translating, I would say, "Start with a living writer" because you can write that writer and ask questions and it's varied between the people that I've worked with. With Coral Bracho, a living writer, and I asked a lot of questions and she responded. With the first book that I did by a woman named Pura Lopez Colome, she just wasn't interested in being--she was a friend of mine, she was like--we were close but she had no interest in like participating in the translations. It's like this will make you a better translator, you figure it out.

[Laughter]

And it probably did make a better translator. And then, with some people that I've translated like I translated a Bolivian poet, two books by--I co-translated them by a poet name Jaime Saenz. I had to travel down to Bolivia to--and he was dead and to get a sense of him and also to get a sense of the vernacular there which is really different from Mexican vernacular. And the same thing when I've translated in an Argentine writer who I should actually--maybe I should read just a paragraph from this Argentine writer 'cause we were talking about him tonight. But other questions, too?

>> Yeah, I would like to add idea of incorporating the Spanish in translation, I think it works because, maybe in California especially we have a sense [inaudible] probably wouldn't work so much if [inaudible].

>> Yeah, yeah.

[Inaudible Remark]

Thanks, yeah, yeah, I thought so too. Here's how--so yeah. So here's a--I've translated a little novel called "Diarrhea of Hepatitis", very exciting title by an Argentine novelist who's [inaudible] written like 78 novels, they're all like this little novels and he's a recluse. Lives in a place that's actually called in Argentine--We're talking about Buenos Aires earlier. There's a neighborhood called CORONEL Pringles. And that's where he lives. So this is the first sentence of "Diarrhea of Hepatitis". If I'm found undone by disgrace, destroyed, impotent in extreme physical or mental anguish, or both together, isolated, for example, and condemned on a steep mountain, drowned in snow, frozen to the core after a fall of hundreds of meters, bounced from the edges of ice and rocks with both legs severed or my ribs, smashed and cracked and all their points perforating my lungs or at the bottom of the ditch, or the end of an alley after a shootout, bleeding into a sinister dawn which, for me, would be the last. Or in the wards for incurables at the hospital, losing to hour my last functions in between paroxysms of atrocious pain, or abandoned to the avatars of mendacity and alcoholism in the street, or gangrene shooting at my leg, or in the phantasmal progression of a glottal spasm or purely insane going about my business in a straitjacket, imbecilic, opprobrious lost, it's probable that even having a little pencil and a notebook at hand, I wouldn't write, nothing, not a line, not a word. I absolutely wouldn't write not because I couldn't, not on account to the circumstances but for the same reason I don't write now because I don't feel like it, because I'm tired, bored, fed up because I don't think it serves any purpose.

[Laughter]

[Inaudible] is laughing.

[Laughter]

So then you get to those questions of, I mean, it's so interesting in Spanish, you know, you don't say, "I hurt my hand," you know, you say, "The hand, it hurts me." You talk about your body in ways that--in English, we only talk about the body if it's a corpse. And there are things like [foreign language] which literally, is "With the gangrene climbing me by a leg." And when people talk about literal translations, it should be a literal translation and there's no such thing as a literal translation. And I like--I mean, there is a kind of poetic quality of the "Gangrene climbing me by the leg." But, colloquially, you're going to translate it as the gangrene shooting at my leg. And many got into questions of, "Well, is that simply a way to sort of--a bad politics of absorbing the strangeness, the difference in syntax of another language and just normalizing it in English?" And that's an interesting discussion to have with the translators if you're a translating. Yes?

>> So I'm curious in why is that comment with the [inaudible], you know, to--I don't know, [inaudible]. I apologize for this [inaudible] Spanish but actually, you know, your slang that--

>> Yeah.

>> --English in a way that--and just makes you work. There're no footnotes of translation. I wonder if you have thought on that dynamic [inaudible] is clearly rhyme principally I think for North American audience and yet using a really wide range [inaudible].

>> Yeah. Well, I think it's politically important to do that and it's not just politically important because it's sort of forcing us to encounter a language that's alien to us, which suddenly makes us, you know, the home boys feel foreign. And that's a good experience. But also, linguistically, that artistically, that is interesting that it adds a texture to his writing that's fresh, that's new, that's interesting. And even if we have to struggle into it, even if we don't know the words at all, we get a sound and we get a texture that flavors our reading in a positive way, I think, you know. Have you like reading in?

>> [Inaudible] I did and I teach it a lot and by talking about that was [inaudible] even if we don't know Spanish, right, texture--

>> Yeah.

[Inaudible Remark]

Yeah.

>> So, I think they're right. It makes you work the real work, and [inaudible].

>> Yeah. Yeah, I think that's the job of art is to knock us out of our comfort zones.

[Inaudible Remark]

>> --the fact that hearing both the article, monolingual one and the [inaudible] has the Spanish?

>> Yeah.

>> It sounds entirely different, the tone, the--

>> Yeah.

>> The meaning of the article--or in English that we get out of those is such a different industry that [inaudible] me to think that--and it's definitely is really stretching it for the artist because you wouldn't have to know both languages to really get that--you know what I [inaudible]--

>> Yeah.

>> My question is, basically, this goes along the line within translation, I mean, [inaudible] do you have to be inert really get the taste of [inaudible] different translation.

>> Yeah.

>> --more, I would say, related to the original or, however, you want to put it [inaudible]--

>> 'Cause at first to me like it brings us closer to Mexico, it's like we're reading like in Mexico, and the other one feels like we're really reading in New England.

[Laughter]

[Inaudible Remark]

Yeah.

>> This sounds more in English but it is read [inaudible] in monolingual version, it sounds like [inaudible] matters, but it's not really--

>> Yeah, yeah.

>> It's not really. It is more--

[Inaudible Remark]

>> Yeah, yeah. So you know that--yeah--that piece really well. That's--Yeah. You know--and I think--I don't want to--I'm not advocating that there's any one way to translate. In fact, what I think is that the more ways that work is translated, the better, you know, the more logic--imagine if the Bible just had one translation, how much poorer all of literature in English would be. So, it seems like--My argument is that it seems like that is a viable way. And that even if you're not bilingual, there's really a small percentage of Spanish word she's using and a lot of times, we sort of get them from the context, what she'll have the Spanish and really she'll have the translation right after it or, you know, rephrase it and that seems really savvy to me.

>> Can you say something about how different it is to be translating to Japanese and I'm also like [inaudible] structure this and other structures to kind of back and forth [inaudible] too. How does that work if you're doing Japanese or have you experimented kind of on maybe--can you say a little bit of that [inaudible] different experiences with those two languages?

>> OK. So, I'm also--I've translated a book--this book right here by Kiwao Nomura called "Spectacle & Pigsty, I co-translated because I studied Japanese, but--and I--you know, I think I sound pretty cool for about two minutes. And then if I'm on the train and asking you if I'm in your seat and you don't answer the way that I think you're supposed to, I don't know whether I should get up or not. So, translating Spanish, I've also occasionally, co-translated, but I prefer translating myself. And translating from Japanese, I have to translate with a co-translator. And I've worked with just a fantastic co-translator named Kyoko Yoshida who will send me--she'll read the poems in Japanese so I have--so I hear them first. She'll send me the Kanji. She'll send me three different scripts for the Japanese so I can both see it and also work out the pronunciation myself. And then she'll send me a first draft with a lot of comments. And then, I will take that and listen to it 'cause again, the sound is really important, this poem I love to show that with this Japanese poem as an old poem which is--you can hear the five, seven, five, seven, seven pattern in it. But what's made this poem last so long, 'cause it's a 16th century poem, is the sound pattern just like in the Coral Bracho.

[Foreign Language]

And that last one is the cool thing about the poem 'cause in the old days--so it's a poem about people saying goodbye to each other, coming into parting at this wall in Osaka and the old word for Osaka, for the town of Osaka, had an extra syllable in it. So, if you just say, "Osaka no seki", you're a syllable short of the seven and so it gives that extra "Oosaka no seki." And that's exactly the sound that that's the most important sound as you heard throughout the poem. And so all of those long Os, which again, going back for our linguistic discussion, is the sound of longing. So, my process is totally different with the Japanese. Yes?

>> I know you have previously mentioned that you didn't feel or maybe [inaudible] that you didn't necessarily feel that there was sort of purity or an idea of an original. I was kind of just wondering in terms of you translating, then, if you don't feel that way, do you ever at all feel like anything is lost through the translation because I know as the gentleman in the front mentioned that he really enjoyed to kind of included the Spanish and the English in one particular course, but I also enjoyed that just because me also being a Spanish speaker, knowing the sounds, kind of my background with the language and kind of what sounds and everything that I have come through--

>> Yeah.

>> --kind of--how would you say it--kind of [inaudible] with, I like sounds of course romantic languages that something that I'm comforting [inaudible].

>> Yeah.

>> So, in terms of you ever translating, do you ever feel like, "Oh, this would--I wish I could just keep it this way," or perhaps it's not necessarily a way you could really get the same idea or feeling across?

>> Oh, you're on to a fantastic short story which is like the Borges story about Pierre Menard, the guy who rewrites Don Quixote. And--I mean, he spends his whole life, you know, writing Don Quixote, well, translating it into the exact thing that it was. And--Yeah, that's the best translation, is to leave it alone. And of course, yeah, there's--of course, there's lots lost in translation. But what's amazing is how much he isn't lost, and how much can be recovered and how much--sometimes you lose something here but you can gain it somewhere else. And if we didn't--so it's this really imperfect system and translation is--I mean, you know, a real translation is impossible. And that without it, we would be absent so much including our imagination of each other, you know, 'cause I'll never, you know, know Sarah [assumed spelling] except by imagining through some empathetic imagination of who she is. So it's worth--it's a great failure that's worth doing. Yeah, I think. Daniel?

>> Yeah, along those lines, I was going to mention [inaudible] Buddhist and stuff, but I mentioned that 'cause it's just right on topic. But in Thailand, which is a Buddhist country and they have the Buddhist scriptures there that [inaudible] which is English language [inaudible]. And they never translated them into topic. They kept the Buddhist scriptures in [inaudible]. So it'd be like us reading the Bible in Hebrew or Greek, whatever, it's not translated. What they did do is they glossed it so they would have glosses, you know, like splitting the complicated word in Thai next to the text, those were the early ones. And then, [inaudible] they would gloss it a little more heavily so they would gradually add more and more Thai to this text and less and less probably until--eventually basically all Thai. They've translated it. But they still followed the original because it's not--they say no [inaudible] lots of glosses, you know, sort of [inaudible], you know, the original text in the translation. But, originally, it was [inaudible] real translation.

>> So it's Talmudic is--what it ends being.

>> So [inaudible] like the questions like at what point does it become the translation, at what point is not be in the original or as you said and you said earlier, is there ever any real original? But that is an interesting question too [inaudible] what's the authentic one. But maybe in that paper if rather the poem is written by a human being, presumably, wouldn't the original be the one that the person wrote in the original language like in religious literature since you don't know who really wrote it. And to translate it to many different languages, you never really know exactly what the original is. But in this--I mean, do you or don't you?

>> Well, what would that the "original writer" used that hadn't been used before? What, you know-- We're all born into a language that structures our minds, that structures our consciousness that belongs to, you know, people before us. So, we're constantly reusing things in different ways. So I'm not saying, of course--yeah, when I--when my work is translated, I'm not really wanting it to come out under somebody else's name. But I think we can fetishize and that historically, there are really horrible reasons to be suspicious of the fetishization of an original and of this notion of the pure source. And also, I'm sick of writers in artist egos about, you know, like it--I wouldn't--like my head is full of other people's language and I couldn't be a writer without for other--without there being other writers.

>> I know you're also phenomenologist.

>> Where did that come from?

[Laughter]

>> How do you unite those two? I mean, your translations of [inaudible] as a phenomenon.

>> Yeah. I don't think I would have the [inaudible] to call myself a phenomenologist. But I'm really interested in the way that philosophies who'd--I mean, and I'd be embarrassed to talk with Troy in the room about this. But sort of--I mean, after the cart has this--yeah.

[Laughter]

I got to have you around me more often, yeah. No. This notion--I think, therefore, I am, as if thinking happened like in some isolated place. And the notion of phenomenologist is that your thinking is already an engagement with the world, you cannot think of something. And that that's a humbling thing because it means the world is involved in our thinking to begin with. And if that's the case, then it maybe extends our sense of responsibility and relieves us of some of the arrogance of, you know, that I think has been the principal of how we've treated the world. So, in my own poetics, I'm very interested in trying to find a way of--I think poetry is very much about perception. And I'm interested in exploring a perception that I think we share that has to do with kind of communion between world and subjectivity.

>> [Inaudible] of your performance particularly your first reading and your last, you know, [inaudible] the left hand, your right hand, your left hand, your right [inaudible]. And that could be [inaudible] to a bigger problems that you just [inaudible]. As your first reading, your reading [inaudible] five lines, seven lines and you're turning page. And you're only reading the [inaudible]. And what does that do for the reading and is it from the original or did you decide to position [inaudible] of blank and what you would [inaudible] by that. Where is that physicality and how do you get it if you're not reading out of [inaudible] page?

>> That's such a nice question, are you an artist? Right. Are you an artist? Right?

[Inaudible Remark]

He is a [inaudible].

[Inaudible Remark]

>> Oh my God.

>> And everybody else is sort of, you know, [inaudible] Shakespeare is good [laughter] that, you know [inaudible]. And then on the page [inaudible] the lines are formed, there are 14 units. It's not syllable, but it's clustered syllable [inaudible] physicality [inaudible], where does it say to us and then how do you interpret it in the original and [inaudible].

>> Yeah. So this--it's a wonderful question and it has to do with your close attentiveness to, you know, the physical space of a reading which interest me a lot. And I wish I had when I was reading--I think I'd started out a little nervous 'cause I didn't know how I was going to do this reading and like I was have a talk and have a reading so I was like figuring it out the last minute. But I think that I would prefer to have read from both sides to read at least some of the Spanish to incorporate it with the English. And it's a funny thing when--especially in the states when you're translating from Spanish, it's going to be completely different experience for you when you publish the book. But because when you have it on [inaudible], on opposite pages and so many people have a little bit of Spanish, it can really mess up their experience of reading the English 'cause they start in a couple lines and then they go over and say, "Oh, men, I wouldn't have done it that way", you know. And so it can be--it can set up a kind of bad system of reading and I'm conscious of that. I'd prefer to have--I'd like to have always the original language in the book, but maybe at the back where people can refer to it and read it also. And that reminds of me a wonderful book of translation of a Vietnamese poet by John Balaban where you read the--you read the English translation first even the strange poems and then you get to the note and the notes are so enriching in the back that you go back and read again and it's a completely different experience. That really worked wonderfully and maybe something you want to consider, too. I mean, 'cause you'd be necessarily having a lot of notes. And if you put the notes, again, sort of footnotes on the poetry page, it immediately just distracts people and turned it into in--kind of academic thing.

[Pause]

[Inaudible Remark]

That's such a nice word and I thought you were going to--yeah, I thought you're going somewhere else with that and then you really surprised me in such a nice way 'cause that is where the authority always is, it's with the reader. And so, they--you know, the reader, the listener has the authority to determine whether it works or not. And, that's just the case. I can make whatever argument I want. But Borges talks about too. This poet who's trudging as he says was for the incredible argument he made for why his poems were so good, [laughter] not for the poems themselves. And it's the audience that has the authority about that and--

[Inaudible Remark]

>> --sort of another sort of ultimate audience is made like the words available [inaudible]?

>> And maybe--Yeah. And maybe it's a greater variety of experiences for the work, too, because people have different relations with the two languages.

[Inaudible Remark]

You know, that's poets, you know, Gina, Heather, Troy just--when you interest into something, you want to eat all of it. And so--I mean, I'm also interest--and this I could talk about Swedish poetry too. But Spanish since I have Spanish, it gives me greater access that way and it's--I just find it really exciting. I want to know what other people are up to. And I'm often really thrilled by it.

>> This might be a good moment to transition to the formal part of our evening. And you could all have some conversation over some snacks and drinks. But first, I'd really like to thank our guest.

>> [Background Applause] Yeah, thank you, thank you.

[Applause]