

**Words without Borders: *Tram 83* by Fiston Mwanza Mujila in French  
- Translated by Roland Glasser in English**

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Literary translation is a type of translation where the source documents are fiction. When reading a story, poem or any other type of literary work translated from a foreign language, we perceive the text itself with its meaning, emotions and characters. It is quite a challenging task to achieve the main goal of the translation - creating a particular image for the reader. Therefore, literary translation might involve some deviations from the standard rules. A literal translation cannot reflect the depth and meaning of the literary work.

A literary translator reproduces a non-literal rendition of the original text. It is all about how the translator perceives it. He/she rewrites the text from the beginning to the very end. This applies, for example, when an obvious expression is replaced by synonyms or the structure of sentences is changed. Here, we find Glasser's search for words to translate *Tram 83* from French to English language.

Born in Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo in 1981, Fiston Mwanza Mujila lives in Graz, Austria. He regularly participates in literary activities. His writing has been awarded with numerous prizes, among which are the Golden Medal in the sixth Games of the Francophony in Beirut, as well as the Best Text for Theater (Preis für das beste Stück, State Theater, Mainz). He writes his short stories, novels, poems and essays in French, his mother tongue, and in German, his adopted language. As a child he dreamed of becoming a saxophonist playing jazz. 'But there was no saxophone, so the jazz rhythm is now added to my poems. I write like a jazz musician.' He writes about the chaos, the civil wars, the 32-year dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko, which have been undermining his home country since its independence in 1960 from Belgium. *Tram 83* is his first novel. *Tram 83* was translated from the original French into English by Roland Glasser.

Roland Glasser studied theatre, cinema and art history in the UK and France, and has published over 25 translations from French (fiction, art, travel, and trade non-fiction). His co-translation, with Louise Rogers Lalaurie, of Anne Cuneo's historical novel *Tregian's Ground* was published by *And Other Stories* in Spring 2015, and his translation of Fiston Mwanza Mujila's *Tram 83* appeared in September 2015, courtesy of Deep Vellum (Dallas), Jacaranda (London), and Scribe (Melbourne). He is a French Voices and PEN Translates Award winner and serves on the committee

of the UK Translators Association. Having lived in Paris for many years, he is currently based in London.

*Tram 83* is Fiston's debut novel. It is set in a central African country in the throes of rebellion, and the title refers to the name of the bar/restaurant/nightclub/brothel in the rebel-held "City-State" where everyone gathers, particularly the diamond miners, railroad men, "for-profit tourists," passing merchants, varied alcoholics, assorted low-lives and a seemingly endless collection of prostitutes. A succession of disparate music acts performed on the little stage: salsa, rap, rock, jazz, Guadeloupean dancehall, South American eco-warrior folk, you name it. Most of the book's action takes place in Tram 83, but also out in the streets, at several apartments, the diamond mine, and at the Northern Station, the initial description of which sets the tone from the very first page:

*"The Northern Station was going to the dogs. It was essentially an unfinished metal structure, gutted by artillery, train tracks, and locomotives that called to mind the railroad built by Stanley, cassava fields, cut-rate hotels, greasy spoons, bordellos, Pentecostal churches, bakeries, and noise engineered by men of all generations and nationalities combined. It was the only place on earth you could hang yourself, defecate, blaspheme, fall into infatuation, and thief without regard to prying eyes. Indeed, an air of connivance hung ever about the place."*

Lucien is the novel's central character, an idealistic writer who has just returned to the City-State after a spell in the "Back-Country" (the region not controlled by the rebels). He has completed half of a "stage-tale" entitled *The Africa of Possibility: Lumumba, the Fall of an Angel, or the Pestle-Mortar Years*: "Characters include Che Guevara, Sékou Touré, Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Lumumba, Martin Luther King, Ceaușescu, not forgetting the dissident General." Lucien is excessively ethical, preferring to spend several days in jail, for example, rather than bribe the chief of police. He cares for nothing but his writing and is always scribbling in a papers and notebook.

The other key character is Requiem, a black marketer, dodgy dealer, and cynical, disillusioned communist. He deals in an unspecified "merchandise"—probably diamonds, commonly referred to as "the stone." He also blackmails "for-profit tourists" (Western businessmen of varying degrees of morality and success) with naked photos of them taken by prostitutes they frequent at *Tram 83*.

Requiem and Lucien have a long history. They used to be firm friends, perhaps comrades in the revolutionary or political cause, but Requiem now resents Lucien for various events that happened in the past, including his divorce. They share an abusive love/hate relationship, out of which Lucien comes off considerably worse.

Roland Glasser translates literary and genre fiction from French, as well as art, travel, and assorted non-fiction. Reading *Tram 83* often puts him in mind of a musical score, with shifts in melody, tone, rhythm and intensity. There are crescendos

and diminuendos, overtures and interludes. Indeed Fiston has told him that he is sometimes quite conscious of composing his writing as one would a piece of music.

Roland Glasser's primary tool is the website WordReference.com, which he uses as a kind of linguistic aide-mémoire. As well as allowing me to check for nuanced meanings that might have escaped him momentarily, there is usually a list of related words—each a clickable entry in this online reference resource.

Some are direct synonyms; others, words that are very close. For example, the miners in *Tram 83* are also referred to as "*creuseurs*," a noun derived from the verb *creuser*, meaning "to dig." The list of related English words includes: bore, burrow, excavate, gouge, delve, entrench, hollow out, and tunnel, to give but a few examples. He opted for "digger," since it seemed to fit best in this context as far as meaning and suggestion were concerned, while also being syllabically and homophonically close to the French—not always essential but nice to achieve.

The other mainstay is *Roget's Thesaurus*, whose arrangement of words by theme is amazingly useful. Look up "dig" in the index, and one of the results is "excavation," itself a sub-entry of a theme entitled "Concavity" comprising all manner of words relating to that particular subject, and arranged by noun, adjective, verb, and adverb. Oh, look! Under "excavation" we find an entry that begins "excavator," and includes such interesting words as quarrier, dredger, sapper, and ditcher. But Glasser also have a *Thesaurus of Slang* (recommended to me by the accomplished Dutch to English translator David Colmer). There, under "miner," it lists groundhog, sandhog, desert rat, hard rocker, sourdough, hard ankle. Had Fiston used a more-slangy word instead of *creuseur*, then perhaps he might have gone for one of them.

But this is not merely a cold, linear process of logical sifting. It's intuitive, too. Glasser has done this translation with several books open on his desk, and multiple active browser tabs on his computer. At a certain point he makes a choice and the fingers move over the keyboard. He also highlights words to return to later: yellow for things he needs to ask Fiston about, blue for words where he has made a choice, but he is not entirely satisfied, and red for ones he needs to discuss with Will Evans, the publisher. Sometimes he will leave himself a note with possible alternatives.

Facebook is much derided as a source of procrastination. But it is also a way for freelance translators to run ideas past colleagues or consult them on subjects where our knowledge is lacking. In the case of *Tram 83*, Glasser's Facebook queries fell into two categories: 1) Words or expressions that would be comprehensible on both sides of the Atlantic, the translation having been commissioned by Deep Vellum in Dallas, then sold to Jacaranda in London and, later, Scribe in Melbourne, and 2) Things he was simply stuck on.

There was an intense discussion on Facebook about whether to refer to a "train driver" or an "engineer," the former being proper to British English, the latter to American English. The consensus was that the average British reader would probably not understand "engineer" in a railroad context, while "train driver" would at least be comprehensible to a US reader, however odd they might find it, not to mention that Glasser had found examples of both terms on websites in both countries.

Then there were the "slim-jims." The French word is *biscottes*. A *biscotte* is a thin piece of industrially produced dry toast that is often eaten at breakfast in France, slathered with jam and possibly dunked in milky coffee. It is not dissimilar to a slice of rusk or a Melba Toast in the US. But in the context of *Tram 83*, *biscottes* are ". . . barely adolescent boys who toil as casual labourers: extracting, carrying, and washing the gravel to separate out the diamond crystals." Fiston referred to them as thin, like those packaged slices of industrially produced toast, all the better for slipping into the cramped spaces of the mining galleries excavated by the *creuseurs*. So, in order to mimic what Fiston had done in the French, he needed to find a word that conveyed thinness, was food-related, and had a tough, masculine sound—not only is *biscotte* full of hard consonants, but there also exists a slang word, *biscotteaux*, meaning "muscles." I thought about "wafer" or "wafer-boy," but it sounded too feminine ("waif"). So he posted his request on Facebook, and very soon got a reply from Zoe Perry (who translates from Portuguese to English). Zoe is half-Canadian, half-American, and she suggested "slim-jim," explaining that there is a popular brand of jerky snack called Slim Jim, which she associates with her Kentucky childhood.

Perhaps surprisingly, there was very little in the way of Congolese-specific slang. Fiston's writing is fairly high register and literary. But what he does do is riff on existing idioms, or even invent new ones, often with surreal intent but interesting results. For example, there is an expression in French, *accoucher d'une souris*, literally "give birth to a mouse." It describes a very poor result to a given chain of events. At one point, when referring to the dead-end peace process between the government forces and the rebels, he writes that "the international community had sponsored nineteen sovereign national conferences which had *accouché d'une chauve-souris*." Now, "*chauve*" means "bald," but "*chauve souris*" literally "bald mouse" is French for "bat" as in the winged mammal.

Fiston evokes the textures of the city in all its deliriousness, blowing marvelous riffs on everything from the sleaziness of foreign visitors to the differing shapes of streetwalkers' buttocks to the way the poor patrons of *Tram 83* like jazz, because it's so classy. Virtually every scene is punctuated by the come-ons of the prostitutes — too lewd to quote here — that serve almost like a Greek chorus repeatedly saying, "Live for now, live for now, live for now."

Congo was always amazed by the vitality that shimmered through even the most downtrodden slums. Fiston captures that surging life-force, too. If his portrait of Congo makes it appear socially and politically hopeless, what's hopeful is the spirit of his writing, which crackles and leaps with energy. Rather than moralize, he transfigures harsh reality with a bounding, inventive, bebop-style prose, translated from the French with light-footed skill by Roland Glasser.

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### References

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