

Jean Delisle. *Interprètes au pays du castor*. Québec, Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2019, 354 p.

Ryan Fraser

Volume 34, numéro 2, 2e semestre 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086629ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1086629ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association canadienne de traductologie

ISSN

0835-8443 (imprimé)

1708-2188 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Fraser, R. (2021). Compte rendu de [Jean Delisle. *Interprètes au pays du castor*. Québec, Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2019, 354 p.] *TTR*, 34(2), 183–191. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1086629ar>

l'auteur, une langue sans locuteur, son usage est symbolique et est important pour deux raisons : illustrer l'usage des langues étrangères et la fonction dramatique de la traduction. L'analyse approfondie du film *A Serious Man* permet à Abend-David d'examiner la réception critique et la signification de la scène en yiddish.

À l'inverse d'une monographie qui exposerait les considérations théoriques et historiques de la représentation de la traduction dans les médias contemporains, *Representing Translation* offre plutôt diverses études de cas qui explorent des situations aussi variées qu'intéressantes, allant du cinéma aux médias sociaux, en passant par l'audiodescription. La représentation de la traduction dans les œuvres de fiction est de plus en plus étudiée dans la traduction, pensons, par exemple, à *The Fictions of Translation* (2018) dirigée par Judith Woodsworth. La présence grandissante de traductrices et de traducteurs dans les films, les séries télévisées et les œuvres littéraires est, à notre avis, une preuve que nous ne sommes plus invisibles, contrairement à ce qu'affirmait Venuti (2017 [1995]). *Representing Translation* de Dror Abend-David s'inscrit dans cette volonté de mettre en lumière la visibilité des traductrices et des traducteurs en analysant des cas de figure où la traduction est à l'avant-plan au grand et au petit écran.

Références

- Venuti, Lawrence (2017 [1995]). *The Translator's Invisibility*. Londres et New York, Routledge.
- Woodsworth, Judith (2018). *The Fictions of Translation*. Amsterdam et Philadelphie, John Benjamins Publishing.

ALEXANDRA HILLINGER
UNIVERSITÉ LAVAL

Jean Delisle. *Interprètes au pays du castor*. Québec, Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2019, 354 p.

The titular animal tells us immediately which Canada Jean Delisle is writing about in this book. This is the Canada of the fur trade—of wilderness toil, wilderness commerce, and wilderness ordeals. His 13 chapters are portraits of 15 colonial-era interpreters ordered chronologically from the 16th to the 19th centuries. And their work did have a component of wilderness ordeal, as most of them became

survivalists at some point in their service to venture capitalists and out-posted governors and Jesuits. Many were experienced woods people—hunter-trappers, scouts, guides, and voyageurs. Some were soldiers, mercenaries, prisoners, or slaves. Some were anti-heroes—sympathetic racketeers, confidence men, thieves, even assassins.

Delisle reminds us that explorers and colonial authorities used interpreters to communicate with Indigenous peoples, and that these interpreters were themselves First Nations, Inuit, Métis, or European. The First Nations, Inuit, and Métis among them begin in 1534 with Domagaya and Taignogany, the two Iroquoian interpreter-guides for Jacques Cartier. After a jump to the late 17th century we read about Métis interpreter Élisabeth Couc (later Isabelle Montour), who worked for Lamothe Cadillac in Fort de Buade (or Fort Michillimakinac, present-day Michigan) and for Robert Hunter in Albany after her relationship with the French soured. In the early 18th century is the story of Thanadelthur, the Chipewyan interpreter who was a diplomat to the Cree for James Knight and the Hudson Bay Company. The 19th century is the last in Delisle's scope, and here we have the portraits of Inuktitut interpreter Tattaneuk (the first two Franklin expeditions 1819-1821, 1825-1827); Kalaallisut and Inuktitut interpreters Tookoolito and Ebierbing (of the three Hall expeditions 1860-1873), and Blackfoot interpreter Jerry Potts, Alberta's famous Métis frontiersman and Canada's answer to Davy Crockett.

The interpreters of European origin, for their part, begin in the early 17th century with Mathieu da Costa, who may very well have never set foot in New France. Étienne Brûlé follows as an interpreter of Algonquin, Huron, and other Iroquoian languages for Champlain and the Jesuits during the same time frame. Then from the late 17th to the early 18th centuries we find no fewer than five successive governors of New France employing interpreter, woodsman, fur trader, and explorer Nicolas Perrot—who had a number of languages from the upper-lakes tribes, as well as Siouan languages, and traded in the *pays d'en haut*¹ far into the territories of the midwestern US. Following Perrot is military man Louis-Thomas Chabert de Joncaire,

1. French “up country” or “upper country.” The expression was used to designate the region of the upper-lakes accessed via the Ottawa river in its northwest extension, as well as all territories west of Lake Huron. The highway to the *pays d'en haut* was the Ottawa River-Georgian Bay canoe route. Traders and missionaries accessed the northern Great Lakes via this route as well.

an interpreter of Iroquoian languages and factotum of Governor Vaudreuil in the early 18th century. Chief among his duties was disrupting trade between the Iroquois and the English in Albany. British interpreter John Long (late 18th century, American Revolution era) is the only pure adventurer of the lot. This self-styled interpreter of Ojibwe was one of the few to leave travel narratives or a biography of any kind, along with fellow Ojibwe interpreter John Tanner, who ranged between the Selkirk settlements (southern Manitoba), Fort Frances (Northwestern Ontario), and Sault Sainte Marie working for various fur companies in the early 19th century. The last portrait is of Jean L'Heureux, a confidence man and *débauché* who pretended to be a priest while traveling across country working for the Oblates and interpreting for the Blackfoot.

Delisle situates his interpreters in the context of their professional activities before, during, and after their time with the employers who made them famous (and whom they helped make famous, as well). There is careful discussion about the languages that they spoke and about inter-personal dynamics with authorities. By and large, we get a picture of at least rough use, when not of outright abuse. Every portrait has one or more episodes where it becomes abundantly clear that the employer is perceiving the interpreter more as an instrument—of navigation, territorial or commercial expansion, and political intrigue—than as a person commanding respect as such. Cartier kidnaps Domagaya and Taïgnoagny. Brûlé is abandoned as a traitor by one employer (Champlain) only to be imprisoned, tortured and executed by the other (the Huron chiefs) for reasons unclear but presumably political. Thanadelthur interprets for the Cree as their prisoner of war and slave before escaping and wandering lost in the woods of Nunavut for a year, and then finally arriving nearly starved to death at York Factory. While she is there, her conditions and treatment improve, but never to the extent where James Knight sees fit to refer to her by any name other than “the slave woman” (p. 89). Élisabeth Couc is born into a family of interpreter-guides living on the seignory of fur and moonshine runner Jean Crevier near Trois-Rivières. After Crevier rapes and murders her sister, Couc flees to Forts Michillimakinac and Detroit, where she herself is then slandered and jailed by her new employer Lamothe Cadillac. When she learns that the Marquis de Vaudreuil (Governor of New France after 1703) has directed his own interpreter Louis-Thomas Chabert de Joncaire (indeed, the portraits intersect in a web of abuse) to kill

her brother and fellow interpreter Louis Montour, Couc changes her name to Isabelle Montour and flees once again to Albany and the protection of Governor Robert Hunter.

This is the type of lawless, frontier-style interpersonal dynamic at play in most of the portraits. The narratives are gritty, and so are their endings. The episode of cannibalism in the first Franklin expedition (1819-1821), for example, has made it a first-class tale of terror. Tattaneuk, the Inuktitut interpreter who witnessed the triple homicide and execution during this expedition, would himself die of hunger and exposure twelve years later while traveling by foot alone over 300 kilometers of tundra to Fort Reliance to join his next British employer, explorer George Back. Other interpreters finish sadly in ruin and poverty (Nicolas Perrot), and others die of viral illness (likely of European origin) before realizing their goals (Thanadelthur). Louis-Thomas Chabert de Joncaire becomes an assassin and pirate, John Long a thief, and John Tanner a town pariah. Still others (Domagaya, Taignoagny, and the ten other Iroquoians kidnapped by Cartier) become lost to the record, simply vanishing in a foreign land.

I want to characterize Delisle's discourse as "museum biography," and I will let this resonate with "museum ethnography" as anthropologists conceive it (Sturge, 2007; Shelton, 1997). The portraits really do have the feel of the narratives that we find threading over the labels of exhibits as we move through the galleries of a museum. A museum banks on the historical significance of the other that it narrates. This significance is really the alpha and omega, the place where discussion of the other begins and ends. All of Delisle's portraits are structured on just this principle: they are bookended by evidence of present-day symbolic capital in the form of plaques, awards, statues, commissioned art, dedicated buildings, postage stamps, dedicated annual events, among others. The portraits begin with an exposition of capital, then proceed into the gritty stories themselves, and then end in the light of posthumous fame once again, with evidence of the interpreters' legacy, and more capital.

Museums also curate their collections to protect them, and in Delisle's book the wisdom in trusting reputable sources is a recurring theme. He takes care to echo only the narratives that are currently privileged as trustworthy, with a particular deference to archival materials. And he weeds out others deemed untrustworthy—notably those that proliferate in the political arena, as we discover in the

chapter on Mathieu Da Costa. This is very much the curator's or archivist's point of view. It is both discriminatory and discretionary, orienting itself straight down the middle of a trusted canon. The *Jesuit Relations* (1896-1901) and De Bacqueville de la Potherie's *Histoire de l'Amérique Septentrionale* (1722) are the contemporary colonial narratives. The exploration narratives, for their part, tap contemporary chroniclers wherever possible—Cartier's (1986), Champlain's (1922-1936), Perrot's (2004), Franklin's (1824, 1828) and Hall's (1865, 1879) travel logs and memoirs, among others, as they have been collected and edited posthumously by scholars.

Delisle's wish, it appears, is to stay within the framework of what has already been said about these people, most of whom are already persons of national historic significance. The fresh angle, however, is in having assembled them here as interpreters first and foremost, and in having told their stories from the point of view of this particular type of employment. The *modus operandi* then seems to be the "story" part of history—stories of history's interpreters from their point of view, from a position of trust in select sources, and trust in History (capital H intended) in so far as it is revealed through these sources.

The book's strength, then, is really the strength of this kind of historiography concerned more with telling stories than with questioning the record. This is fair enough. There is, after all, a time before the atonement begins, a time when compelling stories of the past are just laid out, learned, and questioned primarily on plot. We go to museums for exactly this type of experience. Once we have these narratives in hand, we are free to re-think them. And so a reader cannot really go wrong with *Interprètes au pays du castor* (2019), whether the intention is to absorb its stories at face value or to move on and challenge them in the light of a broader historical inter-text. The book stands effectively upon the staying power of its sources. Someone will always care enough to defend or challenge *The Jesuit Relations*.

If the book has a weakness, it is in what ethnographers call "reflexivity" or "subject control" (Sturge, 2007). This is the reader's sense of whether an author is regulating his or her voice effectively and/or accounting for its shifts of viewpoint over the course of the narrative. In Delisle's discourse, I frequently encounter abrupt shifts of viewpoint, and at times uncomfortable vacancies. I will be surprised, for example, by a sudden turn in the narration or prose style, and will

re-read the passage to find that Delisle's voice has slipped down from the scholar's panopticon to temporarily align itself with a particular character in the narration. Essentially, he will "get down into the mud" with one of his characters and take sides. Take the following paragraph:

Avant le départ, sur l'insistance de Hall, Tookoolito et Ebierbing s'étaient mariés chrétiennement, mais revenus parmi les leurs, les deux Inuits renouent avec les coutumes de leur peuple, dont les « superstitions » et les « tabous » représentent un sujet d'agacement pour l'Américain. Hall perd de son influence au profit de l'*angakkuq*, le chaman. Ainsi, même en hiver, Tookoolito ne peut reprendre ses vêtements de caribou à l'intérieur de son tunic fait de peaux de caribou. Les femmes ayant leurs règles ne doivent pas approcher des chasseurs, car l'odeur du sang fait fuir les phoques. Les chiens roux sont tués à la naissance, car ils ont la réputation d'attirer la foudre. (p. 245)

This paragraph begins in panoptical narration and ends in satire. At the phrase "sujet d'agacement pour l'Américain," Delisle's authorial voice assumes Hall's viewpoint, takes on his "agacement." This shift is a necessary precursor to the increasingly random superstitions found in the next three sentences, which take the tone in the direction of sharpening satire as they continue the narration of the married couple's experience. The satire culminates in an episode of wife swapping that calls to mind the antics in a fabliau (p. 245). Indeed, Delisle's authorial voice is reveling in a mockery of Inuit superstition here as it veers into irreverent humour.

Critical distancing is another type of subject control. The book would have benefitted had Delisle kept his interpreters a little more at arm's length, at times. There can be a kind of hyperbole in their characterization that (1) does not really stand the sceptic's test of truth value and (2) risks alienating readers. Formulations like the following on Nicolas Perrot and Jean Nicolet are of the type: "Ce sont aussi deux esprit curieux et cultivés, appréciés des missionnaires. Les deux interpretes *savent s'insinuer subtilement dans l'esprit des Indigenes, dont ils connaissent a fond la mentalité*" (p. 71; my italics). No one is under the illusion that the mentality of Indigenous peoples (no particular First Nation here, but any or all of them, vaguely) can be "known deeply," whatever this is supposed to mean. The way I see it, there are two strikes here: one against truth value as assessed by the sceptic at critical distance, and the second against political sensitivity. The book

has a number of formulations like this, which would have benefitted from sober second thought and a more circumspect phrasing.

And there is a need for circumspection, given the book's subject and our current political moment. I will refer readers to Marie-Alice Belle's review in *Le devoir* (June 14, 2021) and the discussion following. In today's context of Truth and Reconciliation, we are grieving many of the political actions that were applauded during the time of the fur trade. In the spring and summer of 2021 came the discovery of hundreds of residential school children buried in unmarked graves in British Columbia and Saskatchewan. In this galvanized political context, Belle challenges Delisle on two fronts, the first justifiable and the second problematic for me. The first is the issue of authorial voice that I have just discussed, and I can agree here without necessarily believing the problem to be as pervasive as Belle would have it, and certainly without pursuing it into the indictment that follows.

On the second front, however, Belle accuses Delisle of complicity with deniers of the residential school reality—the proof being that *Interpretes au pays du castor* (2019) is totally silent on the subject. Only in today's political climate, where “not telling” and “not naming” can be made synonymous with deceit and protection of the guilty, could such an accusation seem plausible at face value. I will belabour the point to make it clear in the midst of the confusion deliberately created around it: *there is not a single word in this book on the subject of the residential schools*. Belle has for all intents and purposes stormed Delisle's ship, jettisoned its crew and cargo, and raised a new flag up the mast in service to a contemporary political cause. I am putting it this way because after reading the review in *Le devoir*, readers are likely to see only the new flag and to assume that the ship has always sailed in its service, and this would be misleading.

There is a transfer of sympathies that Belle relies on, and that she handles deftly enough. Delisle's authorial voice feels at times brazen, aggressive, and politically insensitive at a moment when the news about the discovered children is still fresh. Belle denies her sympathies to Delisle and the interpreters portrayed here, and instead shores them up in our collective grieving of the unnamed school children—in other narratives that “should have been.” The school children, she argues, would be among History's *angles morts* generated problematically by narratives like Delisle's that are concerned primarily with promoting

the profession. I see a remarkable amputation and re-distribution of sympathies here, which spark two observations about empathy and grief, and I will conclude with them here.

As I read Belle's critique over and again, a question comes repeatedly: *what of the crew and cargo that have been jettisoned? What of the eight First Nations, Inuit, and Metis interpreters of this book?* Are they simply tokens used to promote the profession, as Belle would have it? Are they really just a distraction from the darker truths of History? It is very hard to think so after any kind of attentive reading. Quite the opposite seems true, in fact: these interpreters seem to be in every way imaginable a part of this truth. Delisle is the first to insist that if many have become persons of national historic significance, it is because they have been rescued from oblivion by First Nations oral traditions and archival research, and then built up in the collective imaginary. And we can only assume that it will be via this process that the missing schoolchildren recover their own narratives. It is hard to gauge Belle's argument here, other than to assume that her empathy in this instance has a short and exclusive reach. There is doubtless something about the ageing of narratives—a kind of scarring over and de-sensitization—that makes them less amenable to the sympathy that we reserve for more recent shocks to the culture.

I have also noticed that the creation, retelling, and then scarring-over of ageing narratives is the path that we navigate through grief. Fresh grief needs to be turned into fresh narratives, which then begin a conversation with ancestral ones. We grieve by telling the stories of lost loved ones over and again until the sorrow becomes easier to bear. And as we compare our stories with those of the past, we find common ground, and the loneliness of grief abates. We will slowly recover the stories of the missing children of the residential schools, and we will begin comparing them with many of the narratives re-framed here by Delisle. We can count on it because these stories are among Canada's most curated museum pieces.

Références

Belle, Marie-Alice (2021). "Missionnaires, interpretes, et pensionnats autochtones." *Le devoir*, 15 June. Disponible à : [<https://www.ledevoir.com/opinion/idees/610560/histoire-missionnaires-interpretes-et-pensionnats-autochtones>].

Cartier, Jacques (1986). *Relations*. Ed. Michel Bideaux. Montréal, Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal.

- Champlain, Samuel de (1922-1936). *The Works of Samuel de Champlain*. 6 vol. Ed. Henry P. Biggar. Toronto, The Champlain Society.
- De Bacqueville de la Potherie, Claude-Charles (1722). *Histoire de l'Amerique septentrionale*. Paris, Jean-Luc Nion and Francois Didot.
- Franklin, John (1824). *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea in the Years 1819, 20, 21*. Philadelphia, Carey, Lea and Carey.
- Franklin, John (1828). *Narrative of a Second Expedition to the Shores of the Polar Seas, in the Years 1825, 1826, and 1827*. Philadelphia, Carey, Lea and Carey.
- Hall, Charles Francis (1865). *Life with the Esquimaux: A Narrative of Arctic Experience in Search of Survivors of Sir John Franklin's Expedition*. London, S. Low, Son and Marston.
- Perrot, Nicolas (2004). *Moeurs, coutumes et religion des sauvages de l'Amerique septentrionale*. Ed. Pierre Berthiaume. Montréal, Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal.
- Shelton, Anthony Allan (1997). "The Future of Museum Ethnography." *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 9, pp. 33-48.
- Sturge, Kate (2007). *Representing Others: Translation, Ethnography, and the Museum*. Manchester, St. Jerome.
- Thwaites, Reuben Gold, ed. (1896-1901). *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France 1610-1691*. Cleveland, Burrows Brothers.

RYAN FRASER
UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA