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Translating Carleigh Baker's "Last Woman"

Traduire « Last Woman » de Carleigh Baker

Szonja Greilinger

Abstract

This article invites the reader on a short – but hopefully informative – journey into the world of literary translation and Galiano Island in Canada through Carleigh Baker's fascinating short story "Last Woman." After a brief introduction of the author, a concise summary of the story and its major themes follows. Additionally, I provide insight into the theory of translating culture-specific words and expressions through the employment of the foreignizing translation method. In the final part of the article, I share examples of my translation of "Last Woman." Using foreignization, I aimed to keep the culture-specific items of the original, English text in the Hungarian, translated text. However, through my examples, I will demonstrate that short stories containing cultural information require flexible and creative solutions rather than the strict application of rules and methods.

Keywords: "Last Woman", Carleigh Baker, translation, social media, video games

Résumé

Cet article invite le lecteur à un court voyage dans le monde de la traduction littéraire et de l'île de Galiano au Canada à travers la fascinante nouvelle de Carleigh Baker intitulée « Last Woman ». Après avoir présenté l'auteur et la nouvelle étudiée, il s'impose de donner un aperçu de la théorie de la traduction des mots et expressions spécifiques à une culture par l'emploi de la méthode de traduction allo-gène. Dans la dernière partie de l'article, l'auteur donne des exemples extraits de sa propre traduction de « Last Woman ». En recourant à l'extranéisation, il a cherché à conserver les éléments propres à la culture du texte original dans le texte traduit en hongrois. Cependant, au fur et à mesure, il démontre que les nouvelles contenant des informations culturelles nécessitent des solutions flexibles et créatives plutôt que l'application stricte des règles et méthodes.

Mots-clés : « Last Woman », Carleigh Baker, traduction, médias sociaux, jeux vidéo



Carleigh Baker is a contemporary Canadian author of Cree-Métis and Icelandic background. She was born and raised on the territory of the Fraser River Indians, the Stó:lō people. She studied creative writing at the University of British Columbia and in 2020 became a Shadbolt Fellow in the Humanities at Simon Fraser University. Her debut short story collection *Bad Endings* (2017, Anvil Press) won the City of Vancouver Book Award. It was also a finalist for the Atwood Gibson Writers' Trust Fiction Prize and the Emerging Indigenous Voices Award for fiction. The Vancouver area, the life of indigenous people, relationships, the burdens of technology and the modern world, the effect of natural disasters on humans, sustainable living and climate crisis are all themes appearing in her stories.¹

Her short story "Last Woman" was first published in the 2017 Hingston & Olsen Short Story Advent Calendar and on the Internet in 2020, on the Canadian Watch Your Head website, defined by its content creators on the main page as an "online journal that publishes writing and art about the climate crisis and climate justice." I chose this piece of prose as my final examination translation to complete the Postgraduate Specialist Training in Translation Studies at Károli Gáspár University in 2023. This article explains the process for selecting "Last Woman" for translation because – being more interested in literary translation than in technical translation – choosing this text had a great impact on me wanting to translate more literature in the future.

So how does an enthusiastic novice translator choose her first longer piece of translation from the vast amount of literature written in English – having in mind that it will be evaluated by experienced professors and translators? There is a list of criteria the final examination translation has to meet: it should be an excerpt no longer than 5–6 pages, written by a native English speaker, and it should be the first translation of the source text into the target language. Other elements played a significant role in my choice of this brief prose piece as well, such as the writing style, the plot and the relevance of its message.² I find "Last Woman" relevant to be shared with Hungarian readers because the hardships of modern humanity are portrayed as universal in the story, but at the same time Hungarian readers may find the setting – and the island's wilderness – unique and impressive. Canada is distant from Hungary, and for some people it may also be a distant place in a cultural and environmental sense as well. However, places and cultures different from the one we live in can often awaken one's curiosity.

Speaking about short stories in an online interview (Hingston H & Olsen) when "Last Woman" was published in the Hingston & Olsen Advent Calendar, Carleigh Baker said

1) The biographical information presented in this paragraph is collected from Carleigh Baker's official website. <https://carleighbaker.com/contact/>

2) As it happens, Carleigh Baker's latest story collection has just been published by McClelland & Stewart – *Last Woman* is the title of the collection.



Short stories are the best. They're like exploded poems. Plenty of room to dig into a satisfying narrative, but constrained enough to let you spend a lot of time on the language. Short stories give a more intense reading experience than novels, and the option to play around with more experimental forms. I appreciate this both as a writer and a reader of short stories.

"Last Woman" is a combination of fiction and autobiography: the protagonist moves from the city of Vancouver to Galiano Island to reconnect with nature and to gain inspiration for writing. She also tries to disconnect from the difficulties of living in the modern world. The double sense of alienation and the need for human connection are portrayed, for example, through the protagonist recalling a Tinder date. Differences between the attitudes of "mainlanders" and those of the inhabitants of Galiano Island are also described. The narration is exciting and uncanny because we follow not only the narrator's life but the struggles of an "other character" as well – the protagonist is playing a video game where a woman is the sole survivor of a geomagnetic disaster destroying life on Earth. The beauty of nature and the negative effects of urbanization and industrialization on "Mother Earth" are introduced to the reader through the description of Galiano Island, while issues of climate change, sustainability and human dependency on technology are portrayed through the last woman's and the protagonist's attempts at survival. In the author's words, solitude, the instinct and need for connection to nature and the feeling of being "one" with it are among the major themes of the story:

This story is about the solitude spectrum. Many writers have a romantic vision of getting away from it all to get some work done in peace and quiet. This is a great idea. However, too much solitude can make you a little squirrely. I've been there, in a remote cabin on a Gulf Island with no phone service and intermittent Internet, and I wrote this piece about it. In fact, it's more memoir than fiction. (Hingston & Olsen Advent Calendar Interview)

During the translation process, I tried to follow the foreignization method, and I examined how English loanwords, international words and technological terminology would function in the Hungarian text. According to Venuti (2001), the method of foreignization may go back to an 1813 essay and lecture by the German philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, "On the Different Methods of Translating," presented at the Berlin Academy of Sciences. "Foreignizing entails choosing a foreign text and developing a translation method along lines which are excluded by dominant cultural values in the target language" (Venuti 242). In this case, English is the source language (SL), the language from which I translated, and Hungarian is the target language (TL), into which I translated. If there is foreignization,



then there is also domestication. Again, Venuti borrows Schleiermacher's views on domestication, which is "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home" (242). When a translator prefers domestication as a translation strategy, the culture of the target language will dominate the translation, and culturally specific or typical phenomena of the source language are likely to be replaced by something similar in the culture of the target language. But how does this happen? And how does a translator decide how to translate a culture-specific expression? What are culture-specific expressions in the world of translation anyway?

An example of domestication in "Last Woman" would be changing the name of the coffee brand, "Bodum." According to the brand's history page it is a Danish-Swiss brand of kitchenware, coffee and tea. The protagonist uses their French press to make their coffee – "In the mornings, I make a half *Bodum* of tar-coffee and crawl back into bed." Although Bodum products are European and marketed worldwide, it is a lesser-known brand in Hungary (its coffee, for example, is not sold in Hungarian cafés, and Hungary is not listed on their website for delivery). If I were to use domestication, I could replace "Bodum" with a popular Hungarian coffee franchise, for example, "Frei café," to eliminate a foreign element and one potentially unknown to readers. But wouldn't that confuse the Hungarian reader even more? Why is a woman in remote Galiano Island drinking "Frei coffee"? Here, choosing foreignization means that I left the brand "Bodum" in the text without clarification about the brand. Thus, it is the readers' choice whether to look up the missing information for themselves.

Before a translator begins, there are some issues that should be taken into consideration. Whether to choose foreignization or domestication can depend on the future audience of the translation, their age, social status, gender, and so on (Nord 2006). For example, in Hungary the number of English speakers has grown in recent decades, but most English speakers are still young and university-educated adults, and those who have lived abroad. It is also important to bear in mind that having some knowledge of another culture should ideally be included in language learning, but the success of this also depends on the learner's motivation. Hungarian university students may speak English at an advanced level, but that does not mean that, for example, if they watch the series of *The Handmaid's Tale* they will know that it is based on Margaret Atwood's novel, which can be considered an instance of culture-specific knowledge about Canadian literature.

It is also worth considering the amount of culturally specific expressions in a text because, for example, in a Hungarian text, foreignization is not necessarily the better choice. Although I would define "Last Woman's" target audience as educated young people and educated adults who speak English, my examples will show that it is not



always advantageous to force the SL into the translated text – especially if the translator seeks to create a fine literary piece in the TL.

Nevertheless, reading literature and its translations is also a form of education, involving as it does the shared knowledge of the world. It is also supposed to be a bridge between cultures and people. To define and recognize culture-specific items, it is useful to have a sound knowledge of intercultural communication, culture, and its different definitions and levels. Peter Newmark remarks that “from a translator’s point of view, culture is deposited in language, e.g. when personification is converted to gender or historical periods into tense systems, but, fortunately, culture is only one component of language, the component that makes translation so difficult” (209). Within each culture, there are elements typical of that culture, and with that in mind let us briefly consider some views and definitions of such culture-specific elements. Rachele Antonini lists them as they may be “aspects of everyday life such as education, politics, history, art, institutions, legal systems, units of measurement, place names, foods and drinks, sports and national pastimes, as experienced in different countries and nations of the world” (154). Baker refers to a culture-specific item as something that “may be abstract or concrete, [something that] may relate to a religious belief, a social custom, or even a type of food” (1992, 21).

The above definitions can be useful for a translator even before translating a text because they help in reading the text from a cultural viewpoint. People usually grow up in a particular culture, which becomes their norm, the obvious way of being, living and thinking, and the objects or accessories of life that surround us in a culture constitute our natural environment. Therefore, the diversity of culture-specific elements is also important to keep in mind during translation. In “Last Woman” – as I will elaborate later – technological terminology, brands, foreign words and even a quoted passage from another literary work appear. These can be considered culture-specific elements where thoughtful translation decisions are advisable. In my limited experience as a literary translator, I feel that the sensitive topics of culture and language require the translator to imagine the text’s reception by the target reader. Translating from one culture to another is a complex process, the result of which should ideally be a balance between sharing and representing the source culture as truly as possible when perceived by a person from the other culture, while simultaneously providing a satisfactory reading experience and a comprehensible style for sharing the source culture in the target language.

Before exploring the practical examples from the short story and its translation, we must consider another important aspect of the relation between the elements of culture and translation. The American anthropologist E. T. Hall developed the Iceberg model or the Triad of culture in 1976, and David Katan (2016) extended it to translation with the model of Logical Levels. At the top of the “Three levels

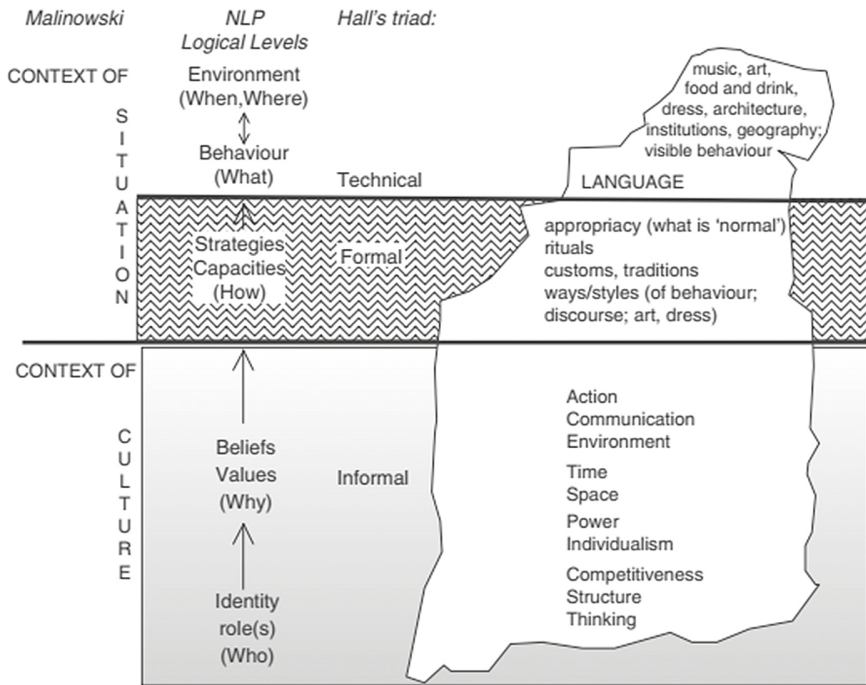


Fig.1: The iceberg representation of culture. Source: Katan, 2009, 78

of culture,” there is the visible or technical part, followed by the middle part of the iceberg – the formal level – just below the water, and the lowest, hidden part of the iceberg, the informal or out-of-awareness level (Katan). This model may be useful for translators when it comes to understanding the other culture and mediating between cultures. In my view, Carleigh Baker’s story – especially coming from a Canadian author – is not only a wake-up call about climate crisis but, through the protagonist’s life, it is also about a human and cultural crisis, where people are in need of reconnecting with each other and preserving their cultures. This dilemma also appears in Margaret Atwood’s 1972 non-fiction *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, where the author draws a connection between the survival of culture, language, and identity and literature’s topos of survival – in both an abstract and a literal sense – particularly in the Canadian context. A graphic of the different levels of culture appears in Figure 1.



There are several ways a translator can try to explain the other culture to readers of a translation. Schleiermacher's thoughts about and definition of paraphrasing well exemplifies the dilemma and the responsibility of translating challenging expressions:

Paraphrase seeks to overcome the irrationality of languages, but only in a mechanical way. It says to itself, "Even if I do not find a word in my language that corresponds to that in the original language, I still want to retain its value by the addition of limiting or expanding definitions." Thus, paraphrase labors its way through an accumulation of loosely defined details, vacillating between a cumbersome 'too much' and a tormenting 'too little'. (4–5)

The responsibility of the translator is well defined when Schaffner (2003) quotes Heidrun Witte (2000, 163) on the translation-specific cultural competence which involves the following: "the ability to become aware of and check what is unconsciously known, the ability of consciously learning something which is not yet known in both one's own and the other (foreign) culture, and the ability to relate both cultures to each other" (93).

The translator usually tries to offset any losses occurring in the TL, which can be done through compensation. In Kinga Klaudy's summary, compensation "is a translation specific operation, since it stems from the very nature of translation: a change in code will inevitably lead to losses. These losses must be remedied by other means" (13–14). In my translation examples, I present other means by which translation losses and cultural elements of the source language can be explained and defined to the readers of a translation.

The following section presents some of the words and expressions from "Last Woman" that were challenging during the translation process from English to Hungarian.

In my interpretation, one major theme of the short story is how modern people can become alienated not only from living in harmony with nature but, given the rise in online communication, distant from each other as well. A less modernized environment or a remote place that is technologically poorly-equipped (i.e., lacking a stable Internet connection), and thus cut off from others, may have its disadvantages in the long run. Even though the protagonist chose to live in a rural area for a couple of months, she still eagerly tries to connect with the "real world" through technology, and several applications and social media platforms are mentioned throughout the story. Tinder, Instagram, Skype, Facebook and words brought alive by the use of these apps, such as the "tweet" (in the sense of using Twitter), "videochat," or "podcast," all appear in the text. English dominates the language of IT and technology, demonstrating its importance as a lingua franca, and it is a fact that native English-speaking countries and their tech companies play a major role



in computer science and innovation. Computer games and their platforms are also mainly created in English; thus, one reason that many Hungarian girls think boys speak better English at a younger age is computer games. It seemed natural to leave expressions related to IT in English, nor did I add extra explanation to any of these words. So if readers are unaware of “story-mode” from computer games, then they must look it up on the Internet or get information from a gamer friend in order to understand the text better. In the example below, I kept “social media” in Hungarian as well. Now I would say that this was a mistake, since we have a Hungarian expression for this term: “közösségi média.”

“*Social Media* has the answer. Hundreds of “OMG, DID YOU FEEL THAT EARTHQUAKE?” *tweets*.”

“A *social media* tudja a választ. Több száz *tweet* jön velem szembe: „ÍRISTEN! TI IS ÉREZTÉTEK A FÖLDRENGÉST?”

“I’m playing the *sandbox alpha*, because *story mode* isn’t ready yet.”

“*Sandbox alphában* játszom, mert a játék *story mode* változata még nem készült el.”

The next sentence is packed with culture-specific items. Here, the translator should make an effort to empathize with the reader and use Witte’s translation-specific cultural competence (2000). Should I explain that “Gastown” is in Vancouver, BC, Canada? Do I need to add some information on “Yeah Yeah Yeahs” to clarify that this is a US rock band? And what about the Japanese “robo-toilets”? If I add any explanation, how will it change the focus of the story and the perception of the reader? How much am I allowed to extend the original text? These culture-specific items could be new or unknown not only to Hungarians but possibly even to Canadians or to the Japanese as well. Since I had chosen foreignization as a translation method, I added no extra information, nor did I hint at these culture-specific elements in my translation, so it is up to the readers whether they take the effort to look up unfamiliar culture-specific elements.

“The first thing he brought up on our first date, in a hip *Gastown* bar with a *Yeah Yeah Yeahs* soundtrack, was the super-deluxe *robo-toilets* they have in the Tokyo airport.”

“Az első randinkon *Gastown*-ban voltunk egy menő bárban és épp a *Yeah Yeah Yeahs* egyik száma szólt, amikor a tokiói reptér hipersuper-luxus *robot wc-jéről* mesélt.”

“Jet lag” is an expression fairly familiar to Hungarians, but I decided to add some clarification. “Időeltolódás” means “time difference,” and I wanted to make sure that keeping the English expression did not create confusion and difficulty in understanding (as it could ruin the reading experience) for the reader. With some items cultural



loss may occur, while with others there is gain. The choices made by translators probably depend on their experience and the compatibility of the languages in use, although instinct and taste may also form part of the decision.

"*Jetlagged*, he replies, with a picture of his dog, Henry, sprawled out on the couch."

"*Jet lagem van az időeltolódástól*, nem tudok aludni, írja, és képet küld a kanapén kiterült Henry kutyáról."

When the protagonist writes about the person she met on Tinder, she uses the word "ghosting" to express that he stopped talking to her and disconnected from her in both the real and the online worlds. Today, "ghosting" is typically used for online communication and especially for dating. In Hungary, the English term is used, but I assume that it is better known among teenagers, young adults and those who date online. With foreignization, one aim was to create a modern text, so I kept the English term.

"I met him on *Tinder*; we went on a couple of dates, and then I think maybe he *ghosted* me but I was too busy moving to Galiano to notice."

"*Tinderen* ismerkedtünk meg, párszor randiztunk, aztán szerintem *ghostingolt*, de nekem akkor fel sem tűnt, mert az ideköltözéssel foglalkoztam."

"Tamagotchi" is an interesting example because the digital pet was a popular toy in the 90s in Hungary as well as in many other parts of the world. What I had to do research on was the spelling. In Hungarian, it is written in its English form and also in some Hungarian forms, based on pronunciation: "tamagotchi," "tamagocsi" and "tamagocsi." One Hungarian online news portal even had an article about the fact that the spelling of the word caused a debate among the editors (Bozsó). They agreed to use the Hungarian form "tamagocsi," so here I broke my rule of foreignization, which shows that the translator must remain flexible and adjust to the dynamic behavior of text, language and culture.

"A *Tamagotchi*." / "Egy *Tamagocsi*."

When the protagonist experiences an earthquake, she initially fears that her furniture is being moved by a ghost, a "Poltergeist" (and her fear of loneliness reappears here, as she is also scared of dying alone). In this case, I decided to provide an explanation for the readers in a footnote. In literary translation, it is advisable to avoid overusing footnotes, but here, it would have been difficult to insert the explanation of the word and the phenomenon into the story without breaking the flow of the events and the tension caused by the earthquake.



"Poltergeist?" / "Csak nem egy Poltergeisttel van dolgom?"

The added footnote in Hungarian explains what a poltergeist is:

A *Poltergeist* német kifejezés. Jelentése: zajos szellem vagy pajkos szellem azután, hogy a jelenséget szellemek vagy démonok művének tartották. Ismeretlen erő, amely megmagyarázhatatlan zajokat vagy tüzeket okoz, tárgyakat mozgat anélkül, hogy láthatóvá válna. (Forrás: Wikipédia, Poltergeist.)

The following examples are not culture-specific items, but they still presented challenges. In the story, the "last woman" is also referred to as "game woman." For me, in the context of the story, "game" holds both meanings: it is the video game character, but since she must survive alone in nature, she also becomes prey for animals and even for other humans, if by chance there are any other survivors. I sought a more colorful expression in Hungarian for this poor game woman, so I chose to name her "vad nő" meaning "wild woman":

"The *game woman* is cold and hungry." / "A *vad nő* fázik és éhes."

The indigenous voice appears in the story when the narrator-protagonist starts singing a line from the poem "Crazy Horse," written by John Trudell (1946–2015), who was a Native American activist, poet, and musician. His father was Santee Dakota and his mother was Mexican.³ This poem has not yet been translated into Hungarian, so I made a translation for the line quoted in the story. Quotations from other literary pieces, music or film are among the most tiresome elements of a translator's work. Today, the Internet may make a translator's job easier, but it is vital to be accurate when gathering all the information and the text – if a translation already exists. Translators should respect other translators' works and provide readers with factually correct information. One disadvantage of the Internet is the ease with which one can become lost in the endless thread of information. I left the original quotation in the text and added a footnote to my translation. This may be one of the most culture-specific elements of "Last Woman," as even the author expresses this idea:

"All that comes to mind is a John Trudell poem, so I sing that. Culturally borrowing – hardcore – but hopefully Trudell would forgive me. *"Days people don't care for people. These days are the hardest."*

Footnote in Hungarian: "John Trudell: Crazy Horse. Saját fordítás: *Napok, amikor az emberek nem törődnek egymással. Azok a legnehezebb napok.*"

3) Biographical information presented in this paragraph is collected from John Trudell's official website, <https://www.johntrudell.com/biography>



This article has offered insight into translating Carleigh Baker's "Last Woman" from English to Hungarian. I have highlighted the importance of cultural awareness not only while reading any literary piece but also in our everyday lives. How a translator perceives culture greatly affects the result of the translated text. I close with a quotation from the American linguist Eugene A. Nida: "Even if the translator possesses all the necessary technical knowledge, he is not really competent unless he has also a truly empathetic spirit" (151). This message also resonates through Carleigh Baker's story: empathy towards each other and reconnecting with humanity and nature are key to our survival.

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