

Layla Benitez-James:

All right, Tell Tell Poetry here, with Gnaomi Siemens.

Layla Benitez-James:

Gnaomi is a poet and translator based in New York City. Her work can be found at Asymptote, Words Without Borders, The Believer, Slice Magazine, Portland Review, The American Journal of Poetry, The Scores in the UK, and American Chordata, among many others in the US and abroad. She has read her translations at The British Library's Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms exhibition in London, was selected by The Poetry Society of New York for a residency at the iconic Mid-Manhattan branch of The New York Public Library, and was a 2019 ALTA Travel Fellow.

Layla Benitez-James:

Gnaomi, thank you so much for chatting with Tell Tell Poetry about translation today.

Gnaomi Siemens:

You're welcome.

Layla Benitez-James:

I'd love to jump in by asking you to talk a little bit about how you understood the process of translation, when you got started, and then just how you got started.

Gnaomi Siemens:

Yeah, totally. Well, I mean, I didn't understand the process of translation, at all. It was kind of an experiment in writing process. I was at Columbia undergrad, and was in the writing program, coming from originally being in the Francophone Studies program. And so I had been writing in French, getting ready to do the Francophone Studies project, and I realized some of the things I wanted to do, stylistically, they're like, "You can't do that in French. We don't experiment that way with language, it's incorrect. It's not experimental, it's just wrong."

Gnaomi Siemens:

And so I was struggling with that. Like, "How can I write in another language? How can I understand how this works?"

Gnaomi Siemens:

And then, I had taken a free poetry class, at the school, and the instructor was like, "Why aren't you in the writing program?"

Gnaomi Siemens:

I guess I said, "I don't know, I guess I hadn't thought of it, or whatever."

Gnaomi Siemens:

So when I got into that program, I met some people, and heard about the MFA program, and how they had a translation, a parallel program. And something about that, because I had been working so much with French, I was just curious to find out how translation works, and what it's all about, and if it can help me with my own writing in English. And so when I got into the MFA program, that was one of the things I knew I wanted to do, was be in the translation program, and check it out, because I had no idea what it was about.

Gnaomi Siemens:

Somehow how I got started.

Layla Benitez-James:

And then you... When you wrote for Asymptote about translation, you were calling your drafts "transgressions." I love that idea, because there's always that idea of the faithful translator, and I love just the idea, from the get-go, of saying, "No, these are transgressions." So I'd love to hear more about how you situate crafting texts, in that light, going a little bit more non-traditional with your approach.

Gnaomi Siemens:

Well, I think even what somebody might call a "straight translation," or a "literal translation," they're all transgressions. No matter what, that was one thing that I really got from working with many translators, professional translators, amateurs. No matter what, you're never going to get the exact same thing in one language as you have in another language. Never. You always either gain or lose something when you translate. So I think you have to keep that in mind, when you're beginning. Because it's okay if it's not quite the same... I think that's the thing that I was really stressed out about, when I first started was like, "I can't quite get that word to be in English. It doesn't really work."

Gnaomi Siemens:

Or whatever. And I think that's okay, you're not going to. So, if you can let go of that, and just be a bit more easy about it, then everything else will make a bit more sense. But I think for me, there's a bit of a sense of play, exploration, with language, and I have this theory that language is this... call it a hyper-object, where it's like you can't really see the whole thing, anyways. Forget about translation, but language in any language, is all trying to get out some deeper meaning. We're all trying to be precise about what we say, in general.

Gnaomi Siemens:

So we're always, even just speaking our mother tongue or whatever, we're always trying to say something, and not quite saying what we want to say. So I think that if we think about translation as this addition into the universal language, then it becomes this... It's okay if it's different than this other language, because it's coming at it from another angle. And we see language in a new way.

Gnaomi Siemens:

I don't know if that makes sense.

Layla Benitez-James:

Yeah, no, it totally does. And I mean that goes into what we've been talking about this week. We've been talking a lot about metaphors for translation, and just the fact that yeah, you're not necessarily going to get the exact thing. And, because that's impossible, everyone has their own metaphor, their own way they like to think about it. And usually that explains a little bit, the fact that it's not entirely possible to have those two sides of the equation equal.

Layla Benitez-James:

And I liked, also in that Asymptote piece, you talk about translating being this, "experience [of] unspecified, vague feelings of longing, as if triggered by the memory of an absent friend."

Layla Benitez-James:

And I wondered, what is your favorite metaphor for translation, or if you could talk about that one a little bit more.

Gnaomi Siemens:

Well thinking about what you were saying about language in general being this vague thing that none of us can see entirely. There was that old story of the blind people and the elephant. I don't know if you've heard that one before. Where there's an elephant and there's all these blind people around it, and they're all touching different parts of the elephant. And they're like, "Well this is what this object is. It has this long thing." Or, "No, it's got this big floppy..."

Gnaomi Siemens:

So I think that really is a good metaphor for language, because everybody around the world, or universe, whatever, is trying to come at life, or meaning, in a different way. And I think with translation, I was trying to think of about that, like a metaphor. And I think that specific, when I was writing those words, it was more thinking about the ancient voice. And it's different, I think, when you are translating a modern

language, that's in use, that many people speak. But to hear something filtered through time, as well, that adds another dimension of distance.

Gnaomi Siemens:

So I guess distance is a really interesting way to think about translation. It's like you're trying to... you're hearing something from far away, and you're trying to clarify it, trying to... like the old game of "Telephone." You hear something and it registers something different. So, yeah, I'm trying to think of another metaphor...

Gnaomi Siemens:

It's a kind of communication with the writer, especially also dead writers, as well. In modern languages, I think that's another way to think about it. You can't talk to them, you can't ask them questions. Like, "What did you mean when you wrote this?"

Gnaomi Siemens:

Especially with poetry, because poetry in general, by its nature, is ephemeral, and is coming at meaning in strange ways. So I think, actually poetry is a good metaphor for translation, in a way. Because you're coming at it through how you feel it, how you register it, as a translator. And I think there's a lot more wiggle room, and play that you bring to it.

Layla Benitez-James:

And then getting specifically into your methods. Most people watching this interview will be a bit newer to translation. So how do you start working with a text, and what are your first moves?

Gnaomi Siemens:

So since I have been lately working with these ancient texts, my first thing is always like, "Read this, read this, read this."

Gnaomi Siemens:

Because I don't know the language, so I'm learning the language, I'm learning the culture. I don't want to misrepresent another culture. Also if it's ancient, then there's a lot that's unknown anyway. So, going to archeology texts, and any kind of literary texts that are behind that. Like stories, mythology, any of that that goes along with it. So when I'm translating one text, I'm actually going through this huge corpus of whatever I can find.

Gnaomi Siemens:

But that's the first thing, getting a feel for what does it look like at that time? What are they wearing? How would this person be treated? What rank in society are they? What kind of freedoms do they have? Especially because I'm thinking of females, usually, as my characters. What was it like being a woman at that time? What was it like giving birth? What was it like trying to find food? Or that sort of thing.

Gnaomi Siemens:

So that's, for me, usually the first thing. But on a practical note, the actual nitty-gritty of getting the text onto paper, the first thing I always do, is do a calque, and I don't know if you've talked about that yet with people. Basically, it's a word-for-word translation, but you take, you have your dictionary, or usually three or four dictionaries, and you just go word for word.

Gnaomi Siemens:

So one of the things I do, which this was taught to me, and I've done it ever since, and it's been invaluable, is just not only finding the word that's closest to that word that you can find, but writing down every single word that it could be. And every single word around those words. So you get this huge thing that's weird and unwieldy, and sounds crazy when you go through it. And you maybe circle the one that is closest that you think. So these sentences can be quite strange. They're like groups of words, then more meaning, words and words and more meaning.

Gnaomi Siemens:

So that's my first thing that I do, on a practical level.

Layla Benitez-James:

And for modern languages, we've been talking about word reference, or some people, I mean, less and less people are using physical dictionaries. But working with ancient texts, we haven't talked so much about. What are you using, academic databases, or what are you using?

Gnaomi Siemens:

The big thing for the Old English, which was my first project that I did, was I researched which were the best. Because there's been a lot of scholarly research on Old English, so there were opinions on which were the best dictionaries. So I found which ones were the best, I used a paper dictionary, from the physical dictionaries I've bought. Then also I found some online, where you could just type in a word, and then it would have... So I found a couple of those. And every single one was not perfect, but using three or four of them, I was able to, along with the physical book, dictionary.

Gnaomi Siemens:

And I still recommend, especially if there's younger people coming in to these classes, physical, paper dictionary, always, always, always. It's a good backup, because it usually has had a lot of history and scholarly research. I don't know what the best one is for Spanish, for the modern languages, but when I was doing French, it was always Collins, was the one that everybody went to. So you always want to find out which is the best, which has the most... behind it.

Gnaomi Siemens:

And then a thesaurus, as well, is a really good tool. And so that was something that... I think all the translators I know that have been doing it, they swear by Roget's International Thesaurus. It's really big. But it's pretty great to have on your desk, it's like a good friend. It's just really great. And I just found they have one online, so you can, as well. But it's really great to flip through it, because then you find other things that you maybe weren't looking for, but then... "Whoa, that's a really good word."

Gnaomi Siemens:

So, yeah, the physical dictionaries, and then I was also working with a classicist, who was a friend of mine who was in classes with me, and he actually had just had a PhD in Classics before this MFA program. So it was just random that he was like, "Oh, I can read Old English."

Gnaomi Siemens:

And I was like, "What?!"

Gnaomi Siemens:

So we met once a week for a year. He gave me grammar lessons, and that was pretty key. And I think that's another thing is always have an expert. So, I'm translating some languages I don't know. And people are usually like, "Oh, what language do you translate from?"

Gnaomi Siemens:

And I'm like, "Whatever. I'll do whatever."

Gnaomi Siemens:

But have dictionary, will travel.

Gnaomi Siemens:

I think it's always good to back it up with somebody who's either... if it's a modern language, a native speaker. Because then you get a lot of those colloquialisms, turns of phrases that you wouldn't know from reading a dictionary. And then with ancient texts, some scholar who's been studying this for a while. So I think that's always a good, if you're going to really... If you're just playing around then whatever, have fun, why not? But if you want to make sure you get the origin text, understand it, then I think that's good to have an expert.

Layla Benitez-James:

Yeah, that's great advice. We have gotten into some of the other lessons about the fact that you're never doing it alone. A lot of people think of translation as a very solitary endeavor, but the Internet is huge, and also there's definitely always scholars that are interested in these kinds of projects.

Gnaomi Siemens:

Well and ALTA. I mean, I don't know if there's another thing in other countries, as well, other translation, is internationally, but for the American Literary Translators, such a good reference. It's a great community. Translators are very cool, they're super non-competitive. And I think that's really cool, and an important thing to remember about translations, the more there are, actually, the better it is, because then you have a better understanding of the text. I don't think there's competing translations, that doesn't really make sense. So, the more the merrier, I say.

Layla Benitez-James:

I found translators to be the nicest people I ever met. Everyone wants to jump in and help you, and they're interested. Especially in more experimental projects, I think. More and more I think people are interested.

Gnaomi Siemens:

Yeah, very surprising. I was so pleasantly surprised by ALTA. I was just like, "Oh, this is cool. That will be interesting. Another academic type conference."

Gnaomi Siemens:

And it was totally not what I expected. People were so kind, and so... So I was one of the Travel Fellows, and there are five of us, all women, actually. Super cool. From different backgrounds, and even one woman who was translating sign language, American Sign Language.

Layla Benitez-James:

Oh, translating American Sign Language?

Gnaomi Siemens:

Yeah, into written...

Layla Benitez-James:

Yeah.

Gnaomi Siemens:

So very cool. And Yiddish. There was somebody translating Yiddish. But yes, super open, and really willing to do projects, and collaborative, and share resources, which is amazing. So that you're definitely not translating in a vacuum, for real. And I think you...[crosstalk 00:17:38]

Gnaomi Siemens:

Part of it, sorry... The text itself is in conversation with an entire literary corpus, global corpus of all literature, at all times. So I think that's especially true with translation. And bringing the ancient text up into the modern world, because then you have this sort of this where we come from, in a literary sense.

Layla Benitez-James:

Yeah, and a lot of times it changes, you can change the text in a positive way that brings it into a new context in a way that allows more people to access it.

Gnaomi Siemens:

Yeah, totally.

Layla Benitez-James:

I was actually just going to bring up your... the translation from the Old Scots. And I was going to see if you could talk about this project a bit, because it's also collaborative with an artist.

Gnaomi Siemens:

Yes, it was very collaborative. I wouldn't have come across it, if it had not had been for that. It was very fun. So I had been actually doing these residencies at this house in Northern England, for the last couple of years, and had become friends with everybody in the town, and there's a lot of artists there. My friend that I stay with is a painter, a visual artist, and his house is actually an art project. So I met this artist, in that town, and her and her partner have a gallery in the town. And I had shared some of the translations I was working on, my Old English translations, at this, we did a little reading in the town. And they really liked them and they had asked for a copy, and they shared with it somebody who came into the gallery who was working on printing ancient texts, and was a scholar of Scottish printing. And he suggested, "Oh, there's this text that I've been wanting to see redone and print."

Gnaomi Siemens:

And so he was asking if he thought I'd be interested in translating, so she got it to me, and I said, "Yes, let's meet with him. Let's see what this is about. I'm curious what this Old Scottish text is."

Gnaomi Siemens:

So we met with him, and he brought us, he had printed just some perfect bound copies of the old book. Just for himself, for his own use, or whatever. So he gave us a copy. And it's this book called "The Shepherd's Calendar," which is a kind of almanac, like a farmer's almanac from the 1500s. And it was from Old French, and then translated into Scottish. And so it's a larger book, but within the book were these horoscopes. And there are these wonderful woodcuts in the book, that are beautiful. And so we were like, "Well what if we just did the horoscopes, and did a series."

Gnaomi Siemens:

And then she would do the images, and I would do the translations of them. So that's what we ended up doing. It ended up being a collaboration between the two of us, the artist and me, and [crosstalk 00:21:11]

Layla Benitez-James:

They were originally in Old French...

Gnaomi Siemens:

Yes.

Layla Benitez-James:

Translated into Old Scots.

Gnaomi Siemens:

Uh-huh (affirmative).

Layla Benitez-James:

But you were working from, you said, both those versions, and then also translated into English before, or Old English? Was it?

Gnaomi Siemens:

It would be... not really, kind of Middle English.

Layla Benitez-James:

Middle English.

Gnaomi Siemens:

Yeah.

Gnaomi Siemens:

But I was mostly using those just as references to see what the differences were between the Scottish version. And some of the words, I couldn't even find. The Scots words I couldn't even find. Then I had to ask Scottish people, and some of them were actually still in use, so we were able to... Because the town

that I was working from was actually in the border. It used to be Scottish, but now it's English. It flip-flopped. So a lot of people there speak, have some Scots words, as well.

Gnaomi Siemens:

But yeah, it was just a kind of random thing, somebody walked into their gallery and was like, "Oh that's cool. I have this thing I want to do."

Gnaomi Siemens:

And then we ended up doing it. We just went with it. Which was kind of fun, because it was like the project came to us. It wasn't like we sought it out. And it was just the most fun, because I had come from working on this long project, five years of Old English. So this was lighter, it was totally different, but still in that language family, and coming from that region. So it was a nice palette cleanser, if you will, after the long, scholarly project.

Gnaomi Siemens:

And I read the horoscopes, and I wanted to bring it into a modern language. It's funny because having English people read it, to them it sounds so different than to the American. It's definitely an American accent, to the translation.

Layla Benitez-James:

Right, with like "queen", and "bae."

Gnaomi Siemens:

Right, exactly. Yeah, they're kind of like, "What is this, even?"

Gnaomi Siemens:

Yeah, I don't know. It was a really fun... Were there any other questions about the project, specifically?

Layla Benitez-James:

Yeah, just your decision to use that language. Like, "queen," and "bae," and to modernize it to that extent. Because I think there are a few... I mean there are so many different ways you could go about it. You could have tried to make it more modern language, but toned down, I guess?

Gnaomi Siemens:

Exactly.

Layla Benitez-James:

And I like the creativity to just go full on, like, "No, we're going to make this modern and playfully modern."

Gnaomi Siemens:

Yeah, well, for part of the research for this project, one of the things I did was read a bunch of horoscope writers, in English, on the Internet. So all the famous astrologers, and that sort of thing. And I discovered there is this playful language that [crosstalk 00:24:32]

Layla Benitez-James:

Yeah, totally.

Gnaomi Siemens:

Unique to that style of writing. It's a whole genre, horoscope writing, really, if you think about it. Which would make an interesting project in itself. So I was kind of like, "Well, if I was doing horoscopes, for I don't know, Nylon Magazine, or something. How would I, me, personally, how would I write them?"

Gnaomi Siemens:

I would obviously lean into my poetic voice, and also think about rhythm, and, since these are such short pieces, I think of them as prose poems. So how would I do that? A hybridized prose poem, slash, horoscope writing, on the Internet. So this is where I ended up. And once I got... I can't remember what

was the first horoscope I did. I think it might have been Scorpio, actually, was the first one I did. Or Aries. I think it was maybe Scorpio.[crosstalk 00:25:36] Yeah.

Gnaomi Siemens:

But that kind of set the tone for the rest of them. So it was like trying to find the rhythm, and once I found it, then I was like, "Oh, okay. We're doing it. This is what's happening."

Gnaomi Siemens:

I did three of them, and I sent it to the artist, and she's like, "Yeah, okay. We're working with this."

Gnaomi Siemens:

And also the other guy, who had told us about the project, was like, "Oh, these are really fun."

Layla Benitez-James:

I love the idea that that could work with so many different projects. Even if you were trying to do more of a straight translation. You have your trot, you have your literal translation, and then it's your decision as an artist, as a translator, how far you want to push it. And you could make multiple versions of the same project, changing the register.

Gnaomi Siemens:

I actually did that with this really fun project, it was a really short project with another friend from that area of the world, is a composer and a mathematician. And he really liked my "Wife's Lament" translation, and was thinking about doing a piece on them. And so he basically commissioned me to do... Or asked if he could use my translations, to put it to music. And I was like, "Yeah, of course. That's great. Amazing. How cool."

Gnaomi Siemens:

But then he was working on it, and he was like, "Actually..."

Gnaomi Siemens:

It gave him an idea for another project, and so he wanted to do these... he used to be a monk, a Buddhist monk, for a while. And he was like, "Oh, I wanted to do these Zen koans."

Gnaomi Siemens:

And, specifically one of them, but he wanted to translate it. But he knows me, so I can easily give him permission. You have to ask for permission to use somebody's translation, which can be difficult. So it's easier if you have a friend who translates to be like, "Can you translate something?"

Gnaomi Siemens:

"Yeah. Okay."

Gnaomi Siemens:

So he gave me this Chinese koan to work with, and I was like, "Yeah, cool. I don't know Chinese. I'll do it, yes. Why not?"

Gnaomi Siemens:

So that was interesting. I mean, it's very short. It's one little piece. And I just did a little research, read some dictionaries, did my normal process of what I do. But Chinese is so different, the way it's structured. So it was really interesting. I actually did a visual translation of it first. I was using the words with little blocks and moving them around, which was super fun.

Gnaomi Siemens:

But I ended up doing multiple versions. I did six versions of the same one. And they kind of became their own poem. The different versions became like a stanza of a poem. So actually in my poetry manuscript I'm working on right now, that comes in as three of the versions are one poem. So that was a really fun thing to do.

Layla Benitez-James:

And so it bled into your other project, as well.

Gnaomi Siemens:

That one, I don't even remember. That was a side thing that I did that was... I actually did a reading of those koans in this virtual conference, the Sant Jordi Festival, in the spring. I don't know if you heard of that. Anyways, they're online now.

Gnaomi Siemens:

Yeah so, side project.

Gnaomi Siemens:

But I think it is fun to try different styles, when you're working with a piece. Because sometimes you might not know whether you want to go into your own voice, or if you want to create a character, or if you want to do a more traditional... So it's good to try those different things and see what works, and what you like. I feel like I'm always changing things. I always think of something better to try later. It just never ends, you can just keep translating, and translating, and translating. Sometimes you have to be like, "This one, let's call it good. This is... that's it. Stop."

Layla Benitez-James:

And then we were... We've also been talking a bit about the idea of accuracy and the super problematic word faithfulness, when talking about translations. And, I mean, just going off that idea of being able to update the text. Perhaps you can share a little bit about your article "Translating the Ancient Female Voice as Queer," and how we might also re-contextualize texts to make them more accurate. Well, accuracy is also a difficult word, but situating them in their proper context. I love you talking about the research you do to think about how was life like for those people, back then. We're talking about ancient, ancient texts. Because I love... you write, "Translation is active, breathes, is trans. It is queer and changes its mind."

Layla Benitez-James:

Translation itself is this amorphous, changing...

Gnaomi Siemens:

Yeah, totally. And I think it should be celebrated, because if we want to learn about ourselves, as a species, as a culture, all humans, all humanoids throughout all time, I think it's very important to come at the ancient texts. And, especially I feel like right now, for some reason, I feel like there's a sense of urgency to bring ancient texts into the modern world. With systems crumbling, and things in the world, it's always happening, everything is always falling apart. I think we, as people, with this global pandemic, we're really feeling, and, also climate change and all this stuff. We're really feeling, the general population is feeling[inaudible 00:31:50]

Gnaomi Siemens:

But I think those are the times when you most want to learn about yourself. Learn about people, learn about how did ancient people... what was their spiritual life like? What did they think of our ontology? How humans were created, or came into being. Their mythology. So I think, in times of crisis, it's interesting to explore mythology, and go to those kinds of things for, not necessarily answers, but maybe more questions. And I think translation is the perfect vehicle for that, at all times. But, sure, why not right now?

Gnaomi Siemens:

But also thinking about the ancient female voice. A lot of the poems I was working with in Anglo-Saxon were these kinds of poems where you have an archetypal figure in the poem. It's not obvious that it's a man, or a woman, or whatever. It's just a human in a situation. And it could be any person. So it doesn't make sense now to say "man." It's so limiting. So, if it can be anybody, then you as a translator have a choice to make it gender neutral, or say "humankind" instead of "mankind." Or things like that.

Gnaomi Siemens:

And I don't think that's inaccurate at all, it's like the original poem was trying to say "any person," so I made the choice in that collection to use the female voice, and I think that's... I mean, I went all the way, I even made all the animals female, and the gods female.

Gnaomi Siemens:

But that was a choice, so accuracy... I don't really know what that means, because it's like, "Okay, in the language, maybe it had a male pronoun, but this isn't really... whatever."

Gnaomi Siemens:

And I think, too, you find, obviously there were women back then.

Layla Benitez-James:

Yeah.

Gnaomi Siemens:

Obviously. Just as many as men. So despite what their roles were, historically, just numbers wise, we're equal. So why not change the balance in the literary corpus, as well. You know?

Layla Benitez-James:

Absolutely.

Gnaomi Siemens:

I think it's... And that's another thing about translating, is it's about choices. You're always making a choice. Well, you could do this, or you could do this. There's a million things you can do. So it's just a matter of finding what works for you, and what you think... There's a certain respect for the text, but forgetting about accuracy. If you're willing to take the time to translate a piece of text, you probably like it. You probably love it. You probably really love it. So if you care about it, like I know you do, then it's like, take care of it. Respect it, love it. What would the text want, if they were here, in this time, in this body. So I think respect for the text is more authentic to me than any kind of sense of accuracy, or...

Gnaomi Siemens:

Obviously if you're talking about a modern language, like French or Spanish, that sort of thing, accuracy comes in with just... don't... there's a certain accuracy that you're going to need to [crosstalk 00:35:55]

Layla Benitez-James:

There's definitely wiggle room. And depending on the text, and depending on how far back... And you were saying that your latest project is going way, way, way far back. Could you talk about that a little bit? I know it's still in process, but...

Gnaomi Siemens:

Oh, it will be in process for a while. So I'm looking to translate the ancient Sumerian text of Enheduanna, who was a priestess, a princess, if you will, daughter of the king. I don't know why, I don't like the word "princess." It's just an idea of a Disney thing.

Gnaomi Siemens:

So she was a powerful woman in ancient Sumeria, that's about 5,000 years ago in ancient Mesopotamia. And she was a literary superstar. Her texts were copied throughout history. They were important enough for scribes to copy them over for hundreds and thousands of years. So she was very important. And she is the first named author we have, ever, in history.

Layla Benitez-James:

Which is amazing.

Gnaomi Siemens:

Yeah. And it's been translated before, but I feel like it's time for a new... Plus I just want to, because I love the text, and it's spicy. No, I think I can do something cool with it. I want to give it some love.

Layla Benitez-James:

Yeah, you're thinking about bringing it more into the modern context.

Gnaomi Siemens:

Yeah, until I see that original text is going to be, I don't know what it's going to be. You never know, and it will probably change. But yeah, I have to find a Sumerian scholar. So I'm currently on the hunt, if anybody knows one. No, I know a few people that I could talk to, but this is a weird time right now, so...

Gnaomi Siemens:

Right now I'm just doing background research on the mythology of the goddess that she writes about, Inanna, who was the precursor to Isis, if you've heard of her, and also Venus. All the main female god is, that's where she comes from. And she's even like coming from older, Neolithic times, but obviously there's no texts for that.

Gnaomi Siemens:

That's the other thing. I've tried to go as ancient as possible with the female voice. So it's like this is the earliest writing we can get in the female voice. Or there's obviously these goddess cults that go way back, and how would you translate Neolithic scratches, or designs on rocks, or drawings. So that's always in my background, too. How do I go back even further? So it's... But, one thing at a time. We'll start with the oldest writing, and then... But speaking of petroglyphs, images on rocks, and how [crosstalk 00:39:06]

Layla Benitez-James:

Yeah, well poetry would be such a good tool for that, because you can write in images, and...

Gnaomi Siemens:

Well even emojis. I was thinking about petroglyphs and emojis and how language has gone this kind of circular, coming back to images. But, I don't know, I have a really weird relationship with emojis. I'm not really sure about that...

Gnaomi Siemens:

Yeah, can you turn that light back on? Sorry, it's just really dark in here.

Layla Benitez-James:

Oh yeah, no, that's good.

Gnaomi Siemens:

Okay. Yeah, anyways, so...

Layla Benitez-James:

That's just really sparking my mind. I might add an assignment, actually, to one of the chapters about doing emojis. Because I had a thing where you have to try to make a book title in emojis, and it was actually really... The translation part of my brain was really lit up, because it's like how do you use pictures to express that idea.

Gnaomi Siemens:

Exactly, yeah. And I actually have an emoji poem, that's in my book, that I'm working on right now. My poetry book that I'm working on right now. And everything is a written out emoji, like the whole thing is like a written out emoji. If you wrote out an emoji. But you can't really... because I was trying to think of like... There's a lot, I mean, you can't use pictures of other things. Words are different. So there's the difference between that and, yeah...

Gnaomi Siemens:

How do you convey a complex emotion in an emoji? I mean, pizza slice... It's... I don't know.

Layla Benitez-James:

But there are so many, I think it's definitely a fun thing to play with, and I like the idea of writing them out, so it's like, as your reading them, you're getting that picture in your brain, but you're also reading.
Gnaomi Siemens:

Well mine were not emojis. They were things that you can't really put into emojis, so it was weird. But I definitely like that idea, and I'm trying to come up with a project of doing emojis in stone, or something. But, I don't know... Pizza emoji petroglyph.

Gnaomi Siemens:

It's really funny, because I have this poem that's called "Pizza Emoji Pubic Triangle." Because I was thinking about all these Neolithic sites, and what writing they have are shapes, basically. So the shape that is the inverted triangle is very common on all these goddess cult areas, right? And it's the inverted triangle, so people just assume it's a pubic triangle. Which, it probably is. But I just was thinking of the pizza emoji, and it's just like the pizza emoji as a pubic triangle. So how would you...? I don't know. Anyways, It's a whole thing.

Layla Benitez-James:

Yeah, but I like it, I wish we could veer into this [inaudible 00:42:20] writing with emojis land. But we're going to have to wrap up. But do you have any advice for beginning translators? And do you have any tips, or tricks, or exercises, or prompts that helped you get started? Or what would you tell to somebody just getting started?

Gnaomi Siemens:

Yeah, totally. I was thinking about that, and so what I mentioned before, the calque, I think, is a great tool. And I think it should be in every translator's toolbox. Just do that dictionary work, word for word. As many dictionaries as you can, as many experts as you can. Just do that in a big document, where it's just this huge thing.

Gnaomi Siemens:

But, for a little bit more fun thing to try, when you're starting out, I love the idea of an English to English translation, as a practice. And just picking a paragraph out of one your favorite texts that you love. Like your favorite book, or a poem that you just love. I think it needs to be something that you really care about, and love. And then just translate it, change it. Go in and change every line. Change everything. But try and think about, "How do I keep that spirit?"

Gnaomi Siemens:

That thing that you love about it. What is the thing that hits you in your body? What is that emotion, or that feeling. And try and replicate that, but in your own language. So whatever your mother tongue is, try doing that from the same language to the same language. I think that's a really fun trick.

Gnaomi Siemens:

And then, I had one more that I was thinking of. I think just remembering that multiple translations are authentic, and just the... I mean, there's a lot of brain power that goes into it, but I think sometimes just let go and have fun, and just play around with text. But even if you know you're definitely not going to do that style, go crazy. Just do something a little bit more extreme, like curse, copy the diction of your favorite celebrity, or something like that. Just try something that you wouldn't normally... Or just how you speak. Just write it how you would normally speak. And use your colloquialisms. Use your local regional -isms. I'm staying with somebody in New England and always saying "wicked." And it's like, use those in your translations. Why not? You might go back and change it later, and tone it down, and make it a bit more universal and accessible, but I think those types of things are valuable.

Gnaomi Siemens:

And also just the most important thing is to really love the text that you're translating. Don't waste your time with things that you're not really interested in, because then it will be a boring translation.

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Layla Benitez-James:

Yeah.

Gnaomi Siemens:

It's like find something you love, and then you're like, "Oh my gosh, this is really amazing in Spanish, or whatever, and I want English readers to read it."

Gnaomi Siemens:

And then, it'll be great, no matter what.

Layla Benitez-James:

That's great, all right well thank you so much for chatting with us about translation.

Gnaomi Siemens:

You're very welcome. This was fun.