



## An interview with Laurence Raw: A live-action adaptation scholar

Silvia Cobelo

### Introduction

Laurence Raw, doctor of Philosophy (Renaissance Studies and Comparative Literature), is a British citizen currently living in Ankara, Turkey. He is currently teaching at the Department of English, Baskent University.

Why am I calling him a *live-action adaptation*? Because Mr. Raw as he himself nicely explained at his opening lecture at JOTA, when forced to use his funny old show business presenter microphone – to enhance his vocal cords. The Brazilian audience was so concentrated with his brilliant talk, trying to copy, to register and resonate with all his spoken English words, that nobody cared about his second mic; some people who arrived late, after his introduction with the explanation regarding the device, believed the apparatus was for a better (secondary) sound quality... So Laurence Raw not only teach, write, research and analyse adaptations, but he also is an adaptation in every minute of his life – he enjoys travelling, listening to different languages, hearing testimonials from several different social participants ranging from: ethnics minorities, native Americans, transsexuals and without disrespecting the academic background of the individuals including high school students<sup>1</sup>.

At his Amazon page<sup>2</sup>, where we can easily check 17 publications, we read: “he is a leading authority on adaptation studies; among his other research interests, he writes

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<sup>1</sup> Read the post “Binarisms, Adaptation, and Love”. Available at: <https://laurenceraw.blogspot.com.br/2016/03/binarisms-adaptation-and-love.html>. Access: May, 30 2016.

<sup>2</sup> *Laurence Raw Amazon's Page*. Available at: [http://www.amazon.com/l/B001JSBKSI/ref=smi\\_www\\_rco2\\_go\\_smi\\_2461293702?\\_encoding=UTF8&follow-button-add=B001JSBKSI\\_author&ie=UTF8&pldnSite=1](http://www.amazon.com/l/B001JSBKSI/ref=smi_www_rco2_go_smi_2461293702?_encoding=UTF8&follow-button-add=B001JSBKSI_author&ie=UTF8&pldnSite=1). Access: May, 30 2016.



on pedagogy, learning strategies, radio drama, comparative cultures and contemporary Turkish affairs”. He is also easily found as author of many articles, most of them available also in his impressive Academia page, where we can also read 54 autobiography essays<sup>3</sup>, including very intimate and personal texts as “My English self” where he recollects about his young years in England and the provocative “How not to Teach”, inspired by the Oscar winning movie *Whiplash*; and his traumatizing teacher at Dulwich College in south London, when he was only 12 years old. Plus a very honest and moving piece about his return to his activity as a lecturer after his oncologic treatment, in “Coping with Conferences”.

He is a member [and prolific contributor] of the following editorial boards: *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance*<sup>4</sup>; *Journal of American Culture*<sup>5</sup>; *Journal of Popular Culture*<sup>6</sup>; *Interactions*<sup>7</sup>; *Literature/Film Quarterly*<sup>8</sup>.

*Y como si eso fuera poco*, as my Hispanic grandmother used to say, he also finds time to post on his several social media pages: *Facebook*; *Twitter*; *Slideshare*; *LinkedIn*; *Apple’s iTunes* medias; besides having two very active Blogs. The first one, *Radio Drama Reviews Online*<sup>9</sup>, where we find his reviews from 2008 of the “best radio drama productions, including book-readings and short stories. They include classics, new books and plays, and contemporary works from Great Britain and the United States”, publication that seems to be quite influent,

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<sup>3</sup> Laurence Raw Academia’s Page. Available at: <https://baskent.academia.edu/LaurenceRaw/Autobiography>. Access: May, 30 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Adaptation Journal. Available at: [http://www.oxfordjournals.org/our\\_journals/adaptation/editorial\\_board.html](http://www.oxfordjournals.org/our_journals/adaptation/editorial_board.html) . Access: May, 30 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Journal of American Culture. Available at: [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/\(ISSN\)1542-734X/homepage/EditorialBoard.html](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1111/(ISSN)1542-734X/homepage/EditorialBoard.html) Access: May, 30 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Journal of Popular Culture. Available at: <http://www.journalofpopularculture.com/editorial-advisory-board/> Access: May, 30 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Interactions, published by Ege University – Izmir. Available at: <http://www.css.ege.edu.tr/Page.php?PageID=12>>. Acesso em: 21 jun. 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Literature/Film Quarterly . Available at: [https://www.salisbury.edu/lfq/ed\\_board.html](https://www.salisbury.edu/lfq/ed_board.html) . Access: May, 30 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Laurence Raw BLOG Radio Drama Reviews Online. Available at: <http://www.radiodramareviews.com/index.html> . Access May, 31 2016.



used by some to spread show off their good work<sup>10</sup>. His other Blog is called *Adaptation and Translation*, and was started in 2015.

I choose to concentrate this short interview on his second Blog. We had a wonderful surprise that he mentioned us and his experience at our Brazilian event in his post from Wednesday, November 18, 2015 titled: “What is Transnationalism?”<sup>11</sup>.

Since this present issue of **Revista de Estudos Universitários (REU)** is mainly publishing articles from the last GREAT<sup>12</sup> JOTA event<sup>13</sup> from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> of November in the year 2015. Hosted at São Paulo University (USP) where professor Laurence gave the mentioned opening lecture, entitled “The Pedagogy of Adaptation”, also the name of one of his latest book, published in 2010.

I began the first question with the theme of the previous mentioned post about “Transnationalism”:

**Silvia Cobelo:** Regarding the theme Transnationalism, you state since the very beginning “the more I become involved in transnational studies, the more confused I become as to how to define it. What distinguishes this mode of thinking from international or multinational studies, or even cross-national studies?” And you also mention the former popular “intercultural studies”. But then you cite a speech from Fred Gardaphè, where he advocate not just listening what people say, but decoding the meaning behind their words, and say we “to be prepared to shift our perspective, to allow for new learning and new insights that might

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<sup>10</sup> One from several examples is the young actor Adam Thomas Wright, who mentions Raw’s review at his own blog, Artifarty. Available at: <http://www.artifarty.com/2015/04/29/the-laurence-raw-radio-review-of-fanny-and-alexander/>. Access May, 31 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Laurence Raw BLOG: *Adaptation and Translation*. Available at: <https://laurenceraw.blogspot.com.br/2015/11/what-is-transnationalism.html> Access May, 31 2016.

<sup>12</sup> GREAT is the acronym for “Grupo de Pesquisa de Estudos da Adaptação e Tradução”, Adaptation and Translation Research Group; registered at CNPq, from the Letters Faculty, São Paulo University [FFLCH-USP], coordinated by professor John Milton.

<sup>13</sup> JOTA Jornada de Tradução e Adaptação. Available at: <http://www.jotatradusp.com/> Access May, 31 2016.



strike us totally spontaneously”, in your words, “learning from others”. Can you explain us more about your conclusion regarding *Transnationalism*? Do you think we can teach it?

**Laurence Raw:** I think that adaptation critics are basically locked in their cultural preconceptions, so that when they invoke the buzz-words ‘transnational’ or ‘cross-national,’ what they really mean is that they want us to listen to them without them listening to us. This is what prevents adaptation studies from developing in any significant way. It is another form of hegemony, reinforced especially by representatives of the prevailing Anglo-American dynasty of adaptation experts. It's the kind of mentality given to imposing definitions on particular phenomena without realising that such definitions are perpetually subject to revision.

One thing I have learned from my vocal struggles is the centrality of listening in adaptation – not just to what people say but to what they mean. I believe it can be taught: only last week I was blown away by a group of learners who adapted a Turkish soap (like a Brazilian soap) and were so thoroughly wrapped up in it that they were oblivious to my presence. I had the chance to listen to them and could not believe what I discovered. It's a matter of encouraging people to stand back a bit and reflect – not just doing self-assessment but considering why they are doing something and how it enhances their sense of well-being.

**Silvia Cobelo:** When connecting “what ‘transnationalism’ represents to individuals and the diverse worlds they inhabit”, you arrive to São Paulo, Brazil and mention our event, JOTA. You said the participants, who “exhibited a refreshing honesty not found in most conferences”, seemed interested in *transnationalism*, “as a form of dialogic exchange” and you ask what you call “ontological questions”:



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a. “How could listening to a paper on translating children’s literature into Portuguese, and the decisions taken by specific translators, affect the ways in which we look at the world?”

Ask yourself simple questions like: why does this book appeal to me? What does it do for my imagination? And how can I find a way of communicating that enthusiasm in my target text? Fidelity and equivalence are the biggest impediments to igniting one’s imaginative energy. They are the tools of scholarship, to be sure, but I believe we should concentrate more on ourselves.

b. “Is there such a concept as cultural specificity, or is this simply an artificial construct designed to reinforce boundaries between self and other?”

I think there are frameworks for cultures (we might call them ‘specificities’) but everyone interprets them in different ways. That capacity is what renders adaptation studies so potentially powerful.

Could you detain yourself to each one and extend your answer, considering that you already said that “transnationalism is inseparable from transculturally and translingualism”?

**Laurence Raw:** Transnationalism requires all of us to listen to each other. To discern our individualities if you like. It is the same with trans linguistics. I find that one of the most profitable forms of adaptation is to sit in cafes and listen and look at people. Then my imagination is stimulated and I can write as well as listen to myself as well as the voices of the texts I am writing about. I’d love to believe that translators could do the same.

**Silvia Cobelo:** First I would like you to explain us a little bit about your blog *Adaptation and Translation*. Even using so many media vehicles to publish your work, why did you feel you needed to start this specific Blog in 2015 about the subject “Adaptation and Translation”?



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Please tell us a little bit about your experience about writing it and its repercussion at your education environment and other spaces.

**Laurence Raw:** The blog had straightforward origins. I did a book with Tony Gutt ADAPTATION AND LEARNING (2013), just before my illness, where we talked about the importance of reflection. Yet at that time the pedagogical and personal aspects of my life were still largely separated in my mind. When I came back to work again, I realised that this was no longer true: how I related to my learners was intimately connected to my sense of self-esteem. In 2014 the learners were so kind to me that I suddenly realised that they were as much part of my psychological circuit of creating an alternative person (one with a damaged voice) as myself. Hence I learned how to listen better – and by doing so realised that adaptive messages were everywhere in my life – in school, at home, in the café. I use the blog to communicate such messages and hopefully enhance my sense of well-being. I don't see it as especially scholarly, but it isn't meant to be. If readers like it, I am delighted for them.

The blog has radically changed my pedagogic approach. I no longer 'teach' but try to engage in reciprocal dialogues with learners. Sometimes I feel it doesn't work (I had a difficult group this semester), but I experienced one of the glorious unpredictabilities characteristic of adaptation, as it turned out they were as fond of me as I of them. This is an example of the importance of listening.

One of the more emotional occasions happened last when I said goodbye to a bunch of graduates and a substantial bunch of them began to cry. This had never happened before. I had in a sense done 'nothing' in terms of actual 'teaching' and everything for adaptation of these youngsters' minds.

**Silvia Cobelo:** And finally, considering I am an Argentinian, living in Brazil, interviewing an English scholar teaching in Turkey for a Brazilian journal in English (at least



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95% of publications are written in English<sup>14</sup>), and agreeing that “dialogue between representatives of different nations and cultures does not have to take place in one language”, how do you suggest we resist to this “hegemonic incorporation”?

**Laurence Raw:** If I knew Portuguese, I'd love to do this in your native tongue! But seriously, I think we can all talk to each other beyond language if we want to. When I first emigrated, I did not know Turkish, and people were exceptionally kind to me. I have always thought it my duty to reciprocate that kindness. Language is only a series of signs and sounds: listening is much harder. On the other hand we have a curious linguistic kaleidoscope in my classes, switching between English and Turkish. Whatever language people are comfortable with, they should use it. On the other hand I have known many bilinguals or trilinguals who are reluctant to adapt. I think that flexibility is the best means to challenge any form of hegemony.

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<sup>14</sup> I got this data from a recent participation at a survey about academic works from non-English speaking scholars made by an EST member.