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Re-engendering translation: transcultural practice, gender/sexuality and the politics of alterity

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BOOK REVIEW

Re-engendering translation: transcultural practice, gender/sexuality and the politics of alterity, edited by Christopher Larkosh, Manchester and Kinderhook, NY, St. Jerome Publishing, 2011, 151 pp., £22.50, ISBN-13: 978-1905763320 (paperback)

As Christopher Larkosh explains in his introduction, the aim of this short, seven-article edited volume is to 'reexamine and diversify understandings of the relationship between translation studies and studies in gender and sexuality' (p. 1). Refracted through the disciplinary perspective of comparative literature, most contributors to this volume are translators reflecting on the theoretical and practical ways in which gender enters their professional work. In different ways, each contribution calls attention to translation as a calibration of the commensurability of social worlds, in which authors, translators, and readers are fully social actors rather than generic roles divorced of culture or history.

Larkosh's opening invocation to consider translation as a form of reported speech neatly captions the way that the strategies, politics, and esthetics of translation are framed throughout this volume. How, then, does gender figure into the accounts of translation presented here? First, several scholars note that the selection of texts does important work in shaping gendered dimensions of literary canons by voicing marginalized or 'minor' perspectives. As a problem of translation, a large focus of this subset of enquiries pivots on how to represent a sociolect in the target language. A second subset of enquiries focuses on rendering idiolect, linked closely to concerns about the implicit or explicit (gendered) biography and modes of self-identification sculpting an authorial voice. To be sure, idiolects are in closely entangled relation to sociolects; by segregating these two terms I highlight those authors who grapple with authorial biography and voice as the central problematic in (gendered) translation. Finally, a third subset details how cultural and transcultural sexual ideologies sculpt translation practice.

Annarita Taronna's 'Writing on race and sexuality in the harlem renaissance: translation as retelling and rememory' takes her 'in-progress translation of a selection of "minor" African-American women's works into Italian' (p. 21) as a starting point to discuss translation as a form of rememory, using Toni Morrison's phrase, and reparation. Taronna focuses on the problems associated with translating words defining 'race' (such as 'negro'), along with culturally-loaded figures of diasporic imagery (such as 'Aunt Jemima'). Taronna's solution in both cases is to rely on what she terms 'strategic footnotes' (p. 26) that elaborate the function and meaning(s) of the lexical items. Providing contextualized examples specific to gendered concerns in the women authors' texts would helpfully extend her argument. Additionally, a discussion of the problems or opportunities specific to Italian as a target language for these texts would help to galvanize comparative work and justify the rubrics of reparation and rememory.

Loc Pham's 'Western others (and 'other' Westerns): translating *Brokeback Mountain* into Vietnamese culture' also deals with text selection and the problematics of rendering sociolect. Pham notes that homosexuality is normatively understood in Vietnam as a 'social movement imported from the West' (p. 114). Pham's central query is how to find strategies that 'resist the preconceived otherness of translation [...] to reinstate

[homosexuality] as a reality in the receiving culture' (p. 116). The first of Pham's practical solutions is to impose a temporal shift by creating a target text that takes place in 1990s Vietnam instead of 1960s USA (pp. 124–125). Secondly, Pham has the characters speak in the northern rural dialect, as it is understood as 'more reserved' within the linguistic ecology of Vietnam. These strategies would benefit from rationales and demonstrative examples.

The concepts of migrant identity, minoritarian becomings, and the 'multilingual writer' are of chief importance in Christopher Larkosh's 'Two in translation: the multilingual cartographies of Néstor Perlongher and Caio Fernando Abreu', which brings together two authors writing in São Paulo in the 1980s and early 1990s. Larkosh discusses the interplay between language, power, and sex in what he terms the 'personal cartographies' of these two authors. The rubric of 'multilingual writer' deserves more nuance: Perlongher, for example, uses lexical items that are Yoruba in origin; is that what makes him a 'multilingual writer', or is multilingualism expressed in another fashion within his *oeuvre*? It may be helpful for Larkosh to expand the purview of his treatment of marginalization and minority identity to account for elements of context, such as institutional practices (or their absence), in which authorship is shaped or mediated beyond biography and the content of texts.

Lisa Bradford's 'Speaking to the dead: Juan Gelman's feminization of Argentine poetics as a politics of resistance' is the only contribution in this volume to take on the issue of grammatical gender as a translation problem. In particular, she discusses her strategy for representing article-noun disagreement from the original Spanish in English, a language in which nouns do not have grammatical gender. Given a noun phrase such as 'la trabajo', in which a feminine article is paired with a masculine noun, Bradford suggests the translation 'mother work'. Bradford's solution is to approximate the sense of the original, which she obtains through a close reading. Does Bradford's solution bring across a comparable sense-feeling? It strikes me as intellectually risky to read socially constructed feminine gender from grammatical feminine gender, which is a largely arbitrary categorization of noun classes. Attention to the limitations of such an approach (both within Spanish and cross-linguistically) would help to motivate Bradford's strategy for negotiating these challenging forms in Juan Gelman's poetics.

In 'The creation of a "lady": gender and sexual politics in the earliest Japanese translations of Walter Scott and Charlotte Brontë', Takayuki Yokota-Murakami discusses translator choices in rendering sexual ideologies from English into Japanese. Yokota-Murakami presents a shifting view of translation within nineteenth- and twentieth-century translation which influenced the gender politics registered in the lexical term *kajin* (lady). Yokota-Murakami takes Meiji-era translations of English prose in order to discuss the ways that the modern notion of the lady, chivalry, romantic love, uprightness, and beauty informed shifting sexual and translational ideologies. As a historically-grounded inquiry, Yokota-Murakami also comments on the gendered division of labor in Japanese translation by pointing out that the field was dominated by male translators, which he argues explains certain omissions and strategies of adaptation (p. 107).

In 'Gender, historiography and translation', Tutun Mukherjee discusses the translation of Ashapurna Devi's novel Subarnalata, which 'tells the story of women's emancipation and the emergence of the "lekhika" or woman writer in India' (p. 127). To do so, she contrasts two translations: a Bengali-English translation, and a Bengali-Hindi translation. She evaluates the Bengali-English translation as less effective than the Bengali-Hindi version, as it abridged the original text by half and 'unpardonably [...] excluded those sections of the narrative where gender operates' (p. 138), among other choices in

adaptation. In the short paragraph she devotes to the Bengali-Hindi text, she argues that it is ‘complete’ and exhibits fidelity because the languages are ‘close’ and therefore commensurate, without offering further elaboration (pp. 138–139). This is the only example in the volume that refers to a text that has a non-English language for both target and source language. Unfortunately, Hanskumar Tiwari’s Bengali-Hindi text functions as a foil to Mukherjee’s commentary on Gopa Majumdar’s Bengali-English translation rather than as a freestanding analysis.

Carolyn Shread suggests in ‘Transformations of violence: metamorphic gains and plastic regeneration in Marie Vieux-Chauvet’s *Les Rapaces*’ that we ‘conceptualize translation beyond paradigms of violence’ (p. 53). Shread translated Haitian novelist Vieux-Chauvet’s last novel, which was part of a series that dealt with gendered violence during the Duvalier dictatorships (1957–1986). Shread aims to displace discussions of translation that emphasize loss and violence in favor of a conceptualization of translation practice that emphasizes gains. Gender enters Shread’s argument in a fashion that risks recapitulating the feminine/masculine binaries she hopes to transcend. Working against Jon Solomon’s discussion of violence in translation, Shread recommends shifting to a ‘feminine’ perspective (emphasizing multiplicity) that conceives of translation ‘outside the dominant masculine vantage through which it is typically viewed’ (p. 52). While evocative, a clean break between masculine/feminine binaries with respect to modes of thought in translation theory remains elusively unmotivated in this account. A further elaboration of what constitutes a dominant approach in translation studies, and, in turn, how this theoretical vantage point is masculine gendered, would greatly enrich this line of argumentation.

Translation serves as a form of transcultural exchange, with social consequences at multiple levels. Many authors in this volume grasp for theoretical resonances between gender studies rubrics that rupture dualities, and the translation studies binary of source/target language-culture. Less effort, however, is devoted to rationalizing specific strategies or emplacing translation into historical and cultural frames that bring out, as Larkosh provocatively asserts, how ‘translation has always already been gendered in multiple ways’ (p. 4). This volume will be of interest primarily to those in comparative literature, and will challenge other disciplinary perspectives, such as anthropology, area studies, and history, to revisit translation as a gendered process of cultural mediation. A common orientation in this volume is questioning how gender studies can enrich translation studies; reflection on the opposite directionality may be equally profitable.

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