

# Introduction. The Politics of Translation: Transnational Feminist Perspectives

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*The Politics of Translation: Transnational Feminist Perspectives* brings together a collection of four essays and a conversation showcasing a range of critical approaches at the intersection of transnational, feminist and translation studies. This special issue originated in an international conference that mapped the transnational reception of women's writing in the twentieth and twenty first centuries.<sup>1</sup> As we started working on this special issue, we decided to select essays that contributed to the current scholarly landscape of translation studies and transnational feminist theory. Feminist perspectives were then enriched by another intersection that we considered vital to the production of new knowledge, that is, decolonial studies. The desire to understand more about how translation can reflect, inform and advance social change led us to seek case studies where translation would intercept and interconnect with theoretical frameworks that are also concerned with change, such as feminism and decolonial thought. We thus offer a diverse yet cohesive collection of critical approaches in translation studies that tackle texts from a wide range of geographical and cultural contexts, spanning Portuguese-speaking countries, the UK, Italy, North America, Arabic-speaking Islamic countries, the Caribbean Canadian diaspora, and colonial and post-colonial Taiwan. By interrogating poetic, narrative, theoretical, and religious texts and contexts, the issue provides a diverse and articulated, but by no means exhaustive, picture of case studies in which change is foregrounded and translation is firmly rooted in a political dimension.

The collaboration of translation and feminist studies is increasingly seen as a critical juncture in producing a more equitable dissemination of knowledge on a national and transnational level.<sup>2</sup> As Ergun, Kripper, et al. argue: 'The pairing of feminism and translation as discourses and practices produces new space for thinking through the politics of

speaking and storytelling in translation contexts.<sup>3</sup> The intersection of feminist theory and translation studies has shown how translation can be used to challenge gender norms and hierarchies of power in diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. This highlights translation as a key tool to transform textual authorities and cultural hegemonies within specific local contexts and across national and linguistic boundaries.<sup>4</sup> The contributions presented in this special issue demonstrate that politically conscious practices of translation play a vital role in preserving and promoting the memory of cultural achievements while leading to the global dissemination of knowledge, overcoming national and international barriers.

Our outlook is informed by the notion of translation as a politically and theoretically indispensable tool for forging transnational feminist alliances and epistemologies. Inspired by the work of Sonia Alvarez, according to whom ‘the Latin/a Americas function as a transborder cultural formation rather than a delimited one’,<sup>5</sup> this issue expands and applies the framework devised in Latin American Studies to a broader landscape. Drawing on Alvarez’s notion of ‘translocal’ as a key concept linking different geographies of power with subject positions, and taking into account movements that are multidirectional, it brings together five case studies in which translation is used as a key tool in the articulation of reflections on change and transformation from a variety of geographical and cultural contexts, as well as from different genres. The diversity embedded in each case study, and yet their intersection at the crossroads of translation, feminism, and decolonial studies, showcases the flexibility of the adopted theoretical framework and the efficacy of combining these critical lenses to bring together different experiences while preserving their individualities. The interdisciplinary take deployed in the composition of this special issue can, in itself, be seen as production of new knowledge advancing our current understanding of the ways in which translation studies, feminism and decoloniality can work together for a more equitable recognition of writers and thinkers coming from a subset of marginalities.

We situate translation within the context of transnational studies, an interdisciplinary field that examines the ways in which people, ideas and cultures move across national and cultural boundaries. The key theoretical point of a transnational approach as we understand it here is that it challenges the traditional understanding of nation-states as discrete, self-contained entities with clear borders, and instead recognises the fluid and dynamic nature of individual and collective identities.

Transnational studies emphasise the importance of understanding the complex processes of globalisation, migration, and cultural exchange that shape our world. In this sense, transnational studies recognise the urgency of understanding the interconnectedness of different cultures, and the ways in which the movement of people, ideas and cultural products can create new forms of hybridity and cultural exchange. It also highlights the need to examine the power dynamics that shape these processes and that can either reinforce or challenge existing forms of inequality and oppression.

Transnational studies and translation studies cross in essential ways. Translation plays a determining role in transnational cultural exchange, not only because it enables the circulation of cultural products, such as literature, film and music across linguistic and cultural borders, and the mediation of cross-cultural communication, connecting people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds; but also because it simultaneously exposes the inherently hybrid and contingent feature of languages, cultures, identities and national confines. As such, the study of translation is a fundamental component of transnational studies, as it provides insight into the ways in which cultural and political power is negotiated and contested in the process of cultural exchange across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Crucially, translation is neither a neutral nor an objective process, but rather is shaped by, and contributes to transform, the cultural and political context in which it takes place. The political dimension of translation equally concerns translation studies: 'Translation as a political act does not only imply the exertion of power, or, conversely, some degree of resistance against it: it is also present in the choices made by scholars themselves. When researchers select an object for analysis, they are engaged in a political act.'<sup>6</sup> In assembling this special issue, we started from an awareness that scholarship has 'an important constitutive role in the field it usually claims to represent'.<sup>7</sup>

With this special issue, we place translation at the heart of transnational feminist and decolonial politics and, in turn, we place transnational feminist and decolonial politics at the heart of reflections on translation and reception, building a two-way relation. As several Latin-American critics have pointed out, 'in the North-South axis, feminists in the North are seen as the abstract mind for the concrete body of feminists in the South'.<sup>8</sup> This is an instantiation of the tendency by hegemonic actors to understand themselves as universal, abstracting from any question of context. Countering the universalistic

abstraction of dominant positions, this special issue presents a number of interventions from different geographies and postures, using the case study as neither purely specific nor purely theoretical, but rather as a situated perspective which may apply organically to other contexts or may generate dissonance. As de Lima Costa argues, 'with the pluralization of feminisms in contemporary times, we need to understand feminism itself as a process of translation [...] signaling the mutability of words and concepts'.<sup>9</sup> Such a pluralization manifests, in the issue, in the juxtaposition of perspectives that are in fact very different, and which range from the 'women's studies' approach adopted by Cláudia Pazos Alonso, to the transfeminist activism proposed by Michela Baldo, Goffredo Polizzi and Elisa Virgili, to Doaa Embabi's endorsement of Islamic Feminism. Creating communication between different feminisms entails 'recognizing the multiple and disjunctive temporalities in which all the interlocutors are situated',<sup>10</sup> acknowledging that '[t]ranslation is politically and theoretically indispensable to forging feminist, prosocial justice, antiracist, postcolonial/decolonial, and anti-imperial political alliances and epistemologies.'<sup>11</sup>

Through the lens of feminist and decolonial critique, this special issue engages transversally with a wide spectrum of themes that are at the heart of contemporary translation studies. To begin with, articles explore translation in relation to different textual genres, including poetry, narrative, theory and religious texts. The issue opens with two articles on poetry: Cláudia Pazos Alonso's critical map of English translations (or lack thereof) of Portuguese women poets, and Alberica Bazzoni's reconstruction of the debate surrounding the 'unauthorised' Italian translation of the poem *Zong!* by Caribbean-Canadian author NourbeSe Philip. The issue then moves on to narrative, with Aoife Cantrill's analysis of Taiwanese Yang Shuangzi's short story 'Flower Blooming Season', itself an adaptation of colonial-era fiction. The last two articles deal respectively with religious and theoretical texts: Doaa Embabi focuses on translations of sacred scriptures of Islam by feminist Islamic scholars; finally, Michela Baldo, Goffredo Polizzi, and Elisa Virgili discuss two recent Italian translations of works by North American queer theorist Jack Halberstam. The geographical, cultural, and linguistic contexts featured in the issue include Portuguese-speaking countries, the UK, Italy, North America, Arabic-speaking Islamic countries, the Caribbean Canadian diaspora, and colonial and post-colonial Taiwan. This choice reflects an explicit intent to de-centre the cultural hegemony of Central-Northern Europe and the US, contributing to drawing

alternative trajectories and redesigning the map of cultural production and transnational exchange.

Textual analysis and interpretation are framed within the concrete contexts that facilitate, inhibit and influence the travel of texts, paying specific attention to the 'material apparatus' of translation, as defined by de Lima Costa:

there is always a material apparatus that oversees the travels of theories and organizes their translation, publication, and circulation. This apparatus—at the same time constituted by and constitutive of the contexts of reception—influences in significant ways which theories/texts get translated and resignified for better fit with local agendas. [...] [T]o grasp the production and circulation of knowledge demands a scrutiny of the local academic and extra-academic networks and their relation to institutional fields, the inscription rules of epistemological repertoires, and the broader political-intellectual conjuncture.<sup>12</sup>

In her investigation of the translation of Portuguese women poets, for example, Pazos Alonso signals the role of Salazar's authoritarian regime in severely limiting the circulation of works by women, determining their exclusion from literary canons and perpetuating sexist views of cultural legitimacy. Furthermore, Pazos Alonso analyses the role of state-sponsored institutions, such as the Instituto Camões, as gatekeepers of a male canon, and the opposite struggle by transnational feminist movements and academic research to promote the translation of women poets. Hierarchies of power within the translation process along gendered and racial axes are also at the centre of Bazzoni's essay, which analyses the different positions occupied by author, translator, publishers and critics involved in the controversy on the Italian translation of NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*. Bazzoni emphasizes the differentials in power and authority among the different actors involved, which effectively resulted in the silencing of Philip's voice, as well as the predominance of a legalistic approach to translation rights which works against a decolonial ethics of relation. Cantrill situates her discussion of Taiwanese fiction within the colonial and postcolonial history of the country. Her analysis of Yang Shuangzi's original adaptation of Japanophone colonial fiction in Taiwan underscores the role of online queer subcultures, including fanfiction, manga and fanart dedicated to 'girls' love' in transforming younger generations' relationship to Taiwan's colonial past and contemporary complex trajectories of national belonging. Embabi foregrounds the role of Islamic feminist scholars as mediating actors, as they translate a substantial body of knowledge originally produced in Arabic over the centuries, adapting it and interpreting it for English

readers. The essay thus brings to light the fundamental role of translation within the context of research scholarship in shaping the transnational circulation of Islamic feminism. The concluding conversation by Baldo, Polizzi and Virgili extends the dialogue to the material apparatus involved in the circulation of queer theory between the US and Italy, with a particular focus on the role of activist translation and the relationship of mutual enrichment, but also friction and conflict between (neo-liberal) academic institutions and transfeminist social movements.

Within the structures and constraints defined by the material apparatus, articles in this issue understand translation as a politically inflected, transformative act, one that is constitutive of the travel of theories and texts in the first place. Denouncing hegemonic modes of operating and giving voice to sites and subjects of resistance, this issue partakes in Lima de Costa's call for decolonial and feminist translation practices.

How can feminists in the North and South (understood more as metaphorical spaces opened up by the frictions of power asymmetries, rather than concrete and delimited geographical regions), working in the gaps and silences of translation and underscoring unequal relations between regions, languages, and institutions, contribute to a counterpractice of translation (*traduttore, traditore*) that disrupts hegemonic narratives about gender, feminism, and the subaltern?<sup>13</sup>

The case studies analysed in this issue constitute significant examples of this 'counterpractice of translation', and in parallel, the articles brought together here aim to offer a 'counterpractice of translation studies'. Articles by Embabi and by Baldo, Polizzi, and Virgili, for example, explore the link between translation and social transformation in the context of transnational feminist struggles. Translation is seen as a fundamental practice to make a text relevant to a different socio-political context, which in turn gives new life to an existing body of thought. Discussions around the translation of specific terms, such as Islamic religious concepts from Arabic into English, or terms that inform Anglophone queer theory from English into Italian (including 'queer' itself), mobilize the full political weight of language and deeply interrogate the ethics and positions of the subjects involved in the translation act. Furthermore, new actors take centre stage in feminist and decolonial translation interventions, such as activists, artists, academics and grassroots communities. NourbeSe Philip's poem *Zong!*, for example, is the poet's attempt at translating an archive of colonial violence into a healing poetic practice, while the Italian translation of *Zong!*, Bazzoni argues, fails precisely its reparatory function by

neglecting an ethical relationship between source and target context. In contrast, Yang Shuangzi's adapted fiction and online queer communities in Taiwan, analyzed by Cantrill, are capable of re-signifying a colonial text by reinvesting it in a new decolonial imaginary that defies national confinements. Finally, Pazos Alonso foregrounds the fundamental role of networks of transnational feminist movements, writers, and academics in enabling the translation and circulation of poetic works in Portuguese, contributing to the transformation of the Lusophone literary canon.

In bringing these case studies together under the designation of transnational feminist interventions, we are endorsing an epistemological paradigm that invests in the possibility of resistance against hegemonic discourses identified as Western, white and patriarchal. In the current conversation between postcolonial and decolonial approaches, the possibility for subaltern positions to have a voice that differs from its constitution by the dominant subject is a fundamental site of contestation.<sup>14</sup> Elaborating on Spivak's critique developed in *Can the Subaltern Speak?*,<sup>15</sup> in their Introduction to the special issue 'Postcolonial responses to decolonial interventions', Gianmaria Colpani, Jamila M. H. Mascat and Katrin Smiet argue:

From this postcolonial perspective, the decolonial enterprise of fully retrieving pre-colonial and non-modern cultural and social formations to play them against the unfinished project of Western modernity relies on the illusion that something could have escaped the totalizing colonial remaking of the modern world and its epistemic violence. [...] From postcolonial perspective, on the contrary, no trace of exteriority or externality can be found in the geographies of former colonial empires.<sup>16</sup>

Contrary to Colpani, Mascat and Smiet's view – which charges the decolonial project with essentialism and maintains that the only possible intervention is 'persistent critique', identified as 'the most characteristic and sophisticated aspect of the postcolonial'<sup>17</sup> – decolonial and feminist scholars emphasise the possibility of expressing counter-hegemonic positions without endorsing any self-transparent, self-contained and immediate notion of identity. A focus on translation as a practice structurally dealing with mediation, relation, opacity and semantic instability, we believe, is constitutive of this alternative positioning, which is at the same time anti-essentialist and anti-totalizing.<sup>18</sup> This is precisely the position proposed by decolonial thinker Maria Lugones, when she states: 'In our colonized, racially gendered, oppressed existences we are also other than what the hegemon makes us be. That is an infra-political achievement.'<sup>19</sup> And she continues: 'instead of thinking the global, capitalist, colonial system as in every way successful in its

destruction of peoples, knowledges, relations and economies, I want to think of the process as continually resisted, and being resisted today'.<sup>20</sup> Far from being self-transparent and pure, the resistant subject is a being 'who begins to inhabit a fractured locus constructed doubly, who perceives doubly, relates doubly'<sup>21</sup>: 'The sole possibility of such a being lies in its full inhabitation of this fracture, of this wound, where sense is contradictory and from such a contradiction new sense is made anew'.<sup>22</sup> Within such a feminist and decolonial paradigm of resistance, thus, translation plays a crucial role both as the very material activity which shapes cross-cultural exchange and as the core condition of non self-identity of culture, language and subjectivity.

Essays in this special issue represent an instantiation of a way of doing translation studies inhabiting the tension between different geographies of power, between the 'Global North' and the 'Global South', and investing in feminist, queer and decolonial struggles as transnational connectors. Informed by this framework, the articles collected here seek to construct a critical perspective from within and on the Global North that mobilise subaltern positions by gender, sexual orientation and racialisation; to give voice to perspectives from within and on the Global South; and to foreground translation as a core political act that articulates conflicts and enables transnational alliances. These articles are intended as critical interventions that work to undo the hegemony of Western-centric, white, male, heterosexual perspective, both in the case studies presented and in the critical approaches adopted, without replicating essentialist views of identity and culture.

We hope that this special issue will contribute to the creation of a space where case studies addressing the intersection between the material apparatus of translation, decolonial readings of works of poetry and prose in translation, as well as critical reflections of the theories informing the translation of religious and theoretical texts can showcase the interdisciplinary products of translation practice. We aim to highlight how the combination of translation, feminism and decolonial approaches sheds new light on authors who negotiate new spaces for the conception and reception of their writings. In so doing, multiple marginalities are not only addressed but also re-evaluated in their disruptive and creative force as counter-hegemonic sites of resistance.



## NOTES

- 1 The conference 'Gender and Transnational Reception. Mapping the Translation, Circulation and Recognition of Women's Writings in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries', originally planned as a two-day event with multiple panels, funded by the British Academy, the MHRA and the Institute of Advanced Studies at Warwick, could not take place due to the eruption of the covid pandemic in 2020. It was then reduced to an online seminar, which took place in March 2021 in collaboration with the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Women's Writings, Institute of Languages, Cultures and Society, School of Advanced Studies, University of London. <https://www.sas.ac.uk/podcasts/gender-and-transnational-reception-mapping-translation-circulation-and-recognition-womens> [accessed 30 September 2023].
- 2 In chronological order: Claudia De Lima Costa. 'Chapter Six. Feminist Theories, Transnational Translations, and Cultural Mediations', in *Translocalities/Translocalidades: Feminist Politics of Translation in the Latin/a Américas*, edited by Sonia E. Alvarez, Claudia de Lima Costa and Veronica Felio (New York, USA: Duke University Press 2014), pp. 133–148; Olga Castro and Emek Ergun, eds, *Feminist Translation Studies. Local and Transnational Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2017). Luise von Flotow and Hala Kamal, eds, *The Routledge Handbook of Translation, Feminism and Gender* (London: Routledge, 2021). In 2016, the Leverhulme International Network 'Translating Feminism: Transfer, Transgression, Transformation (ca. 1960–1990)', led by Maud Bracke and Penny Morris at the University of Glasgow, was launched. In 2017, the mailing list *Feminist Translation Studies* was created by Olga Castro and has since been an important hub of transnational initiatives and collaborations. A new journal specifically dedicated to this field has recently been founded, with title *Feminist Translation Studies*, to be published by Taylor & Francis starting in 2024.
- 3 Emek Ergun, Denise Kripper, Siobhan Mei, Sandra Joy Russell, Sara Rutkowski, Carolyn Shread, Ida Hove Solberg, 'Women (re)writing authority. A roundtable discussion on feminist translation', in von Flotow and Kamal, *The Routledge Handbook*, pp. 5–14 (p. 9).
- 4 Castro and Ergun, *Feminist Translation Studies*.
- 5 Sonia E. Alvarez, 'Introduction to the Project and the Volume. Enacting a Translocal Feminist Politics of Translation', in Alvarez, de Lima Costa and Felio, *Translocalities/Translocalidades*, pp. 1–18 (p. 1).
- 6 Roberto A. Valdeón and Caterina Calafat, 'Introduction: The Politics of Translation and the Translation of Politics', *Translation and Interpreting*, 12.2 (2020), 1–6 (pp. 2–3).
- 7 Claudia de Lima Costa, 'Feminist Theories, Transnational Translation, and Cultural Mediations', in Alvarez, de Lima Costa and Felio, *Translocalities/Translocalidades*, pp. 133–148 (p. 140).
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 137. Costa refers among others to the work of Chilean Nelly Richard, 'Experiência e Representação: O Feminino, O Latino-Americano', in *Intervenções Críticas: Arte, Cultura, Gênero e Política*, edited by Nelly Richard (Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2002), pp. 142–55.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 137.

- 10 Claudia de Lima Costa, 'Introduction to Debates about Translation/ Lost (and Found?) in Translation: Feminisms in Hemispheric Dialogue', in Alvarez, De Lima Costa and Feliu, *Translocalities/translocalidades*, pp. 20–36 (p. 31).
- 11 Sonia E. Alvarez, 'Enacting a Translocal Feminist Politics of Translation', in Alvarez, de Lima Costa and Feliu, *Translocalities/translocalidades*, pp. 1–18 (p. 1).
- 12 de Lima Costa, 'Feminist Theories', pp. 134–135.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 135.
- 14 See the recent special issue 'Postcolonial Responses to Decolonial Interventions', edited by Gianmaria Colpani, Jamila M. H. Mascát and Katrin Smiet, *Postcolonial Studies*, 25.1 (2022); previous significant (and more conciliatory) interventions in this debate include Gurinder K Bhambra, 'Postcolonial and decolonial dialogues', *Postcolonial Studies*, 17.2 (2014), 115–121; Sabine Broeck and Carsten Juncker, eds, *Postcoloniality – Decoloniality – Black Critique: Joints and Fissures* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2014).
- 15 Gayatri C. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 66–111.
- 16 Gianmaria Colpani, Jamila M. H. Mascát and Katrin Smiet, 'Introduction. Postcolonial Responses to Decolonial Interventions', *Postcolonial Studies*, 25.1 (2022), 1–16 (pp. 10–11).
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 18 On a similar approach to translation, see for example the recent symposium: 'Translation, Mediation, Power', which took place at the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry in June 2023: <https://www.ici-berlin.org/events/translation-mediation-power/> [accessed 30 September 2023].
- 19 Maria Lugones, 'Toward a Decolonial Feminism', *Hypatia*, 25.4 (2010), 742–759 (p. 746).
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 748.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 748.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 752.