

## Surfaces



# PARALYSIS, CRUTCHES, WINGS: ITALIAN FEMINISMS AND TRANSCULTURATION

Beverly Allen

Volume 3, 1993

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1065097ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065097ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Article abstract

A discussion of the way in which recent feminist writing on the body as a site of ideology enforces a rethinking of translation practices. Questions of translation and transculturation in Italian studies, with reference to feminist praxis.

### Publisher(s)

Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal

### ISSN

1188-2492 (print)

1200-5320 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Allen, B. (1993). PARALYSIS, CRUTCHES, WINGS: ITALIAN FEMINISMS AND TRANSCULTURATION. *Surfaces*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1065097ar>

Copyright © Beverly Allen, 1993



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

**é**rudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

## **PARALYSIS, CRUTCHES, WINGS:**

### **ITALIAN FEMINISMS AND TRANSCULTURATION**

Beverly Allen

#### **ABSTRACT**

*A discussion of the way in which recent feminist writing on the body as a site of ideology enforces a rethinking of translation practices. Questions of translation and transculturation in Italian studies, with reference to feminist praxis.*

#### **RÉSUMÉ**

*Les récents travaux féministes qui font du corps l'ultime lieu de l'idéologie obligent à repenser les pratiques traduisantes. Ce constat général permet d'aborder la problématique spécifique de la traduction/transculturation dans les études Italiennes sous l'angle de la praxis féministe.*

I told an anecdote at a conference of Italianists just after "The Silence of the Lambs" had come out. It shows how not even the most apparently innocuous high cultural aspects of my work as an Italianist are immune from dangers that might accrue to my body because of them. In the scene in the film where a makeshift panoptical cell has been built for the cannibal-psychologist-mass murderer, Hannibal Lecter, Lecter (who is nothing if not a

voracious reader), is holding up a book and reading it with his back turned when he recognizes the footsteps of Clarice, the investigator. As I watched the movie for the first time, my spectator's tension was enormous. I was terrified, but I comforted myself with the thought that what I was seeing was fiction, not real, had nothing to do with me. Suddenly, however, Lecter turned around, slowly lowering his book. At that moment I saw what he had been reading: the most recent issue of Poetry magazine, a double issue devoted to Italian poetry since World War II.<sup>[1]</sup> At this point my wilful insistence on the fictional nature of what I was viewing abandoned me completely, for that particular real issue of Poetry contains translations I had done, and, even worse, it contains a blurb that tells what else I have written, who my publishers are, and where I worked at the time, which was tantamount to giving my address. Hannibal the Cannibal Lecter, in other words, could now find me, and all because of some delicate translations I had mistakenly presumed innocent, or perhaps, in fact, immune. I want to discuss this kind of presumed innocence, this air of immunity that surrounds the work of translation. And I want to show that such presumptions and such airs are a sham, because they veil the final reality of the body. Along the way, I introduce some significant recent work by the Italian feminist theoretician, Luisa Muraro, and elaborate my own views regarding the importance of maintaining a transculturative perspective in intellectual work, feminist intellectual work, in particular.

My considerations here presuppose a minimal acquaintance with recent Italian cultural production, and in particular with literary and theoretical texts, some of which have been translated into English. The transalpine conversations between French and Italian feminists that have gone on for decades may now expand to include those of us on this side of the northern Atlantic.<sup>[2]</sup> Some of the basic aspects of Italian feminist cultural production to keep in mind are (1) the strong regional nature of subjective and communal "identity" in Italy; (2) the hypervalorization, compared to the United States, of literature, and of poetry, in particular, in Italy; and (3) the dual magnetism in Italian cultural production of a canonical philosophical tradition, on the one hand, and, on the other, a perdurant feminine mythos that includes goddess worship (in the form of Marianism, mostly) as well as an occulted matriarchy that until recently located a modicum of female power in the women's world of domesticity and the extended family. In particular, I want to bring some attention here to the figure of Dacia Maraini, a poet, dramatist and novelist now living in Rome whose activism includes establishing women's centers as loci of small town theatrical productions. Furthermore, let me remind you that recent Italian feminist theory has strong regional bases. In particular, the production, both by single members and the collective as a whole, of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective in Milan and by the group of feminist philosophers that calls itself Diotima in Verona has been serious and fruitful from before the time of the national referendum on divorce and the legalization of abortion in the 1970s to the present. In addition, the Centro Virginia Woolf in Rome has been a principal location of feminist cultural production and distinguishes itself as being, among other things, a kind of feminist university, where people can follow courses in feminist theory, for example

(which do not exist in Italian universities). Finally, there is the Transizione group in Naples, which developed in response to the northern and central collectives and is characterized mostly by the journal *Madrigale*.

The conundrum underlying my musings here is that of the so-called "mind-body" problem, against the terrifying oppressions of which U.S. feminists have been calmly working at least since Adrienne Rich's movingly eloquent indictment of it in *Of Woman Born* (1976) and, more recently, in Jane Gallop's *Thinking Through The Body* (1988), to name but two landmarks. Whenever I think about the so-called "mind-body" problem, I am reminded of a former colleague, a professional male philosopher born on the very day I was, who once carefully (and patronizingly, I thought) asked me if I had ever heard of it. I was stunned. I certainly knew, in ways that went beyond the history of philosophy, about the so-called "mind-body" problem. I, a second generation Swede in the U.S., who had agonized through high school in Oakland, California, never knowing whether it was better to be an honors student or a cheerleader, a beat poet or a sorority girl; I, who had always felt torn in a duality I conceptualized as my mind and my body but was unwilling to relinquish either; I who therefore felt I had to do everything. The "mind-body" problem, indeed.

I would prefer to relegate negotiations of the mind-body problem to a forthcoming film some Italian producers in Hollywood are putting together, written by Martin Scorsese and directed by Liliana Cavani, and starring Jodie Foster as Queen Kristina of Sweden and Anthony Hopkins as René Descartes. Unlike the Garbo Queen Kristina, this one is a cheerful lesbian who, in order to while away the long, dark northern winters, takes up an epistolary relationship with the well-known French philosopher. Kristina, you see, holds residually pagan notions of the primacy of myth, the body and sensuality, and she basically just wants to have fun. In her own elegant French, therefore, she challenges René to demonstrate the preeminence of thought in his proof of being /pp. 7-8/ in a way she finds convincing. After a correspondence fraught with the frustrations of delay, letters arriving out of order, and disagreements over the exact meaning of the French, *passion*, and the Latin *res*, Kristina invites René to accept employ as her tutor at the Stockholm court. Thus, the French thinker embarks for the Venice of the North. Unfortunately, in the course of his first Swedish winter, René catches viral pneumonia and dies. Now totally exasperated in her search for some sort of convincing reason for fully giving herself over to the excruciating denial of the flesh that her dogmatic Lutheran chaplains demand of her, and feeling that she really did have a go at it, Kristina orders a vast banquet at long Viking tables in the palace hall in Uppsala, where she abruptly abdicates the throne. She heads for Italy that same night and, once in Rome, converts immediately to the sensual allowances of Roman Catholicism, takes up hunting with the resident Medici, and falls into the habit of staging elaborate trionfi, the parades that become the hallmark of the high Italian baroque. Although I know it only in its grossest outline, this, I must admit, is my favorite treatment of the mind-body problem in years.

With various fictions, and the so-called mind-body problem in mind (and in body) then, let me begin where I want to end by placing a related notion before you: the body is the final site of ideology.

Now, I am brought to my topic, "Italian Feminisms and Transculturation," by recent and projected translation and editorial work that has rendered numerous Italian texts in feminist theory, as well as literary texts by women, available in English. Let me mention a few: Lucia Birnbaum's *liberazione della donna: feminism in Italy*, *The Defiant Muse: Italian Feminist Poetry from the Middle Ages to the Present*, which Muriel Kittel, Keala Jewell and I edited and translated, Mara Benetti and Elspeth Spottiswood's translation of Dacia Maraini's *Donna in guerra* as *Woman at War*, Martha King's *New Italian Women: A Collection of Short Fiction*, Teresa De Lauretis' introduction to and her and Patricia Cicogna's translation of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective's *Non credere di avere dei diritti: la generazione della libertà femminile nell'idea e nelle vicende di un gruppo di donne* as *Sexual Difference*, *Contemporary Women Writers in Italy: A Modern Renaissance*, edited by Santo Aricò, *Women and Italy: Essays on Gender, Culture and History*, edited by Zygmunt Baranski and Shirley Vinall, Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp's edition of *Italian Feminist Thought, A Reader*. Furthermore, many Italianists are now acquainted with recent texts in feminist theory coming out of Italy, and I know of at least one collective translation project, that being organized by Serena Anderlini, of Patrizia Cavarero's *Nonostante Platone [Plato notwithstanding]*. Translations of such books as *Mettere al mondo il mondo* [bringing the world into being] and *Il pensiero della differenza sessuale* [thinking sexual difference] by the group of feminist philosophers in Verona, Diotima, may soon be forthcoming. And, not unrelated to the issues of community and identity that this activity accentuates, I would also mention Issue #41 of *Sinister Wisdom: A Journal for the Lesbian Imagination in the Arts and Politics* (Summer/Fall 1990) entitled "*Il viaggio delle donne*" and dedicated to the writing of Italian-American lesbian women.

Italian feminist theory can be extremely helpful on this side of the northern Atlantic, particularly for the ways in which it elaborates and challenges the abstractions and overly systematizing aspects of much French feminist theory, especially that of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. Simultaneously, Italian feminisms are permeated by a concern for praxis in a way that characterizes the highly politicized nature of Italian cultural production in general and that provides exemplary notions of such problematic concepts as agency for feminist theory and praxis in the United States. Therefore, this remarkable recent production of translations has enabled me to draw my non-Italian-speaking colleagues into a more textured dialogue than was possible before, and it enables me to teach such courses as "Comparative Feminisms: France and Italy," to students who lack multiple languages. Furthermore, some of these translations contributed greatly to the literacy level of the audience at the Santa Barbara conference on Italian Women Writers held in 1991.<sup>[3]</sup> Whether their perspective is feminist, as in Bono

and Kemp's *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*, or not, as in Santo Aricò's collection of essays, *Contemporary Women Writers in Italy*, these recent translations and editions raise several feminist issues. For example, such work necessitates a consideration of the construction of "identity" according to gender and the historical marginalization of persons according to such categories in the discourses of literature and cultural theory.

But I would like to draw your attention to another critical issue implied by this body of work, one elicited by the fact of translation, itself, and applicable to some degree to all work done by people who call themselves practitioners of cultural studies in this country as well as abroad. Put simply, the fact of such translation as we now observe -- and of translation and our critical work in general -- implies the possibility, and in fact, the encouragement, of globalized readings of local texts, which, after all, texts in feminist theory as well as those in any other field inevitably are. This being the case, let me suggest that what easily gets lost in translation is cultural specificity, including all class, regional, ethnic, institutional, sexual and aesthetic differences as they are located within the culture in which the text was produced. Clearly, then, a simple notion of translation as the movement of meaning from one side of a divide to the other, where meaning on the second side retains equivalence to meaning on the original side, is impossible. Any translation, therefore, that fails to recognize the impossibility of translation, fails. This necessary condition of impossibility, however, may lead to practices of transculturation. Such practices entail the sifting through of local thicknesses on both sides of the crossing in order to find near equivalencies or rough correspondences or to flash light on the sites of meaning where such equivalencies or correspondences are nonexistent. It recognizes the positionality of the original and of the translation, and with that the positionality of their writers as well as their readers. In all cases, the practice of transculturation seeks to find loci within what I shall temporarily call the receiver cultural code that somehow might indicate the original text while accounting for the specificities that pertain on both sides of the crossover.

This approach requires, it seems to me, radically rethought practices of linguistic translation, editorial presentation, interpretation, assimilation, and the intricate elaborations of metaphors, explanations and fictions we call theory. In particular, it requires cognition deriving first from experience and intuition and secondarily faceted through logic rather than the other way around. In traditional disciplinary terms, transculturation favors anthropology over philosophy, but actually it only puts up with any disciplinary definitions as still another set of cultural specificities.

With this in mind, please recall now my earlier offering: the body is the final site of ideology, and let me take you on a brief itinerary of sites within recent Italian feminist texts that I want to be particularly precise about in my own practices of transculturation. These are five instances of the metaphorized

female body that occur in a recently translated novel, in Italian feminist abortion discourse, in Italian feminist gender discourse, in the Italian feminist practice of *affidamento* [entrustment], and in the use of the figure, "mother," in Italian feminist theory.

My first example, the one present in my title, is Dacia Maraini's metaphorization of the bodies of several female characters, but particularly Suna in *Donna in guerra* [woman at war], as crippled and mythic, prosththesized, and finally transcended. I see this narrative figured not only in the character of Suna, but also in that of Marianna Ucrìa in Maraini's prize-winning *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*, published last year in Italy and not yet translated. In the Maraini novel recently made available in English, *Donna in guerra*, Suna is an iconoclastic woman whose intervention in the life of the protagonist Vannina effects a kind of implicit *affidamento*. Along with the steam-shrouded, obscene women in the initiation space that the novel figures as a laundry, Suna helps Vannina to recognize the oppression she suffers in all the contexts of her sexuality. Maraini depicts the laundry women in all the force of a ripe bawdiness she constantly associates with the peasantry. The laundresses' arcane knowledge of sexuality and a particular strength associated with women evokes the segregated rites of goddess worship, surrounding these characters with a mythic aura of power. Furthermore, Maraini's figuration of Suna, whose legs are paralyzed, as a mermaid, conflates Suna's own archaic power with a crippling handicap in the present, as if the present were capable only of a gross, disempowering interpretation of the mobilizing properties of fin-like legs, which the present sees only as a stabilizing handicap. The technology of crutches enables Suna to mobilize not only her own body, but Vannina's nascent political convictions as they attempt to politicize women working in the local sweatshops. Finally, upon Suna's death, Maraini figures her in flight, in a Niké-like image of victorious escape that inspires Vannina to flee the oppression of her marriage.

Now, while I cannot help but react with a kind of weariness at yet another instance of a woman's broken body in the long history of such metaphorization in Italian literature, I note that Maraini's variant uses such metaphorization as a vehicle for the oppressed state of women rather than for the state of a man's soul or the state of the state, as has been the norm from Dante and Petrarch right up to Ettore Scola, for example. Let me consider how, then, to translate Suna, and, in particular, how to translate Suna's body.

A transculturative analysis would look at the local cultural constructions or knowledges or ideologies within which such a crippled, mythic, prosththesized and eventually transcended body as Suna's is produced. If I translate Maraini's novel to United States English, I need to ask what crutches mean in a Calabrian fishing village. What would be the U.S. equivalent of that? How can I translate Suna's body, which is both crippled and sensual and

sexual, from its Roman and Southern Italian contexts, where puritanism is unknown, to cultural sites in the U.S. that are imbued with puritanism? Can I find equivalents for the reactions of Maraini's other characters, Roman or Calabresi, bourgeois or proletarian, urban or rural, in a U.S. culture that, since the Vietnam War, has witnessed an effective movement for the state guaranteed civil rights, including the right of access, for the physically impaired? And can I cross the mermaid over from her mythic Mediterranean homeland where goddess worship has never disappeared to the body-commodifying pop culture United States of "The Little Mermaid", who was Danish to start with, or "Splash?"

Here I risk presenting a view of transculturation so radical as to obviate any possibility of translation. My aim is not to revive Romantic polemics and their concomitant nationalisms. Instead, I want to point out that, if transcultural equivalence is by definition impossible, and if transcultural correspondences are generally inexact, the translation itself will always necessarily be in a position of false cultural authority. It will reveal itself, in fact, as assuming something like a colonizing position in its claim to represent one localized pattern of cultural production of sexed, classed experience within the codes, and therefore the contexts, of another. This recognition implicates me. What is my position vis-à-vis Suna's body, for example, when I "use" Maraini's novel in a support group at the Vera House shelter for battered women in Syracuse, New York?

The difficulties any transculturative translation of Suna's metaphorized body encounters are related to the fact that there is a difference between forms of common experience and what the Milan Women's Bookstore feminists have called "common denominator representation" (Bono & Kemp, 134). Such "common denominator" images are those that show women as a generically oppressed sex without taking into account "the differences with which the female sex is marked" (Bono and Kemp, 134). Therefore, all instances of such representation reify individual women's bodies as one generic body which, while it may dramatize aspects of the plight of many and perhaps even all female sexed persons, ignores the specificity of single bodies, each bearing its own specific marks of culture. A transculturative attitude would keep this difference in /pp. 13-14/ mind. Please recall my braid phrase: the body is the final site of ideology.

A second locus of difficult transculturation in current translations of Italian feminist production is abortion. When abortion appears as a plot element in an Italian fictional text or as a theme in Italian feminist debate, how can I convey its cultural specificity? The dual historical subjectivity that has permeated Italian feminisms since Carla Lonzi's 1970 "Sputiamo su Hegel" [we spit, or let's spit, on Hegel], or the refusal of Rivolta Femminile to participate in attempts to legalize abortion and thus to sustain the power of the State, or the massive fact of a state juridical system based on Roman, rather than Anglo Saxon, law, are locations of discursive constitutions of the body within Italian cultures that resist correspondence in U.S. contexts. In



the U.S., for example, the foundational argument for the plaintiff in *Roe v. Wade* is the notion of the right to privacy, where the state is held as authority over and hence guarantor of such a right. In Italy, however, alongside a constitutional nation state governance system there exists a strong pre-unification tradition of indigenous aporia as positive, and banditry as just in the historically colonized peninsula and islands. The liberal, legalistic nature of U.S. pro-abortion argumentation, on the one hand, and the revolutionary refusal of some Italian feminists to resort to legal arguments, on the other, along with all configurations of the female body that these diverse contexts imply, clearly have no exact equivalencies across the Atlantic cultural divide.

(At this point in my considerations of the metaphorization and contextualization of female bodies I cannot help but pause for a moment to wonder about the metaphor of the body in U.S. anti-abortion arguments, where the woman is seen as the vessel of the foetus. How will this be affected by the recent Florida court declaration that, although "Baby Theresa" lacked all but the stem of her brain, the anencephalic infant could not be declared legally dead in order to use her organs in lifegiving transplants for other infants? This decision effectively declares that the integrity of the female body as a vessel takes precedence over whatever potentially life-bestowing properties may exist in its "contents." Will this new metaphorization be utilized by pro-abortion arguments in claims that the adult female integral vessel body takes priority over whatever potentially life-generating "contents" it may enclose?)

The body is the final site of ideology.

A third point of resistance to translation is gender. How can I transculture gender from Italian to U.S. contexts? Given the integrally gendered nature of all languages deriving from Latin, how can I render the cultural texture of gender in Italian feminisms, where "gender" is, in fact, primarily a linguistic category, within a U.S. context, where it is a paramount notion in current feminist theory? This problem is eloquently glossed by the "Note on Translation" in the Cicogna and De Lauretis translation, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*. Furthermore, as the forthcoming essays in *Feminism and Femininity in Italy: An Ongoing Discourse for the Nineties* show, the distribution of "femininity" across sex is radically different in the United States and in Italy, where dominant class males, for example, exhibit vastly more "feminine" characteristics in their self presentation than is the case among their counterparts in the U.S. Many Italian feminists refuse even to think in terms of gender and thereby, as they see it, to accept "female" as a variant of a "male" standard. Instead, the predominant meaning of "gender" as a grammatical fact in Italian puts gender in a very different location within Italian feminisms than it occupies in the U.S. The other concept that challenges any potential primacy of gender in Italian discourse is the Italian feminist notion of dual historical subjectivity, which holds that

two kinds of people, malesexed and femalesexed, have always existed and exercised historical agency. This highly significant anti-Hegelian development renders moot the very category of gender. By positing dual historical subjectivity, Carla Lonzi in 1970 simultaneously posited the always already sexed subject, and therefore the radically partial subject. In Lonzi's thinking, dual historical subjectivity remains a constructivist notion, but one located prior to as well as within collective memory. Dual historical subjectivity, therefore, is radical, given, historical difference. It is the basis of all Italian feminist thought. By contrast, then, Judith Butler's recent arguments for a plethora of genders as performative or illocutionary effects appears massively culturally specific, "sensible" only within the discursive politics on this side of the ocean.

Now I arrive at the fourth locus of resistance to transculturation in contemporary Italian feminist discourse. *Affidamento*, the practice discovered or invented by the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective in the early 1980s, is a pact between one woman who is relatively empowered according to professional status, class, age, finances or any other socially significant category and another woman who is relatively disempowered in order to help that woman realize her desires for greater empowerment. Furthermore, *affidamento* requires by definition a reciprocal recognition not only of discrepancies in social or psychological empowerment but also of locations of superior empowerment in some respects in both participants. For example, an affluent attorney who has problems of self-esteem might enter a relation of *affidamento* with a poor student whose self-esteem was high. In general, however, the identifying characteristics of *affidamento* include primarily the relatively strong social position of the elder woman. Possible rough correspondences in U.S. culture might include the relation of a long term prison inmate to a new arrival, that of a long-term recovering battered woman, rape victim, alcoholic or drug addict to a newly recovering woman, that of an older relative to a younger one, that of an older to a younger lover, that of mentor to mentee and, finally, in a managerial version not unknown in academia, that of networking.

Many of these U.S.-based relations place a social context (prison, recovery, kinship, or profession) in a determinant position, while others (lovers, mentor-mentee) fail to make it clear. Therefore, perhaps none of these "translations" is appropriate. Any transculturation of *affidamento* would thus best be accompanied by an explanatory gloss. And such a gloss, inelegant though it might prove, would need to acknowledge not only the difficulties of transculturation but also the ambiguities of the term in Italian. In their *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*, Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp translate *affidamento* as "entrustment." This English word implies a pact between two people in which the less empowered chooses to place faith in the more empowered. But *affidamento* also means "custody" (and I thank Serena Anderlini for reminding me of this), a word evoking the power of the state to back the more empowered person in a two-person contract as that person takes control of the life of the less empowered person -- as in adoption, for example. In the case of *affidamento*, then, any translation may quite literally

obfuscate some of the constraining aspects of this otherwise apparently liberatory engagement, one which, by the way, has had a success rate in practice that more or less resembles that of marriage.

Before I present my final instance of resistance to translation, or rather my final instance of the necessity of transculturation, let me linger for awhile on what I have already said. In my considerations of the metaphorization of the female body in Italian feminist fiction, Italian feminist discourse on abortion, Italian feminist discourse about gender, and the practice of *affidamento*, I have intended to show some of the snares that lie in wait when I engage in transculturative practice. My arguments until now, braided with my insistence that the body is the final site of ideology, would seem to be of the most noxious sort, insisting, as they apparently do, on the futility of a practice to which many of us devote a great deal of energy and which, in fact, characterizes contemporary global cultural production: translation. Further, they would apparently condemn to futility all the rest of our pedagogical practices, as well, to whatever extent any of us claim to represent one culture within another.

Here I welcome you to the felicitously hazardous terrain of transculturation as a fact in spite of its logical impossibility. Hazardous because slippery and difficult. But felicitous because it brings me to a wider consciousness of contemporary cultural dynamics. For example, the whole diagram of my argument, in fact, is wrong, since it pretends that such a phenomenon as two utterly separate and monolithic national cultures -- Italy and the United States -- can still exist. I need to offer the corrective that, to the extent that I perceive them to exist, they do so only as two possible constructions among myriad ones of the multiplicities that actually pertain in contemporary cultural contexts, including constant confluences of "Italy" with "the United States." Mappings of contemporary cultural discourse that hold fast to borders such as those I've used in my "hands-across-the-ocean" figures are partial, at best. Instead, both "Italians" and "Americans", like everyone else, live in a multiplicity of culturally specific contexts as well as in what Mary Louise Pratt calls "contact zones," where such contexts overlap and interact, thus creating new contexts. Clearly, one of these contact zones is this journal, this particular instance of academic feminist discourse in the U.S., where, 500 years after Columbus, and in mightily different guise, Italian feminist thought is just beginning to "land."

The practice, now appearing as unavoidable rather than impossible, of transculturation in this multiplicitous terrain is best engaged by malleable strategies.<sup>[4]</sup> Such transculturation is a situationist art that calls upon historically patriarchal disciplines when it wants to but refuses to be limited by them to binary oppositions or the rule of logic alone. With the ironies of etymology fully in mind, and thinking in particular of the social histories that undo grammatical equivalencies of such terms as "patrimony" and "matrimony," or "anthropology" and "gynecology," I would like to choose as a

tentative term for the transculturative practices I advocate the word  $[[\gamma]][[\upsilon]][[\nu]][[\alpha]][[\iota]][[\kappa]][[\omicron]][[\lambda]][[\omicron]][[\gamma]][[\iota]][[\alpha]]]$ . In utilizing the Greek, I reclaim the word from its philological, modern function in the pathologization of healthy women's bodies and their subjection to phallogocentric medical practices. I would insist on  $[[\gamma]][[\upsilon]][[\nu]][[\alpha]][[\iota]][[\kappa]][[\omicron]][[\lambda]][[\omicron]][[\gamma]][[\iota]][[\alpha]]]$  as an improvement on anthropology.  $[[\Gamma]][[\Upsilon]][[\Nu]][[\Alpha]][[\Iota]][[\kappa]][[\omicron]][[\lambda]][[\omicron]][[\gamma]][[\iota]][[\alpha]]]$ , that is, would conserve the current awareness of cultural relativism and situated subjects that anthropology -- ethnography in particular -- speaks about now. But rather than labor under the implicit assumption of universal humanity assimilated to a male model in "anthropology," would seek a recognition of relativism and situatedness where a major awareness would be constitutions of difference as they occur in particular locations. Such a feminist transculturative practice of  $[[\gamma]][[\upsilon]][[\nu]][[\alpha]][[\iota]][[\kappa]][[\omicron]][[\lambda]][[\omicron]][[\gamma]][[\iota]][[\alpha]]]$  would be, then, the study of people, praxis and artifacts in their relations to various instantiations of difference, including sex, in local contexts, and a recognition of the relation of the student to such instantiations in her or his contexts, with the sole "given" being a constant recognition of the body as the final site of ideology.

The body, a variable notion itself in spite of the universalizing tendency of the definite article, thus becomes localizable as a place identified by the ideologies that settle there, the detritus, so to speak, or the gifts, of the various discourses (or truths, knowledges, or chances) that traverse that place. And ideology stands in all possible attributions, from the "-isms" of traditional ideology critique, to the value sets instilled by any of modernity's Grand Narratives, to the daily life choices, pointed out by Bourdieu and De Certeau, for example, I view as "natural," especially the choices I make when I'm unaware I'm making choices.

The body is the final site of ideology. My suggestion also inevitably recognizes, therefore, the inseparability of "mind" and "body." It acknowledges the caste, class, so-called "race," "gender," or national "identity" determination, for example, of the possibilities of thought.

In a perspective, a recognition of the congruence of two of the separate foundational discourses of Western philosophy, mind and body, resembles something like the consciousness of female authority Luisa Muraro poses in her *L'ordine simbolico della madre* [the symbolic order of the mother]. There, such authority is evidenced not in opposition to that of the father, not in opposition to anything, in fact, but in conjunction with, in physical conjunction with, the presence of the child.

Let me get to Muraro through Julia Kristeva. Kristeva's theory of the semiotique depicts a feminine prelinguistic space all infants inhabit until the onset of the law of the father and, hence, language and social subjectivity: the symbolique. This semiotique continues to exist, nonetheless, after the infant's accession to the symbolique, realm of language and the law. It manifests itself as vocalized but non-linguistic interruptions in the order of language, as laughter, for example, or cry, or exclamation of jouissance. It is the place of undifferentiated contact with the mother, an experience of physicality that remains preverbal and can erupt like the return of the repressed throughout the individual's adult, language-ridden life. Because of its vestigial, interruptive nature, it is constrained to marginality, a position whose positive characterization has gained Kristeva much opposition from feminists concerned with agency. Significantly, Kristeva's theory of the semiotique therefore relegates a stage undeniably associated with the mother and hence, in her theory, the female and femininity, to a site whence it can have no agency but only a kind of performative, attention-getting hysteria.

It is perhaps more than marginally significant to note that this stage in Kristeva's long negotiation of her own formalist and structuralist heritage, which enables her to align herself clearly in the camp of the Lacanians, and her Maoist and, later, feminist proclivities, occurs at around the time she herself takes on the yoke of matrimony and prepares to become a mother. In any case, the ambiguities rife in her theory of the semiotique and hence the repressed maternal body have recently met with astute critical readings by both Judith Butler and Nancy Fraser.

In stark contrast to Kristeva's invention of the eternally nonverbal maternal place, whether that place is the physical contact she assumes to be universal between the infant and the mother or the psychological place whence utterance short-circuits language, the Italian feminist, Luisa Muraro, has invented another fiction, one that invites my attention here.

In her very recent, as yet untranslated book, *L'ordine simbolico della madre*, Luisa Muraro, a member of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, maintains that the Lacanian *loi du pere* has only a secondary function in language acquisition. By means of a textual practice that weaves its way in and out of canonical Western metaphysics and psychiatric theory as well as personal experience, Muraro tells me that language acquisition is simultaneously a mental and a physical process the infant experiences indistinguishably from her or his experience of the mother's body. Such language acquisition eventually allows the child to figure, or to bring into being, the world. Significantly, this process occurs prior to any definitive recognition of separation from the body of the mother and therefore gives new meaning to the expression, "mother tongue."

Unlike Kristeva's *sémiotique*, which locates the somatic in an undifferentiated preverbal and eternally marginalized psychic place, Muraro's *ordine simbolico della madre* privileges a stage of undifferentiated physicality with the mother as the place of language acquisition (which itself is physical as well as mental) and consequently of agency. Some of her conclusions, in particular the authoritative position of the mother and the effective absence of the father in the child's acquisition of language and hence in her or his construction of a world view and accession to agency, bear structural resemblance to Teresa De Lauretis' recent readings of Freud and Helene Deutsch (although De Lauretis recognizes this absence of the father as problematic and a temporary glitch in her thinking). But for any feminist theory that seeks to claim experiential authority for cultural praxis, as mine does, the most exciting aspect of Muraro's vision is the physical nature of the acquisition of a mother tongue and, simultaneously, of the child's effective creation of the world. In opposition to the ideology, canonical in Western philosophy since Augustine, at least, and reinstated in supremely logocentric fashion by Descartes, that divides the body from thought (even when attributing to thought the Cartesian capacity to verify the body's existence), Muraro's story of mother and child re-members that body as whole with all its functions, thought included. Physicality, in Muraro's figure, is coextensive with cognition and the assumption of agency. The body is the initial site of ideology.

I must be very careful here. *L'ordine simbolico della madre*, though clearly written, would be very difficult to transculturate. Muraro snatches language back from the patriarchal realms to which Lacan and Kristeva had relegated it, but at the expense of universalizing notions of motherhood, of maternity as a guarantor of female agency, and of the mother as the constant border between nature and culture (De Lauretis 1984). For U.S. readers, this might easily smack of Gilligan's or Chodorow's notions of mothers and women in general as naturally nurturing beings, an image that has gone a long way toward barring women from political viability in both the U.S. and Italy.

Furthermore, a transculturative reading of *L'ordine simbolico della madre* must consider the differences between *madre* in Milan and mother in New York, say. In all the workings of feminist theory in Italy around the notion of mothering (which generally conflates conception, gestation, birthing, lactation, child care and long term child rearing), in political considerations regarding child care, reproduction, and ideologies of domesticity, and in particular in Muraro's Milanese production of "the symbolic order of the mother," I need to ask which localizations of "mother" are in question, whether "mother" is insistently symbolic or whether she is a speaking subject, whether she is by definition heterosexual or even female. Is this Muraro herself, whose activity with the Milan Collective coincides with her calling upon her own parents to provide child care for her daughter? Is this the Muraro who chooses lesbianism after childbirth? Is an inevitable referent the "mother" in Milan or the one in Nocera Inferiore? The rural or the urban? Then, in translation, is it Barbara Bush or mothers in U.S.

prisons? The mother I wish I had? Single mothers, lesbian mothers, adoptive mothers, or nonmothers, on both sides of the oceanic divide? The term, "mother," is one most often used generically, universally, and biologically, even in feminist theory, where it should be most ruthlessly analyzed. Like "gender," it is one of the terms that most clearly necessitates culturally specific readings. The body is the final site of ideology. How can I read Muraro? With great caution, with vast antiviral doses of cultural relativism.

In any case, my transculturative reading can attribute varying statuses of fiction, philosophy, theory, self-analysis, or poesis to Muraro's text and also read it selectively, according to my own fictions, philosophies, theories, self-analyses and poesis. And thus I find that Muraro's book contains a wonderful figure for the transculturative practice of I am advocating, where the body is the final site of ideology. This practice, as I have it, valorizes self-consciousness, observation, relativism, shared agency, and intuition over rigorous logical formulations in one philosophical tradition or another. It claims agency via action and gets on with things. To engage in this, then, means to trust many modes of cognition deemed secondary according to patriarchal norms. It means a leap of something like faith.

The figure in Muraro's book I find particularly helpful in this regard is one she uses to access the symbolic order of the mother and one that might stand for the accession to what I am calling

It is the epistemological change Muraro notes in the first step of the program of Alcoholics Anonymous, an anti-authoritarian self-help organization founded in the U.S. during the 1930s which Muraro sees as an historic precursor of consciousness raising groups and hence of the women's movement and contemporary feminism in general. In this "step," the addicted person, who has spent a great deal of time thinking she could control her addiction, finally accepts that it controls her, that she is entirely powerless over it. The paradox of this realization is that only by recognizing her absolute powerlessness over her addiction can the addict relinquish her self-abusive bondage, or, in another metaphor, gain the "power" to give it up. [\[5\]](#)

The shift away from ego psychology that such a step out of misleading logic into helpful paradox entails is described by Muraro, as I mentioned, as an epistemological change. I might also see it as a challenge to the autonomous self of the enlightenment project, as a spiritual consciousness, or as a surpassing of what Angela Davis calls "historically obsolete bourgeois individualism." [\[6\]](#)

If I apply such an epistemological change to the current situation of local productions and global consumptions of literature and theory, I would say that the shift from philosophy to that I advocate as a practice of transculturation might entail a similar recognition that, no matter how good at it I become, there will always be something in the logic of philosophy that will control me. When I give up my pretences at the mastery of philosophy, then I can move toward new sites of agency, even if the authority of those sites is unclear to my tradition-fogged mind.

The body is the final site of ideology. In transculturation, the value of intuition appears, then, over that of logic. The practice of living within contradictions and recognizing their historical formation takes precedence over resolving them. From a transculturative perspective situated within myriad contemporary contact zones, I can recognize the essentialism debate, for example, but not depend on it. If ideologies of "gender," so-called "race," class and national "identity" affect my body adversely by limiting its access to health care, education, housing, work, leisure, nonproductive eros or anything else, the "I" ideologized in that same body can simply act for greater social justice in the name of that body and perhaps of others who tell me they feel similarly located and authorize me to represent them.

Even when the lesson comes through fiction, as in my experience with "The Silence of the Lambs," or maybe especially then, it is clear that there are no innocent or innocuous translations. There never have been. In contemporary global conditions, however, it would be a double foolishness not to see this. What we now do is always some form of transculturation. And what I propose for the study and production of culture is the transculturative practice of , where all cognitive categories are recognized in their cultural specificity and relativism, and where thought and body merge in what Emma Bacri of Catania, whom Muraro cites, calls *il cerchio di carne*, the circle of flesh; the body is the final....

**Beverly Allen**

**Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures**

**316 H.B. Crouse Building**

**Syracuse University**

**Syracuse, New York 13244-1160**



[Surface Page d'Accueil/Home Page](#)

## **Bibliography**

Allen, Beverly, Muriel Kittel and Keala Jane Jewell, eds. *The Defiant Muse: Italian Feminist Poems from the Middle Ages to the Present*. New York: The Feminist Press, 1986.

Aricò, Santo L., ed. *Contemporary Women Writers in Italy: A Modern Renaissance*. Amherst: U Mass Press, 1990.

Baranski, Zygmunt, and Shirley W. Vinall, eds. *Women and Italy: Essays on Gender, Culture and History*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.

Birnbaum, Lucia Chiavola. *liberazione della donna: feminism in Italy*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1986.

Bono, Paola and Sandra Kemp, eds. *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader*. Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Esquisse d'une theorie de la pratique*. Geneva: Droz, 1972. In English as *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York, London: Routledge, 1990.

Cavarero, Adriana. *Nonostante Platone: Figure femminili nella filosofia antica*. Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1990.

Daly, Mary. *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Boston: Beacon, 1978.

De Certeau, Michel. *Arts de faire: L'Invention du quotidien*. Paris: Union generale d'editions, 1980. In English as *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: UC Press, 1984.

Diotima. *Il pensiero della differenza sessuale*. Milan: La Tartaruga, 1987, 1990, 1991.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Mettere al mondo il mondo: Oggetto e oggettività alla luce della differenza sessuale*. Milan: La Tartaruga, 1990.

Frabotta, Biancamaria. *Letteratura al femminile*. Bari: De Donato, 1980.

Fraser, Nancy and Sandra Lee Bartky, eds. *Revaluing French Feminism: Critical Essays On Difference, Agency, and*

*Culture*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1992, especially Nancy Fraser, "The Uses and Abuses of French Discourse Theories for Feminist Politics," 177-194.

Gallop, Jane. *Thinking Through the Body*. New York: Columbia UP, 1988.

King, Martha, ed. *New Italian Women: A Collection of Short Fiction*. New York: Italica Press, 1989.

Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language*. New York: Columbia UP, 1980.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Polylogue*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1977.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. New York: Columbia UP: 1984.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Recherches pour une semanalyse*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1969,

Madrigale: *Trimestrale di Politica e Cultura delle donne*. Naples: Edizioni Lo specchio di Alice, 1988-present.

Maraini, Dacia. *Donna in guerra*. Turin: Einaudi, 1975.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Letters to Marina*. Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1987.

\_\_\_\_\_. *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*. Milan: Rizzoli, 1990.

Miller, Francesca. "Anarquistas, Gracias a Deo!: Italians in South America." Paper delivered at "Designing Italy: 'Italy' in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas," Smith Symposium in the Humanities, Syracuse University, October 1992. Forthcoming, Syracuse UP.

Muraro, Luisa. *L'ordine simbolico della madre*. Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1991.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London and New York: Routledge, 1992.

Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York, London: Norton, 1976.

Ronell, Avital. *Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, and Mania*. U Nebraska Press, 1992.

The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective. *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1990.

Via Dogana. *Circolo cooperativo delle donne "Sibilla Aleramo"*. Milan: Libreria delle Donne. 1991-present.

[1] *Poetry*, vol. CLV, No.s 1-2, October-November 1989.

[2] I specify "northern Atlantic" here as the site at which I encourage increased reception of and interaction with Italian feminist theory not in order to ignore Central and South American locales but in acknowledgement of the fact that rich interactions between Italian and Latin American feminist work has been going on for quite awhile. From the nineteenth-century importation to Argentina of anarco-feminist ideologies by immigrant Italian women to current trans-Atlantic dialogues, the critical interaction between American and Italian feminisms has been stronger in South America than in the U.S. and Canada, where French feminisms have generally been read to the exclusion of other European feminisms.

[3] Organized by Maria Marotti, this November, 1991 conference, entitled "Italian Women Writers," brought together many U.S. scholars, feminist and otherwise, engaged in revising the canons of Italian literature.

[4] Chela Sandoval's "oppositional consciousness" is one possibility. See Chela Sandoval, "U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World." *Genders*, 10, Spring 1991. Special issue: "Theorizing Nationality, Sexuality, and Race," 1-24.

[5] For another, post-Heideggerian, take on addiction, especially in its relation to fiction and the novellistic constitution of social gender roles, see Avital Ronell, 1992.

[6] In a talk given at Syracuse University during the spring of 1992.