

# Acts of Passage: Women Writing Translation in Canada

## Les actes de passage : les femmes et « l'écriture comme traduction » au Canada

Alessandra Capperdoni

Volume 20, Number 1, 1er semestre 2007

TTR a 20 ans I  
TTR Turns 20 I

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/018505ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/018505ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Association canadienne de traductologie

### ISSN

0835-8443 (print)  
1708-2188 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Capperdoni, A. (2007). Acts of Passage: Women Writing Translation in Canada. *TTR*, 20(1), 245–279. <https://doi.org/10.7202/018505ar>

### Article abstract

This article discusses the relationship of writing and translation in Canadian feminist poetics, specifically experimental. As feminist poetics collapsing the boundaries between theory and creative act, “writing as translation” is a mode of articulation for female subjectivity and a strategy for oppositional poetics. The article engages with the practice of “writing as translation” in the works of two leading avant-garde artists, the francophone Nicole Brossard and the anglophone Daphne Marlatt, located respectively in Montreal and Vancouver. Building on the groundbreaking critical work of Barbara Godard, Kathy Mezei and Sherry Simon, it situates these practices in the socio-political and intellectual context of the 1970s and 1980s, which witnessed the emergence of women’s movements, feminist communities and feminist criticism, and in relation to the politics of translation in Canada. This historicization is necessary not only to understand the innovative work of Canadian feminist poetics but also the political dissemination of a feminist culture bringing together English and French Canada.

# Acts of Passage: Women Writing Translation in Canada<sup>1</sup>

Alessandra Capperdoni

La traduction est un acte de passage par lequel une réalité devient tout à la fois autre et semblable. Qu'il s'agisse de passer de la réalité à la fiction par l'écriture ou de passer de la fiction à la réalité par la lecture ou de faire passer un texte d'une langue à l'autre, ma fascination pour l'acte de passage a toujours été au centre de mon questionnement littéraire et existentiel.

– Nicole Brossard, “Mauve,” 1989

In the last decades, Canadian women writers have shown an increasing fascination with the practice of translation and theories of “writing as translation.” Framing women’s language as always “double,” working within and against the confines of patriarchal representational and linguistic structures, Canadian feminist poetics envision translation both as a mode of articulation for female subjectivity and a strategy for oppositional poetics—what Nicole Brossard has termed “poetic politics” (1990b). Among the most productive experimentations are those of Nicole Brossard and Daphne Marlatt, who have received much attention from academic critics and Canadian avant-garde milieus, while maintaining a “marginal” status within the mainstream

---

1 A first version of this essay was presented at the 18<sup>th</sup> ACSUS Biennial Conference held in St. Louis, Missouri, in November 2005. Thanks to Lynette Hunter for her fruitful response on that occasion. Thanks also to Kathy Mezei for her productive comments to a first draft of the essay.

literary scene.<sup>2</sup> The francophone Nicole Brossard, who enjoys international recognition, has emerged in the 1960s as the leading avant-garde writer in Quebec and has repositioned herself as a radical feminist writer since the 1970s. The anglophone Daphne Marlatt, who has been living in Vancouver since 1951 when she moved with her British colonial family from Malaysia, is the most prominent experimental feminist writer of the West Coast. In this essay, I discuss Brossard's and Marlatt's translational writing practices with reference to two seminal texts, Marlatt's *Touch to My Tongue* (1984) and Brossard's *Le Désert mauve* (1987; trans. *Mauve Desert*, 1990a), as poetics of feminist intervention in the structuring of gender and sexuality within patriarchal language and fictions. Both texts were published in the 1980s, when the dialogue between French and English feminism was particularly productive and when feminist articulations of language and writing achieved their most innovative results. While privileging the feminist poststructuralist approach that underlies these writings, I am interested in reading these practices as grounded in the socio-political and intellectual context in the 1970s and 1980s that framed their emergence both in relation to women's

---

2 While Nicole Brossard's work is being read and taught in Canadian universities, it is often re-contained by the politics of language and representation, in that it appears predominantly in courses of Quebec writing or in courses of feminist writing and theory; rarely is it included in courses on Canadian literature or in introductions to women's writing. This confines the work of Brossard to areas of teaching that foreground feminist theory (already marginalized in academia outside of women's studies departments) rather than disseminating her work to a larger readership. Yet, internationally, and specifically in Europe, Nicole Brossard has been acclaimed for her work both by those who have interest in experimental writing and readers who are interested in writings by women in general. Thus, her ficto-theory has been neither absorbed nor marginalized by mass-produced literature. Conversely, Daphne Marlatt's work is known predominantly in Canada, and taught and read mainly in the West. Her experimental practice and her ficto-analysis are foregrounded in courses on the cultural production from the West Coast, where she is located and supported by a network of writers and intellectuals. In central Canada, she is often included as a representative of "postmodern writing" or in courses that address the relationship of women to colonial space, especially through her novel *Ana Historic*.

and feminist movements and the longstanding tensions between English and French Canada.

Traditionally, Canadian critics have emphasized the role of translation as cultural mediation. Early translators such as F.R. Scott engaged in a politics of mutual recognition and integration between anglophone and francophone communities to produce a Canadian culture building on its internal differences yet unified in its values. Working to assuage the troubled legacy of colonial history, symbolized in the popular imaginary by the title of Hugh MacLennan's nationalist fiction, *Two Solitudes* (1945), landmark criticism on translation has privileged the notion of a "bridge" between cultures, a notion that still acknowledges the discrete boundedness of culture and nation, rather than problematizing the nation as imagined textual community (Ellenwood, 1981, 1983, 1984; Hébert and Scott, 1960, 1962; Jones, 1977; Stratford, 1969, 1979a, 1979b, 1983, 1986; and Sutherland, 1971).<sup>3</sup> It is only since the mid 1980s that a new generation of critics has begun to historicize the emergence and institutionalization of translation in Canada. With the "cultural turn" of translation studies (Lefevere, 1992), critics have taken up the task of contextualizing the practice of translation as constitutive of Canadian cultural politics to show the entanglement of the humanistic ideal of the "cultural bridge" with the ideological structures informing the discourse and practice of translation and the uneven power relations that underlie them (Godard, 1997; Mezei, 1988, 1998, 2003; Simon, 1997, 1999; and Woodsworth, 1994a, 1994b, 2000). At the same time, feminist critics have shifted the focus of their analyses to the translational nature of language—a notion that builds on the philosophy of language articulated by M.M. Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin—and the doubleness within which

---

3 The notion of translation as "cultural bridge" has been at the centre of Scott's translational practice and informs his theoretical stance in his dialogue with Anne Hébert, "La Traduction: dialogue entre le traducteur et l'auteur" (1960). As Godard (1984, 2002) and Mezei (1986) point out in relation to this creative exchange, the dialogue between poet and translator is symptomatic of the blindness to the sexual dimension of hierarchical power structures. On that occasion, Hébert critiqued Scott for not realizing that her poem *Le Tombeau des rois* (1953) is about a ritual rape and the sujet of her poem is a young girl.

female subjectivity is positioned as framed by, yet excluded from, phallogocentric representational practices. As is the case in the larger field of translation studies, these critical discourses often fail to encounter each other, yet, in Canada, cultural criticism, feminism and translation studies have intersected in productive ways, especially in the theoretical work of Barbara Godard (1984, 1985, 1989, 2000, 2004), Kathy Mezei (1986, 1988a, 1988b, 1989), Sherry Simon (1996), and Luise Von Flotow (1980, 1995, 1996, 1997, 2004).

Within the larger scene of Canadian literary criticism, as well as a mainstream Canadian feminist discourse, feminist experimental practices are still positioned as either inaccessible to a wider readership or read within the strict boundaries of francophone or anglophone feminist production and, more often than not, the historicization of their practices is absent from academic and critical writings in general. A point in case is Robyn Gillam's critique of Canadian feminist experimental writings (1995), specifically of Brossard's poem "Mauve," as failing to reach a larger female audience and becoming exclusive to the bilingual reader—a reading which has been challenged by Barbara Godard in her article "La traduction comme réception: les écrivaines québécoises au Canada anglais" (2002). In this essay, I take up Godard's critique of Gillam as failing to historicize the dialogue between anglophone and francophone feminist writers, a failure that prompts Gillam to read the translation of French feminist texts into English as the reflection of the inability of experimental feminist writing to break through the barriers of marginality and speak to the larger feminist public. As Godard points out, Gillam's critique is symptomatic of a lingering desire of some feminist voices to be assimilated to the imagined community of the nation-state, which prompts them to read the marginality of experimental practices as elitist stances rather than viewing the margin as a product of patriarchal structures. Specifically, I am interested in re-reading the translational practices of feminist experimental writers as both emerging from and intervening into the historical context of post-war Canadian cultural politics and the discourse of feminism—a context that I address in the first two sections of this paper. While translation between English and French texts was meant to bridge and recontain national linguistic

and cultural boundaries, feminist experimental writings have taken those boundaries as the site of intervention into the (nationalist) politics of aesthetics and language; they have unhinged the fixity of notions of nation, language and territory, and these notions' powerful alignment in the construction of a national imaginary. Most importantly, in so doing, they have exposed the gendered nature of nationalism (McClintock, 1995) and the gendered structures of phallogocentric representational practices (Irigaray, 1985a, 1985b). I argue that Brossard's and Marlatt's poetics, inscribed by their translational dialogue and the central position assigned to translation in their texts, have played a central role in opening a space for female subjectivity and unseating the notion of nationness from its sedimented meaning. Since my discussion of *Touch To My Tongue* and *Le Désert mauve*, in the final section of the paper, is grounded in the larger production of the two writers, I also gesture, albeit briefly, toward the collaborative project of Brossard and Marlatt with respect to the mutual translation of two poetic texts, "Mauve" and "Character/Jeu de lettres." I will therefore illustrate how these texts, both translational enactments and theories of translation, weave together the complex issues of cultural identity, language, lesbian sexuality, and the violence of colonization(s) through a feminist re-writing of woman's spaces of the imagination.

### Translation in Canada

The discourse of translation is central to Canada's articulation of national unity as resting upon the dual heritages of the "two founding nations," the French and the English. A cultural practice of translation had already been established in Canada before the creation of the Dominion, with travel narratives, journals and diaries being translated since the eighteenth century. A tradition of official bilingualism dates back to 1767, when Governor Guy Carleton appointed a bilingual jurist to translate laws and documents to ensure the effective working of the "contractual union" of the two nations (Woodsworth, 2000).<sup>4</sup> The

---

4 In 1763, the Treaty of Paris confirmed the British acquisition of Canada. Although translation was at the heart of European imperial history in North America and central to the "encounter" with aboriginal populations, as Judith Woodsworth and others have pointed out, its

recognition of Canada's bilingual duality was also included in the 1867 Constitution Act. In literature, the translation of works of fiction from French into English started with the translation of Aubert de Gaspé's *Les Anciens Canadiens* (1863) by Georgiana M. Penée in 1864; English-into-French translation was inaugurated by the translation of Rosanna Eleanor Leprohon's *Antoinette de Mirecourt, or Secret Marrying and Secret Sorrowing* (1864) by J.A. Genand in 1865, and the translation of William Kirby's *The Chien d'or / The Golden Dog: A Legend of Québec* (1877) by Léon Pamphile Lemay in 1884.

Despite the increasing translational activities since the early twentieth century, the legal encoding of translation in Canada's polity took place only in 1963, when, through the appointment of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, a bilingual official policy was introduced to contain the threat of Quebec's secessionism. The Official Languages Act of 1969, which followed the recommendations of the commission, institutionalized translation through the creation of translation agencies and programs, and by securing their official funding. The Official Languages Act had an immediate effect in the flourishing of literary translation and the growing of a veritable translation industry to date. Nevertheless, the increase in literary translations following the passing of the Act also reflected the asymmetrical power relations between the two languages and echoed the relationship between English and French Canada that had been apparent since the colonial beginning of the nation: to date most translations from French into English are literary works, while translations from English into French are predominantly official documents, legal and commercial (Giguère, 1997; Godbout, 1997; O'Connor, 1997).

---

institutionalization responded to the need to ensure the co-existence of English and French communities. As Woodsworth interestingly remarks, since the State was founded, "a decision was made to adopt British criminal law, but retain French civil law" (2000, p. 83) with profound consequences in terms of legal proceedings and obligations, as well as commercial interests. In 1934, the federal Translation Bureau was created.

This cultural and political imbalance, which marks English as the dominant language and French as the colonized Other, or as minority discourse, has been the subject of numerous analyses, official and non, as well as interventions. With the increasing “restlessness” of Quebec nationalism from the 1960s, which erupted in the activism of the FLQ in the 1970s, the relationship between English and French Canada became the focus of official politics—the gaze of the nation-state upon its citizenry to salvage the social “contract”—and, consequently, gained the attention of cultural critics and practitioners. The Translation Grants Programme, created by the Canada Council in 1972, and the Literary Translators’ Association of Canada, founded in 1975, testify to the increasing importance and dissemination of translation, but also to the hierarchization of Canadian society underlying their foundation. Indeed, the cultural politics of translation cannot be understood outside the context of a national politics of culture which, since the 1960s, has increasingly exposed the deep-seated anxieties about a fragile Canadian identity, an always threatened national unity, and a Canadian culture repeatedly framed as “lack” by critics and writers alike.<sup>5</sup>

The contestation of the official politics of multiculturalism in the 1980s, alongside First Nations activism in the 1990s, has unsettled the binary of this logic, thus re-articulating the discourse of the nation as the contested site between (post) colonialism, migrancy and aboriginal displacement. Yet the primacy of the English-French relationship is still institutionally entrenched, as well as saturating the discourse of contemporary Quebec. Furthermore, despite the increasing participation of “ethnic minorities” in the cultural production of the Canadian nation, the practice of translation is still predominantly between English and French. Specifically, as aforementioned, literary translation has been recurrently understood as a way to “bridge the two solitudes” between francophone and anglophone cultural communities without questioning the production of these borders.

---

5 I am referring to Northrop Frye’s notion of the “garrison mentality” and Margaret Atwood’s articulation of Canada as inhabiting a victim position in her influential publication *Survival* (1972).



Paradoxically, this encounter, slow, contested and never easy, has been especially productive in the context of feminist poetics that take up language as the site of social critique and transformation and, as such, engage in oppositional stances toward the Canadian nation-state and the literary establishment.

### **Gender, Translation and Feminist Communities**

In the 1980s, the challenge of feminism to societal patriarchal structures increasingly focused its attention on language as the site of contestation and liberation of women's lives. While Anglo-American feminist criticism of the 1970s had exposed the sexism of language and the inherent inequality and gender hierarchies of societal structure, French feminism strayed from this socio-linguistic analysis by engaging with a deconstructive critique of language. Working on the constitution of the subject in language, French feminist theorists were interested in exposing the erasure of the feminine in language and the constitution of "woman" as a sign of exchange in a patriarchal, phallogocentric economy which privileged male sociality (Cixous, 1976, 1980; Irigaray, 1985a, 1985b; and Kristeva, 1980, 1982). In Canada, where the literary establishment was firmly grounded in nationalist modes of cultural production and interpretation, and where anti-mainstream writing was formulated either as "regional" or as an "avant-garde" dangerously close to the New American Poetics, this "linguistic turn" produced a new intellectual climate which was favourable to the increased visibility of women writers interested in language-centred practices. Specifically, it was the poststructuralist notion of woman's being-in-translation which became a fertile ground for new theories of writing in the feminine.

Working on Lacan's notion of the constitution of the subject in language and his formulation that the female subject is excluded by patriarchal language and representation, poststructuralist feminist theorists were able to expose (and explode) the gender-neutral assumption underlying a normative understanding of language and representation. If the constitution of the female subject takes place within a language that forecloses the feminine and obliterates the specificity of the female body, women live and experience the world in a constant state of

translation. Thus, by re-articulating female subjectivity as always translational, feminist theorists paved the way for a cultural critique of translation. For Quebec women writers, living in the double subjection of female and Quebecois subjects in dominant English Canada, this notion was particularly resonant with their lived experiences (although we should add that a “translational theory of culture” is also at the base of Franz Fanon’s and Homi Bhabha’s writings on the condition of (post)-colonial subjectivity).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, feminist translator Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood notes how early on, in translating the poetry of Quebecois rock singer-poet Lucien Francoeur, she “became painfully aware that [her] translating voice was speaking from a male viewpoint,” thus being forced “to play the role of the male voyeur” (1991, p. 97). Realizing that “I am a translation because I am a woman,” she was able to engage with a feminist critique of language which allowed her to enact strategies of feminist interventions in her translations and “become” a feminist translator. Her translation of Nicole Brossard’s *Mauve Desert* (1990a) is the work in which a translational feminist practice as a site of intervention in language becomes most apparent. The emergence of a feminist theory of translation, with a growing body of translators identifying themselves as feminist and producing theoretical work on their practice, proves to be inseparable from the dissemination of feminist thought articulating the need to re-insert the feminine which has been erased from systems of patriarchal language and representation. More importantly, feminist theorists reconceptualized translation as a process of re-writing, which echoed Derrida’s reconceptualization of the writing practice as a constant act of reading-as-writing and writing-as-reading.

Through what Barbara Godard called the “meeting of gender theory and translation studies” (Godard, 2000), feminist theories of translation and new feminist poetics of writing have intersected to produce a generative site for women’s articulation of language and imagination. Foremost, this site has been made possible by the “translational encounter” between English and

---

6 Godard notes that Madeleine Gagnon’s *La venue à l’écriture* (1977) had already commented on the parallels between the position of Quebec and the alienation of women in language (1989).

French Canada, and particularly the language-centred writings of Vancouver-based Daphne Marlatt and Montreal-based Nicole Brossard. While translation had so far functioned as a “bridge” or point of contact between cultural productions in English and French, thus leaving them as discrete and separate cultural geographies, the new translational feminist interventions in language enacted an intersection of cultural and artistic practices which broke down cultural barriers and resulted in a veritable explosion of writings (both creative and theoretical) that earned international attention to the Canadian writing scene.

As Godard points out, radical feminist magazines in Quebec, such as Nicole Brossard’s *La Nouvelle Barre du jour*, *Têtes de pioches* and *L’Intégrale éditrice*, have been influential in the articulation and dissemination of a feminist culture, and this role has been early on recognized by feminist writers in English Canada (Godard, 2002, p. 86). The translation and publication of two issues from *La Nouvelle Barre du jour* in English magazines signals an attentive reading of Quebecois feminist writing practices on the part of anglophone writers.<sup>7</sup> Yet this movement was not uni-directional. In the West Coast, it was made possible by a vibrant poetic scene which was also part of a North American network of experimental practices. Daphne Marlatt’s own editorial work throughout the 1970s and early 1980s focused on the opening up of aesthetic possibilities in radical ways—a work that enabled the productive encounter with Brossard’s theory of writing. In an interview with Pauline Butling, Marlatt remarks that although she was first exposed to Quebec writing through *TCR: The Capilano Review*, it was the chance reading of an issue of *Ellipse*<sup>8</sup> (1979) dedicated to the writing of *Tish* and *La Nouvelle barre du jour* that struck a chord: the reading of Nicole

---

7 The *NBJ* issue n. 56-7 « le corps les mots l’imaginaire » (mai-août 1977) appeared in *Room of One’s Own* 4.1-2 (1978), and *Tessera* 2 « La lecture comme écriture / L’Écriture comme lecture » was the guest issue of *NBJ*, 157 (1985).

8 The essay, published in *NBJ* n. 50 « Femme et langage » in 1975 (hiver, pp. 10-27), was translated and re-published in *Ellipse* 23/24 (1979), pp. 44-63.

Brossard's essay « l'è muet mutant » resonated with her feminist consciousness (Butling, 1992-93, p. 120).

Women-centred conferences also played a central role in the articulation and dissemination of a feminist culture and in the building of feminist communities across social and cultural boundaries. This movement *across* was both translational and transnational (Bhabha, 1994) for in bringing together writers, translators, academics, critics, journalists, and social and cultural activists it also imagined an alternative feminist community to the boundedness of the nation. Rather than absorbing difference to the economy of the (national) same, these conferences problematized the fictive boundaries that produce competing and mutually exclusive socio-cultural categories. They exposed the inherent instability of these categories, thereby opening up a space for the articulation of difference as inter-relation—difference recognized in its specificity and alterity, yet always relational. Marked by their polyvocal structure, these conferences accepted risks and rifts, yet not in order to seal but, instead, to explode the illusory stability of dominant discourse. Not surprisingly, then, the intimate relationship of writing and translation was at the centre of these events.

The Dialogue Conference at York University (1981) was organized by Barbara Godard, a professor of English as well as a renowned translator who has produced a large body of translations and feminist criticism. The conference was the first important event in Canada focusing on women writers and feminist critiques and cultural practices (the proceedings, published as *Gynocritics: Feminist Approaches to Writing by Canadian and Quebecois Women / Gynocritiques: démarches féministes à l'écriture des canadiennes et québécoises* in 1987, became an influential text for Canadian feminism). Marlatt remarks that the conference was “a major turning point” (Marlatt, 1998, p. 9). She felt “stimulated by the theoretical energy of the feminist writers” and she clearly identifies this collective moment in feminist theory and writing as simultaneous with her own practice: the “rapid changes in my thinking about my relationship to language as a woman writer (...) had been set in motion by the Dialogue Conference that Barbara Godard organized at York University (...)” (Marlatt,

1998, p. 9).<sup>9</sup> It was during this dialogue that Godard, together with Kathy Mezei, also a feminist academic and a translator, and writers Daphne Marlatt and Gail Scott, came up with the idea of initiating a feminist journal:

It was terrifically exciting to be exposed to all this writing going on in Quebec and they seemed so far ahead of us theoretically, such sophisticated, elegant analysis. We felt we needed to have more contact with these women. There's got to be something ongoing. Kathy and I were talking with Ann Mandel, in our car ride back downtown to Toronto from York, about how it might be possible to do a magazine. (...) Our first actual editorial meeting was in 1983 when Barbara and Gail came out for *Women & Words*. That was exciting. (Marlatt in Butling, 1992-93, p. 121)

The project was pursued during the Women and Words conference in Vancouver in 1983, when the first editorial discussion about the feminist magazine *Tessera* took place. *Tessera* was started the following year as a guest issue in the already established Vancouver magazine *Room of One's Own*.<sup>10</sup> *Tessera* marks the beginning of an important feminist collaboration between the members of the editorial board (Louise Cotnoir, Barbara Godard, Susan Knuston, Daphne Marlatt, Kathy Mezei, and Gail Scott). By enacting a *translational* practice of feminist writing and theory (it included translations-as-writing as well as writings-in-translation), it helped create the first strong community, and network, of feminist critics and writers in Canada. In her introduction to *Collaboration in the Feminine* (1994), Godard notes how each member was not an isolated voice but was connected to other feminist reading and writing groups:

Four we were for four years and then we were five. Even as four, though, we were multifarious, each of us bringing to *Tessera* the charged issues from other feminist reading/writing

---

9 Marlatt's *Touch to My Tongue* and the ficto-essay *Musing with Mother tongue* were written in the wake of these changes during the fall of 1982 (Marlatt, 1998, p. 9). The ficto-essay was published in the first issue of *Tessera* in 1994 (guest issue of *Room of One's Own*).

10 Other texts from the conference were published in the same issue.

groups, enriching and complicating the dialogue. Daphne's long involvement with West Coast editorial collectives, Gail, nourished by her regular Sunday meetings with Montreal women writers, I with my feminist reading groups from the Toronto universities, extended by exchange with international feminist theorists at the Semiotics Institutes, Kathy, and Susan, working with similar communities in Vancouver and Nova Scotia. Later still, Louise continued the connection with the Sunday group, contributing new dimensions from her literary friendships in l'Estrie. (Godard, 1994, p. 10)

The centrality of translation in women's consciousness and the writing/reading act was brought to the fore from the very beginning. Indeed, the entire issue of *Tessera* 6, "La Traduction au Féminin / Translating Women" (Spring / printemps 1989) was dedicated to the relationship of writing and translation. Both Mezei and Godard have since written abundantly on the nexus of gender, feminism and translation—questions that relate translation and women's writings to the production and dissemination of knowledge; and, in their ficto-theory and poetics, Marlatt and Scott have openly engaged with translation as a site of re-enunciation, re-creation, and *poiesis* which makes visible the incommensurability of languages, and the thought- and bodily landscapes that language anchors. *Tessera* was, therefore, a matrix for a poetic articulation of *ré-écriture* and "border writing."

The Women and Words/Les Femmes et les mots Conference, held in Vancouver in 1983, was a second landmark event. It brought together over one thousand women from all over Canada to discuss the status of women, including women as cultural workers and activists. The Conference,

(...) which Betsy [Warland] initiated and coordinated with Victoria Freeman and the support of a core group of women in Vancouver, brought together scores of Francophone, Anglophone, white, First Nations, Asian and Black women writers, editors, publishers, translators, critics and readers for a spirited series of discussions and performances. It was the first and largest gathering of women across the country who were active in so many different areas. (Marlatt, 1998, p. 9)

It also presented a panel on “Translation: The Relationship between Writer and Translator,” and the whole conference was translational in its structure. Not only were different communities brought together to engage common concerns and differences, but the re-enunciation of woman’s position was at the centre of these discussions.

One of the most significant outcomes of the conference was the contact between avant-garde writers from the English West Coast and those from Quebec (both anglophones and francophones). While both groups were involved in “oppositional poetics,” the cultural sites they inhabited were radically different. West Coast women writers were relatively marginalized by the presence of a radical scene of writing which was dominated by male writers (largely associated with the former *Tish* group), and were influenced mainly by feminist movements from the United States.<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that since the 1960s “oppositional”

---

11 The marginalization of women writers is a contested issue and needs further clarification. Women writers have always been a strong presence on Canada’s West Coast and, despite the lack of recognition from the anglophile and male engendered literary canon, they have achieved considerable visibility. Notable is the example of poet Dorothy Livesay, who grew up in the Prairies but lived primarily in British Columbia. Her poetry, modernist in its articulations but with strong early feminist and socialist stances, was excluded from the publication of the first anthology of modernist poetry, *New Provinces* (1936). Ethel Wilson, widely read, also received little recognition from the literary establishment, while in the 1970s and 1980s the works of poet Pat Lowther and novelist Audrey Thomas remained confined within categories of women’s writing or labour politics. It is telling that poet George Bowering remembers the literary scene in Canada as “dominated by women” (informal conversation). Nevertheless, the margin is a shifting location and can acquire different meanings. If for the new avant-garde it signified the margin of the nation, the specificity of gender and sexuality did not have much room in the practices and theories of writing of Vancouver poetry (the West Coast centre of postmodern avant-gardes). Marlatt notes how, in her formation as a writer, a “largely male-mentored postmodernist poetics” (1998, p. 1) also meant for the woman writer a sense of “being always on the periphery trying to emulate men, trying to emulate their objectivity. So the question was, how did my being a woman make a difference in

poetics in Canada had been framed as counter-mainstream and definitely “local.” Furthermore, West Coast writers inhabited a social geography marked by hybridity: “visible” minorities, especially from the Asian diaspora and First Nations constitute large sections of the population; this ethnic and cultural diversity, along with large working class communities and the Vancouver skid row, engenders not only a strong sense of locality, but also a sense of postmodern cultures of “transit” (against the more “historically” bounded Eastern urban centres). Conversely, the closer ties of Quebec to French culture facilitated the exposure to French theory (across linguistics, literature, philosophy and sociology) and the dissemination of deconstructive critiques of language and systems of cultural formation. These found a fertile ground in Quebec, where writers were actively involved in the critique of the Canadian nation and colonial domination—though overlooking the uneven power relations between Quebec and First Nation cultures—but they also provided a critical vocabulary for the articulation of woman as double-colonized subject and subject-in-translation.

Translation was once again at the centre of the discussion in the conference “Telling It: Women and Language Across Cultures,” which took place in Vancouver in November 1988 (the proceedings were published in 1990). The organizing collective included poets Daphne Marlatt, Betsy Warland, and First Nations writers Sky Lee and Lee Maracle.<sup>12</sup> As the concerns of the previous conference were refocused on the specificity of ethnicity and sexuality, the articulation of feminism to a translational practice engaged the urgency of the questions of racialization and the uneven structures of the sex-gender system in the imagined community of the nation.<sup>13</sup>

---

my writing? A difference not peripheral but central” (Interview with Brenda Carr, p. 99).

12 At the time, Daphne Marlatt was the Ruth Wynn Woodward Chair of Women’s Studies at Simon Fraser University. Although organized within an academic structure, the conference was community focused.

13 The conference was preceded by the 1987 Third International Feminist Book Fair in Montreal, where panels and workshops were



## Feminist Experimental Writings and Writing-As-Translation

The “translational” encounter and exchanges between English Canada and Quebec have proved fruitful in building a network of feminist practitioners—a generative site of some of the most interesting textual productions and theories of writing in Canada to date. The fertility of this practice for a radical aesthetics is best exemplified in the works of Nicole Brossard and Daphne Marlatt, who actively engaged with writing-as-translation and also collaborated actively in a project on translation. *Touch to My Tongue*, published in 1984, is the first text by Daphne Marlatt in which the processual nature of writing not only departs openly from the experimental models of male postmodern West Coast writers but roots itself in a feminist practice.<sup>14</sup> A text about longing and desire prompted by the separation of the two women lovers (Daphne Marlatt and Betsy Warland), it writes lesbian subjectivity. The drift of words and the pulsating rhythm of language are a feminine semiotics of productive excess, where yearning cannot be contained within a “phallic economy of solids exchange,” nor can it be fixed as “lack” (Irigaray, 1985b). While the distance between the two women engenders desire, desire “writes”: “creatures of ecstasy, we have risen drenched from our own / wet grasses, reeds, sea. turned out, turned inside out, beside / ourselves, we are the tide swelling, we are the continent / draining, deep and forever into each other” (Marlatt, 1994, p. 10).

The poem is structured as circular sequences of prose lines. Punctuation is reduced to the minimum, and the logic of thought is undermined by word associations that cannot be

---

organized to discuss issues and strategies of feminist thought and where the issue of “voice appropriation” was first raised.

14 From her earliest works Marlatt has engaged with a postmodern, language-centred practice that interrogates the position of woman in patriarchal societies (and capitalist structures). Nonetheless, a theoretically informed feminist politics becomes apparent only in the 1980s in ways that reveal the importance of her exposure to poststructuralist feminist theory and, foremost, the writings of Brossard. This time also coincides with Marlatt’s articulation of a lesbian consciousness.

accommodated in the rational structure of logos. The minimal use of grammatical connectives and relational elements (such as prepositions and verb conjugations) unsettles the “ordering of language” into normative, logical patterns of thought and eroticizes language in unforeseeable ways. Words call each other up following the erotics of sound, just as the women attract each other through their longing. The erotics of the poem is also apparent in the use of an embodied language, where words do not simply “describe” images of bodies and landscapes but, through the working of poetic language and through the strong aural component, they perform an erotic dance on the page. Sounds leap and this activation of language engenders estranged meanings and unpredictable images. The etymological maze that the writer follows is not meant as a search for a lost origin, either as essence (of the self) or authority (of meaning). It is the ongoing discovery of the processual nature of writing and its infinite traces which open up new possibilities of articulation, an uncovering of the sedimented layers of language and the possibilities that the sealing of “official discourse” hides from representation. Writing is wandering through “the passageways” of language, within a labyrinth of language with no centre (Marlatt, 1998, p. 32). But this process of uncovering also un-hides the “matter” of language, the matrix, mother, (m)other, the mother-daughter privileged (and fraught) relationship, and language as semiotic *chora* (Kristeva, 1980). The female/lesbian subject’s relationship to language is marked by difference (the lesbian exclusion and erasure from representation, the female relegation to the margin of official discourse), but the writer’s erosion of language uncovers the hidden traces which have also spoken (though inaudible or invisible) through dominant discourse. The poet’s labyrinthine search, therefore, is the longing for reaching/inhabiting “this place full of contradiction” (Marlatt, 1994, p. 9), as the lesbian in language can only be:

**Hidden ground**

lost without you, though sun accompanies me, though  
moon and the maps say always i am on the right track,  
the Trans-Canada heading east—everything in me longs  
to turn around, go back to you, to (that gap), afraid i’m  
lost, afraid i’ve driven out of our territory we found (we  
inhabit together), not *terra firma*, not dry land, owned,

along the highway, cleared for use, but that other, low-lying, moist and undefined, hidden ground, wild and running everywhere along the outer edges. lost, *losti*, lusty one, who calls my untamed answering one to sally forth, finding alternate names, finding the child provoked, invoked, lost daughter, other mother and lover, waxing tree, waist i love, water author sounding the dark edge of the word we come to, augur-ess, *issa*, lithesome, *lilaisthai*, yearning for you, and like a branch some hidden spring pulls toward our ground, i grow unafraid increasing ('lust of the earth or of the plant'), *lasati*, (she) yearns and plays, letting the yearning play it out, playing it over, every haystack, every passing hill, that tongue our bodies utter, woman tongue, speaking in and of and for each other. (p. 17)

This is also a translational process, in its *rereading* and *rewriting* of language and subjectivity as constructed by hegemonic patriarchal discourse. Translation is enacted in its double meaning of transposal and displacement. Working intra-linguistically, the lesbian writer is also a translator in that she uses a language that denies her the language she was born into. Yet her writing is also a rupture in the closure of this monologic system for, through her gestural and bodily trans-(in)scribing, she displaces the phallic order that she was meant to reproduce and opens a space for the articulation of difference: "creatures of unorganized territory we / become, a *physical impulse* moving from me to you (the / poem is), us *dancing in animal skins* in the unmapped part of our world" (p. 18).

"Writing as translation," always marked by loss and betrayal, exposes the poetics of transparency as the ideology of Hegelian idealism and the illusion of the referential nature of language. For the female lesbian subject, the re-insertion of difference in the economy of dominant language is signature and inscription of the marker of difference which exposes the constructedness of gender and sexual values. To re-write the discursive structures that define and entrap women's love for women, the text adopts translational tactics that betray and "pervert" normalized linguistic signification:

perverse in that, having to defend myself from attack,  
encroachment on that soft abyss, that tidal place i knew as

mine, know now is the place i find with you. not perverse  
but turned the right way round, redefined, it signals us  
beyond limits in a new tongue our connection runs along.  
(p. 11)

Working across semiotic systems, feminist “writing as translation” (as well a “translation as writing”) is both “transformance” and “performance” (Godard, 2002).<sup>15</sup> This emphasis placed on translation as an inter-semiotic process of meaning production differs from the encoding of translation as equivalence, the “carrying over” of a predefined meaning, implied in the idealistic belief in the transparency of language. The process of meaning production takes place in the traversal of different linguistic and cultural systems of signification: the time-old metaphor of the translator-as-betrayer is therefore re-read as the acknowledgement of the incommensurability of languages and cultures, where the hierarchy between original and target text, author and reader, is unsettled and writing is re-articulated as an endless process of differential relations with no “originary text,” and no privileged meaning. This process is foregrounded in Nicole Brossard’s *Mauve Desert*, a “novel” set in the desert of Arizona where the wild-eyed Melanie rages at the violence surrounding her and lingers in the desire for female bodies, while the unnamed figure of the nuclear scientist l’homme long / Longman (clearly evocative of J. Robert Oppenheimer) is intent on nuclear testing. The book has a tripartite structure: part I, “Mauve Desert,” is a novel by Laure Angstelle; part II, “A Book to Translate,” includes the discovery of the novel by the reader/translator Maude Laures and maps Maude’s reading and translation process; and part III, “Mauve the Horizon,” is the translated novel by Maude Laures (names also intersect and echo each other). A comparison between the “original” and the “translation” reveals the productive agency of the translator in transforming the reality contained in the source book. Yet it also shows how writing is always a translational process and reality a fiction: “La réalité est ce que nous inventons”

---

15 De Man, elaborating on Walter Benjamin’s theory of translation, had already pointed out how “this movement of the original [...] is a wandering, an *errance*, a kind of permanent exile if you wish, but it is not really an exile, for there is no homeland, nothing from which one has been exiled” (1986, p. 92).

(*Le Désert mauve*, 1987, p. 88).<sup>16</sup> The mauve horizon toward which Melanie drives recklessly and so desperately can only point to the blurring line between reality and fiction, where the violence of reality (in the text clearly represented by male scientific power and aggressiveness) is *constructed* as “natural” through language and representation:

Le désert est indescriptible. La réalité s’y engouffre, lumière rapide. Le regard fond. Pourtant ce matin. Très jeune, je pleurais déjà sur l’humanité. À chaque nouvel an, je la voyais se dissoudre dans l’espoir et la violence. Très jeune, je prenais la Meteor de ma mère et j’allais vers le désert. J’y passais des journées entières, des nuits, des aubes. Je roulais vite et puis au ralenti, je filais la lumière dans ses mauves et petites lignes qui comme des veines dessinaient un grand arbre de vie dans mon regard. (...)

L’ombre sur la route dévore l’espoir. Il n’y a pas d’ombre la nuit, à midi, il n’y a que certitude qui traverse la réalité. Mais la réalité est petit piège, petite tombe d’ombre qui accueille le désir. La réalité est un petit feu de passion qui prétexte. J’avais quinze ans et de toutes mes forces j’appuyais sur mes pensées pour qu’elles penchent la réalité du côté de la lumière. (p. 11, p. 14)<sup>17</sup>

---

16 “Reality is what we invent” (p. 133). From now on, I will also provide the English translation of Brossard’s novel by Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood (1990a) to highlight the polysemic quality of writing-as-translation as it seeps further in the translated text.

17 “The desert in indescribable. Reality rushes into it, rapid light. The gaze melts. Yet this morning. Very young. I was already crying over humanity. With every new year I could see it dissolving in hope and in violence. Very young, I would take my mother’s Meteor and drive into the desert. There I spent entire days, nights, dawns. Driving fast and then slowly, spinning out the light in its mauve and small lines which like veins mapped a great tree of life in my eyes. (...)

Shadows on the road devour hope. There are no shadows at night, at noon, there is only certitude traversing reality. But reality is a little trap, little shadow grave welcoming desire. Reality is a little passion fire that pretexts. I was fifteen and with every ounce of my strength I was leaning into my thoughts to make them slant reality toward the light” (p. 11, p. 13).

It is in the landscape of the desert (desert of nature as well as desert of writing), where “reality” loses its reference value and “the gaze melts,” that lesbian subjectivity can find a way for articulation. This space of the unwritten evokes both the difficulty of creating new images when our perception of reality is saturated by dominant modes of production, as well as the liberating potential for imagining the experience of the unsaid. In the desert-landscape of writing this experience becomes heightened, the foreignness of perceptions and sensations (the erotics of Brossard’s language) also recreating alternatives for women’s imagination:

La première fois que j’ai vue Lorna, je l’ai trouvée belle et j’ai prononcé le mot « salope ». J’avais cinq ans. Au souper, ma mère lui souriait. Elles se regardaient et quand elles parlaient leurs voix étaient pleines d’intonations. J’observais obstinément leurs bouches. Lorsqu’elles prononçaient des mots qui commençaient par *m*, leurs lèvres disparaissaient un instant puis gonflées se réanimaient avec une incroyable rapidité. Lorna dit qu’elle aimait le moly et la mousse de saumon. Je renversai mon verre de lait et la nappe se transforma en Amérique avec une Floride qui se prolongeait sous la salière. Ma mère épongea l’Amérique. Ma mère faisait toujours semblant de rien quand les choses étaient salies. (p. 12)<sup>18</sup>

Language is “flow over the edge of thought-frame” (p. 133)<sup>19</sup> so that images cannot close themselves off within a patriarchal system of value which has built itself throughout centuries

---

18 “The first time I saw Lorna I found her beautiful and said the word ‘bitch.’ I was five years old. At supper my mother was smiling at her. They would look at each other and when they spoke their voices were full of intonations. I obstinately observed their mouths. Whenever they pronounced words starting with *m*, their lips would disappear for a moment then, swollen, reanimate with incredible speed. Lorna said she liked moly and salmon mousse. I spilled my glass of milk and the tablecloth changed into America with Florida seeping under the saltshaker. My mother mopped up America. My mother always pretended not to notice when things were dirtied” (p. 12).

19 “Parce que les paysages vrais assouplissent en nous la langue, débordent le cadre de nos pensées. Se déposent en nous” (p. 143).

of knowledge production. Writing-as-translation is *body* and *desire*, channeling the energy through the arteries of language. Channel *as* site of production, it transforms borders into creative possibilities to think the unsaid.<sup>20</sup>

The central section of the book articulates a theory of translation as intimate reading and re-writing which foregrounds the creative (and experimental) agency of the translator (translator as re-writer and re-enunciator), and the status of the translation as “text” in its own right. The writing follows Maude in her approach to the text, her dissection, attraction, distancing, meditation and crossings—the unraveling of a process which is traditionally marked as derivative and passive:

Elle ne saura jamais pourquoi tout son être s’est enfoncé dans un livre, pourquoi pendant deux ans elle s’est brisée, s’est allongée dans les pages de ce livre écrit par une femme dont elle ne sait rien sinon la preuve présumée d’une existence recluse dans le temps et l’espace franchi d’un seul livre. En somme ce livre était *innocent*. Il reposait, mince tranche de papier entre les appuis-livres. C’était un matin de décembre, d’une blancheur spectrale qui érodait les objets. Elle pensait lenteur en soustrayant du regard le livre à son équilibre. Et il basculait soulevant dans le ralenti du silence le lancinant désir qui ne la quittait pas. À l’horizontale, le livre ressemblait à une pierre tombale: un nom, un titre et l’éclat de la couverture.

L’univers était un risque. Elle était une présence minimale, un espace embué devant la fenêtre. Un jalon peut-

---

20 This resonates with Brossard’s articulation in many of her theoretical writings and talks of the relation of body (*corps*), writing (*écriture*) and text (*texte*): “The expression *Le Cortex exubérant* summarizes my obsession with body, text, and writing. For me the body is a metaphor of energy, intensity, desire, pleasure, memory, and awareness. The body interests me in its circulation of energy and the way it provides, through our senses, for a network of associations out of which we create our mental environment, out of which we imagine far beyond what we in fact see, feel, hear or taste. It is through this network of associations that we claim new sensations, that we dream backward in accelerated or slow motion, that we zoom in on sexual fantasies, that we discover unexpected angles of thought” (1990, p. 27).

être entre ce livre et son devenir dans un autre langue. C'était précisément à voir. (p. 55)<sup>21</sup>

Translating is “reading backwards” in the original language. A text is a system that cannot adequately find its place in another. Translation is always risky and the doubts of the *auteure* are legitimate: “Comment croire un instant que les paysages qui sont en vous n’effaceront pas les miens?” (p. 143), asks Laure Angstelle to the translator, Maude Laures.<sup>22</sup> But although the translator’s initial intention is “to carry over” meaning and re-produce the “original,” she becomes increasingly entangled in the world of the novel. She studies characters, places, objects, the action, and imagines dialogues that could reveal something beyond the words. But words come to life in a different way: no reality appears behind them; they resonate with multiple meanings, and sometimes in a contradictory way; they take up shapes, colours, music reverberates through them, modulation running through the writing. Maude’s irresistible attraction to the novel is a desirous relation to language whereby she realizes that “le monde de Laure Angstelle prenait place en elle et cela bien différemment de ce qu’elle avait ressenti au tout début alors que durant ses premières lectures, elle avait éprouvé le sentiment diffus d’une

---

21 “She will never know why her whole being plunged into a book, why for two years she spent herself, stretched herself through the pages of this book written by a woman she knows nothing about except the presumed evidence of an existence cloistered in the time and space of a single book.

All told this book was *innocent*. It rested, thin slice of paper between book ends. It was a December morning, of a spectral whiteness which eroded objects. She was thinking slowness while with her gaze she abstracted the book’s equilibrium. And it fell over in the slow motion of silence arousing the throbbing desire that never quit her. Horizontally, the book resembled a tombstone: a name, a title and the cover’s brightness.

The universe was a risk. She was a minimal presence, a misted space in front of the window. A marker perhaps between this book and its becoming in another language. This remained precisely to be seen” (p. 51).

22 “How am I to believe for a single moment that the landscapes in you won’t erase those in me?” (p. 133)



réciprocité” (p. 64).<sup>23</sup> Translation is not self-transparent. As a writing act, it *produces* meaning and Maude Laures’s work makes this process visible as she becomes aware that she is a marker of difference within the text: “Et elle se faisait de plus en plus à l’idée de devenir une voix autre et ressemblante dans l’univers dérivé de Laure Angstelle” (p. 176).<sup>24</sup> This work, close to the text and close to language, is also a strategy of intervention: “Car à l’improvisiste <tromper la langue> lui venait comme une réplique nécessaire afin que soit reconstituée <la fiction>, le contour tremblé de ses effets” (p. 65).<sup>25</sup> The feminist writer/translator works through the text to disassemble “reality” and “images” to open a space for the articulation of the un-said, “flow over the edge of our thought-frame” (p. 133) and, finally, realize that “Là où il y avait eu des personnages, des objects, de la peur et du désir, Maude Laures ne voyait plus que des mots. Les mots prenaient le relais, parés pour la capture des sens” (p. 178).<sup>26</sup>

The collaborative enterprise of writer and translator which is creatively theorized in *Mauve Desert* becomes practice in the collaborative translation of Brossard and Marlatt in the two sequences “MAUVE” and “Character/Jeu de lettres” (1986). Although the translation was solicited by poet Colin Browne for a joint publishing venture between the journal *Writing* and *La Nouvelle Barre du jour*, this “transformance” grew out of the encounter (and traversal) of the two writers’

---

23 “Laure Angstelle’s world was taking place inside her and this quite differently than what she had felt at the outset when, while first reading she had experienced the diffuse feeling of a reciprocity” (p. 60).

24 “And she progressively got accustomed to the idea of becoming a voice both other and alike in the world derived from Laure Angstelle” (p. 160).

25 “For unexpectedly ‘deceiving language’ came to her as a necessary reply so that ‘the fiction’ be reconstituted” (p. 61).

26 “Where the characters, objects, fear and desire had been, words were all Maude could see now. Words were taking over the action, poised for the capture of the senses” (p. 162).

experimental practices.<sup>27</sup> An “example” of translation, in that it enacts translation, it is also a performative theory of translation of body/mouth in the feminine. The intra-linguistic and inter-semiotic writing of the two poets is further re-written through the inter-lingual translation which produces a dialogic space for their feminist and ficto-theoretical articulations. Whose texts are these? While in both “MAUVE” and “Character/Jeu de lettres” the “original” precedes the “translation,” the sequence of the two languages engenders a linguistic reverberation which re-constitutes a *différent* meaning. This translational act subverts the normative relationship between producer (authenticity) and re-producer (copy and secondary) by unhinging “reality” from its self-invisible and referential status. Indeed, language spills over the borders of the real in MAUVE’s poetic acts, and it illuminates the interrelationship (and multiple significations) of the senses and meaning formation (*le sens*), reality and the virtual, language and fiction: “fiction culture cortex / M A U V E” (p. 88) points to the energy liberating from the opening up of the inter-semiotic through sound patterns, desirous words and linguistic games. Marlatt’s text re-plays twice the “fiction culture cortex / M A U V E” and adds a coda to the “transformance” which, as supplement, re-enacts the poetics of the French text yet anchors it in the specificity of the English language. The polysemic significations of “mauve” ripple through the text(s), with its associations of flowering plant, colour, lesbianism, “mauvais” and what Marlatt, dubbing Stein and the tradition of English letters

---

27 In *À tout regard* (1989), Brossard explains that the two texts are part of a cycle of exploration of the relationship of writing and translation. *L’Aviva*, which precedes the two poems in this collection, “fait aussi partie de ce cycle qui se termine en 1987 avec la parution du roman *le Désert mauve*” (p. 84). Interestingly, Brossard also notes her collaboration with American language poet Charles Bernstein. After remarking that “*Polynésie des yeux* est le seul de mes textes que j’aie traduit,” she adds: “Ce texte a été publié pour la première fois dans la revue américaine *Notus*, vol. 2, n° 2, 1987. Le poète américain Charles Bernstein a écrit à partir de la version anglaise, un autre texte intitulé *Polynesian Days* paru dans *Notus*, 1988” (p. 84). This exchange also shows the *transnational-as-translational* (Bhabha, 1994) aspect of language-centred poetic practices.

in her meditation “Translating MAUVE: Reading Writing” (1989), echoes as “a mauve is a mauve is a mauve” (p. 29):

M A U V E  
cortex fiction culture  
  
stains the other  
mew maiwa mauve  
malva rose core text  
fiction rings round  
skin immersed in  
resemblance takes  
the stain, sense  
roseblue in tissue re-  
membering  
(p. 93)

In this creative re-writing of what is reality and what is fiction, it is not surprising that the poetic sequence “Character” investigates the value-laden notions of subject, subjectivity, identity, character, and characterization that underpin novelistic genres and fiction’s genders in the dominant thought-frame of representation. By exposing the alignment of character with property, belonging, and appellation, the poem unsettles the ideological closure of the “economy of solids” (Irigaray, 1985b) and unseats sedimented meanings into new possibilities: the projection of “meaning” onto words is unhinged by showing words as graphic signs inscribed, yet playing freely, through multiple chains of signification (*I* and *Elle*). The energy that emanates from these translational acts is poetics. As the reading act moves back and forth between the English and the French text (reading as writing in that the reader also becomes a participant of this fluid economy), layers of languaged meaning multiply in unpredictable ways:

«enjeu de pointe»

take a character, write s  
not the S-burn hide, not  
property marked with belonging

prends une lettre, écris /  
non pas ce L de brûlant Brandon, non  
qui soit exempte de toute appartenance

S does not belong, goes beyond  
herself in excess of  
longing to leap  
right out of her skin

L n'a de dieu, n'a de lieu  
va au-delà d'l-même  
en l'excès du désir de l'élan  
sortir de sa peau

shin (tooth) Š  
take hold, bite into

perce la (dent)elle  
tu saisis, mords-y

 S s.

signor, sister, son, sire, soprano  
more she has a stake in  
biting through the traces left  
across her body writing  
you

*E L le*  
sibylle si belle elfe ellipse, la lyre  
elle a de plus tout intérêt à  
couper court au vertige des vestiges  
en travers de son corps écrivant  
toi

(p. 102)

(p. 108)

The “lettering” of the poems, revolving around *s* in English and *l* in French yet seeping into each other,<sup>28</sup> makes visible not only the constructedness of language but the slippages, reverberations, movements across, and displacement that both produce and betray meaning. Writing-as-translation produces a slippage that makes visible, and re-articulates, the borderlines of linguistic frames of representation, curves and lines doubling reality and the real. It proves to be “faithful” and “literal” (*à la lettre*), thus activating the liberatory potentials of language. But it will always betray, for it can only expose transparency as the materialized fantasy of patriarchal knowledge production. As “conversion, transmission, neural seepage, transgression of

28 See Susan Holbrook’s “Mauve Arrows and the Erotics of Translation” (1997).

boundaries, connection and communication” (Marlatt, 1989, p. 29), writing-as-translation also rewrites the margin not in the mirror of the imagined community of the nation but in the drift of an imagination *au féminin*.

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

### References

BHABHA, Homi (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London and New York, Routledge.

BROSSARD, Nicole (1975). « l’e muet mutant ». *La Nouvelle Barre du jour*, n. 50, (1975 hiver), pp. 10-27. Trans. and rpt. in *Ellipse*, 23/24, (1979), pp. 44-63.

— (1987). *Le Désert mauve*. Montréal, Éditions de l’Hexagone.

— (1989a). “Mauve” [1985]. En collaboration avec Daphne Marlatt. *À tout regard*. Québec, Éditions NBJ, pp. 83-93.

— (1989b). “Character / Jeu de lettres” [1986]. En collaboration avec Daphne Marlatt. *À tout regard*. Québec, Éditions NBJ, pp. 95-108.

— (1990a). *Mauve Desert*. Trans. Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood. Toronto, Coach House.

— (1990b). “Poetic Politics.” *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*. Ed. Charles Bernstein. New York, Roof, pp. 107-126.

BUTLING, Pauline (1992-93). “Magazining: Interview with Daphne Marlatt.” *Open Letter*, 8.5-6, pp. 113-124.

CARR, Brenda (1989). “Re-casting the Steveston Net: Re-calling the Invisible Women from the Margins.” *Line*, 13, pp. 83-95.

CIXOUS, Hélène (1976). "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs*, 1.4 (Summer), pp. 875-893.

— (1980). "Sorties." [1975]. *New French Feminisms*. Ed. E. Marks at al. New York, Schocken Books, pp. 90-98.

DE LOTBINIÈRE-HARWOOD, Susanne (1991). *Re-Belle et infidèle: la traduction comme pratique de réécriture au féminin / The Body Bilingual: Translation as a ReWriting in the Feminine*. Montreal and Toronto, Les éditions du remue-ménage / Women's Press.

DE MAN, Paul (1986). "Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'." *The Resistance to Theory*. Foreword by Wlad Godzich. Minneapolis, U of Minnesota P, pp. 73-105.

ELLENWOOD, W. Ray (1981). "Literary Translation in Canada." *Academy of Canadian Writers Newsletter*, 3.1 (Oct), p. 5.

— (1983). "Some Actualities of Canadian Literary Translation." *Translation in Canadian Literature: Symposium 1982*. Ed. Camille R. La Bossière. Ottawa, Ottawa UP, pp. 61-72.

— (1984). "Some Notes on the Politics of Translation." *Atkinson Review of Canadian Studies*, 2.1, pp. 25-28.

GIGUÈRE, Richard (1997). "Translation: English to French." Ed. William Toye. *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Toronto, Oxford UP, pp. 794-795.

GILLAM, Robyn (1995). "The Mauve File Folder: Notes on the Translation of Nicole Brossard." *Paraglyph*, 17.2, pp. 8-12.

GODARD, Barbara (1984). "Translating and Sexual Difference." *Resources for Feminist Research / Documentation sur la recherche féministe*, 13.3 (November), pp. 13-16.

— (1985). "The Translator as She: The Relationship Between Writer and Translator." *In the Feminine: Women and Words / Les femmes et les mots*. Ed. Ann Dybikowski, Victoria Freeman,

Daphne Marlatt, Barbara Pulling, and Betsy Warland. Edmonton, Longspeer, pp. 193-198.

— (1989). “Theorizing Feminist Discourse / Translation.” *Tessera*, 6 (Spring/printemps), pp. 42-53.

— (1997). “Culture as Translation.” *Translation and Multilingualism: Post-Colonial Contexts*. Ed. Shantha Ramakrishna. New Dehli, Pencraft International, pp. 157-182.

— (2000). “Gender and Gender Politics in Literary Translation.” *Encyclopedia of Literary Translation into English*. Olive Classe, ed. Vol 1. London, Fitzroy Dearborn, pp. 501-12.

— (2002). “La traduction comme réception : les écrivaines québécoises au Canada anglais.” *TTR*, 15.1, pp. 65-98.

— (2004). “The Moving Intimacy of Language.” Introduction to Nicole Brossard, *Intimate Journal or Here's a Manuscript*. Mercury, pp. 5-27.

GODARD, Barbara (ed.) (1994). *Collaboration in the Feminine: Writings on Women and Culture from Tessera*. Toronto, Second Story.

— (1987). *Gynocritics: Feminist Approaches to Canadian and Quebec Women's Writings / Gynocritiques: démarches féministes à l'écriture des canadiennes et québécoises*. Toronto, ECW.

GODBOUT, Patricia (1997). “Translation: English to French. 1982-1996.” Ed. William Toye. *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Toronto, Oxford UP, pp. 1123-1125.

HÉBERT, Anne et F. R. SCOTT (1960). “La Traduction : dialogue entre le traducteur et l'auteur.” *Écrits du Canada français*, 7, pp. 193-236.

— (1962). “The Art of Translation.” *The Tamarack Review*, 24, pp. 65-90.

HOLBROOK, Susan (1997). "Mauve Arrows and the Erotics of Translation." *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 61, pp. 232-241.

IRIGARAY, Luce (1985a). *Speculum of the Other Woman* [1974]. Trans. Gillian Gill. Ithaca, Cornell UP.

— (1985b). *This Sex Which is Not One* [1977]. Trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca, Cornell UP.

JONES, D.G. (1977). "Grounds for Translation / Raisons d'être de la traduction." Trans. Joseph Bonenfant. *Ellipse : Œuvres en traduction / Writers in Translation*, 21, pp. 58-91.

KRISTEVA, Julia (1980). *Desire in Language. A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* [1977]. Edited by Léon Roudiez. Trans. Alice Jardine, Thomas Gora and Léon Roudiez. New York and London, Columbia UP / Basil Blackwell.

— (1982). *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* [1980]. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York, Columbia UP.

LEFEVERE, André (1992). *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*. London, Routledge.

MARLATT, Daphne (1989). "Translating MAUVE: Reading Writing." *Tessera*, 6, pp. 27-30.

— (1991). "Acts of Passage." *Salvage*. Red Deer, Red Deer College, pp. 93-110.

— (1994). *Touch to My Tongue* [1984]. *Two Women in a Birth*. Toronto, Guernica, pp. 7-30.

— (1998). *Readings from the Labyrinth*. Edmonton, NeWest.

McCLINTOCK, Anne (1995). "No Longer In A Future Heaven: Nationalism, Gender and Race." *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York, Routledge, pp. 89-112.



MEZEI, Kathy (1986). "The Question of Gender in Translation: Examples from Denise Boucher and Anne Hébert." *Tessera*, 3, (rpt. in *Canadian Fiction*, 57), pp. 136-141.

— (1988a). "Speaking White: Literary Translation as a Vehicle of Assimilation in Quebec." *Canadian Literature*, 117 (Summer), pp. 11-23.

— (1988b). "Tessera, Feminist Literary Theory in English-Canadian and Quebec Literature, and the Practice of Translation as Betrayal, Exchange, Interpretation, Invention, Transformation and Creation." Ed. David Homel and Sherry Simon. *Mapping Literature: The Art and Politics of Translation*. Montréal, Véhicule, pp. 47-49.

— (1989). "Traverse / Traversée." *Tessera*, 6 (Spring/printemps), pp. 9-10.

— (1998). "Bilingualism and Translation in/of Michèle Lalonde's *Speak White*." *The Translator: Studies in Intercultural Communication*. 4.2, pp. 229-247.

— (2003). "Dialogue and Contemporary Literary Translation." *Tendances actuelles en histoire littéraire canadienne*. Dir. Denis Saint-Jacques. Québec, Nota bene, pp. 107-129.

O'CONNOR, John J. (1997). "Translation: French to English." Ed. William Toye. *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Toronto, Oxford UP, pp. 1127-1132.

SCOTT, Gail (1989). *Spaces Like Stairs*. Toronto, Women's Press.

SIMON, Sherry (1996). *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission*. New York, Routledge.

— (1997). "Translation and Cultural Politics in Canada." *Translation and Multilingualism: Post-Colonial Contexts*. Ed. Shantha Ramakrishna. New Dehli, Pencraft International, pp. 192-204.

— (1999). “Translating and Interlingual Creation in the Contact Zone: Border Writing in Quebec.” *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*. Ed. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi. London, Routledge, pp. 58-74.

STRATFORD, Philip (1969). “French-Canadian Literature in Translation.” *Meta : Journal des traducteurs / Translators’ Journal*, 13.14 (Dec), pp. 180-187.

— (1979a). “Reconciling the Two Solitudes.” *Quill & Quire*, 45.13 (Nov), pp. 12-14.

— (1979b). “Quebec Writers and Translators Meet.” *Quill & Quire*, 45.14 (Dec), p. 14.

— (1983). “A Bridge Between Two Solitudes.” *Language and Society*, 11 (Autumn), pp. 8-13.

— (1986). *All the Polarities: Comparative Studies in Contemporary Canadian Novels in French and English*. Toronto, ECW.

SUTHERLAND, Roland (1971). “Notes on Translation and Comparative Studies in Canada.” *Second Image: Comparative Studies in Quebec / Canadian Literature*. Toronto, New Press, pp. 157-165.

TELLING IT BOOK COLLECTIVE (1990). *Telling It: Women and Language Across Cultures: The Transformation of a Conference*. Vancouver, Press Gang.

VON FLOTOW, Luise (1980). “Translation, Praxis, Criticism and Theory ‘au féminin’.” *Études canadiennes / Canadian Studies*, 22.41, pp. 181-195.

— (1995). “Legacies of Quebec Women’s ‘Écriture au féminin’: Bilingual Transformances, Translation Politicized, Subaltern Versions of the Text of the Street.” *Journal of Canadian Studies / Revue d’études canadiennes*, 30, 4 (Winter), pp. 88-109.

— (1996). “Weibliche Avantgarde, Zweisprachigkeit und Übersetzung in Kanada.” *Literarische Polyphonie: Übersetzung und Mehrsprachigkeit in der Literatur*. Ed. Johann Strutz and Peter V. Zima. Tübingen, Germany, Narr, pp. 123-136.

— (1997). *Translation and Gender: Translating in the ‘Era of Feminism.’* Manchester and Ottawa, St. Jerome / U of Ottawa Press.

— (2004). “Sacrificing Sense to Sound: Mimetic Translation and Feminist Writing.” *Translation and Culture*. Ed. Katharina M. Faull. Lewisburg, PA, Bucknell UP, pp. 91-106.

WOODSWORTH, Judith (1994a). “Aladdin in the Enchanted Vaults: The Translation of Poetry.” *Textual Studies in Canada / Études Textuelles au Canada*, 5, pp. 105-115.

— (1994b). “Translators and the Emergence of National Literatures.” *Translation Studies: An Interdiscipline*. Ed. Mary Snell Hornby, Franz Pöchhacker and Klaus Kaindl. Amsterdam, John Benjamins.

— (2000). “Translation in North America.” *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*. Ed. Peter France. New York, Oxford UP, pp. 81-88.

**ABSTRACT: Acts of Passage: Women Writing Translation in Canada** — This article discusses the relationship of writing and translation in Canadian feminist poetics, specifically experimental. As feminist poetics collapsing the boundaries between theory and creative act, “writing as translation” is a mode of articulation for female subjectivity and a strategy for oppositional poetics. The article engages with the practice of “writing as translation” in the works of two leading avant-garde artists, the francophone Nicole Brossard and the anglophone Daphne Marlatt, located respectively in Montreal and Vancouver. Building on the groundbreaking critical work of Barbara Godard, Kathy Mezei and Sherry Simon, it situates these practices in the socio-political and intellectual context of the 1970s and 1980s, which witnessed the emergence of women’s movements, feminist communities and feminist criticism, and in relation to the politics of translation in

Canada. This historicization is necessary not only to understand the innovative work of Canadian feminist poetics but also the political dissemination of a feminist culture bringing together English and French Canada.

**RÉSUMÉ : Les actes de passage : les femmes et « l'écriture comme traduction » au Canada** — Cet article se penche sur la relation entre l'écriture et la traduction dans la poétique canadienne féministe expérimentale. En tant qu'écriture féministe dissolvant la division entre théorie et création, « l'écriture comme traduction » constitue une pratique d'articulation de la subjectivité au féminin et une stratégie de poétique oppositionnelle. Cet article examine « l'écriture comme traduction » dans l'œuvre de deux artistes de l'avant-garde qui occupent une place prééminente : la francophone Nicole Brossard et l'anglophone Daphne Marlatt, qui résident respectivement à Montréal et à Vancouver. S'appuyant sur le travail critique innovateur de Barbara Godard, Kathy Mezei et Sherry Simon, ce texte situe ces pratiques dans le contexte sociopolitique et intellectuel des années 1970 et 1980, au moment de l'émergence des mouvements de libération de la femme, des communautés féministes et de la critique féministe, de même que des politiques de la traduction au Canada. Cette historicisation est nécessaire pour mieux comprendre non seulement le travail innovateur de la poétique féministe canadienne, mais aussi la dissémination politique d'une culture féministe qui rapproche les cultures anglophones et francophones du Canada.

**Keywords:** gender, writing, and translation; feminist theory, politics of translation in Canada, feminist communities, experimental writing.

**Mots-clés :** écriture, traduction au féminin; théorie féministe, politiques de la traduction au Canada, communautés féministes, écriture expérimentale.

**Alessandra Capperdoni**

983 Thermal Drive

Coquitlam B.C. V3J 6S2

acapperd@sfu.ca

alessandra\_cy@yahoo.com