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## Introduction: Translating Transnational Feminisms

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# Introduction: Translating Transnational Feminisms

Erin Katherine Krafft and Caroline De Souza

**Abstract:** In this introduction to the Special Issue “Translating Transnational Feminisms,” we argue for the integral position of feminist translation practices and the theories of Feminist Translation Studies as tools for both local and transnational feminist solidarities. Beginning with the understanding that transnational feminist solidarities rely on not only linguistic translation but also cultural fluencies that allow for exchange rather than simply the import or export of locally bound feminist praxis, we illustrate that the practice of feminist translation thus carries with it the conflicts, the fraught and unfolding contestations of meaning, and the ever-evolving conceptions of gender, feminism, and solidarity that exist not only between languages but also within any language and its political and cultural landscapes.

**Keywords:** Feminist Translation Studies, transnational feminism

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When we began this work, we did not quite know that we were beginning this work.

What we did know: that as professor and student, our scholarly interests and backgrounds intersected at specific and significant points, and that our different roles should in no way preclude an equal exchange; and, having both been teachers or tutors of language (De Souza of Portuguese and Krafft of Russian), and both having particular interests in the analysis of state power, in gender studies, and in the relationship between language and inter- and intra- cultural transformation, our casual conversations about Brazil and Russia became longer, more detailed, and more urgent. And, what we came to discover: that the nature of those intersections and conversations called for further exploration and collaboration, and that that collaboration would in all likelihood expand beyond to and through an independent study course and on to further projects. Ultimately, that collaborative exploration has led us to this Special Issue.

When our conversations began, they were at first a haphazard jumble of spontaneous observations about teaching grammar and about the complicated relationship between signifiers and the signified. Soon enough, they evolved to incorporate observations about the relationship between gender-related language and state power in the very different landscapes of Brazil and Russia, so we began then as we begin here: with the understanding that transnational feminist solidarities rely on not only linguistic translation but also cultural fluencies that allow for exchange rather than simply the import or export of locally bound feminist praxis. Hence, this Special Issue, drawing from the evolution of our own collaboration, as well as from the wisdom of the field of Feminist Translation Studies and the scholars and writers that give it life, will examine the multiple meanings of translation that must be considered given the multiple meanings and practices of feminism within and across communities and regions.

Feminist Translation Studies, since its emergence in the 1970s, has insisted that translation is a linguistic, cultural, social, philosophical, interdisciplinary, and complex practice, and as Castro and Ergun note in their introduction to *Feminist Translation Studies: Local and Transnational Perspectives*, it is also a “substantial force and form of activism” which, in their formulation, requires (re)considering “feminist

theories and practices developed in different geohistorical and disciplinary contexts,” as well as recognizing that Feminist Translation Studies can (or perhaps should) become “more transnational, interdisciplinary, and overtly political” (2017, 1-2). Following this, we recognize that the practice of feminist translation carries with it the conflicts, the fraught and unfolding contestations of meaning, and the ever-evolving conceptions of gender, feminism, and solidarity that exist not only between languages but also within any language and its political and cultural landscapes. This Special Issue, then, approaches the concepts of both “translation” and “feminism” via the acknowledgement that both are embodied in multiple ways whenever solidarity across boundaries is sought.

The boundaries that a translation must cross may be demarcated by legally recognized borders between nation-states, by language, by variable conceptions of any subject or object (whether the self, social norms, cultural markers, feminism as a practice or as a belief-system, or anything else that contains meaning), by differences in lived experiences, which create perspectives that are sometimes disruptively distant, or by any of these in combination with each other and with any number of other forces that categorize, divide, and determine. This view of translation, then—as more than simply a linguistic endeavor and instead a practice of inscribing collectively built visions of feminist world-making into practices of solidarity—also suggests that these encounters across boundaries often require translators to reckon with the legibility of feminisms that may be both simultaneously adjacent to one another and also positioned so differently in relation to structures of oppression that solidarities are threatened. In other words, feminist translation practices must navigate signifiers that may contain radically different—or even contradictory—ideas and states of being and knowing. As bell hooks writes in *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, “[t]hroughout American history, the racial imperialism of whites has supported the custom of scholars using the term ‘women’ even if they are referring solely to the experience of white women” (1981, 8), so it becomes clear that even within a single language, acts of translation and resignification may be crucially necessary. How can one word or one concept contain multiple subjects when those subjects are, in other cases, defined by their difference from one another? How can a potentially contested term with multiple claimants and heavy with meaning be packaged for transit if it cannot fit into a neat, single box?

As Maud Anne Bracke, Julia C. Bullock, Penelope Morris, and Kristina Schulz write in their Introduction to *Translating Feminism: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Text, Place and Agency*:

translation in all its forms has been absolutely central to the ways in which feminism has evolved. Indeed, we propose, it is the actual, imagined, or literary encounter with the “other woman”—with someone situated in a society or culture that is perceived as significantly different to one’s own—that stimulates the desire for a transformed womanhood and makes possible the imagining of a radically different gender order. Moreover, it is by understanding feminism and translation in relation to each other over time—a history of feminism through its transnational, translingual, and transcultural encounters—that a differently shaped account emerges that is sensitive to the diversity of feminism and revealing of a wider range of actors and contexts. (2021, 29)

The productive potential of these encounters and the forms of evolution they make possible are dependent on feminist translation practices that sense in difference or distance radical new possibilities for meaning-making. The shape and subject of feminism, of “woman,” of “other”—all of these may be drastically different based on the situation and situated-ness of the writer or the reader, the speaker or the listener, or the act and the audience, and it may be exactly in those fraught boundary zones that feminist translation practices can be activated to deconstruct the boundaries and local and transnational obstacles to solidarity. In this sense, Feminist Translation Studies, as both a set of methodologies and as a mode of interpretation, has much to offer feminist scholarship, practice, and movement more broadly. After all: the field’s framework

for exchange actively works toward dismantling the multiple barriers that perpetuate gender inequalities, cultural hegemonies, divisive and disruptive discursive categories, and the real-life consequences of those divisions and disruptions. Feminist translation practices and their interrogations of multiple layers of meaning thus have the unique capacity to unseat dominant paradigms and narratives. As Claudia de Lima Costa and Sonia E. Alvarez write, “conditions of power” often mask the fact that “theories are intertextual and citational: they do not necessarily appear in the usual form of a scholarly citation. They are hidden between the lines of the text, in its margins, in assumptions that are not spelled out by the author, or in the complex circuitry of knowledge formations” (2014, 560). Unearthing the unsaid and uncited, then, exposes those conditions of power, an aim common to both Feminist Translation Studies and to the feminist movement more broadly.

The contributions in this Special Issue, then, address translation as both an intra- and trans-lingual act, as an act of making legible in multiple ways, as a conceptual framework that may bridge or highlight gaps, and as a form of feminist praxis relevant to not only feminist translation practices but to feminist scholarship and solidarity. In “From ‘A Room of Your Own’ to ‘A Room of Her Own’: Women ReWriting Women and The Path to Feminist Practice,” Vasiliki Misiou examines three Greek translations of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), exploring the significance of both word choice and paratextual material in representations of gender, identity, and sexuality. In Misiou’s analysis, the linguistic choices and translators’ prefaces and introductions are configured as not simply conveyance of a source text, but as potential opportunities for readers in the target context to reconceptualize their own gendered worlds and possibilities for resistance.

Elsa Kunz’s article, “What Difference Does It Make? Early Reception Stories about Luce Irigaray’s Writing on Divine Women,” explores the complex conditions surrounding the uptake of French feminisms in the growing Anglo-American field of feminist philosophy of religion. In Kunz’s analysis, the entrance of Irigaray’s formulations of the divine and women’s subjectivity into the field revealed and responded to pre-existing ruptures between U.S. feminist theory and philosophers of religion, religious studies, and theology. Grounded in academic analysis as well as in moments of autoethnographic reflection, translated texts and theories are here positioned as and in transdisciplinary interventions.

Frameworks of feminist translation practice emerge in Flore Chevaillier’s “Translation, Weather, and Erasure in Bhanu Kapil’s *Schizophrene*” as a method of interrogating the possibility of written or spoken language to translate the body. Can the corporeal experience be expressed in any language, neatly written on a page? Can colonial and intergenerational trauma be transmitted through purely linguistic means? Can words erased convey erasure? What happens when the source text is the body?

Finally, in “SWERF Necropolitics: Three Sites of Mistranslation and the Politics of Feminist Exclusion,” Aaron Hammes examines the layers of meaning encased in the word “feminism” to reveal the conflict embedded in a single signifier with a contested interpretation, and the impacts this conflict may have on feminist praxis. If the “feminist” of “feminist praxis” is contested, then it is likely that the “praxis” may be, too, and opportunities for resolving this contestation—or, at least, clearly identifying its terms and its stakes—rely on an intralingual investigation of the multiple manifestations of one fraught and heavy signifier.

Each of these articles takes up the notion and practice of translation in different ways, but each of them utilizes frameworks and methodologies that recognize that the transit of meaning is linguistically, culturally, and philosophically complex regardless of which sorts of boundaries are traversed. And each of them poses crucial questions that remind us that all practices of transnational, transcultural, translational, and hence relational feminist practice require at all times multiple considerations: how we navigate intersections of meaning and being, in *what* we interpret, in *how* we interpret, and in *why* we interpret.

Finally: this is the first of a two-volume Special Issue on Translating Transnational Feminisms, and it feels fitting that we leave this introduction, in some ways, unfinished. Feminist Translation Studies, as an inherently interdisciplinary field, will always necessarily contain research gaps, as it must always leave space for changing meanings, realities, and experiences, for deconstructions and new connections, and for the fluctuations that are intrinsic to evolving languages, political and cultural contexts, and unfinished histories. The array of articles and ideas developed here do fill in some research gaps, but also—and very importantly—may point to further gaps. Feminist Translation Studies is a field whose map can never be fully plotted, because the map itself grows and transforms with each new text, with each utterance of a new word, or even of an existing word, imbued with new meaning.

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