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Feminist translation ethics

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1 Introduction

The question of ethics is inherent to translation, which is a universal, yet conditional, practice of the human condition that is plural—multilingual and multicultural, to say the least. As a meaning-making practice of human relationality where differently interpellated, situated, summoned, and invested subjects encounter one another in geohistorically contingent occasions and (consciously or unconsciously) make choices of subjectivity and intersubjectivity (as well as textuality and intertextuality) to connect with one another, translation indeed begs the question of ethics. In a world where differences are hierarchically coded and violently regulated, the following questions arise in regard to translation ethics: how to mediate across those differences and navigate power-ridden borderings that demand translation? How to be accountable for the power to translate? How to translate against the contemporary global currents of heteropatriarchal colonial capitalism, while the very mechanisms and conditions of translation are shaped by that global order? How to engage in translation in ways that not only empower marginalized communities, but also lay the groundwork to build cross-border affinities and solidarities of resistance? How to translate the other so that we connect with them outside the assimilative and oppressive parameters of the binary logic? In other words, how to translate ethically? As a matter of plurality, connectivity, and alterity, translation invites us to ask those urgent ethical questions of why and how to translate. This chapter explores the feminist responses to these ethical inquiries, first within the context of feminist translation studies, and then within the larger framework of feminist theories developed particularly by feminists of color and indigenous feminists.

The bridge between feminisms and translation is a two-way street fraught with ethical concerns. On the one hand, translation is indispensable to feminist politics not only because translation is a gendered practice that too often serves to perpetuate heteropatriarchal regimes of truth (and other intersecting systems of domination), but also because feminist movements, heterogeneously organized across different locales, have always existed in and through translation, largely due to the ruling presence of differences and borders that justice movements have to navigate as well as challenge to build transnational solidarities. The crucial role that translation plays in reinforcing or challenging gender discourses is precisely why exploring translation ethics from various feminist perspectives is an urgent task. Formulating such an ethical framework not
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only helps us question existing practices of translation that connect (or fail to connect) people and peoples across differences and borders, but also guides future translation practices, which, when undertaken ethically, can facilitate the formation of resistant cross-border connectivities and subversive transnationalities. In other words, without a feminist ethics of translation that is solid enough to challenge intersecting operations of power and flexible enough to recognize differences, the concrete struggle for achieving egalitarian cross-border exchanges of feminist knowledges, establishing political commonalities of resistance, and building transnational feminist solidarities will continue to suffer.

On the other hand, feminist critiques are also indispensable to translation because as a revolutionary platform of political thought and action, feminisms have developed ground-breaking discursive tools and frameworks that help destabilize the historically male-dominant norms of translation and develop new translation praxes whose ethics are informed by a vision of gender justice. In a multilingual planet that is ruled by heteropatriarchal colonial capitalist machineries and mechanisms of meaning making and knowledge production, feminist theories – some more than others – can provide us with crucial ethical and political insights on how to simultaneously intervene in those interlocking machineries and mechanisms in our cross-border interpretive practices, which is translation. That is, if globalization is an intense, yet unequal, process of cross-border trafficking that happens in and through translation, then translation provides us with a unique opportunity to disrupt the unjust operations of global contact and exchange and engage in anti-hegemonic relational practices. This disruptive potential of translation is precisely why we need a translation ethics that is tuned to globally and locally intersecting structures of power – heteropatriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, etc. And feminist politics, with its focus on theorizing, imagining, and materializing cross-border justice and liberation for all, can offer us key lessons on how to realize that disruptive potential of translation – disruptive of unjust global relations – and reconsider translation as an ethical praxis of meaning making and knowledge production. This chapter aims to cover some of those lessons. In the rest of the chapter, I first discuss how these mutually transformative political formations have ethically informed each other, largely within the context of the Canadian School of Feminist Translation, and then, by drawing particularly on women of color, indigenous, and transnational feminisms, propose new, more complex, and more nuanced ways to revisit translation ethics.

2 Historical trajectory: the Canadian School

In the disciplinary framework of Translation Studies, translation has traditionally been understood within the ethical confines of the Western logic of phallogocentrism that upholds the assumed “truth” of the superior (masculinized) original as opposed to the assumed “untruth” of the subservient (feminized) translation. Plagued by such a dualistic framework that simultaneously claims closure and fixity of meaning and privileges the masculine (the phallus), even the field of Translation Studies itself has historically treated translation as a lesser form of textuality whose worth is too often ascribed based on the gendered and sexualized notion of fidelity to the original. This phallogocentric ethical stance is captured perhaps most notably in the French phrase les belles infidèles that prescribes that translation can be either faithful or beautiful, thus situating “ethics as the opposite of elegance, the drudgery of moral obligation as incompatible with stylistic (and marital) felicity” (Simon 1996, 10). It is largely thanks to the Canadian School of Feminist Translation scholars, like Sherry Simon (1996), Luise von Flotow (1991, 1997), and Barbara Godard (1990), that “fidelity to the original” has not only been reframed as an empty premise and promise, albeit with immense lasting power to dictate translation ethics, but also been politicized as a patriarchal concept that is deeply invested in gender hierarchies. Lori
Chamberlain’s (1988) pivotal essay on the misogynistic metaphors of translation, particularly the ones coded around issues of “fidelity,” has also been crucial in revealing the prevalence of heterosexism in conceptions of translation.

Under the multiple influences of the Quebec sovereignty movement that challenged the colonial hegemony of English, the 1970s’ “second wave” feminism, particularly North American radical feminist thought and its critiques of male language, and French poststructuralist thought, especially Derrida’s work on phallogocentrism and *différance* (difference and deferral of meaning), Canadian feminist translation scholars not only avidly pointed out the indeterminacy and relational fluidity of meaning, but also highlighted the political agency of the translating subject as a gendered producer of meaning. In doing so, they scandalously rejected the notion of “objective translation,” which undergirds the conventional ethics of fidelity (Flotow 1997; Simon 1996). In the context of the “cultural turn” of the late 1980s and early 1990s, this critical gesture was welcome by many translation studies scholars. However, such denunciation of the heteropatriarchal ethics of fidelity that recognized both translation’s indeterminate nature as a situated process of cross-cultural mediation and signification and the translator’s political subjectivity as a determining factor in the making of textual and intertextual choices also revived longstanding anxieties about translation’s insurgent potential to unsettle and challenge the status quo and, thus, received some backlash—critiques of (Canadian) feminist translation practices for being elitist and accessible only to a small group of bilingual scholars (Guillaumin 1995; Voldeng 1985), adhering to a universalistic (read: white-Western) and essentialist definition of womanhood and gender (Martín Ruano 2005), and pursuing a “double standard” (Arrojo 1994).

The experimental translations produced by the textually assertive Canadian feminist translators and their “interventionist” rewriting strategies were particularly criticized for violating the ethics of fidelity. Especially Godard’s (1990) strategy of “woman-handling” and Flotow’s (1991) classification of feminist translation strategies that included “hijacking” caused quite a stir, with the most notable critique coming from Rosemary Arrojo (1994, 1995), well known for her work on postmodern, psychoanalytical, and postcolonial perspectives on translation. Arrojo (1994), while recognizing that “[Feminist translators’] successful determination to make themselves ‘visible’ in the texts they translate is a clear sign that both translation and women’s issues have conquered a much deserved space within the prevailing, phallogocentric world of men and alleged ‘originals’” (159) also called Canadian feminist translators “opportunistic traitors” that appropriated texts for their own political gains, displaying “contradictory ethics” (1995, 73). The underlying logic of this critique is problematic on two grounds. First, it assumes that translation, when not presented with a self-admitted political agenda, is not invested in or influenced by existing relations of power. That is, the façade of impartiality is mistaken for impartiality and feminist translators are singled out for producing biased rewritings and transgressing the ethical boundaries of fidelity. However, even when a translation is not framed as an ideological project, it still is one. The notorious example of the first English translation of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* immediately comes to mind here (Bogic 2010; Moi 2002; Simons 1983). While this translation was presented to the Anglo audience as an impartial translation without an ideological agenda, studies revealed that it was indeed a heteropatriarchal translation that eliminated a large amount of “sensitive” materials from the volumes (e.g. names of historically important women, the issue of lesbianism, etc.), and, thus, caused a common misperception of de Beauvoir as an incoherent, intellectually lacking philosopher in the Anglophone world. Perhaps nowhere is the ideological nature of translation more evident than in the competing translations of holy texts—allegedly unbiased (and institutionally authorized) ones versus feminist-identified ones. In fact, part of the reason why the feminist English translations of the Bible and the Quran have
become so controversial is that, through their inclusive writing strategies, they have offered alternative interpretations of these religious texts and revealed the ideological nature of all translation (Simon 1996, 111–133). In the face of such challenge to authority and the traditional exegesis, heteropatriarchal translations that were previously deemed apolitical and mainstream have become more suspect, albeit with continuing institutional safeguarding. Then, what makes those seemingly disinterested translations more ethical than feminist translators’ rewritings?

The question brings us to the second issue with the aforementioned critique that labels Canadian feminist translators as “hypocritical” (Arrojo 1994, 149). According to this critique, Canadian feminist translators condemn patriarchal interventions while championing their own political interventions in translation. Is this not an ethical “double standard,” as Arrojo (1994, 149) puts it? What is missed here is that heteropatriarchal and feminist agendas are not ethically comparable, even if fidelity in the conventional sense were a possibility, since they serve different political causes – the former is invested in relations of domination while the latter is in pursuit of equality and justice. Moreover, while heteropatriarchal translations are often cloaked as apolitical, which increases their textual legitimacy and thus political reach, feminist translations are accompanied by ethical and political disclosures to the reader, which is also part of the larger feminist task of increasing the visibility of the translator. As Castro and Ergun (2018) note, “[u]nlike feminist translation’s ethical, celebratory recognition of the translator’s visibility, hegemonic translation practices tend to demand the translator’s invisibility as a precondition of successful translation, which further perpetuates the illusion of ‘objective’ translation” (134). In this regard, it could in fact be argued that feminist translators are more ethical because they do not pretend to be “nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively” (Haraway 1988, 584), but rather openly recognize the incompleteness, ideological partiality, and geohistorical situatedness of their work. Instead of claiming a false objective (faithful) stance, feminist translators are aware of the fact that translation is necessarily an interventionist act of interpreting and rewriting and, therefore, they inform their readers about the specific processes of intervening that they have engaged in in the recreation of the text. This does not mean that feminist translators are right or righteous in every decision they make or that their translation strategies necessarily serve transgressive and liberatory ends for all marginalized groups. Rather, my argument here solely focuses on their disclosure practices. This is an ethics of accountability that simultaneously recognizes the translator’s agency and contingency and translation’s potential to perpetuate or disrupt relations of power, both locally and transnationally. This is how feminist translators have redefined the concept of fidelity in translation, which “is to be directed toward neither the author nor the readers, but toward the writing project – a project in which both writer and translator participate” (Simon 1996, 2). Indeed, close collaborations, or “closelaborations,” a term coined by Cuban writer Guillermo Cabrera Infante as reported by his feminist translator Suzanne Jill Levine (1991, xiii), between the translator and the author have been quite a celebrated practice among feminist translators, especially in translations of feminist experimental writings. For instance, Susanne de Lothièr–Harwood (1991, 155), a prominent Canadian feminist translator, discusses her translations as products of a “shared process of co–authership” during which the translator and the “auther” engage in working sessions, negotiations, and discoveries, all defined in mutual respect and support.

After experiencing a period of high productivity in 1980s and 1990s thanks to the scholarship produced mostly in Canada and the US (particularly by Carol Maier and Suzanne Jill Levine), the field of feminist translation studies seemed to come to a standstill in 2000s, partly because of its limited political focus on gender/women (in a largely essentialist and gender-only framework) and partly because of its limited geopolitical focus on North American contexts. Similarly, the ethical discussions in feminist translation studies continued to narrowly revolve around the
question of fidelity, keeping the field on the defensive. Then, under the impact of the third wave feminism, whose sharper focus on differences, intersecting relations of power, and transnational flows brought about a new surge of critical scholarship on feminist translation and the inter/disciplinary, geographic, political, and ethical boundaries of the field began to expand. Two particular publications played a bridging role in this process of epistemic transition: Keith Harvey’s (1998) innovative article that explored politics of sexuality and translation and José Santaemilia’s (2005) edited collection, *Gender, Sex and Translation*. In the next section, I discuss the political need for such an epistemic expansion and the feminist theories that have so far challenged the field and pushed its boundaries.

### 3 Core issues and topics

In the 1990s, particularly with the determination of black and women of color feminisms and the rise of postcolonial and Third World feminist theories, transnational feminist theory, postmodern feminism, indigenous feminism, and queer theory, a “new” chapter was opened in the history of North American feminisms, which has been branded as the third wave feminism. The third wave has deeply challenged the essentialist and hegemonic politics of the second wave and brought intersectionality and transnationality to the forefront, although none of the critiques raised by the third wave was fully new, because feminists of color and queer feminists had been voicing them for decades already. In fact, intersectionality itself was not a new idea since it had been articulated by feminists of color actively throughout the Anglo-American history – most notably, in Sojourner Truth’s 1851 talk, “Ain’t I a Woman?” and the Combahee River Collective’s 1977 “A Black Feminist Statement.” However, it was Kimberlé Crenshaw who officially coined the term in 1989, and intersectionality has been at the center of Anglo-American feminisms since then (and also has traveled to other feminist landscapes around the world through translation). The concept importantly underlines the complex interfaces of multiple systems of domination as well as identities that create distinctive, multifaceted living conditions for differently embodied and situated individuals. That is, intersectionality highlights the importance of recognizing differences among women as a condition of solidarity and that women’s different experiences with oppression, survival, and resistance demand more complex, nuanced, and flexible ethical frameworks to achieve solidarity and social change.

While the focus of intersectionality theories has initially been on local relations of ruling in the US, the framework has later been expanded to recognize its global scope. For instance, in *Black Feminist Thought* (227–228), Patricia Hill Collins (2000), whose well-known concept “matrix of domination” describes the “overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained,” pointed out that the concept “encapsulates the universality of intersecting oppressions as organized through diverse local realities.” Indeed, such a seemingly paradoxical embrace of both the local (particular) and the global (universal) has become a key problematic of third wave feminisms. And as a practice that is simultaneously local and global, translation is at the center of that debate. However, the locally framed (US-centric) intersectional focus has been most considerably expanded by postcolonial and transnational feminists who have rightly called out North American feminists on their imperialistic, colonialist, and orientalist tendencies – neatly packaged in universalistic claims of “global sisterhood” – and demanded them to take responsibility (and make amends) on their exclusionary, monolingualistic, and assimilative knowledge production, legitimization, circulation, and reception praxes (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Mohanty 2003; Spivak 1993). It is in this intersectionally and transnationally re-envisioned political platform that translation has finally firmly appeared as a central question of feminisms.
The impact of the third wave on feminist translation studies intensified particularly in 2010s when a surge of scholarship began to explore the intersectional, transnational, and queer politics of feminist translation within inter/disciplinary contexts of translation studies and feminist studies. For instance, Amireh and Majaj's (2000) edited collection *Going Global* brought politics of translation and reception into the forefront of discussions on transnational and postcolonial feminisms. Davis (2007) and Thayer (2010) examined the transnational travels of feminist texts and discourses between the Global North and the Global South asking critical questions on the geopolitics of global flows (what flows in what direction and why?). Finally, a number of publications exploring the queer politics of translation (particularly in relation to postcoloniality) came out in the 2010s (Baer and Kaindl 2018; Epstein and Gillett 2017; Ruvalcaba 2016; Spurlin 2014). “A Manifesto for Queer(ing) Translation,” collectively authored by the Queer Translation Collective, also illustrates the third wave perspective on translation. In the following paragraphs, I unpack the ways in which these large-scale epistemic and political shifts manifest themselves in the study and praxis of feminist translation.

Third wave feminist translation scholars have not only reclaimed “feminist” to mark their multifaceted political and ethical stance of “cross-border solidarity in difference,” but also expanded the definition of feminism from its previous focus on gender equality to a more holistic and geopolitically grounded understanding of equality and justice on all fronts of oppression (Castro and Ergun 2017, 1–2). While gender, now redefined in line with queer and postcolonial critiques of binaries, essentialisms, and homogenizations, has remained the primary focus of the field, feminist translation has moved beyond its simplistic (and largely depoliticized) focus on “women in translation” and adopted a transnational framework, or “a politics of location,” that now recognizes local and global differences and hierarchical power relations among women across borders (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Mani 1990; Mohanty 2003; Nagar 2019; Rich 1984). As a result of this new attentiveness to how geopolitics affect the production, circulation, and reception of translations and how translation plays a central role in global flows and exchanges, the urgency of crafting a geoethics of feminist translation has also become clear (Costa 2006; Costa and Alvarez 2014; Nagar 2019).

Within the context of the third wave, Gayatri Spivak’s (1993) pivotal essay, “The Politics of Translation,” and her English translation of Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi’s (1995) short stories, *Imaginary Maps*, have played a key role in expanding the epistemological scope of feminist translation studies by reframing translation as a simultaneously feminist and postcolonial question. In the essay, focusing on translations of Third World women’s texts into Western languages, particularly English, Spivak charts a postcolonial feminist ethics of translation where the geopolitical directionality of translation/reception and language hegemony appear as key ethical issues. Spivak recognizes that translation – as an encounter with the other – is ripe with potential to further otherize, especially in a world heavily marked by gendered colonial violence, and asks how to translate in pursuit of feminist solidarity. She writes, “The task of the translator is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay” (1993, 202).

As the basic principle of her postcolonial feminist ethics, Spivak (1993), then, calls for a “loving distance” between the translating subject and the translated subject to hold off the colonial reflexes of Western feminists to appropriate Third World women’s texts in the name of easy accessibility, which is driven by their belief in common gender oppression – a tradition of “humanist universality,” in Spivak’s (1993) words (214). This is why she wants the translator to “surrender to the text” and advocates for using foreignizing strategies and supplementary texts like prefaces, where the translator’s mediating political agency serves to prevent reductionist and assimilative readings (205). Spivak is aware of the fact that the risk of colonial readings never fully
disappears in translations of Third World women’s texts and therefore urges English-speaking feminists (feminists of a “hegemonic monolinguist culture”) to learn Third World women’s languages: “Rather than imagining that women automatically have something identifiable in common, why not say, humbly and practically, my first obligation in understanding solidarity is to learn her mother-tongue. . . . This is preparation for the intimacy of cultural translation” (215). Learning another language enables inhabiting the symbolic world of the other, which is why “translation is the most intimate act of reading,” during which the supposedly solid boundaries between the self and (versus) the other blur (Spivak 1993, 201). The key question of ethics, then, is how to make that porous, ambivalent, liminal space one of hospitality and generosity (rather than of hostility and/or charity) where subjects of different languages, geohistories, and gender/sexuality systems touch each other in (surprisingly) liberating ways and become (surprisingly) anew together. This is precisely why we need an intersectionally and transnationally refined feminist ethics of translation because intimacy also harbors a genuine potential for violence, and if we want feminist translation to be attuned to liberation and solidarity in difference, we need to ask more complex questions on how to connect with the other in and through translation. In the next section, I explore this question by bringing in various theoretical tools from black feminisms, indigenous feminisms, decolonial feminisms, and queer theory.

4 New debates and emerging issues

In her article “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” feminist philosopher María Lugones (2010), who is well known for her work on the coloniality of gender, asks, “[h]ow do we learn about each other? How do we do it without harming each other but with the courage to take up a weaving of the everyday that may reveal deep betrayals? How do we cross without taking over?” (755). In response to these questions, in this section, I draw on various feminist theories to describe a decolonial feminist ethics of translation, where translation is reconceived as a praxis of “world-travelling” that can enable “loving perceptions” of the other and noncolonizing mutual connectivities (Lugones 2003). It should be noted that this will not be a blueprint of practical steps for ethical translation. Rather, by borrowing theoretical insights from various decolonial feminist scholars, I offer some broad ethical principles that could help translators (and readers of translations) devise ethical practices that could work within the contingency of the particular translational encounter they find themselves in.

While there is no single published work in translation studies that provides an overview of a decolonial feminist ethics of translation, it is important to highlight some existing scholarship outside the discipline that may help lay the theoretical foundation for the development of such an ethics. Outside the terrain of translation studies, Mignolo and Schiwy’s (2002) chapter on the de/colonial potential of translation, which draws on Anzaldúa’s concept of “borderlands” and the Zapatistas’ politics of translation, directly focuses on translation and, thus, probably comes closest to delivering an early theoretical framework for a decolonial feminist ethics of translation. Also, Alvarez et al.’s (2014) edited collection, Translocalities/Translocalidades: Feminist Politics of Translation in the Latin/A Américas is a key text revealing the urgency of such an ethics because as Alvarez notes in the introduction to the volume, “[t]ranslation is politically and theoretically indispensable to forging feminist, prosocial justice, antiracist, postcolonial/decolonial, and anti-imperial political alliances and epistemologies” (2014, 1). This section, by building on these existing foundational works, explores the ways in which Lugones, Anzaldúa, and Ricœur’s theories may further add to a model of decolonial feminist ethics of translation.

By now, it has become clear that as an act of cross-border mobility and relationality, translation is deeply infused with power. Thus, translation can serve to produce and preserve “arrogant
perceptions” of the other, or it can enable “loving perceptions,” depending on what kind of traveling and connecting it facilitates – one that assimilates and eradicates the other and their world in self-assuring ways, or one that takes the risk of being surprised and challenged by the unknowns (or the knowns) of the other and their world in self-reflexive and self-transformative ways (Lugones 2003). I argue that a decolonial feminist ethics of translation can bring us closer to the second model of translation, which Richa Nagar calls “hungry translations” (2019) and which is deeply relevant to the question of global feminist resistance, because as Lugones (2003, 3) puts it, “The opportunity is of understanding by ‘translation’ a much larger act, a much more faithful act, a more loving act, a more disruptive act, a more deeply insurgent act than the finding of linguistic ‘equivalences.’”

A decolonial feminist (and queer) ethics envisions translation as a potentially transgressive textual border-space where asymmetrically situated subjects of difference may engage in acts of mutual recognition, confrontation, reconciliation, collaboration, and transformation (Mignolo and Schiwy 2002; Nagar 2019; Spurlin 2014). Unlike “colonial translation” that silences, distorts, and disciplines all voices and knowledges that do not serve the colonial machinery of modernity, decolonial feminist translation not only disrupts or unsettles the oppositional and separatist economy of the colonial border-spaces, but also enables cross-border flows and encounters of connectionist energies – formation of transnational synergies, if you will – which is necessary to what Lugones (2010) calls “coalition-in-the-making” (755). In other words, decolonial feminist translation both disrupts the “coloniality of language” and monolingualism by facilitating the co-existence of multiple (and fluid) languages, subjectivities, and epistemologies, and also helps us theorize and exercise alternative planetary visions of being, knowing, and relating (Lugones 2010, 750). When we add to this discussion the fact that gender binary itself is a colonial project of modernity, “queering” and “decolonizing” appear as inseparable components of the ethical and political agenda of decolonial feminist translation (Lugones 2007). As William J. Spurlin (2014) nicely puts it;

By attempting to inhabit the otherness of the source text when we work across languages and cultures, by bringing to light the slippages of signification that cannot be accommodated in accordance with the predominant cultural values of the target language, translation becomes a transgressive practice that disrupts and challenges, producing new, unassimilable circuits of linguistic and cultural difference.

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Then, the key question is, how can translation enable such ethical cross-border encounters that do not reduce us to instances of othering abstractions and repeat the epistemic violence of gendered colonization? In Nagar’s (2019, 27) words, “what might it take to reimagine translation as a dynamic, multidirectional process of ethical and politically aware mediation among otherwise impermeable local diversities – a process that always hungers for new political possibilities that we may never have imagined before?” (And the intersectional focus on dismantling the gendered, sexualized, and racialized economy of colonization and imagining alternative – nonviolent – forms of transnational relationality is what makes an ethical framework feminist and decolonial at once.) This is a crucial question, for as much as colonialism itself is an unfinished enterprise in translation, decolonization similarly needs to be configured as a translational process where borders are put to use to connect us in ways that do not pursue homogeneity, assimilation, or annihilation. Then, the task that awaits us is to find ways to channel the borderwork of translation towards planetary togetherness, while that same planet is already divided by manmade borders – borders that demarcate the very cognitive and affective horizons that make our selves. In
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that sense, translation is an attempt to negotiate differences claimed by borders – both material and symbolic, external and internal. The consequences of that negotiation largely depend on how the border navigation is done in the course of translating and reading translation. Therefore, a decolonial feminist ethics of translation first compels us to ask: does the act contain or contaminate colonial borders; does it challenge or confirm our deep-seated colonial and gendered meaning-making habits? This first calls attention to the question of text choice. Text choice has been a thorny subject of feminist translation as it, once again, brings up the ethical question of fidelity: should feminist translators only translate feminist texts or should they also translate patriarchal texts?  

The underlying (false) logic of this question first assumes that “ideological interventions” take place in translation only when there is no ideological alignment between the translator and the author. Second, it wrongly assumes that feminism is one and the same across the world, so all feminists share the same ideological perspective. Third, the assumption naively conceives the world as free of power and ignores intersectionality and transnationality, which in reality situate authors, translators, publishers, and readers in unequal webs of relations and create unique local and global conditions of production, circulation, and reception based on the directionality of the textual flow. A decolonial feminist ethics of translation would invite translators to exercise text selection with a complex and comprehensive political agenda of resistant solidarity and ethical vision of cross-border connectivity. This is the step where decolonial feminists question the promise that the translation holds (Alvarez 2014, 8–9; Mignolo and Schiwy 2002). So a decolonial feminist ethics of translation begins with a planetary vision – a hopeful, perhaps even a utopic one – of a text that not only crosses divisive borders and connects across against all odds, but also destabilizes the very borders it crosses. Of course, practicing this ethics would require both enabling material conditions (can the translator truly afford it?) and intellectual and political acuteness to navigate the borders and terrains that the text is traveling through.

Once text selection is made, the decolonial feminist translator translates it in ways that she believes will bring differently assembled and situated feminist texts and subjects together across borders without perpetuating the symbolic violence of colonial and gendered meaning-making economies. While each translation project would demand its own set of particular strategies, depending on the geopolitics of the textual flow (e.g. in which direction is the text traveling?), adding politically framed supplemental texts (e.g. footnotes, prefaces, afterwords, interviews, etc.) and directly engaging with target readers seem to encourage them to experience more ethical encounters with the text (Ergun 2015). These supplements can inform readers about the potential risks of colonial readings, particularly if such readings are culturally and institutionally promoted (e.g. in Anglo-American contexts), and introduce alternative solidarity-based reading mechanisms (Gayatri Spivak’s translation of Devi’s Imaginary Maps and Richa Nagar’s translation of Sangtin Writers’ Playing with Fire are two examples) (Sangtin Writers and Nagar 2006). That is, paratextual materials can help devise an “ethics of responsibly receiving stories” that travel through translation (Nagar 2019, 40). Other than these more practical suggestions, what ethical principles could help translators in their interpretive decision-making practices?

One such principle is “loving perception,” as theorized by Lugones (1987, 2003). Translational encounters necessarily involve some degree of domestication, or rather familiarization, but they also contain an element of surprise that can shake up the familiar ground of gendered colonial borders and worlds. (The reader should not be fooled by the apparent familiarity in translation, for translation itself is living proof of difference.) Translation is where the familiar and the unfamiliar, difference and commonality, coexist. The ethical imperative, then, is to balance that coexistence without sacrificing the other’s voice (as is commonly done in English translations of Third World women’s texts) or the possibility of a mutual – loving and playful
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– dialogue between different subjectivities. This is “a relationality embedded in radical vulnerability [which] strives to internalize that our self is intensely co-constituted and entangled with the other” (Nagar 2019, 31).

In Lugones’s (2003) theory, embracing surprise – being playful (“loving playfulness”) – is a key part of practicing “loving perception.” Translation is a text, in the broadest sense, that has traveled from another “world,” which is not what we think it is, and it can take us to that “world” if we are willing to go there playfully, not arrogantly; if we are willing to embrace “openness to being a fool, openness to self-construction or reconstruction and to construction and reconstruction of the ‘worlds’ we inhabit playfully” (96). This world traveling can be full of surprises as a result of which subjectivities, including ours, are transformed and give birth to new forms of intersubjectivity. As feminist philosopher Judith Butler, whose groundbreaking work on gender performativity and queer theory has deeply challenged gender-essentialist feminist discourses, notes (in Olson and Worsham 2000);

Taking for granted one’s own linguistic horizon as the ultimate linguistic horizon leads to an enormous parochialism and keeps us from being open to radical difference and from undergoing the discomfort and the anxiety of realizing that the scheme of intelligibility on which we rely fundamentally is not adequate, is not common, and closes us off from the possibility of understanding others and ourselves in a more fundamentally capacious way.

Then, the border-space that translation forges between worlds is a space of uncertainty that we need to inhabit creatively, playfully, and bravely. Attending to the invitation of the other in such an active and open-minded way is a work of “wonder,” “the passion that allows us to encounter, to perceive, what is un-usual and extra-ordinary, new to our previous experience” (Heinämaa 2017, 214). Loss may be inevitable in this process of crossing borders, but not all loss is impairing or depraving. Indeed, some loss is necessary in the process of learning how to engage in “loving playfulness” because that process also involves unlearning our well-entrenched “arrogant perceptions.” As renown Chicana feminist – and one of the founding names of the flourishing field of border studies – Gloria Anzaldúa (2015, 150) says,

[w]hen you relate to others, not as parts, problems, or useful commodities, but from a connectionist view, compassion triggers transformation. This shift occurs when you give up investment in your point of view and recognize the real situation free of projections – not filtered through your habitual defensive preoccupations.

A decolonial feminist ethics of translation, thus, invites subjects of translation, particularly those acculturated in Anglo-American (feminist or not) traditions of knowing, theorizing, and experiencing the world in arrogance (a cultural superiority complex, if you will), to relate to others differently and re-conceptualize, re-know, re-theorize, and re-experience the world to accommodate planetary polyphony:

Seeing feminist theorizing through the eyes of the “other,” from the “other place,” through the “other” worldview has the capacity to defamiliarize feminist theory as we know it and assist it not only in interrogating, understanding, and explaining the unfamiliar but also in refamiliarizing the familiar in more productive and enriching ways. . . . It is by accommodating “other” feminisms that feminism can survive and grow in a truly polyversal form.

(Nnaemeka 2015, 528)
The second ethical principle of decolonial feminist translation, which could be called “vulnerable hospitality,” is closely tied to the first one as it is the enabling condition of “loving perception.” In *Muddying the Waters* Richa Nagar (2014, 46) writes that translation is “an act that contains the possibility of becoming radically vulnerable. It is impossible to ‘know’ where the sharing might lead us without having taken the risk of exposing that intimate fragment that can only be translated inadequately.” That is, unless the subjects of translation relate to the traveling text in ways that turns themselves vulnerable – exposing their selves to the text and all that it brings, familiar or unfamiliar – translation’s indeterminate potential to connect across borders and transform in ways that are unpredictable in advance will be threatened. This is an exercise of mutual vulnerability since the displaced text is already vulnerable, particularly if its route and “destination” are organized by colonial mechanisms that vilify, appropriate, fetishize, or commodify “the foreign” in a self-serving manner (that is, for self-preservation). Without exercising vulnerability, the subject of translation will miss the (ethical) opportunity to stretch and grow beyond their known horizons. As Butler (2004, 228) writes;

> [I]t is only through existing in the mode of translation, constant translation, that we stand a chance of producing a multicultural understanding of women, or indeed, of society. The unitary subject is the one who knows already what it is, who enters the conversation the same ways as it exits, who fails to put its own epistemological certainties at risk in the encounter with the other, and so stays in place, and becomes and emblem for property and territory, refusing self-transformation, ironically, in the name of the subject.

(emphasis original)

What the ethical principle of vulnerable hospitality calls for, then, is to reciprocate the vulnerability of the traveling text/subject with “generosity and hospitality” (Ahmed 2000, 150). Sara Ahmed calls this a “strange encounter” – an encounter between the self and the other that is a case neither of assimilationist othering nor of rejectionist othering. Yet, to achieve such an ethical encounter, vulnerability should be accompanied by hospitality.

Translation as vulnerable hospitality is precisely what Paul Ricœur’s (2006) notion of “linguistic hospitality” highlights: “the act of inhabiting the word of the Other paralleled by the act of receiving the word of the Other into one’s own home, one’s own dwelling” (xvi). In translation, the translator invites the other into another world of language and then invites the reader to join in the dialogue. This mediation between subjects that are positioned as selves and others needs to be done with utmost care since the border economy that pits those subjects against each other is geohistorically ridden with hostility and violence. As AnaLouise Keating (2013, 51–52) writes;

> [w]hen we examine the world through this binary lens, we assume that the differences between our views and those of others are too different – too other, as it were – to have anything (of importance) in common. This assumption of negative difference traps us within our existing ideas and beliefs, for it prevents us from developing new forms of knowledge and new alliances. After all, if we’re so busy defending our own views, where is the room for complexity, compromise, and exchange?

(emphasis original)

This is why the ethics of vulnerable hospitality also requires a mental shift in the way we conceive of the self and the other as distinctly separate (and opposite) and mutually exclusive singular entities. What if the boundaries between the self and the other are not as solid and secure as we
assume them to be? What if otherness and selfhood are constitutive of each other? What if, as Riceur (1992) writes in Oneself as Another, “the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other”? (3) This shift would require us to rid ourselves of our deep-seated fear of the other (often conceived as a threatening force of corruption and deterioration) – thus, our deep-seated fear of translation – and replace it with a sense of multiplicitious, porous, codependent self that does not give in to the anxiety caused by an encounter with another.

This reconceptualization of the oppositional self/other binary as relational selves brings us to the third ethical principle of decolonial feminist translation, “radical interconnectivity,” which is the enabling condition of the previous principles. Inspired by indigenous feminisms, particularly Anzaldúa’s theory of nepantleras (“those who facilitate passages between worlds”), the principle of radical interconnectivity sees all life forms on this planet as deeply interrelated, and with that vision comes the recognition that we have an ethical responsibility toward each other (and the planet) because our actions always have an impact on others’ lives (2002a, 2002b, 1). As Keating (2013) explains;

[t]o borrow Rosario Morales’s analogy, we are all in the same boat, floating on the same water, tossed about by the same waves, battered by the same storms: We all rise or sink together. . . . Defining and perceiving ourselves as radically interrelated, we react thoughtfully as we engage with others; we learn to pause and self-reflect. We practice a relational ethics that demands a new level of mindfulness: we must carefully think through the implications of our words and deeds before we speak or act.

(49)

The task of the decolonial feminist translator – a nepantlera – is, then, to translate in ways that would help reveal our radical interconnectedness by inviting readers to stop championing walls (both material and symbolic) and begin re-envisioning (and re-experiencing) ourselves in symbiotic relationships with other selves who are already of us. This is not an easy task. Yet, translation, as a practice of world traveling, is essential to planetary justice, which can only be achieved in polyphony and, thus, in translation.

5 Conclusion

This chapter first discussed the historical trajectory of the praxis and ethics of feminist translation, largely within the geopolitical context of the second wave feminism in North America. In this context, achieving gender equality and visibility (of women in general and women translators in particular) in the world of literature was the main ethical concern of second wave feminist translation scholars. I, then, explored some potential expansions of the feminist translation ethics by drawing on the critical insights of the third wave feminisms, particularly black and women of color feminist theories, postcolonial and Third World feminist theories, transnational feminism, indigenous feminism, postmodern feminism, and queer theory. Together, these theories emphasize the urgency of developing an intersectional, transnational, decolonial, and interconnectionist ethical framework of feminist translation with a revised conceptualization of borders, inter/subjectivity, and solidarity. That is, third wave feminist translation scholars have claimed a broader political and ethical agenda of social justice on a transnational platform. Based on this expanded political agenda, the last section described three broad ethical principles that could guide translators and readers of translation in devising decolonial feminist meaning-making mechanisms and engage in non-othering translational encounters: (1) loving perception,
(2) vulnerable hospitality, and (3) radical interconnectivity. All these principles highlight the necessity of experiencing translation as “mutual stretching” across differences, which for Audre Lorde ([1988] 2017) is essential to “mutual surviving” (10–11). As Anzaldúa (1999) notes, the borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns are the enemy within. Rigidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically.

Yet, it should be remembered that, depending on the kinds of intersectional lives we live and the geopolitical locations we inhabit, some of us are more experienced with stretching than others are (indeed, for some, stretching is more than a “hobby”; it is a matter of survival). Hence, the application of any ethical principles that pursue mutual stretching requires different kinds of decolonizing work from different communities of feminists.

Before I end the chapter, I should also note that the ethical framework offered here is a partial one, for I am constrained by my own geopolitical and inter/disciplinary situatedness. For instance, all the theories I have drawn on exist in English and this poses a major limitation of vision. Moreover, I would like to emphasize the scarcity of scholarship on the queer ethics of translation, feminist ethics of interpreting,\footnote{13} and the ethical implications of machine translation, which, when expanded, will add crucial insights to the ever-evolving configuration of a decolonial feminist ethics of translation. Therefore, I present this partial chapter to you as an invitation to extend the geopolitical and interdisciplinaty/transdisciplinary scope of feminist translation ethics from your own situatedness so that it is nourished by voices, experiences, and theories that have not been heard in English, yet. In Donna Haraway’s (1988) words, “We seek those ruled by partial sight and limited voice – not partiality for its own sake but, rather, for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible. Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals” (590).

Related topics in the volume

The ethics of linguistic hospitality and untranslatability in Derrida and Riceour; the ethics of postcolonial translation; Venuti and the ethics of difference; ethics of activist translation and interpreting; translating and interpreting in conflict and crisis; accessibility and linguistic rights.

Notes

1. I use “heteropatriarchal” to describe sociopolitical systems of male domination and heteronormativity, which, together, elevate the binary categorizations of gender and sexuality (men vs. women/heterosexuality vs. homosexuality), at the expense of human plurality, and create a toxic (discriminatory, dangerous, and degrading) environment for women, trans people, gender-queer people, asexuals, LGBTQI people, etc. That is, the term recognises the interlocking nature of two separate systems of oppression.

2. I use “scare quotes” the first time I refer to the “wave” terminology in the essay because it is important to note that the waves metaphor, which has been the dominant periodization tool in conceptualizing the historical trajectory of US feminisms, has been criticised heavily for privileging the political experiences of white heterosexual upper-class women, reinscribing hierarchies and omissions in US women’s history, obscuring plurality among feminist activists and activists, failing to capture the historical complexities of US feminist politics, and misrepresenting US feminisms as a homogeneous movement. For an overview of the debate, see Laughlin et al. (2010) and Nicholson (2010). Also see Rowley (2013)
on the problematics of using the US waves metaphor transatlantically to describe other local feminist genealogies.

3 Gender essentialism here refers to the idea that there is a biologically fixed, universal, intrinsic, and innate essence to women and men. Gender essentialism claims that women and men are intrinsically different from each other ("sex differences") due to biologically determining factors and ignores socially determining factors that seek to condition (and discipline) humans into two separate gender categories.

4 It is not a coincidence that Patricia Hill Collins wrote the preface to Feminist Translation Studies (Castro and Ergun 2017), which is the first book published in feminist translation studies that has explicitly claimed an intersectional and transnational agenda for the field. Also, for a discussion on the transnational travels of Collins’s Black Feminist Thought and the concept of “intersectionality” to South Korea, see Choo (2012).


7 While Mignolo and Schiwy (2002) prefer the term “transculturation,” Alvarez (2014) uses “translocation” to refer to translational flows, contacts, and formations across borders.

8 For more on the enabling role of translation in colonialism, see Cheyfitz (1991), Niranjana (1992), and Rafael (1988).

9 For a brief discussion of this question, see Flotow (1997, 24–30).

10 Some might interpret this text selection ethics as “political censorship,” an accusation feminist translators are not fully unfamiliar with, although it could just as well be framed as “positive discrimination.”

11 For an interesting discussion of the transnational feminist politics of translation, see the collective chapter in Feminist Translation Studies (Castro and Ergun 2017), in which Butler is a participant along with Richa Nagar, Kathy Davis, AnaLouise Keating, Claudia de Lima Costa, Sonia E. Alvarez, and Ayşegül Altunay.

12 This border economy situates epistemic subjects in oppositional frameworks (”us” versus “them”) and regulates, even dictates, the ways in which those subjects relate to each other and hear each other – or not hear at all. It is this colonial border economy that tells us, for instance, to cherish the voices of the so-called French feminists as legitimate theories that can expand our horizons while designating theories produced in and of Africa, South America, Middle East, indigenous lands, etc. as illegible or unqualified. Then, these theories either do not cross borders to engage with audiences located in other geographies, or when they are allowed to cross borders, they end up serving colonial motives because they are translated and/or read with an agenda of othering, which is an operation of containing one’s horizons rather than expanding them.

13 Although it does not claim the title “feminist translation,” Nicole Doerr’s recent book (2018) on the intersectional politics of interpreting offers a great introduction to questions on the ethics of interpreting.

References


Davis, Kathy, and Mary Evans, eds. 2011. Transatlantic Conversations: Feminism as Travelling Theory. Farnham: Ashgate.


Further reading


This collection, composed of 20 chapters, explores the critical roles of translation and translators in enabling hemispheric feminist dialogues within and across Latin American, Caribbean, and US-based Latina feminisms. The volume represents the third wave of feminist translation studies although it has a limited geopolitical scope and is framed around a broad definition of translation.


This collection, composed of 11 chapters, explores the reception of Third World women writers’ texts as they travel from different locales across the globe into the Anglo US. The chapters not only highlight postcolonial feminist politics of translation and reception, but also critique ethnocentric versions of US feminism for appropriating Third World women’s voices and knowledges. The volume represents the third wave of feminist translation studies with its focus on the geopolitics of both translation and reception.


This collection is composed of 16 essays that explore translation as a form of local and transnational feminist activism from different interdisciplinary perspectives, while at the same time seeking to geopolitically expand the Anglo-Eurocentric boundaries of the field. The volume represents the third wave of feminist translation studies as it conceives feminist translation both as a transnational and intersectional form of feminist action.


This book is based on Doerr’s fieldwork on participatory democracy conducted in several multilingual political settings (e.g. World Social Forum) – settings that require politically engaged interpreting to become truly democratic. Doerr challenges long-standing assumptions that monolingual settings are more prone to democratic modes of communication by revealing that when facilitated by “political translation” (translation and interpreting tuned to intersectional operations of power), multilingual settings enable greater levels of democratic engagement and decision-making. The book represents the third wave of feminist translation studies due to its intersectional approach to translation and interpreting, although it does not claim “feminist” as an identifying marker.


This special journal issue, composed of seven essays, discusses the gender and queer politics of translation particularly within the critical framework of postcolonial studies. The articles explore key questions, such as how to translate varying gender and sexuality terminologies, including “queer,” across different linguistic and cultural landscapes when those very translation circuits are fraught with colonial forces and how translation has triggered social change when subversive narratives of sexuality travel across borders and enter into new cultural settings. The volume represents the third wave of feminist translation studies due to its intersectional perspective on translation informed particularly by queer and postcolonial studies.