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Queer feminisms and the translation of sexual health

Michela Baldo

1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the notion of health, which will be discussed through the lenses of translation on the one hand, and gender and sexuality studies on the other. It will make references to the way health has been theorised by a range of contemporary queer feminists in the United States, Europe, Latin America and China, who were inspired mainly by the feminist initiatives in the 1970s, like self-help clinics and self-awareness groups in the United States. For queer feminisms, health becomes synonymous with freedom of choice on matters such as one’s own body, affective and sexual relationships, and reproduction. Many queer feminist groups are actively engaged in the production of counter-knowledge on health, i.e. new and peripheral knowledge that opposes the official mainstream one, for two main reasons: first, to subvert the asymmetrical relationship between expert mainstream knowledge and the needs expressed by women and LGBTQ* subjects on these topics; second, to challenge institutional medical narratives, which have marginalised or censored this counter-knowledge. Pivotal in the production of an understanding of health in feminist terms is translation, given that it can make up for the lack of specific knowledge in a given cultural context. In this chapter I will discuss a number of translation scenarios, touching on health concerns that were raised by feminists in the 1970s and are still of interest to queer feminisms in the present day, namely the questions of female sexual health and reproductive choices, which appear to be the main topics that the translations focus on.

2 Definitions and historical perspectives

This section will provide a brief historical outline of the concept of sexual health in feminist terms. The 1970s can be considered a crucial moment in the feminist history of sexuality in Italy, the United States, the UK, France and Spain, among other countries. The feminist movements in these countries had felt the urge to revolutionise the patriarchal medical system that was silencing women’s needs and desires in relation to health and sexuality. This urge was part of the general feminist revolution that fought against patriarchal control on women’s bodies, which the healthcare system was especially contributing
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to perpetuate, given its focus on bodily health. Such a patriarchal medical system was operating by making use of the binarism ‘normal/pathological’ (Busi and Fiorilli 2014: 5), which constrained any form of women’s rebellion through a control of their sexuality, and by silencing those needs that exceeded the sphere of reproduction. Feminists thus elaborated on, and at the same time contested, the notion of ‘medicalisation’ (Busi and Fiorilli 2014), understood not only as the violence perpetrated by the medical institutions on women’s bodies, but also as ‘the performative effects of medical/scientific categories in the organisation of the possibilities of expression’1 (Busi and Fiorilli 2014: 6) in relation to women’s bodies. The effects of medicalisation are as familiar to the feminist movements as they are to the LGBTQ* movements. For instance, during the HIV epidemic of the 1990s, the latter campaigned for life and health rights against a medical system that considered ‘non-reproductive and non-heteronormative bodies, sexuality and pleasures to be “sick” ’ (Busi and Fiorilli 2014: 6). Moreover, the concept of medicalisation has been fundamental to more recent reflections by the international transgender movement on the de-pathologisation of trans people; this movement has reclaimed self-determination of bodies beyond the constraints of the medical/institutionalised sex/gender transitioning practices (Busi and Fiorilli 2014). The idea of de-pathologisation has also been central to the intersex movement, which – starting in the 1990s – has opposed the surgical treatments used to ‘normalise’ ambiguous genitals; these treatments have been, and still are, guided by a perception of intersex bodies as pathological.

Through their conceptualisation of the notion of medicalisation, feminists in the 1970s thus tried to find new ways of understanding and experiencing their bodies and sexualities. In order to do so, they started a series of practices ranging from self-help interventions via the publication of informative material (e.g. leaflets, booklets, books) to the creation of self-awareness groups and self-managed health clinics and centres. In the United States, for example, the Feminist Women’s Health Centre was founded in Los Angeles between 1971 and 1972 (Percovich 2005: 11), alongside the birth of self-managed women’s health clinics. Some of these Italian clinics also practised illegal abortions.3

The birth of these health centres and clinics, and especially of the self-help groups (Voli 2007: 109), was partly influenced by the important and popular book, Our Bodies, Ourselves (hereafter OBOS),4 published in 1971 by a group of women in Boston. These women wanted to share knowledge about their bodies among themselves and with other women. OBOS became pivotal for international women’s movements and was translated into several languages,5 including Italian in 1974, under the title Noi e il Nostro Corpo (We and our Body). The book touched on topics such as contraception, abortion, menopause, venereal diseases and medication (Percovich 2005). What was striking about this project was that personal experience was transformed into collective political experience and knowledge of women’s bodies was no longer relegated to male experts but to the women themselves (Percovich 2005: 38–39). In Italy, the book was used within the consciousness-raising feminist groups along with another book, Donne è Bello (Women is Beautiful),6 a translation of three texts written mainly by the New York radical feminists (NYRF).7

Given this historical background, this chapter will build on the importance of a notion of health as conceptualised by feminisms in the 1970s, taking also into account the prominence transgender issues have gained in the last 20 years.8 The chapter will also examine the resurgence of feminist practices within certain contemporary queer feminisms, such as the health clinics inspired by the feminist practices of the 1970s. Finally, it will take into account the rise of transnational feminist movements engaged in the struggle to
stop ‘male’ violence against women, inspired by the feminist movement *Ni Una Menos* (Not One Woman Less), born in Argentina in 2015 to combat violence against women, which led to the creation of other feminist movements with the same name in many Latin American countries and in Europe (i.e. Spain, Italy, the UK, the United States, Germany, Switzerland). These transnational feminist movements’ agenda touches on many of the concerns raised by *OBOS* and by the feminist movements of the 1970s, such as women’s sexual health, violence against women and reproductive choices. In doing so, the chapter will also examine the fundamental role of translation in the development of ideas around health understood in feminist terms.

### 3 Critical issues and current research

#### 3.1 Transfeminism and health

In the previous section we have seen that the notion of health and sexuality has been an important object of investigation, and a field of intervention, for feminist movements. In this section I will make particular reference to the way health has been theorised within queer feminisms. However, I will refer also, and more specifically, to a strand of queer feminism called transfeminism, which is a type of feminism more in line with my understanding of, and involvement in, feminist activism.

Transfeminism can be considered a form of feminism that is informed by transgender politics. Transfeminism has developed mainly in countries such as the United States, Spain, Italy and France, and also in some Latin American countries. In the United States, the term transfeminism was used for the first time by Emi Koyama, in her *Transfeminist Manifesto* of 2001, where it is defined as a feminism by and for trans women, also open to queer and intersex people, trans men, non-trans women, and non-trans men who are sympathetic toward the needs of trans women. In Spain, on the other hand, the term transfeminism first appeared during an annual conference entitled *Jornadas Feministas Estatales* (Feminist National Days) held in Córdoba in 2000. By 2009, the term had become ‘a familiar and persistent expression for reclaiming space for feminist trans people excluded from feminist circles’ (Espineira and Bourcier 2016: 87). As Italian transfeminist scholar Rachele Borghi (2018) writes, when discussing Spanish and Italian transfeminisms, the prefix trans does not only refer to the inclusion of the trans subject within feminism – which is more the case for US transfeminism – but to a total shift of paradigm. The prefix trans challenges (Borghi 2018) the epistemology of dominant feminisms centred on a feminine identity conceived as a natural essence or biological fact and moves beyond that. Spanish transfeminism, for example, is based on non-hierarchical alliances; it is a feminism that crosses various social spheres, touching mainly on questions of social justice. As clearly expressed in the *Manifiesto para la insurrección transfeminista* (Manifesto for a Transfeminist Revolution), written in Córdoba in 2009 by a group of collectives and feminist activists, transfeminism puts emphasis on building a feminism based on a coalition of subjects living at the margins, such as ‘squatters, lesbians, anticapitalists, fags and transgender people’ (Solà 2013: 19).

Because of its intersectional nature, Spanish transfeminism can be defined as queer feminism. Since the first inception of the term at a conference in 1990 delivered by Teresa de Lauretis (1991), the adjective ‘queer’ was used to highlight the differences between gay and lesbian subjects, despite their shared non-heteronormative sexuality. The adjective ‘queer’, as used by de Lauretis and others who followed her, was meant to stress, among
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other things, the importance of taking into account the intersection between the notions of gender and sexuality, and race, class, ability, age, migration, etc. However, according to Karine Espineira and Marie-Hélène/Sam Bourcier (2016), Spanish transfeminism prefers to use the prefix trans instead of the term ‘queer’, which is associated with ‘Anglo white queer theory and English as an imperialistic language’ (2016: 88), especially considering ‘the theoretical excesses’ (2016: 88) of the first wave of white queer theory. Transfeminism instead places the questions of the body and of embodiment at the centre of its theorisations and practices.

The Spanish transfeminist movement has had significant influence on the Italian and French ones. In Italy, the term transfeminism has been circulating at least since the translation of the above-mentioned Manifiesto para la insurrección transfeminista into Italian in 2010 by the Italian diasporic art collective ideadestroyingmuros, which is based in Spain. Like Spanish transfeminism, the Italian one is centred on the critique of binarisms, cisnormativity and essentialism, and is a form of feminism from the margins, based on alliances of micro-groups and identities, with strong anti-capitalist, postcolonial, antiracist, transnational and sex-positive connotations. As for France, the transfeminist movement started through the queer group Le Zoo and its seminars, organised by Marie Hélène/Sam Bourcier between 1996 and 2003. It formally went public when the trans collective OUTrans published a statement in 2009 (and in a revised form, again in 2012) entitled Transfeminismes. French transfeminism, like the Spanish one, can be considered a form of third-wave feminism, a queer feminism that stresses the importance of building a politics of resistance and alliances, and places emphasis on anti-capitalist struggles.

Spanish, Italian and French transfeminisms, which share similarities with Latin American transfeminisms (Bettcher and Stryker 2016: 12), are the main coordinates within which this chapter develops its analysis, as these feminisms are closer to my experience as an Italian. This chapter, however, will also make reference to other geographical contexts when possible. Transfeminisms constitute the ideal background against which to place an analysis of feminist health issues, given that the theme of health is a ‘natural object of transfeminist politics’, as Beatrice Busi and Olivia Fiorilli put it (2014: 9). The reason for this is that transfeminism has placed a great deal of emphasis on the body, as mentioned above. Spanish transfeminism, for instance, is closely linked to the post-porn movement (Egaña and Solà 2016: 77), which in Spain emerged in the 1990s, in the wake of the post-porn movement that originated in the United States in the 1980s. The movement represents practices that are not represented by the mainstream porn scene. Such practices, according to Egaña and Solà (2016: 77), ‘problematises the male/female binary and compulsory heterosexuality’, and use the body ‘as a support for making visible abject, antinormative, and pathologised sexualities’. Moreover, the post-porn movement emphasises the political value of sexuality by bringing it into the public sphere, thus breaking not only the public/private binary, but also the divide between theory and practice, by considering practitioners of post-porn as authoritative voices on sexuality (Borghi 2014: 170).

The body as theorised within transfeminism therefore differs from the body as theorised by feminists of difference, as it is based on an anti-essentialist and anti-binary epistemology, which is centred on a transgender epistemology and on the idea of transformation, or better still, of an ‘ongoing transformation’, to quote Espineira and Bourcier (2016: 88).

Moving from these premises, Busi and Fiorilli (2014) perceive the transfeminist movement’s fight against medicalisation as one that is especially centred not on a complete dismissal of technologies, seen as representatives of a sort of techno-patriarchy,
but rather, on their re-appropriation. This re-appropriation follows in the footsteps of the self-help practices of the 1970s (e.g. tools for self-abortion, menstrual aspiration practices and so forth). Yet, it places a stronger emphasis on the desires that such practices pay attention to, which mainly stem from transgender people’s refusal to accept the pathologisation of themselves as the only way to gain access to medical technologies. Moreover, the transfeminist post-porn movement also fights against the pathologisation of non-mainstream sexual practices and androgynous bodies, by making them visible through performances and creative practices, where the body serves as a tool to expose and fight against such pathologisation. The term used to describe this is to ‘hack’ (Kinki 2013: 305). For transfeminists, technologies are thus desirable because in post-porn transfeminist practices, the body is closely connected to the concept of technology and can be itself conceived as technology (Kinki 2013) – a sort of open software, a machine that can be hacked and deprogrammed from the influence of the hegemonic medical system. For transfeminism, the body can thus become a tool of resistance against heteropatriarchal power, as it makes us imagine ways in which we can manipulate and transform our bodies outside of the framework of compulsory heterosexuality and gender binarism.

The next subsections will refer to the themes that have emerged from my introduction to transfeminism in relation to translation and health: transgender issues and, specifically, the medicalisation of sex reassignment; female sexuality, in particular female genitalia and sexual pleasure; and technology and reproductive choices. In terms of the translation scenarios, I will start by illustrating examples of translations from Italy, Spain and France, and I will then make references to other countries, including the United States, Poland, Turkey, Morocco, Brazil and China, taking into account similarities and differences between the diverse contexts. The translations analysed here are mainly located within the political/activist strand of translation studies (Baker 2013; Tymoczko 2010) and, more specifically, within the feminist strand (Castro and Ergun 2017b); the latter focuses on the feminist/activist role of translation as a tool for social transformation. Although there are several studies on feminist translation, which have gained prominence since the 1990s, very little has been written on the translation of transfeminism, apart from some sporadic articles (see for example Gramling and Dutta 2016; Baldo 2019). This chapter, then, also aims to fill this gap.

3.2 Translating trans issues

Taking inspiration from the feminist self-help practices of the 1970s, several transfeminist initiatives originated in Spain in the 21st century. One example is GynePunk, a Catalan collective who developed first-aid DIY (do it yourself) – and DIT (do it together) – gynaecological tools for disadvantaged women, sex workers and refugees (but also for themselves). Italy saw the birth, from 2013 onward, of Consultorie Transfeministe Queer (queer transfeminist self-help clinics), borrowing their name from the self-help clinics of the 1970s, which were called consultori, though using the feminine grammatical gender instead of the masculine one. These are political spaces of personal and collective awareness, which use the practice of self-enquiry, that is the practice by which needs and desires are collectively shared starting from a reflection on one’s own life experiences and political positioning. These spaces are based on the re-appropriation of discourses on, and practices of, sexual health from a queer transfeminist perspective, in view of the possibility of experimenting with new relationships.
Particularly interesting for our discussion is the case of the 2015 translation of Testo Yonqui (Preciado 2008) into Italian, under the title Testo Tossico (Junkie Text) (Preciado 2015). This is a book by Spanish queer transfeminist scholar Paul B. Preciado, who is considered a major theoretical inspiration for transfeminism. Preciado’s text is a memoir about the self-injection of testosterone outside of the medico-juridical protocol for sex change, as in the vast majority of cases this hormone is not prescribed for women outside the protocol. By taking small doses of testosterone, which are not aimed at making the transition to a male body, Preciado, an assigned woman at birth, wanted to sabotage the norm that is based on a strict gender binarism, which contemplates the existence of strictly male (testosterone being one) and female hormones. The story of this voluntary intoxication is interspersed with a theoretical and political critique of what Preciado (2008) calls the ‘pharmaco-pornographic regime’ in which we live, referring to the processes of production of masculinity and femininity that are mediated by the pharmaceutical and pornographic industries. In this text, Preciado understands the body as a site of investigation, a training lab, in line with transfeminist understandings.

Prior to the publication of the Italian translation, parts of the text were translated by the activists of the Consultoria Transfeminista Queer Bologna, to be read within a seminar focusing on testosterone, as part of a cycle of seminars centred on ‘endogenous and synthetic hormones’ and on issues such as ‘transitioning, pharmacological contraception and medicalisation of the menopause’ (Consultoria Transfeminista Queer Bologna 2014: 17). The chosen extracts were read and commented on by interspersing them with personal narratives shared within the group.

The political value of the translations used by the Consultoria Transfeminista Queer Bologna within the seminars is reflected in the topics of the extracts chosen for the translation. Some of these include passages that revolve around the idea of ‘techno-gender’ (Preciado 2008: 99), similar to the idea of techno-patriarchy mentioned above, that is, the mechanisms of the production of subjectivity, affects, desires and identity by the heteropatriarchal pharmaceutical and capitalist regime in which we live. Other extracts were selected to confirm the practical and instrumental aspects of these translations. These extracts contain information (like that contained in information leaflets) on the composition of testogel (testosterone in form of gel), on its use and practical effects (e.g. increased energy, increased sexual desire, better concentration, etc.), and on the fact that testosterone is not a masculine hormone per se, or a property of biological men (since also biological women produce it), and that masculinisation is only one of the outcomes of testosterone, since the physical effects of the hormone need to be understood as not separated from the mediation of our gendered subjectivities.

The translations are thus used in discussions that insist on the importance of giving visibility to an alternative imaginary, one based not on gender binarism, but on the importance of legitimising fluid embodiments of masculinity and femininity. Although such alternative imaginary cannot be built merely on disruptions of ideas linked to a hormone like testosterone, the discussions conveyed by these translations help to legitimise the desires of re-appropriating, collectively, body practices and technologies, which are otherwise conventionally reserved to assigned males at birth. Like the practices they put forth, the translations here can be considered a DIY/DIT activity, for they are carried out by non-professional translators who are activists. Moreover, the DIY ethics is centred on grassroots politics and autonomous cultural production (Kempson 2015). It relies on personal bodily experience, which in the post-porn movement is valued as more important than an expert’s knowledge of sexuality (Preciado 2013), and it aims
3.3 Translating female sexuality

Another interesting case of silence, distortion of information and pathologisation of sexuality is that concerning the anatomy of the vulva. This is the subject of a book written by transfeminist Spanish writer and post-porn performer Diana Torres, titled Coño potens (Powerful Cunt, Torres 2015a) and translated into Italian with the title Fica potens in 2015 (Torres 2015b) by two transfeminist activists, Valentine and Luciana Licitra. The text is a manual about female sexuality and is centred on female ejaculation, a topic censored and pathologised by institutional medicine for centuries. In the book, Torres narrates her own episodes of squirting, which were dismissed by the gynaecologists who examined her as incontinence. This text is therefore the outcome of her personal research and investigation into female ejaculation, and of the theoretical and practical workshops she organised on the topic, which later became the inspiration for her book. Her thesis once again challenges gender binarism, since for Torres every woman should have the capacity to ejaculate; women, like men, have a prostate, which traditional medicine has instead given the name of ‘skene glands’.

As I have written elsewhere (Baldo and Inghilleri 2018; Baldo 2019), it is interesting to look at the Italian translation of Coño potens, which was published by Golena edizioni, a small publisher in Rome. One of the translators of this text, Valentine, had participated and acted as an interpreter in Torres’s workshops on female ejaculation. Subsequently, she started running workshops herself, including presentations of the Italian translation, under the stage name Fluida Wolf. Translation thus becomes another DIY/DIT tool that facilitates self-experimentation with the body and self-learning. Moreover, along with the source text, translation becomes a way to fight the censorship and lack of research within...
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a traditionally misogynist and sexist medical establishment on topics revolving around expressions of female pleasure and sexuality, which fall outside the field of reproduction; it also allows fighting against the shame and stigma associated with this phenomenon. The stigma is accurately described in Torres’s book, and has to do with feelings of ‘being dirty or perceived as ‘a slut’. This is not the only translation from Torres. Challenging the prospect of censorship, Golena edizioni has published other translations of texts by the performer, such as Pornoterrorismo (Torres 2011/2014) and Vomitorium (Torres 2017a, 2017b), which contributed a great deal to the growth of transfeminist activism in Italy.

The prejudices and silences surrounding vulvas and vaginas are also described by American transgender writer Julia Serano, whose essays have been translated into Italian, Spanish, French and Turkish, and whose popular book Whipping Girl (Serano 2007), on misogyny and transphobia against transsexual women, was translated into French by Naomi Grunenwald (2018). In a chapter of this book Serano argues that women are not even told the name of their own sexual organs, that some are unaware of the existence of the clitoris, and that vaginas are understood to be ‘simply the hole where the penis is supposed to go’ (Serano 2007: 230).

Another important work addressing these issues is Eve Ensler’s (1998) The Vagina Monologues, whose translations have been examined within translation studies, such as in Chinese (Yu 2015; 2016) and Turkish (Bircan and Koçak 2016). The Vagina Monologues is a feminist play that made its debut in 1996 in New York. It is a series of monologues based on a number of interviews Ensler conducted with several women of different ages, sexualities and races, and which revolve around consensual and non-consensual sexual experiences, descriptions of the vulva (a word that some feminists claim should be used instead of or alongside the word vagina), genital mutilation, rape, reproduction, sex work, and lesbian relationships. Ensler also created the V-day movement, a global activist movement whose aim is to stop violence against women and which has been funded through the ticket sales of performances of the play The Vagina Monologues. In 2004 Ensler, in conjunction with Jane Fonda and Deep Stealth Productions, produced and directed the first all-transgender performance of The Vagina Monologues.

The monologues, as Ensler states, are intended to celebrate the vulva/vagina, a word still considered taboo in many societies. As Zhongli Yu (2015; 2016) demonstrates, this is certainly the case in China. Yu analyses three translations of The Vagina Monologues in Chinese, two carried out by two male translators – respectively a Chinese playwright, Rongjun Yu, and a Taiwanese professor of English, Cangduo Chen – and a third translation carried out by a female translator, Xiaoming Ai, who is a feminist activist and a former professor of gender studies. Zhongli Yu reaches the conclusion that the female translator’s strategies reveal her feminist positioning, while the strategies adopted by the male translators disclose a heteropatriarchal perspective, for example in their negative views toward lesbianism and their toning down of the descriptions of female pleasure. Yu’s study should not, however, make us jump to the conclusion that the gender of the translator is the most important indicator of the outcome of a translation. José Santaemilia (2015), who analysed the translations of terms related to female sexuality from English or French into Spanish and vice versa, states that what is more important is the explicit or implicit feminist stance of the translator.

This partial manipulation of Vagina Monologues in China not only stemmed from the translators’ self-censorship, but also from the censorship imposed by Chinese authorities. However, ever since the publication of the translation by the above-mentioned feminist professor Xiaoming Ai, the play has become an empowering tool for feminist and women’s
groups all over China, as documented in the *VaChina Monologues* by queer activist Fan Popo (2013); this documentary chronicles 10 years of the play’s performances throughout the country. Some of these performances were organised by LGBTQ activists, like the one staged in 2012 by members of the Zhehe Club in Fudan, who rewrote parts of the play to include LGBTQ topics (such as the wives of gay men for example) in order to fight discrimination against LGBTQ subjects.⁴

In a study of the Turkish translation of *The Vagina Monologues*,²⁵ Bircan and Koçak (2016) similarly stress the determination of the feminist translator and stage director Amula Merter, who managed to fight the strict censorship that topics related to female sexuality and pleasure usually provoke within Turkish institutions. The play was translated into Turkish in 2002. The district governor of Kadıköy in Istanbul banned it from being performed in public on the pretext of the ‘indecent title’, that he himself was allegedly ashamed to pronounce, let alone shout in a theatre. Despite this, Merter and her actresses were invited to perform the play in many conservative cities around the country and the media were generally supportive of the play (*ibid*). Merter’s translation also inspired the publication in 2008 of a Turkish book titled *İşte Böyle Güzelim* (There You Go, My Dear) (Düzel *et al.* 2012), hailed as the Turkish *Vagina Monologues*²⁶ and written by four academics.

The way *Vagina Monologues* often requires the audience to repeat the word ‘cunt’ after the actresses, as a way to reclaim the slang word, mirrors what happens in relation to Torres’s *Conó potens*. The book – translated into Italian using the equivalent of the obscene slang term for cunt, *fica* – not only exposed a topic, namely female ejaculation, which is completely dismissed by the medical heteropatriarchal system, but also reclaimed the use of taboo words in relation to female sexuality, bringing what is considered private into the public sphere, following the post-porn attempts of bridging the divide between private and public. Indeed, Diana Torres reclaims the use of obscenity – which she calls ‘pornoterorismo’ (porn terrorism) – in her performances, in order to destabilise the audience, to make them feel the violence being perpetrated on women and LGBTQ* subjects by the society we live in. Another Spanish transfeminist and post-porn writer of Basque origin, whose work has been translated into Italian and gained popularity within Italian transfeminism, is Itziar Ziga. Her 2009 book *Devenir perra* (Becoming a Bitch/Slut) was translated into Italian in 2014, by a group of five activist translators,²⁷ with the title *Diventar Cagna* (Ziga 2014), a title which uses the same derogatory words in Italian. The translation thus echoed the attempt to reclaim, in a positive way, the word ‘bitch’ or ‘slut’ (*perra* in Spanish and *cagna* in Italian) in order to fight misogyny and slut-shaming, challenging the use of these words as a rhetorical device to control women (see Baldo and Inghilleri 2018; Baldo 2019). ‘Slut’ has also been used more recently in the compound *SlutWalk*, a protest march that first appeared in Canada in 2011 against rape culture and the shaming of its victims (Robinson 2017). The SlutWalk campaign was translated into many different languages and cultural contexts. In Italy the first slut walk was organised in 2013, by a transfeminist collective called *Le Ribellule*, and expressed the same messages contained in the translation of Ziga’s book *Devenir perra*. The term ‘slut walk’ was borrowed from English and was not translated into Italian. This is not the case for all the contexts in which the campaign was translated. As Rebecca Robinson (2017) states in her study of the translation of the *SlutWalk* in Morocco, the feminist activists decided to change the name because the term slut was too offensive for Moroccan sensibilities. They eventually chose one that focused on sexual harassment in the street, rather than on slut-shaming and rape, calling the movement ‘Woman Choufouch’. The combination of terms
is a wordplay on the Moroccan Arabic term ‘Manchoufouch’, which means ‘What’s up?’, a phrase used by men to catcall women on the street (Robinson 2017: 214).

3.4 Translating reproductive issues

One of the pivotal feminist issues of the 1970s was the question of reproductive rights and technologies, and, more specifically, the topic of abortion. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, as part of the Italian feminist movement, self-help feminist clinics in Italy in the 1970s practised abortions before abortion was legalised in 1978. However, despite the legalisation of abortion, nowadays in Italy this practice is still not guaranteed due to the high number of doctors and pharmacists refusing to perform abortions or to provide abortion pills, invoking a ‘conscience clause’ (Salvatori 2018: 75).

Many Italian feminist movements – including the transfeminist one – have placed the topic of abortion at the top of their political agenda, like many other feminisms around the world. This happened especially after the mass women’s strike in Poland in October 2016, called Black Monday, against the proposal for a total ban on abortion in the country. This strike took inspiration from the first massive demonstrations held in 2015 and 2016 by the above-mentioned movement Ni Una Menos. It also inspired a series of protests organised by the movement for the legalisation of abortion in Argentina and in other Latin American countries.

Availability and legalisation of abortion is only one of the topics that feature in the agenda of Ni Una Menos (others include femicide, domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment, gender roles, sexual objectification, and the gender pay gap) but is certainly a major concern of the movement. Translation has played – and continues to play – a pivotal role in the internationalisation of this movement. Documents, including articles, assembly reports, public announcements and calls for demonstrations and strikes, which circulate on the movements’ web pages and social media accounts or through internal newsletters, are constantly and collectively translated by teams of volunteer translators into e.g. Spanish, Italian, German and English. Moreover, volunteers also act as interpreters during assemblies or at demonstrations.

The international demonstration and assembly organised in Italy by the Italian branch of the movement, Non Una di Meno, which took place in 2019 in Verona, defined itself as characterised by a strong transfeminist agenda; the event was called ‘Verona città transfemminista’ (Verona transfeminist city), and was meant to oppose the 13th International Conference of the World Congress of Families, an American Christian coalition that promotes the value of the ‘natural family’ and opposes abortion and LGBTQ* rights. The Verona branch of this conference was funded by local authorities and had the support of the far-right League party and other neo-fascist groups. The call for demonstration by Non Una di Meno, which was translated into English and Spanish, stressed its opposition to these ‘lords of patriarchy’, and the fact that behind the ‘natural family’ lie patriarchal violence and the reproduction of gender hierarchies. The Verona Congress of Families is indeed described as the imposition of compulsory heterosexuality against the freedom of women and LGBTQ* subjects, who refuse to conform to established and prescribed identities and social roles, such as those that see maternity as a destiny and try to subordinate women to a caring role within the family. As part of this control toward non-confirming bodies, we can also include the issue of forced sterilisation imposed on transgender people for years in many European countries, as a condition for legal gender change. In light of this, we can state that reproductive issues (used either to
impose reproductive work or deny reproduction rights) have been and still are a weapon used to subjugate certain bodies to the heteronormative dominant system.

This is a scenario that is certainly worth analysing further from a translation studies point of view. A strong emphasis on collective translation (that is, signed simply by the name of the movement) characterises *Non Una di Meno* and other similar movements. This is confirmed in a recent and interesting study by Sergi Mainer (2017) on German anarcho-feminist texts by the collective *Rote Zora*, on reproductive technology and abortion, which were translated into Spanish in 2012. The Spanish translation of the texts by *Rote Zora* refuses to make the names of the translators visible, due to their anarchist critique of private property and authority, and of capitalism in general, stating that this is a collective enterprise. *Rote Zora*’s anarchist translation gives emphasis to egalitarian collaboration between various agents involved in the translation and reception process, validating all their voices and putting them in dialogic relation to each other. It does so in the belief that this de-authorisation can make translation a more efficient instrument of contestation and transformation.

The transfeminist interest in reproductive issues is also confirmed by the references Italian, and especially Spanish, transfeminism makes to the thought of the scholar Donna Haraway, who has been translated into Italian by Claudia Durastanti and Claudia Ciccioni (Haraway 2019b) and by Angela Balzano (Haraway 2019c), as well as into Spanish by transfeminist translator Helen Torres (Haraway 2016c; 2019a). Donna Haraway’s ‘Chthuchulene Manifesto’ in *Manifestly Haraway* (2016b) and her book *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016a) focus on the importance of making kin both with and among other humans and non-humans. Making kin among humans involves getting connected to persons not bounded by ancestry or genealogy, outside of normative familial (or species-bound) structures. These texts do not discourage giving birth to children but stresses the need to conceive natality more as a collective choice. In her translation of these texts Helen Torres (Haraway 2016c; 2019a) has paid attention to the question of invoking, in a performative way, the idea of making alliances by producing, based on the translation, collective performances, collective writings and games inspired by collective readings. This understanding of translation is indeed in line with the DIY/DIT and the collective and performative uses of translations by transfeminist collectives, mentioned throughout the chapter. Haraway’s idea of reproduction that generates kinship instead of children has been also influential for Italian transfeminism, as anticipated above. For Italian transfeminist groups, Haraway’s suggestion, which can also be understood as a remedy against the environmental crisis, is meant to encourage us to pay attention to all living species on earth and make alliances especially with migrants, in order to create better conditions of living for all.

4 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the role of activist translation (see Tymoczko 2010; Baker 2013) in the construction of queer feminist understandings of health: a construction that refuses pathologisation and places emphasis on the concept of self-determination and subjectivity, fighting trans exclusionary, ‘essentialist, whoraphobic and techno-phobic’ (Bourcier 2015: 125) views on health and sexuality. It has done so by analysing the translation of trans issues, and of taboo topics in relation of female sexuality and
genitalia, and reproductive choices (in particular, abortion), as these are some of the most prominent topics discussed within queer transfeminisms in relation to the concept of health. The translation genres discussed here range from volunteer draft/unpublished translations circulated among collectives and used within workshops, to translations published either by small publishing houses or online (e.g. on websites, Facebook pages, Twitter, Instagram) and to volunteer interpreting. Two main topics have emerged: first, to challenge pathologising heteropatriarchal notions of health requires translation of knowledge and language that have traditionally been censored; second, these translations, generally done collectively, are political tools for the co-creation of new feminist knowledge on health, which involve much experiential knowledge and bodily self-experimentation.

As for the question of censorship, the chapter has shown that terms considered obscene or taboo in relation to female sexuality can be reclaimed in activist translation scenarios, when these act in solidarity with the (trans)feminist cause, as a means to fight against a mainstream heteropatriarchal medical and social system that has silenced these terms. It has also shown that this act of reclaiming is not a smooth one, as it might entail a series of negotiations and self-censorship depending on the specific cultural context in which translation occurs.35

In relation to the second topic mentioned above, this chapter has discussed the political importance of translation in the fight against pathologising and heteropatriarchal notions of health by resorting to the idea of DIY (do it yourself) and DIT (do it together) translations. Given the centrality of the notion of self-help in feminism, which I discussed in reference to the recent birth of self-help clinics and practices inspired by those of the 1970s, translation can likewise be understood as a DIY/DIT political practice. On the one hand, this is so because it is used in bodily self-experimentations, and its transformative role thus stems from the profound impact that self-knowledge on body and sexuality can have for political struggles (starting from the feminist idea that the personal is political). On the other hand, volunteer activist translation performed by non-professional translators who are activists can be understood, according to the ethics of the DIY/DIT, as a radical practice that relies on the participants doing as much as possible themselves, given the lack of help and understanding from the institutions. I have written on this DIY/DIT aspect of translation elsewhere (Baldo 2019; Baldo and Inghilleri 2018); I have also analysed the performative aspect of these translations, as they produce new translations, discourses, networks and even performers (as in the case of translator Valentine, aka Fluida Wolf).

Finally, in relation to the DIT aspect of translation, this chapter has focused on the collective dimension of the translation of health issues, performed by groups of volunteer translators/activists. The collective aspect of translation reflects the political importance queer feminisms – especially transfeminisms – have placed on transforming female and LGBTQ* private issues into politically widespread issues, taking them out from the private and invisible space to which they have been relegated by, in this case, a heteropatriarchal medical system aimed at controlling them.

Future research is needed in order to investigate further translational contexts in relation to the topics discussed in this chapter, especially with reference to the translations produced as part of the growing transnational feminist movements which took inspiration from *Ni Una Menos*. These movements are communicating with each other more and more and using translation as part of such communication.
Notes

1 All the back translations of quotes from Italian and other languages into English are mine.
5 As of April 2019 the book has been translated into 31 different languages. See www.ourbodiesourselves.org/global-projects/ (Accessed: 28 July 2019).
6 Donne è bello places much emphasis, like OBOS, on sexuality, which was one of the most prominent topics to be discussed within the feminist consciousness-raising groups: a theme that had become important also thanks to the translations into Italian of these and other texts by American radical feminism, to which Italian feminism was looking up to as a source of inspiration (Basilio 2017).
8 It is interesting to note that in 2014 a book called Trans Bodies, Trans Selves (Erickson-Schroth 2014) was published, which was inspired by OBOS, and which contained an afterword written by one of the founders of OBOS.
9 Although the Italian branch of the movement, called Non Una di Meno, states that patriarchy is not only a system of oppression perpetrated by men, the use of male here reproduces the slogan used by the movement, which focuses on the fact that violence against cis and trans women, such as rape and femicides, is almost exclusively a problem related to the heteropatriarchal construction of masculinity.
10 In the UK the movement is called ‘Women Strike Assembly’ (I am a member of the Leicester branch of this movement). Ni una Menos inspired the birth of Women’s Marches in the United States. See further info at https://womensmarch.com (Accessed: 31 July 2019).
11 By ‘theoretical excesses’ Espineira and Bourcier (2016: 88) refer to the fact that the first-wave white Anglophone queer theory relied heavily on poststructuralism, with the consequence of promoting an abstract concept of political subjectivity and dismissing the importance of the embodiment of the political subject.
12 Cisnormativity is the assumption that all human beings are ‘cisgender’ or ‘cissexual’, i.e. their gender identity matches the sex assigned to them at birth.
13 I will be discussing the post-porn movement more in depth further in this chapter.
15 These consultorie (self-help clinics) were born in Bologna, Padua and Rome. For the Consultoria Transfemminista Queer in Bologna see www.facebook.com/consultoriafqbolognal (Accessed 31 July 2019); for the Consultoria Transfemminista Queer in Padua, called ‘queersultoria’ and is now closed, see the description at www.dwf.it/queersultoria-esperimenti-di-welfare-dal-basso-per-un-nuovo-diritto-alla-salute-e-alla-vivibilita/; for a talk on the project of the Consultoria Transfemminista Queer in Rome, see www.ondarossa.info/redazionali/2018/02/consultoria-transfemminista-e-riflessioni (Accessed: 31 July 2019).
16 Paul B. Preciado worked for a long period in France as he was Professor of Political History of the Body, Gender Theory, and History of Performance at Université Paris VIII. Testo yonqui was also translated into French and English.
17 This is confirmed also by the lack of availability of testosterone for post-menopausal women in the UK to treat hypoactive sexual desire dysfunction (HSDD). Testosterone for women is not licensed by the UK’s regulatory authorities and is only available privately. This is in stark contrast to the fact that men are allowed to get testosterone and Viagra prescribed on the National Health Service for their sexual needs. See e.g. the following article www.theguardian.com/society/2019/sep/11/testosterone-postmenopausal-women-uk-hormone (Accessed: 30 January 2020).
18 The concept of techno-gender as formulated by Preciado refers to the idea that bodies are produced and controlled by technology, and more specifically, by the pharmaco-pornographic industrial technology, which regulates and reduces the messy nodes of both sex and gender to a binary form. Technology per se, however, is not considered negative by transfeminism, which instead conceives bodies as tools or technologies through which we can experiment with ways to resist and subvert this techno-patriarchal system.

19 Here I do not want to emphasise a biological masculinity separated from the cultural construction of masculinity. The argument put forward by the assigned women who experimented with testosterone is that the symptoms it produces vary according to our gender expectations and specific bodily configurations. Therefore, the outcome is a mediation between biochemical physical processes and gendered subjectivity and culture.

20 Diana Torres prefers to use the term ‘female ejaculation’ instead of squirting to challenge gender binarism. This term is also used in the Italian translation.

21 Skene glands were named after the Scottish gynaecologist Alexander Skene, who wrote about it in Western medical literature in 1880.

22 Valentine named her workshops ‘ejaculation for cunts’.

23 Some feminist claims that in The Vagina Monologues the word ‘vulva’ should have been used instead. Vagina and vulva are both medical terms, but whereas vulva refers to the external part of the female sexual organ, which is devoted to pleasure due to the presence of the clitoris, vagina is a term preferred by mainstream heteropatriarchal medicine, as it refers to the reproductive part of the female sexual organ.

24 For further information on this aspect, see www.gaystarnews.com/article/china-vaginamonologues170412/ (Accessed: 5 March 2020).


27 The translators were Valentine, feminoska, Serbilla Serpente, Elena Zucchini and lafra.


29 Argentina legalised abortion on 24 January 2021, after the corresponding bill was passed by the National Congress in December 2020. This law was possible thanks to the battles for legal abortion by the aforementioned feminist movement, Ni Una Menos.

30 Non Una di Meno in Italy produced a document called ‘Piano Antiviolenza’ (Anti-violence programme) which is currently being translated into English and German.


33 Haraway’s thought has greatly influenced transfeminism and the post-porn movement. Her emphasis on the fact that the body becomes an experimentation site, which can be modified and altered by technology, resonates with post-porn ideas about the body as a machine that can be altered.

34 Interview with the author of this chapter, October 2018.

35 For further reading and a list of bibliographic entries on the notion of censorship of taboo/sensitive words in written and audiovisual translations, see the works of José Sántaemilia (2014, 2015), who has looked into the nuances of censorship, and the chapter by Martín Ruano (2018), as part of the Routledge Handbook of Translation and Culture (Harding and Carbonell Cortés 2018).

Further reading


This special issue focuses on the translation of transgender issues in a variety of cultural contexts and includes many references to health and medicine which can be useful to further clarify concepts discussed in this chapter.

This book is a collection of chapters that analyses feminist translation from a transnational perspective, touching on some of the topics mentioned in this chapter.


This edited collection of articles introduces the question of transfeminisms and contains some of the articles mentioned in this chapter along with many others touching on different geographical areas and periods. A very useful resource for examining transfeminism more in depth.


This chapter gives more background information on the concept of DIY in relation to translation and to the concept of performativity associated with it.


This book is a useful resource that examines the translation of gender and sexuality and the question of censorship which have been mentioned in this chapter.

**Related topics**

Translation and Women’s Health, Translation in Maternal and Neonatal Health, Disability in Translation

**References**


Queer feminisms


