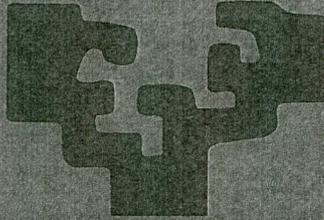


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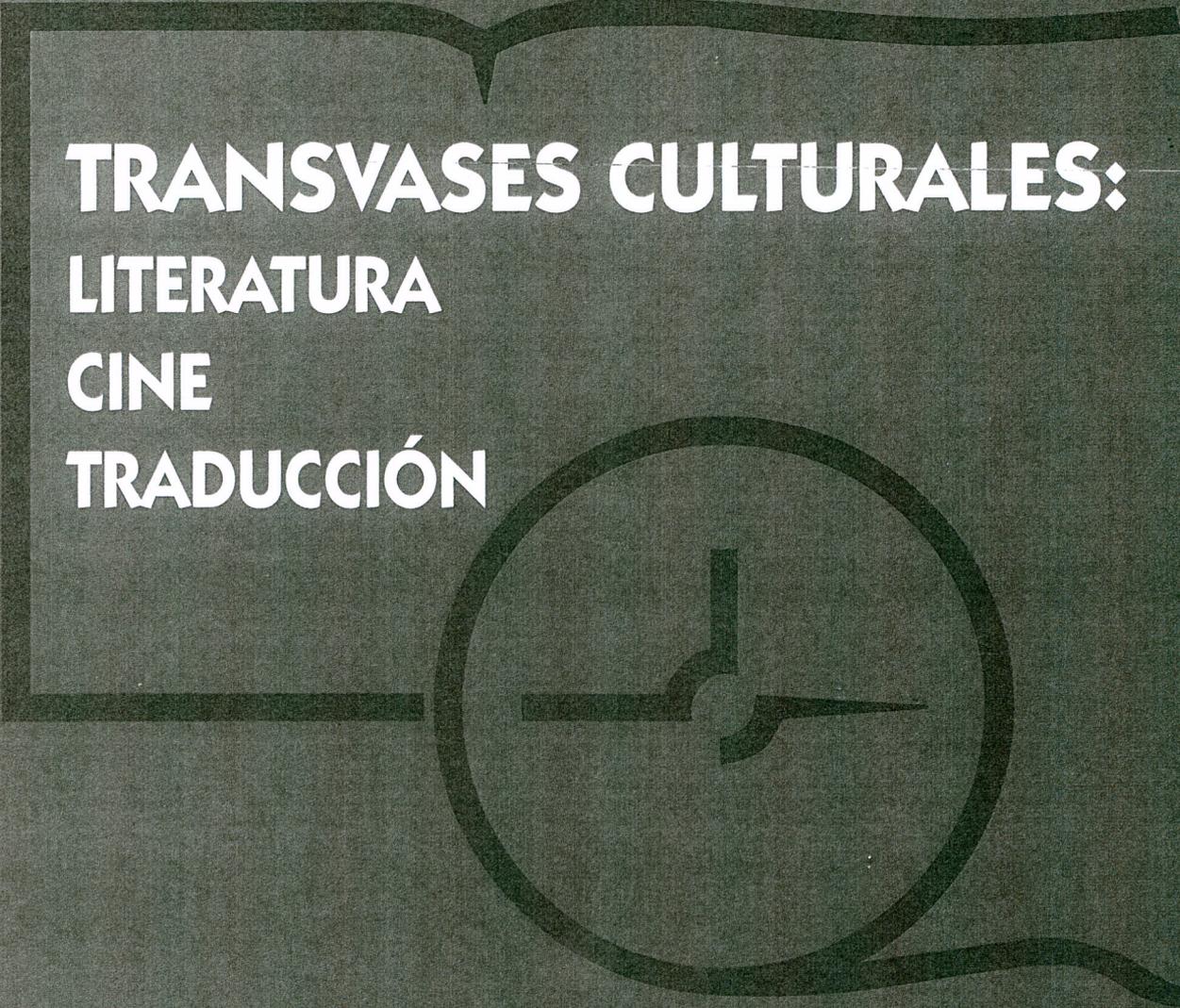


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QUEBEC'S "ÉCRITURE AU FÉMININ" AND TRANSLATION POLITICIZED

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This essay is about cultural transfer between two Canadian cultures; specifically, it is about Quebec's "écriture au féminin" of the 1970s moving westward into Anglo-Canadian writing of the 1980s. My focus is on two rather different forms of translation: bilingual writing and French-English translation. I will also explore the effects that the translation of these creative new writing strategies have had on the work of the literary translators involved. My interest here lies in the effects of feminist ideology on translation.

QUEBEC'S "ÉCRITURE AU FÉMININ": A CANADIAN AVANT-GARDE

Canada has traditionally consisted of two "solitudes", two quite different cultures, separated by language, religion and even by their legal systems. This state of affairs obtained at least until the post-war period when waves of European and later, third-world immigrants, began to diversify the former French/English difference. Nonetheless, this duality persists even in today's social and cultural politics. Though the English part of Canada may no longer seek economic and political dominance over the French, Quebec still struggles to assert its difference, its right to be different *and* equal, a "distinct society" within Canada, to use 1990s political vocabulary.

In one particular area, however, Quebec seems to have successfully maintained this difference, and perhaps even developed a "lead" on English Canada - this is in the area of artistic experimentation and avant-gardisms of various kinds. One rather acrid explanation for this phenomenon was given by Hubert Aquin, Quebec writer and thinker of the 1960s and 70s, who ascribed the ostensible Québécois talent for innovative creativity to the fact that colonized peoples, barred from economic and political participation, focus on creative and cultural activities; they are allowed to be "clowns". Other writers have connected such cultural avant-gardism¹ to political tensions. Caroline Bayard, in a recent book on experimental writing in Canada and Quebec, notes the fact that Quebec artists, writers and performers have, in the recent past, always been more daring

... over the last three decades, Quebec has usually been one step ahead of its Canadian counterpart : into performances while Canada was delineating aleatory doodles; into theory, while Toronto and Vancouver started dis-

covering the merits of performance; and into deconstructionism when the other culture was only just beginning to explore the arid territory of the said theory (136).

She then goes on to argue that the Québécois writing practices of the 1970s were inextricably linked to a wider terrain that included socio-economic and political pulsions less present in English Canada. Quebec's "écriture au féminin" was one of these forms of avant-garde writing of the 1970s, and one of its most experimental thinkers and writers was Nicole Brossard². Brossard launched the literary and popular debate on "patriarchal language" in Quebec by proposing the following question as inspiration for the first "women's issue" in 1975 of *La barre du jour*, a journal she co-edited:

Comment une femme qui utilise quotidiennement la langue (professeur, journaliste, écrivain) peut-elle se servir d'une langue qui travaille systématiquement contre elle?

Discussion of this question of language, its institutionalized gender bias, and women's role in working with a language that worked against them dominated much of the next decade in Quebec literature and made feminist thought and writing one of its most powerful movements. "Radical feminism" flourished in a society whose formerly rigid patriarchal structures based on Jansenist Catholicism and fierce cultural isolationism had already been worn down by the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, but remained part of living memory.

The political underpinnings of this new writing by women - the attempt to analyze and lay bare insidious effects of patriarchal language and its institutions and develop strategies against them - led to work that was at the same time creative and critical. A new fusion of the writing subject and the critic occurred which negated the supposed neutrality of the critic as well as the notion of original creativity on the part of the writer. Both critic and writer were self-reflexively biased, with a particular ideological point of view, and in "écriture au féminin" the two roles merged. Jean Fiset has ascribed the rise of feminist writing to this twofold approach: "vu [...] à la fois comme lutte, comme cause sociale, comme problématique de constitution du sujet (féminin) et aussi comme pratique d'écriture, c'est-à-dire à la fois et simultanément : critique et création; écriture... production de sens, de significations nouvelles, de sujets nouveaux. (Fisette, ed. Bayard, 241). Fiset's view reflects much of the agenda of "radical feminist" writing of the 1970s in Quebec : criticism of existing literature and ways of thinking was as important as and often implicit in, new creative writing. New meaning and new subject matter meant delving into mysterious, unexplored regions of women's psyches, lives and experiences and expressing *l'inédit* - one of Brossard's terms referring to women's silence and silenced lives.

Other terms came to stand for this feminist approach to writing : *déparler* and *délire* evoked women's need to "unspeak" and "unread" the texts of

patriarchy that had inhibited their own development. They described women's linguistic condition in patriarchy: women's words were considered gibberish, they could only *déparler* or remain speechless, while women's literary work was taken as a form of *délire* (delirium). But Brossard and other writers invested these terms with new life and subversive energy: *déparler* and *délire* meant deconstructing patriarchal beliefs determined by language; women were unspeaking or unreading these beliefs, they were producing work *à la dérive* - work that was adrift and in search of new meaning and new forms. They created challenging new texts, that in their turn sought to challenge power structures, assumptions and beliefs, by rendering visible the hitherto invisible and expressing it in new ways. Among these invisible elements was the female body.

Brossard (and many other writers of this period) drew a parallel between women's bodies and women's writing: both had been hidden away and needed to be exposed in order to exist. Evoking women's writing as the anti-glamorous body of a sixty-year-old, she addressed both the ageism prevalent in patriarchal society and announced the focus on women's bodies in feminist writing: "Manifestement l'écriture de la femme en est une qui doit ... s'exposer comme un corps de sexagénaire" (1974, 1984, 56). This focus on the body came to be a major aspect of "écriture au féminin" in its earliest, most radical forms, leading to attacks on some of the more established customs of patriarchy. In *L'Amèr* (1977), Brossard attacks and rejects traditional forms of "patriarchal motherhood", which suffocate both mother and child; she puts the revolutionary image of the uterus recycled as a bookbag in its place. In the play *La Nef des sorcières* (1976), Brossard's monologue on the writer begins: "Ce soir j'entre dans l'histoire sans relever ma jupe", subverting the notion that women gain significance solely through their sexual rapport with men: only as mothers, spouses or lovers of famous men could they once "enter history".

Although Nicole Brossard was one of the most important writers of this period, many other Quebec women contributed to a large body of experimental feminist material produced roughly between 1975 and 1985³. And they remained far ahead of English-Canadian women in this respect. Barbara Godard, professor of Canadian literature and one of Canada's best-known "feminist translators" early on observed that Quebec women were much more open to experimentation and radical change than the same generation of Canadian writers. Similarly, Marlene Wildeman, translating Nicole Brossard's *Lettre aérienne* (1985) in the late 1980s commented on the sense she had even then that "the literary preoccupations of Quebec feminists [were still] a mystery for the majority of Canadian feminists" (1989, 31).

In Quebec, women's political sensibilities and artistic creativity meshed early on to create a body of self-consciously avant-garde writing. One obvious reason for this early literary feminist activism, which I only want to mention briefly here, is Quebec's geographical and cultural positioning, midway between

France and North America. While French post-structuralism and deconstruction were available to very few anglophone intellectuals in the early 70s, thinkers such as Hélène Cixous were already teaching seminars at Quebec universities (Université de Montreal, 1972/1973). Further, many Quebec intellectuals spent time at French universities, or engaged in joint writing and publishing ventures with French colleagues⁴. Through early “contamination” by European thought, but also through the proximity to American feminists’ energetic socio-critical activities, Quebec feminisms rapidly developed into a Canadian avant-garde.

CONTAMINATION AND TRANSFORMANCE: BILINGUAL WRITING

The most immediate transfer of this new feminist thinking and writing into English Canada was carried out by bilingual writers such as Lola Lemire Tostevin and Gail Scott. Their bilingualism gave them rapid access to developments in Quebec and inspired them to integrate some of these in their own writing. Daphne Marlatt, too, though not bilingual, sought contact and devised joint writing projects with Nicole Brossard which focussed on their shared radical lesbian interest. Tostevin and Marlatt will serve as examples of this cultural transfer from Quebec to Canada.

In Lola Lemire Tostevin’s work French and English appear side by side, interfering with and supplementing each other. And very early the Québécois feminist terms appear. To illustrate one of her main themes - the problem of linguistic assimilation of French into English — she uses the Brossardian term *déparler*, introducing it as early as 1982 into an English text. In part, *déparler* stands for the loss of French that she experiences in an English cultural context; the point is made clearly in French, and then translated: “*Tu déparles / my mother says / je déparle / yes / I unspeak*” (1982, 3). But a page further *déparler* becomes the “*Unspeakings/ the Unbinding of Umbilicals...déparler / décomposer / sa langue*” (4), implying a distancing from one’s mother-tongue and its institutions. *Déparler* means “*la source renversée / the course unlaidd/ baby lulled/ by a lie*” (3) — and a potentially radical “feminist?” change of direction. Tostevin seems as suspicious of the “lie” of language and discourse as her Quebec contemporaries.

Similarly, Tostevin is *à la dérive* in language, a term she always incorporates, translated as “adrift”, and links to the loss of trust in the mother tongue as source:

mother
 tongue
 memory
 drawing
 towards with

drawing
 retracing
 retrieving
 à la source
 à la dérive
 adrift (1982)

This text, like much of Tostevin's work, is marked by translation; French terms are included — and almost always translated, (a discreet demonstration of the status of French in Canadian letters). But her focus on language in this early text, *Color of Her Speech* (1982) is not limited to the dissymmetries of Canadian language politics; on the contrary, Tostevin's adaptation of terms such as *déparler* and *à la dérive*, shows her awareness of the political questions of gender and language first raised by Quebec feminists. In later texts, *Gyno-text* (1983) and *'sophie* (1988), Tostevin continues to draw on and respond to Quebec's "écriture au féminin", thus integrating its concepts into English-Canadian writing.

Tostevin's work is a deliberate merging of the two cultures - a contamination of the English through the French. In an essay on the bilingual aspect of her work, "Contamination : A Relation of Differences" (1989), Tostevin rejects the "illusion of authenticity and purity" (14) of unary language and insists on the contamination of language as an opening to difference, as contact between different cultures. The contact in her work is both between French and English as languages, and between French and English as hierarchically very different ways of thinking in Canada. And so her essay is also an answer to a Canadian critic's comment that French "detritus" is percolating down and contaminating the Canadian literary scene (13). She is determined to recycle this "detritus" as a political statement to undermine some of the Canadian binary oppositions in both gender and language.

Despite the tensions that terms such as "detritus" and "contamination" reveal, the cultural transfer of Quebec's "écriture au féminin" accelerated into English Canada, not least through the efforts of Daphne Marlatt, co-organizer of an important English/French women writers' conference (Vancouver 1983). In the introduction to the conference proceedings *In the feminine. Women and Words : Les femmes et les mots*, Marlatt sums up the basic differences in approach between English and French Canadian women's activism at that time — the one more socio-critical, the other more philosophical — and she stresses the effect that the Québécois approach had on Canadian women:

[...] many women were inspired by the evidence of a feminist culture in Quebec that is vital, affirmative, visionary, and firmly rooted in an analysis of language and culture. [...] Quebec women writers [...] have initiated a feminine culture based on difference that looks forward, is almost utopian

in its vision and devastating in its criticism of what it leaves behind. A radical departure, in short. (1985, 13)

Marlatt's emphasis on the radical nature of the work by Quebec women soon bore fruit in her own writing projects. She was the first to develop literary French/English dialogues, joint writing and translation projects, with Nicole Brossard. One example of this cooperation are the short pieces entitled *Acts of Passage* (1985/86, 1989, 1991). A Brossardian text "Mauve" is rewritten in English as "Marlatt/Mauve/a reading", while a Marlatt text "Character" appears in Brossard's adaptation "Jeu de lettres". In this second set of texts, the work of translation moves from English into French. Marlatt deconstructs the use of the word "character" in English - its frequent occurrence in expressions such as "he's a man of character", or its importance in the old boys' network that functions by "character reference" to the exclusion of women "as if character were company limited ... a series of positions/ drawn with finesse, finite in liability" (105). Marlatt then evokes the woman on the margins of this world of "characters" ; naturally, she has no character :

liable everywhere & scarcely singular
 she enters at all points unlimited
 rupture of children trivia noise

 she has no character meaning
 indissoluble boundaries

 s/he:
 s plural in excess of he (105)

Yet the "excessiveness" of the woman, already visible in the "s" that turns "he" into "she", means that she breaks the bounds of conventional character - and of conventional language and writing. Since "s/he" has no "indissoluble boundaries", she is eminently flexible, adaptive, elusive. While Marlatt's text plays with the letter "s" as a sign of the feminine, Brossard's "translation" into French does the same with the letter "l" (phonetically "elle") :

fiable partout & à peine singulière
 elle déclare la rupture en tout point illimitée
 les enfants, le bruit anecdotique

 elle est sans caractère signifiant
 insoluble l/imite
 i/le :
 plurielles dans l'excès de ce qu'il (109)

This is evidently not a translation, but rather a "transformance"⁵ of Marlatt's original, and the sound of the letter "l" with its homophone "elle" in French may

make Brossard's text work better. Marlatt's version of Brossard's "Mauve" is no translation, either. The point however is that in initiating these processes of "transformance" Marlatt sought to appropriate methods of linguistic deconstruction for English that came from Quebec's largely different tradition of philosophical, literary and psychoanalytical analysis. Further, she sought to stimulate discussion on gender and language in English Canada, and explore translation as a form of "de-territorialization".

In an essay on her work with Brossard, "Translating MAUVE : Reading Writing", Marlatt describes her translations as a labour of "slippage and difference", in which she had to sense her way along Brossard's sentence, along its currents of meaning and its drift. She picks up the Brossardian term *à la dérive*, and multiplies her use of the term "drift/adrift" to characterize women's texts. Certain women writers, she says, are "aware of the displacement that occurs between their own experiences as women and the drift that is patriarchally loaded in their language. Then you have drift and resistance, immersion and subversion..." (1989, 28). This joint venture in feminist "transformance" is a "leap beyond the horizon line of language, beyond that borderline of words, beyond the separateness of two languages, two minds" (1989, 29) - and into a merging of territories. The translation that is cultural transformance is an innovative approach to closing one of the great Canadian gaps.

TRANSLATION POLITICIZED

Just as writing in the feminine became a political act in Canada, so did translation. And just as the critic's neutrality and the author's originality were debunked, so was the translator's traditional silence and invisibility⁶. In "feminist translation" the translator's solitary confrontation with the text has also disappeared. This translator collaborates with the "auther" (a feminist re-spelling) on the one hand, and, on the other, writes prolifically and theoretically about her work of translation. Since many such translators are also academics, there is often a copious production of secondary literature⁷, theorizing the "contamination" and merging of difference that is translation, and building on the assumption that women have a lot to say to each other *despite* the acknowledged differences between them.

This development has led to an assertive approach to translation, where Barbara Godard writes of "womanhandling" the text and flaunting her signature and her presence as translator. As a result, there can no longer be much of an argument for transparent translation or invisible translators. Indeed, at the mundane level of day to day economics, it would not make sense for feminist writers or translators to insist on transparent translations; they want to make women's work visible, they want women to be seen and heard — they know that most translators are women. Suzanne de Lotbinière-Harwood has stated this political agenda explicitly in her recent book on feminist translation:

“Parler n’est jamais neutre”, écrit Luce Irigaray. Traduire non plus. Contrairement à une pratique de traduction orthodoxe, qui entretient l’illusion de la parfaite neutralité, voire même de la non-existence de la main traduisante, la traduction comme pratique de réécriture au féminin met cartes sur table dès le départ. Son projet est de faire entrer la conscience féministe dans l’activité traductive. Comme l’écriture au féminin, dont elle est tributaire, la traduction au féminin se présente comme une activité politique visant à faire apparaître et vivre les femmes dans la langue et dans le monde. (1991, 11)

Nonetheless, it may be easier to announce translation as a political act than to actually carry out this project : how do translators bring their feminist consciousness to bear on translational activity? Two examples drawn from an earlier paper on “feminist translation”⁸ will suffice to make the point here.

The critique of “patriarchal language” in Quebec led to an emphasis on the female body, and focussed on the paucity of language to describe women’s experiences and (sexual) bodies. The English translations of French passages seeking to remedy this situation often overstate the case : Brossard’s “ce soir j’entre dans l’histoire sans relever ma jupe” became in English: “tonight I enter history without opening my legs”, polemically driving home the political point. Overstatement, over-clarification, and polemics can thus be characteristic of “feminist translation”, elements that Jean Delisle has compared with certain methods of medieval translators⁹.

The deconstruction of French gender rules posed enormous problems for translators, since English grammar is less gender-marked. Rather than “lose” this aspect of the text, they sought to make similar criticisms of the phallogocentric aspects of the English language - thus supplementing the translation. One of the best examples is from a translation of Louky Bersianik’s *L’Euguelionne* by Howard Scott, Canada’s only male “feminist translator”. In a discussion on the politics of abortion the question of punishment comes up: “Le ou la coupable doit être punie”. The silent “e” on the past participle indicates that it is the woman who is punished for aborting, not the man. His translation reads : “The guilty one must be punished whether she is a man or a woman.” The silent “e” of French thus becomes the feminine pronoun “she” in English, and the disconcerting (im)possibility that “she” could be a man reflects the (il)logic of the French.

Finally, the plethora of translator’s prefaces and footnotes, as well as the many texts in which translators have reflected on their authors and their tasks as translators indicate the heightened awareness in Canadian feminist circles of the politics of translation. In this respect, “feminist translators” have realized what Lori Chamberlain called for in her essay “Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation” (1988, 1991) : “the importance of not only translating but of writing about it, making the principles of a practice part of the dialogue about revising

translation". The revision of translation involves not only making the work of (women) translators visible, but also disrupting the typically "female" aspect of translation - its silence. Further, the heightened political consciousness of the translator can help resist (not censor) texts that are "offensive" or "antagonistic"¹⁰, or in the Canadian context, can turn a "gender-neutral", i.e. a patriarchal text, into a feminist piece of writing. This was de Lotbinière-Harwood's approach to what she called the "generic masculine" language of Lise Gauvin's *Lettres d'une autre*. Insisting on countering the "all-male-gendered stance of language, where the referent is presumed to be male until proven ... other" (1991, 113), De Lotbinière-Harwood intervened in the text in order that it reflect her own political intentions. These she stated explicitly in the preface: "My translation practice is a political activity aimed at making language speak for women [...] this translation has used every possible translation strategy to make the feminine visible in language" (1990, 9).

To sum up the situation in Canada: although there have doubtless been many contemporary influences on writing and translation in both Quebec and Canada, it seems that in the area of feminist cultural politics, Quebec's "écriture au féminin" played a vital role. Its avant-garde literary applications of French philosophical thought and psychoanalytic perceptions occurred in the 1970's and 1980's, in the cultural context of women wanting to enter into dialogue across language borders, and resulted in new forms of English/French transformative "contamination". These, in turn, led to a highly politicized view of translation. Feminist ideology rendered not only women writers but also translators conscious of the traditional logic of binary oppositions fixed by and through language according to which "woman" is a lack or at most a token of exchange. Women assumed the right to appropriate language and use it as writers, readers and translators to their own ends. A new ethics of translation developed from this focus on gender in language, whose major points could be listed as: "taking women's experience as starting point", "recognizing the moral agency of women" and "seeing feminist ethics as an active involvement in radical social change" (de Lotbinière-Harwood, 166-168). Translation has thus moved from being a covert language art and become an overt and committed, political language act.

NOTES

¹ A number of recent works on the avant-garde stress this connection between experimental work and political thinking: cf. J.F. Lyotard, Peter Bürger, Andreas Huysens.

² Nicole Brossard has published prolifically. Among her most important “radical feminist” works are : *L’Amèr ou le chapitre effrité*, Montreal, Quinze 1977, Reprint 1988; *Amantes*, Montreal, Quinze, 1980; *Picture theory*, Montreal, Nouvelle Optique, 1982 and *La lettre aérienne*, Montreal, Les Editions du remue-ménage, 1985.

³ Many other Quebec women contributed literary and creative work to “radical feminist” projects, making the movement a vast and diverse field of experimentation. See a selection of the following critical works: Louise Dupré, *Stratégies du vertige. Trois poètes: Nicole Brossard, Madeleine Gagnon, France Théoret* (Montreal: Les Editions du remue-ménage 1989); Louise Forsyth, “Beyond the Myths and Fictions of Traditionalism and Nationalism: The Political in the Work of Nicole Brossard” in *Traditionalism, Nationalism and Feminism. Women Writers of Quebec* ed. Paula Gilbert Lewis (Westport, Conn and London, England: Greenwood Press 1985); Karen Gould, *Writing in the Feminine. Feminism and Experimental Writing in Quebec* (Carbondale and Edwardsville : Southern Illinois University Press 1990); Patricia Smart, *Ecrire dans la maison du père* (Montreal : Québec/Amérique 1988), various articles in *Féminité, Subversion, Ecriture* ed. Suzanne Lamy et Irène Pagès (Montreal : Les Editions du remue-ménage 1983), *L’Avantgarde culturelle et littéraire des années 70 au Québec*, ed. Jacques Pelletier (Montreal: UQAM 1986); *Gynocritics / La Gynocritique: Feminist Approaches to Writing by Canadian and Quebecois Women* ed. Barbara Godard (Toronto: ECW 1987); Luise von Flotow, *Quebec Feminist Writing : Integrating the Avant-garde and the Political in the Works of Nicole Brossard and France Theoret*, Diss. U. of Michigan 1991.

⁴ One such joint publishing project was *La Venue à l’écriture* with Hélène Cixous, Annie Leclerc and Madeleine Gagnon, Paris: Des Femmes, 1977.

⁵ “Transformance” is the term adopted by Barbara Godard to refer to feminist translation : translation and simultaneously performance of a language act. Marlatt gives the definition “reading reading, writing writing, writing reading - that flicker pan-linear, lured beyond equivalence: a new skin...” (1989, 28).

⁶ For more on the translator’s (in)visibility, see *Rethinking Translation. Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*, ed. Lawrence Venuti, London/New York, Routledge 1992. Canadian feminist translators would seem to be an early exception to the “dilettante/artisan” translator Venuti deploras in his introduction (2).

⁷ See for example the translator’s prefaces by Barbara Godard in *Picture theory* by Nicole Brossard, tr. Godard, Montreal:Guernica 1991; *The Tangible Word* by France Théoret, tr. Godard, Montreal: Guernica 1991; the translator’s preface in *The Aerial Letter* by Nicole Brossard, tr. Marlene Wildeman, Toronto : The Women’s Press 1988; *Re-Belle et Infidèle/ The Body Bilingual. Translation as a Rewriting in the Feminine* by Suzanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, Montreal: Les Editions du remue-ménage 1991.

⁸ See L.von Flotow, “Feminist Translation : Contexts, Practices and Theories”, *TTR*, IV, 2, 69-84, 1991.

⁹ See his recent article “Traducteurs médiévaux, traductrices féministes : une même éthique de la traduction?” in *TTR*, VI,1, 1993.

¹⁰ See Carol Maier’s short text on translating Octavio Armand’s “machismo”: “A Woman in Translation, Reflecting”, *Translation Review*, 17, 3-8, 1985.

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