The Strain of Cultural Transfer: A Brazilian Critic of Canadian and Other Feminisms

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Experiencing the strain of cultural transfer

In 1995 on a visit to Concordia University in Montreal for a job interview, I came across the work of Rosemary Arrojo for the first time. I was being interviewed mainly due to the texts I had published in Canada in the late 1980s and early 1990s: English translations of texts written in French by Quebec women authors, a number of articles on Quebec women writers, and one academic article on "feminist translation" in Canada. This text, published in 1991 in the Canadian translation studies journal *TTR*¹, had consisted of an overview of the increasingly visible and assertive work of those translators (all Canadians) who were inspired or moved by various feminist ideas, and were translating Quebec writers. It also outlined three main translation strategies that I discerned in their work, namely, supplementing, commenting in prefaces and footnotes, and 'hijacking'. This term I appropriated from a critic who had used it to criticize the growing practice favoured by certain translators to take a middle-of-the-road piece of writing and through their translation turn it into a feminist text. They did this, they asserted, to express their political stance, which was largely feminist, on the issue of women's words, women's work, women's visibility, women's politics.
The new issue of TTR had just arrived from the printer at Concordia, and I was happy to accept a copy. As I glanced through the table of contents, I was intrigued by one particular article, entitled “Fidelity and the Gendered Translation” by Rosemary Arrojo, from the Universidad de Campinas near Sao Paolo. I saw that my article was referenced in its bibliography, but left the reading of it for later. Good thing too! For had I read that text immediately, it would have been rather more difficult to focus on the job interview. Since then, I have read it several times, assigned it to students, and incorporated some of its criticisms in a book I wrote a few years later. Its basic premise is that claims about “feminist translation” are hypocritical; they unjustifiably appropriate and mis-use deconstructionist ideas; and they start from an unacceptable binary opposition – women good, men bad.

In a subsequent text published in 1995 and entitled “Feminist, ‘Orgasmic’ Theories of Translation and their Contradictions” Arrojo continues her assault on feminist work in translation, this time in response to an article by Susan Bassnett. What was at stake this time was the “pretension to offer a non-violent alternative to the “masculine” metaphors of invasion implied by most traditional theories of translation” (68). Bassnett’s text draws parallels between Hélène Cixous’ enthusiastic celebration of the “feminine” and the female position assigned to translation as analyzed by Lori Chamberlain, and it ends on the idealistic note, as Bassnett admits, of imagining an “orgasmic theory of translation in which elements are fused into a new whole in an encounter that is mutual, pleasurable and respectful” (72). Arrojo latches on to this idea of “orgasmic” translation, and ignores the many intersections between her own and Bassnett’s thinking—i.e. on the contingency and contextuality of translation (Bassnett 64-65), and the potential for power in the translator’s voice and intervention (Bassnett 70).

Finally, in 1999, Arrojo publishes “Interpretation as possessive love”, an analysis of and attack on Cixous’ readings of the Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector. This is presented as a hypocritical, self-interested, imperialist appropriation and a deliberate mis-reading (155), despite Cixous’ protestations of feminine/feminist respect and “love” for another woman’s text. Arrojo concludes that “far from demonstrating the possibility of undoing the basic “masculine” oppressive dichotomy between subject and object […] Cixous’s (sic) textual approach to Lispector’s work is in fact an exemplary illustration of an aggressively ‘masculine’ approach to difference” (160).
For me, these polemics are signs of a distinct strain in cultural transfer — between Western feminisms and an "other" reader, between different "marginalities" (North American/French women on the one hand, and the Brazilian critic on the other), both trying to make headway or carve out territory in relatively new fields, both seeking recognition and power. While this strain remains unacknowledged and untheorized, it reveals itself in the acid irritation that Arrojo's texts express with Anglo-American (or First World) feminisms, and her defensive discourse on the subaltern "marginality" of Brazilian writing. In what follows, I will largely confine my remarks to the earliest text, published in 1994.

Contradictions

There is a general thrust in academia today that encourages and studies cultural transfer and exchange as something inevitable, and largely desirable, though sometimes problematic; as something that will bring cultures together, forge links and cooperations, build bridges, foster understanding, and so on. This is also the traditional thinking that underlies translation, and translation studies. Even a creative scholar in the discipline such as Anthony Pym, for instance, does not shy away from asserting that translators should aim to "create long term cooperation between cultures" (Pym 2002, 2000). Yet contemporary work in translation and other cultural studies has shown again and again that profound difference (and not necessarily cooperation) seem to be the constant in this domain of exchange and transfer. Indeed, since the mid-1980s, translation studies has virtually abandoned the traditional focus on equivalence between texts in order to explore all the variations on difference. So, while the discourse on cultural transfer and exchange as a mediating factor that fosters understanding and contact may have grown (especially at the level of institutions), those of us in translation studies know that difference rules, and may continue to stymie transcultural understanding.

Perhaps one of the most telling aspects of this situation is contained in the new term "localization": in our increasingly globalized world, where we are relentlessly "informed" about and offered news and products from around the world, many texts, information, and especially sales blurbs are being localized, NOT globalized. This buzzword, and the business worth millions it refers
to, has to do with difference as a problem, with the fact that most cultures are local and not global and do not easily tolerate difference (except on holiday), and most people function (and buy) locally. In the area of translation, localization, which often refers to the translation of websites, computer manuals and other paraphernalia that are mainly produced in the USA, seeks to undo or mitigate difference, in order to better sell.

But any celebration of cultural transfer must be queried for reasons that move beyond the mere mercantile. While information may currently travel between cultures at lightning speed, there are many signs that it does not travel easily, or smoothly; it does not arrive untarnished, unchanged, and pristine at the other end. There is always some of the original, some source cultural matter left clinging, and it may well be reason for conflict. My experience of Arrojo’s text, and doubtless her experience of my text and those of the other North American/Western European writers she takes to task, hold much that is conflictual. The whole thing reeks of an enormous cultural strain.

And in this case, it seems to revolve around relatively established local North American/Western feminisms and Arrojo’s perception of them as seeking to assert universalizing, absolutist notions. Writing in 1990/1991 when North American feminisms were at a peak (Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble had only just come out and people were just beginning to unwind its convoluted syntax), certain Canadian women academics, myself included, were working at the contact point of feminist ideas about the empowerment of women in and translation – exploring women’s visibility in translated texts – as translators, as translated authors, as translation analysts and critics. Our interest in this confluence between feminisms and translation led to numerous publications, largely in Canada, the USA and the UK. Since, two books have also come out in German, and entire conferences on the subject have been held in England, Austria and Spain. Basically, and very simply, the idea was that translation is a creative process, a molding and adapting of the text which produces meaning rather than simply repeating it. Long coded as being related to or typified by women’s reproductive work, translation (i.e. cultural transfer) could thus be revisioned/revamped along with the many other issues around women that feminisms had focused attention upon. The time was one of empowerment, agency, and pro-activeness for and by women.
The Wet Blanket

Into this happy euphoria steps Arrojo, with the said article in 1994, the “orgasmic” text (1995), the Cixous-Lispector piece (1999), and a number of other articles that champion deconstruction, and struggle to “de-essentialize” thinking about translation. Her main point of reference is Jacques Derrida, whose work she unquestioningly mines for support – and always cites in English translation.

There are several points that particularly rile Arrojo about feminist discourses on translation. These are

a. claims that the deliberate manipulation of a text through translation may still be seen as a form of fidelity to the original (1994, 156-159). Indeed, Arrojo objects to any reference to fidelity, arguing instead that on the one hand, Derrida has amply shown that fidelity and equivalence are out of the question, and on the other it is not acceptable to deliberately undermine a text and still claim a certain fidelity.

b. claims that the appropriation of deconstructionist notions about texts as fluid, flexible, unstable things, that are always subject to translator’s manipulations, may give the feminist translator the “right, and even the duty to ‘abuse’” the source text (1994, 156-160). Abuse is abuse, says Arrojo, and hence violent, and furthermore this idea is a travesty of deconstruction.

c. the assumption she notes in certain texts, and seems to assign to most North American/French feminist women’s writing, that feminine or female values, elements, or treatments of a text are somehow less aggressive, more understanding/loving than the traditional male/masculine approach (1995, 73-74) – Hélène Cixous and Susan Bassnett are particularly guilty of propagating this idea, which, she says, is no different than that underlying “patriarchal” translation.

In this discussion, filled with harsh adverbs and grating sarcasms, it is not clear whether Arrojo has understood the largely local political and cultural provenance of these texts, nor their tactical, strategic way of operating, selecting
the most useful concepts of deconstruction and other theory – for their purposes, precisely “when it is convenient” as Arrojo so cuttingly notes. While feminisms may have had transnational aspirations in the 1970s, and a problematic German translation of Mary Daly’s difficult Gyn/Ecology (1977/1980) is prefaced in this vein, it is clear that by the 1990s, these ideas had subsided – in the wake of the recognition of immense differences between and among women. Thus, the work of Barbara Godard, Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, as well as my own essay are very Canadian – departing from Canadian texts, and referring to Quebec-Canadian situations and publishing opportunities, where a small community of like-minded readers and writers can understand and support the work. While Arrojo may recognize that community is important for such enterprises – she gives backhanded sarcastic credit for this when she writes “we can say that the feminist translators’ explicitly authorial strategies to take over the texts they translate are perfectly legitimate within the political context they are so bravely trying to construct […]” (1994, 159), but she instructs us, “such translations cannot be absolutely acceptable, as they are not absolutely more “noble”, or more justifiable than the patriarchal translations and notions they are trying to deconstruct” (ibid). An interesting, somewhat baffling point, since the term “noble” had not been current in feminist work nor had there been any claim to absolute acceptability.

**Addressing Fidelity, Abuse, Feminine/Feminist Values**

a. The equivalence problem, and especially the term “fidelity”, has dogged translation and translators for centuries. It speaks to the fact that a translation is usually a later version of an earlier text, and that translators are traditionally expected to render a recognizable copy of the source text. It has been problematized over the past 20 years - by deconstructionists such as Jacques Derrida and American commentators interested in translation such as Barbara Johnson and Philip Lewis (Graham, ed. 1985); by thinkers who follow Foucault’s ideas on power and knowledge (postcolonial theories) or Bakhtin’s on heteroglossia and textual flux and movement; by feminist translators and translation theo-
rists (Chamberlain, Levine, Maier, Simon); by those interested in ethics of translation (Pym), and many others – including those who struggle over applications of machine translation, and cannot produce equivalent texts either. All camps are intrigued and challenged by the problems involved in creating the same, or related, meaning in translation; the feminist camp in the early 1990s, however, chooses to use “fidelity” strategically – not tying itself to Derridean apron strings – but exploring exactly how useful for their purposes the increasingly flexible and indefinable notion of fidelity can be. Arrojo, in her earnest “deconstructionist school marm”¹⁰ approach, disapproves and calls them to (her) order.

b. The issue of abuse – and the “right, even duty to ‘abuse’ a text” - revolves around the “hijacking” of a text, in this case into feminism, as a political move that makes sense at a certain moment and in a certain historical context. It has occurred in many different translation contexts and ages (including Jerome’s production of the Vulgate), and is usually a covert activity. Feminist translators (of the early 1990s in Canada), however, proudly call attention to this activity since they thereby demonstrate their new-found power. Arrojo, however, takes “hijacking” as a strategy that has been developed to apply to ALL translation and righteously argues that “hijacking” a text is a violent activity, as reprehensible as any other violent act. Moreover, she asserts that women who claim to be non-violent nurturing creatures, and thus “better than men” (Arrojo 1995), are in fact being hypocritical when they “hijack” a text and code this activity as less aggressive than other forms of translation. Indeed, Arrojo seems to read any text with even a slight feminist tinge to it as participating in a reprehensible – women good, men bad – binary system, ideas that North American and French feminist translation theorists and translators had largely jettisoned by the 1990s. By this time they were less concerned with harping on about ideas of the 1970s than with exploring ways to translate experimental writing from that period or otherwise strategically applying the
empowerment and energy that had come from the early forms of the women’s movement. In other words, Arrojo seems to be beating a dead horse. Much as she does in her most recent work in translation theory where she continues to write about the lessons of deconstruction and anti-essentialism (Arrojo 1998, 200011). It is amply clear by now, and probably always has been to those who cared to think about it, that translation will change a text considerably, and each re-translation will do so again. Texts, in other words, are flexible, malleable, unstable, and uncontrollable, and translations, which are also texts, hardly differ12. They simply fasten down a particular version of a text for a moment, stabilizing it somewhat, temporarily – until the first reader arrives to use it his or her way.

A Question of Tone (Der Ton macht die Musik)

While the reasoning in Arrojo’s scathing 1994 text may be skewed because she imputes far greater aspirations to feminist translation theories and practices in Canada than actually were there in the early 1990s, it is the tone of her work that is most disconcerting. Heavily sarcastic, it abounds in inverted commas used to subvert or ridicule certain topos of 1980s/90s feminist discourse, for example, in her discussion on the traditional “masculine” opposition between productive and reproductive work and its reflection in the metaphors used to discuss translation (Chamberlain 1987). Chamberlain bases her research on a topos that does not square with Arrojo’s own perception. Hence, the inverted commas every time Arrojo purports to cite feminist topos – such as “the infamous double standard” (1994, 149) and ideas about “our traditional ‘masculine theories and conceptions of translation’” (149). Further, Arrojo chooses to misunderstand the recuperation of the term “hijacking”; she lumps it together with other violent acts such as castration, bandies about the slur of hypocrisy, and ascribes it all to what she calls the very dubious ethics of feminist politics in translation. Finally, she imputes to all feminist approaches the same desire to offer some form of twisted “fidelity” to the authors and texts they render. This is in fact the question she sets up to explore – ignoring the fact,
that only one of the scholars she dresses down (Suzanne Levine) ventures into this terrible territory. In this regard, Kathleen Davis in her *Deconstruction and Translation* (2001) quite rightly asserts that "Arrojo's essay unfairly homogenizes the work of the many women she discusses" (90).

I suspect that her ire is directed toward North American feminisms in general, their fascination with Hélène Cixous in the 1970s, and their claims to agency, and generally pro-active stance. While this may be a defendable scholarly position, the issue of Arrojo's own positionality, the personal and professional points from which she is writing, and the issues at stake for her, remain unaddressed. Which is why her conclusion to the 1994 piece sounds oddly off: "After all," she writes, "if we cannot really be faithful to the texts we translate, if we cannot avoid being faithful to our own circumstances and perspective, we should simply make an effort to accept and be open about our "infidelities" and try to forget the unnecessary guilt they bring" (160). She unfortunately does not specify who "we" are, nor does the pious tone conceal that she has her own position on the matter although she conveniently fails to unpack her particular "circumstances and perspectives". What is it in 1990s Brazil, at the Universidad de Campinas, or in her training (or her reaction to this training) in the USA in the late 1980s and in the professional ambition and personal life of Rosemary Arrojo that makes her style herself as

a. a sarcastic, intolerant commentator on Western/Anglo-American feminisms

b. an exegete of Jacques Derrida, and more generally

c. a proponent of absolute anti-essentialism, if there can be such a thing, struggling against the essentialism that seems to pervade translation studies (Arrojo 1998, 2000).

**Fateful Translation**

Perhaps the most jarring aspect of Arrojo's writing, which seriously puts into question her ability to understand 1990s feminist and other ideas about empowerment and agency through the assertive rewriting/revision of texts, is the notion of fate. In Arrojo's view, the translator is fated to be "abusive" and "violent", fated to "misread" and "misrepresent", even when she
or he, unlike the feminist sort, really wants to be invisible and "recover and reproduce the totality of the author's "original meaning" (1994, 158). This is the underlying idea that doubtless accounts for much of the strain in this particular cultural transfer. While I operate in the belief that I have some agency, some power to make changes where I feel they are necessary or politically warranted, (for instance, by correcting a text that refers to the "Iraq war", or to "Iraq as a problem" in a recent translation, and writing instead about the "US invasion of Iraq" and the "problems caused by the US position on Iraq"), Arrojo presents this opportunity to flex the translator's muscles as the translator's fate: activism and agency vs determinism, perhaps. This idea suffuses all her subsequent writing on translation and becomes her particular inescapable absolute.

I wonder though how much of the motivation for Arrojo's anti-feminist production between 1994 and 1999 lies in the area of participatory power politics; in attacking something that is in vogue (such as feminist ideas in the late 1980s and early 1990s), or in producing exegeses of a philosopher such as Derrida who has managed to stay in relative vogue in North America, one makes a name for oneself, and escapes the fate of "marginality" that may or may not come with the Brazilian situation.

Notes and Bibliography


6 On several occasions in the Cixous/Lispector article, Arrojo refers to Lispector's "marginal context and language" (156, 160).


9 A recent call for papers for an English-Arabic conference by Basil Hatim on the failure of translation to “build bridges” is another sign of the lack of success in this area (in October 2004 in the United Arab Emirates).


12 Littau, Karin (2000). “Pandora’s Tongues”, TTR XIII, i, 21-35. Littau develops and examines this truism in a feminist vein with reference to the many images of Pandora, Luce Irigaray’s work on women’s multiple sexuality and psychoanalysis, and women’s empowerment and applies it to a theorization of re-translation and the seriality of translation as a powerful and empowering way to create knowledge.