EDWIN GENTZLER

Translation, Postcolonial Studies, and the Americas

Anecdote

I have been recently conducting research on the topic of translation and resistance for a new book, and my travels have taken me a couple of times to Chiapas, Mexico. I have

Larry Venuti from the United States representing “foreignizing” translation, Nicole Brossard/Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood in Canada, representing *“réécriture au féminin,”* and Augusto and Haroldo de Campos in Brazil, representing “cannibalistic” translation. I then look at what might be called the first wave of criticism of those theories levied by translation scholars such as Douglas Robinson, Rosemary Arrojo, and Roberto Schwarz, who critique the respective postcolonial theories above. I conclude by raising questions regarding the respective critiques, wondering if their forms of critique do not reflect vested interests that might hinder rather than further the exploration of postcolonial thought and modes, including translation, for giving voice to those ideas.

Lawrence Venuti: “Foreignizing Translation”

Perhaps the most influential and controversial translation studies scholar of the last decade in North America has been Lawrence Venuti, editor of the pioneering anthology *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology* (1992), author of two major books on translation—*The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1995) and *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (1998)—and compiler of *The Translation Studies Reader* (1999).[2] Venuti’s contributions to translation studies are multiple. In this paper, I will refer primarily to his concept of “foreignizing” translation, which has been used by scholars such as Sherry Simon and Samia Mehretz when referring to postcolonial translation.

Venuti’s main thesis is that translation tends to be an invisible practice in the United States. Translations are judged to be successful when they read “fluently,”

What features does Venuti suggest that the practising translator reproduce? Precisely those that signal linguistic and cultural difference. He is attracted to poststructural strategies that foreground the play of the signifier, puns, neologisms, archaisms, dialects, satire, fragmented syntax, and experimental forms, all of which result in discontinuous, fragmented, and less than unified final texts. Such translation techniques expose the illusion of transparency by making the translator's work visible, and thereby encouraging a rethinking of the secondary, derivative status of the translator. They also, ironically, preserve important elements of the source text that frequently are smoothed over, elided, and/or adapted to the point that they are no longer recognisable. Thus one can see the attraction, for postcolonial translators, of Venuti’s preferred style.

Questions remain regarding Venuti's recommendations for practising called postcolonial translators. The link, he claims, is that these translators are "marginal" translators. The term "modernist" or "non-academic" might be more appropriate, for these translators' linguistic, sexual, and political translation choices have challenged and offended more traditional scholars, and many academic reviewers have criticised their linguistic and cultural choices. But in terms of creative writers and practising translators in the United States, their translations are well known and perhaps even more influential than their academic counterparts. The strategies employed—an emphasis on vitality and energy; the absence of aesthetic references in favour of material ones; the sexual frankness; the use of varied lexicons, dialects, colloquialisms, and vernaculars; the attention to the music and tone; and the use of archaisms and foreign terms—all reflect conventions well known in modernist texts.

The two paradigms Venuti sets up for translation—fluent and foreignizing—seem to allow no middle ground. With regard to the history of translation in the United States, not all the translators he wishes to categorise as producing fluent translations would agree; many, including Felsteiner, Kunitz, Merwin, Bly, Weissbort, Auster, and Wilbur—translators who do not subscribe to Venuti's preferred strategies—are in their own ways quite successful in importing foreign ideas and concepts. Additionally, many of the translators he claims as marginal and abusive, are in fact drawing upon long literary traditions of using translation to challenge cultural norms of the receiving society. Many of Venuti's proposals for practising translators remind scholars of Brechtian alienation effects, or Russian formalist *ostranenie* elements, rather than the poststructuralist devices to which he alludes.

American (European) culture. However, the strategy in practice also tends to commit abuses against the source-language culture and author, creating all too familiar unbalanced relations of power with the source-language author having little or no way of fighting back.

Nicole Brossard/Lotbinière-Harwood/Barbara Godard: *réécriture au féminin*

A group of feminists in Quebec have taken a different course from Lawrence Venuti, rethinking postcolonial translation not as a form of writing in opposition to some sort of prevailing "fluent" paradigm, but rather as a new form of productive writing in and of itself, meshed or interconnected with "original" writing. As the French feminists developed a kind of writing they called *écriture féminine* to challenge the logocentric male discourse of their culture, so too did the Quebec feminists develop a kind of translation they called *réécriture au féminin* (rewriting in/of the feminine), one that emphasises difference without hierarchising and that celebrates creativity in both translation and original writing. For writers such as Nicole Brossard, author of novels such as *Picture theory*, *La Lettre aérienne*, and *Le Désert mauve*,[10] translation is not distinguished from "original" writing, and not viewed as a neo-literal, subordinate, derivative practice. Brossard encourages her translators, including Barbara Godard, translator of *These our Mothers* and *Picture Theory*, and Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, translator of *Under Tongue* and *Mauve Desert*,[11] to intervene, to write, to translate from within, and "to go further." The Quebec translators' task might be described both as resisting standard colonising French French in favour of a liberating Montréal French, as well as challenging patriarchal language wherever it may occur, in standard French as well as in the encroaching United States English. *Réécriture au féminin* is cognizant of the constructed nature of language and the possibilities for participating in the construction of culture. Rather than positing sexual difference in language as something given, the Quebec feminists seem to be more intent on exposing the manipulated nature of language, the limitations imposed on a culture for reasons of colonisation and/or patriarchy, and creative possible solutions to escape those limitations.

Rather than using writing to exposes essential differences between masculine and *appeler une cafetière si tu tiens un café*?" (Literally, "Will you be called a coffee-maker if you run a café?"). *Cafetier*, the masculine form, describes the owner of a café; *cafetière* refers to a coffee-maker and is never used to refer to a woman owner. In her translation, Lotbinière-Harwood ironically uses "chefess" in "Are you going to be called a chefess?"[15] Bersianik continues with "*Quel est le féminin de garcon? C'est garce!*" (Literally, "What is the feminine for *garçon*/boy? It's *garce*/slut!"). While at one point in French linguistic history, *garce* used to mean "girl," over time its meaning has shifted to the point where today its primary connotation is "slut" or "whore." Lotbinière-Harwood substitutes a similar slippage in English when she translates the passage as "What is the feminine of dog? It's bitch!"[16] In addition, translators are given the freedom to add to text, to run with the ideas, to expand upon the metaphors and images in the target language, thereby allowing new meanings to proliferate.

Yet the Quebec feminist translators are doing more than merely invoking French feminist typographical changes and resexing pronouns to destabilise male discourse; Translation, in the words of Barbara Godard, another translator of Brossard, becomes a way to signify difference in cultural codes despite its similarity to a source text. This difference is the key concept in the larger cultural practice of challenging the languages and cultural policies that govern the Canadian nation-state. She writes, "The feminist translator affirming her critical difference, her delight in interminable re-reading and re-writing, flaunts the signs of her manipulation of the text. *Womanhandling* the text in translation would involve the replacement of the modest, self-effacing translator."[17] Translation, thus, has become a major theme of the fiction and secondary literature itself. Translation, in their Quebec feminist view, can be used increasingly as a tool to articulate a new theory of culture, one that is more inclusive, more “democratic” for all its citizens, and more open for change and evolution. Whereas in most countries, translation, including feminist translation, continues to be of marginal national interest, in Canada it has become one of the central issues in considerations in the highest literary and cultural circles.

Again, as in the case with Venuti, certain critics rethinking postcolonial translation have begun to critique the Quebec women. In “Feminist, ‘Orgasmic’ Theories of Translation and their Contradictions,”[18] Rosemary Arrojo takes issue with the concept of *réécriture au féminin*, especially with its re-writing, re-reading, aspect, and the empowering of the translator that accompanies such a definition of translation. She particularly takes issue with Godard’s notion of “womanhandling,” equating it with traditional notions of manhandling and its accompanying notions of violence and manipulation. Despite claims to trying to find a new way of translation that is not governed by traditional binary opposites—neither masculine nor feminine, source/target text, faithful/free, good/bad—Arrojo feels that the Quebec feminists are prejudiced in favour of the feminine, and that whatever the in-between space that they claim to have opened up, it is essentially a feminine space and politics that in many ways mirror the violent and appropriative practices that have characterised translation in patriarchal cultures historically. Arrojo concludes that a search for a non-violent theory of translation, one based on respectful collaboration between author and translator is “utopic,” “idealistic,” and “incompatible” with any process to “determine and take over meaning,”[19] which means, in short, incompatible with the process of translation itself. Arrojo wants us to realise that all translation involves political choices, and that translators need to be cognizant of their own interests and goals, and that these interests are inevitably biased and in some way violent, since they always intend to replace other texts and translations.

Arrojo's critique, I think, does an injustice to the level of deconstructive and feminist thinking that has gone on in Quebec and unfairly equates often extremely respectful author/translator collaborations with violent, non-respectful, and confrontational theories of colonising translation. I find the contributions of the Quebec feminist translators significant in several areas, including their viewing translation as a movement across multiple sign-systems and languages simultaneously. I certainly do not find anything non-respectful in the Quebec feminist translation strategies. I am also attracted to their view of translation as a creative process, not just in terms of art, but also in terms of identity formation and the evolution of the society as a whole. The translator, together with the original author, is seen as a creative, evolving subject, and the activity of translation as one that involves an active/activist translator.

Haroldo and Augusto de Campos: Translation and Cannibalisation

Perhaps the leading postcolonial theory to emerge from the Americas has been the *movimento antropófago* or "cannibalist movement." in Brazil. Founded by Oswald de Andrade in 1928 with the "Manifesto Antropófago," originally published in the first issue of the *Revista de Antropofagia*,[20] the group comprised just one of many avant-garde movements characteristic of the age, and indeed intersects with modernist movements and manifestos ongoing in Europe and the Americas at the time. This Brazilian movement more or less disappeared from view in the West until resurrected by a group of translators such as the brothers Haroldo and Augusto de Campos in the mid-1960s, then by filmmakers such as Joaquim Pedro de Andrade, Glauber Rocha, Nelson Pereira dos Santos in the late 1960s and early 1970s, musicians such as Caetano Veloso in the 1970s and 1980s, and most recently by critics and theorists such as Else Vieira, Sergio Bellei, Roberto Schwarz, Nelson Arscher and others in the 1980s and 1990s.

The term itself derives from the cannibalistic acts of the Tupi Indians, the indigenous tribe first met by the Portuguese, French, and Spanish explorers. The Tupi practice, however, was by no means “heathenistic” or irreligious in any way. Despite the way it has been characterised by Western explorers, missionaries, and anthropologists, it was highly religious, and in many ways akin to the Christian practice of communion with its symbolic drinking of the blood of Christ. For the Tupi Indians, cannibalism had nothing to do with the European notion, which involves concepts of devouring, dismembering, and mutilation, but rather an act of taking back out of love, honour, and nourishment. Only the bravest and most virtuous soldiers were devoured. They would first be taken into the community to live among the families and children of the conquering tribe so that the people could learn virtuous behaviour from the captured soldier. The final act of eating the brave soldier was symbolic as well as physical. Cannibalism was seen as an act of nourishing, in which the positive values of the brave but defeated soldier would be digested and absorbed and become part of the future physical and mental identity of the victorious community. In a Darwinian fashion, the transfusion of blood was the means by which the virtues would be transmitted.

One of the best portrayals of the Tupi culture can be viewed in Nelson Pereira dos Santos’s film *Como era gostose o meu Frances* [*How Tasty was my Little Frenchman*], produced in Brazil in 1971. Dos Santos, part of Brazil's *Cinema Nova* movement of the 1960s and 1970s, did extensive anthropological research on Amerindian tribes of Brazil and consulted historical depictions of such tribes, including the one by Hans Staden, a German gunner on a Portuguese ship who was captured by the Tupinambá tribe, but who escaped and wrote the account “transcreation,” “transtextualiz

as a kind of pseudo-morality of the source culture. Haroldo de Campos's interpretation of the final stanzas of Goethe's *Faust*, parodying interpretations that emphasise Christian moralising, might serve as one example. In addition, and perhaps most radically, the translator has the freedom to interject local referents into the text: Augusto de Campos, for example, intersperses lines from Brazilian folksongs into his translations of John Donne, creating a kind of transcultural hybrid form that resonates in both European and Brazilian cultures.

For the Brazilian writers, translators, and filmmakers, cannibalism has become one of the primary conceits for illustrating Brazilian cultural difference, its bi-cultural development, and its complex and often contradictory identity as a nation. Its citizens have developed by absorbing many European values, but at the same time by not ignoring their indigenous roots. By reinterpreting, rewriting, and translating their own culture, incorporating positive elements from both European and Brazilian traditions, but at the same time questioning European sources with ethnocentric prejudices against indigenous peoples, these writers have arrived at a theory of translation and identity formation that is historically rich, culturally diverse, and theoretically highly original, European or North American culture, but one blending elements of both North and South, European and indigenous, First and Third World.

In recent years, however, a powerful critique of cannibalism theory has been accumulating in Brazil, led by Roberto Schwarz, one of the most respected critics of Brazilian literature. In his *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*,[26] Schwarz suggests that Haroldo de Campos's move from *antropofagia* to transculturalisation and transluciferation reveals the failure of Brazil's modernising project, especially the failure of the intellectual elite of the country to construct their own identity. Indeed, much recent social as well as literary criticism regarding Brazil is characterised by commentary on the increasing failure of the culture to achieve the modernism and industrialisation of other Western nations. Rather than integration and interdependence, Schwarz sees disintegration and deeper and deeper dependencies, especially in the realm of economics, employment, and technology. Schwarz sees the goal of modernising via a cannibalist process of blending the rural Brazilian with the urban European as largely unattainable, another kind of utopian, elitist desire out of step with the realities of the situation.

mass of data offered by cultural historians, critics, musicians, filmmakers, and postcolonial critics.

Yet Schwarz is not alone in his critique of the “elitist” nature of the de Campos brothers’ theories of translation. Sérgio Bellei in his essay “Brazilian Anthropophagy Revisited”[32] makes similar claims. He suggests that the anthropophagists have a kind of split consciousness, aware of both the “superior” European culture and the material backwardness of their own culture. The “purpose” of the anthropophagists, according to Bellei, was to dissolve the borders between the two,[33] leading to a certain reversibility between BraR(c)5.4.9(s.)y25B3sdw83(7.1dw83(7.1d4)-1s004 Tc7c0 (“B)]TJ8.6ween)-10(B)6.2 Tw[(0(B)6.

To be frank, I do not find that these readings hold. It is precisely the historical depth that does resurface in a cannibalistic translation, invoking native cultural practices

North American intellectual circles to make all Third World writing sound the same—that the woman peasant writer from India begins to sound the same as the male writer from Taiwan.[37] I am sceptical of any universalising theory at this point, and what is most interesting about postcolonial translation is the multitude of different cultures, ideas, traditions, gender roles, religions, myths, and metaphors. To collapse these into any fixed notion of sameness or difference would be a shame.

If we have learned anything from postcolonial translation in the Americas to date, it is that it is much too early to place any limits on the forms and strategies open to postcolonial translation. Rather than one approach—be it modern/postmodern, foreignizing/fluent, masculine/feminist, cannibalistic/Christian—I advocate that we allow for multiple approaches, and diverse and even contradictory strategies, depending upon the text, the communicative situation, and the audience. While I personally do not particularly like traditional strategies of being strictly wedded to the source text, I am also not too enamoured with the new "laws" being generated by target-oriented scholars. While the flaws of Venuti's, Brossard's, and de Campos's theories are now manifest, they are at least experimenting with new forms and strategies, and are challenging notions that historically have been used to suppress and marginalise ethnic minorities within cultures.

In terms of rethinking postcolonial translation from the standpoint of the Americas, questions asked include whether Venuti's theory is elitist, and how? Are the Canadian feminists "womanhandling" texts in the same way as male translators such as Steiner? Is their approach another essentialising approach? Is a cannibalistic form of translation another form of "art for art's sake" divorced from real practical politics? I have welcomed foreignizing translations, feminist translations, and cannibalist translations, which I find innovative, intellectually fascinating, and more often than not giving voice to new perspectives and ideas. Venuti's "foreignizing" approach in his translations of Tarchetti, for example, remind me of Brechtian theatre, with his estranging, alienation effects. What is wrong with reminding the reader that they are reading a translation, or with the translator making him/herself visible in the process? And Brecht's theatre, the Threepenny Opera in Berlin, also performed translations—Russian translations, Greek translations—but using the same techniques developed by Brecht in his own work. Actors would step out of character, interrupting the flow of the piece, reminding the audience that they are not getting a transparent view of the work and forcing them to think about the processes of cultural mediation. With regard to the Canadian feminist theory of translation, are the critics not unfairly equating "womanhandling" with "manhandling"? Perhaps "womanhandling" might be something slightly different—perhaps something more reverent, respectful, collaborative, and creative rather than the violent, invasive, possessive, and manipulative connotations implied by the male term. While the French feminists have been accused of "essentialising," I am not so sure that the same criticism applies to the Canadian women, who to me seem very cognizant of the fact that all discourse is mediated and multiple, of colonisation, particularly in a postcolonial world, do not necessarily follow the lines of straight class analysis. Colonisation of ideas can take place at all levels of society, including the intellectual elite as well as the working classes. I return to thinking about the negotiations that led to the San Andrés accords in Mexico, and Marcos's desire to allow more voices to be heard during the negotiation process. As we begin summarising and classifying this first wave of postcolonial translation scholarship, I urge the field neither to uncritically accept, nor too critically reject any one theory. Rather, I suggest that scholars continue with an open mind, open multiple versions, and remain open to translators' voices from all parts of the culture. Postcolonial translation studies is still in its infant stages, and before falling into rhetorical strategies of affirmation or negation, I suggest creating more openings and letting more thoughts proliferate. Let's have more voices at the table rather than fewer. Too many voices have been silenced for too long.

> Nos armamos luz a luz
> de los espectros que somos.
> Somos más que todos juntos,
> somos más
> que los pétalos del misterio.
>
> Graffiti en los muros de una estación de ferrocarril[38]

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[1] Luis Hernández Navarro and Ramón Vera Herrera, eds., *Acuerdos de San Andrés* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1998).

[2] Lawrence Venuti, ed., *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1992); *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1995); *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an Ethics of Difference* (London: Routledge, 1998); Mona Baker and Lawrence Venuti, eds., *The Translation Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000).

[3] Venuti (1992), 3-5.

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[4] Venuti (1995), 148ff.

[5] Venuti (1992), 12-13; (1995), 182-83.

[6] Marilyn Gaddis Rose, "Foreignizing or Domesticating: Debating Norms Goes With the Territory," in Edith F. Losa, ed., *Keystones of Communication: Proceedings of the 34th Annual Conference of the American Translators Association* (Medford, NJ: Learned Information, 1993, 265-71), 266.

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[37] Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak, "The Politics of Translation" in Michele Barrett and Anne Phillips, eds., *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992, 177-200), 180.

[38] Hernández, *Acuerdos de San Andrés*, 33. "We gather arms light by light / of the ghosts that we are. / We are more than all of us together, / we are more than the petals of mystery. // Graffiti on the walls of a railway station"