

INTRODUCTION TO DEBATES ABOUT TRANSLATION/ LOST (AND FOUND?) IN TRANSLATION/FEMINISMS IN HEMISPHERIC DIALOGUE

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This chapter is a reprint of an article originally published in *Latino Studies* 4, no. 1 (2006). It was initially written as a concept paper on feminism and translation to capture and systematize the conversations and inquiries that had for several years informed the agenda of our Latina and Latin American(ist) feminist research group on questions of translation and translocation. In meetings marked by lively and provocative conversation, the group explored how the notion of translation could be deployed to track the movements of feminist concepts and political strategies across localities, especially between and among U.S. Latina and Latin American feminisms. We decided to include this concept paper in its original form to mark the theoretical ground from which many of the discussions in the ensuing chapters of this anthology departed, exploring the ways the idea of cultural translation plays out in a multiplicity of transnational, national, regional, and local arenas of feminist struggles and interventions.

Since the original publication of this concept paper, and with the increasing importance and visibility that the notion of cultural translation (and translation in general) acquired vis-à-vis the global shuttling of peoples, ideas, and commodities, a plethora of journal articles, book chapters, and books have appeared on the subject. My other contribution to this anthology (chapter 6) incorporates more recent debates on translation, as do many of the chapters that follow. While reading those, it is important not to forget what Spivak (2012, 242) teaches us—that the very notion of translation, that is, of one word or idea standing in for another, dislodges any possibility of literal translation. In the sense that the concept is deployed throughout this volume, translation can only be understood as a catachresis, as an always already misuse of words, an impropriety and inadequacy that underpins all systems of representation.

In contemporary globalized postcolonial formations, in light of the reconfiguration of knowledges and the contemporary remapping of all kinds of borders (geographic, economic, political, cultural, libidinal, among others), the problematic of translation has become an important, as well as recent, domain of feminist contention.¹ In the context of “diverse, interconnected histories of travel and displacement” (Clifford 1997, 18) and the transnational traffic in theories and concepts, the question of translation becomes quite pertinent and constitutes a unique space from which, on the one hand, to take on critical analyses of representation and power and the asymmetries between languages and, on the other, to examine the knowledge formations and institutionalities in/through which these theories and concepts travel. In summary, at this moment when “mobility, proximity, approximation” (Chow 1995), promoted by the movements of capital and the transnationalization of culture, have signaled the entrance of increasingly disparate regions into a forced and homogeneous modernity, to theorize the process of translation (to translate translation) requires an analysis of the various economies within which the sign of translation circulates.

I should begin clarifying that the use of the term *translation* is borrowed from Tejaswini Niranjana’s (1992) deployment of the concept, that is, it does not refer exclusively to discussions about the strategies for semiotic processes in the area of translation studies but to debates on cultural translation. The notion of cultural translation (drawing on debates on ethnographic theory and practice) is premised on the view that any process of description, interpretation, and dissemination of ideas and worldviews is always already caught up in relations of power and asymmetries between languages, regions, and peoples.² Much ink has been spilled about the travels of theories across different topographies and through itineraries that are ever more complex. The metaphor of “traveling theory” was first introduced by Edward Said (1983), who looked at the movement of theories as embedded in other cultural practices, larger historical contexts, and power struggles. Since then, it became a traveling metaphor taken up by many other theorists who wanted to examine the conditions shaping the constitution of knowledge formations through the traffic of ideas and concepts, including the changing conditions of traveling in increasingly transnationalized, yet unequal, world economy and academic markets.³ In the traffic of theories, Mary E. John (1996) argues, those that travel more easily articulate such a high level of abstraction that any question of context is rendered irrelevant (e.g., deconstruction, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis). While crossing territories, theories are continuously appropriated and transformed by

their local readings, acquiring a more composite structure. Feminist theories fall under this category, for in making simultaneous use of several registers (material, political, cultural frameworks), they are forged at different levels of abstraction.⁴

In the context of the Americas, in the interactions between Latina and Latin American feminisms, the travels of discourses and practices encounter formidable roadblocks and migratory checkpoints when they attempt to cross borders. This is in part due not only to the existence of certain dominant and exclusionary institutional configurations but also to the fact that different historiographies have excluded subjects and subjectivities from both sides of the North–South divide (and within each side), making the possibility of productive dialogue a daunting political and epistemological challenge. Given these difficulties, the questions posed early on in our conversation were as follows. How is academic knowledge conveyed from one hemisphere to another? What is lost in translation, and why, in conversations between Latinas and Latin American feminists?

The point of departure of this chapter—and of our research cluster interrogations—was the insight that the relationalities and attachments that different analytical categories have as they travel will greatly influence their ability to translate. For instance, although the project of subaltern studies was in a first moment anchored to theory and detached from projects of race and gender, the project of women of color from the start has been anchored to race. However, race is a category that is “read” in specific ways in different racial formations, hence the (un)translatability of the U.S. concept “woman of color” when carried to other topographies.⁵ Likewise, resistance to Latinas’ and Chicanas’ concerns in some Latin American feminist quarters, which were often racialized and quickly dismissed as not serious or relevant to Latin American matters, indicate how questions of sexuality, race, and class are obliterated at the same time that a universal subject of Latin American feminism is produced. An important issue facing feminists engaged in the process of translation while crossing borders, then, is to mediate linguistic, cultural, racial, and other barriers so as “to create sites for alliances and cross-border talk that does not lead to cross-talk” (Carrillo 1998).

The recent polemic spurred by an article by Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (1999), in which these two sociologists criticize the transnational circulation and importation of U.S.-based ideas and models, serves as an illustration of the problematic of translation when some categories are transported from one context to another. As John D. French (2003, 376) has incisively put it, Bourdieu and Wacquant describe the global export of concepts (including the imposition, for instance, of a U.S. black-and-white model of race relations

in Brazil) as the proliferating McDonaldization of out-of-place ideas, hence “neglecting the dynamics of ‘reading’ and ‘translation’ through which ‘foreign’ ideas come to be incorporated into national intellectual fields, each with its own historical trajectory, cultural formation, and social mythologies.” According to French, “Their simplistic model of US domination/imposition and subaltern submission/complicity is empirically and theoretically wrongheaded. It erases the process of local appropriation while vastly exaggerating the power and influence that US-based notions have had or can have in Brazil. In summary, they make a fetish of the ‘foreign’ origin of ideas (itself questionable) while depicting the process of transnational exchange as inherently one-sided. Worst of all, their call for resistance is vitiated by their own preference for taking refuge behind flimsy nationalist barricades rather than conducting serious transnational intellectual and political debate” (French 2003, 376).

To engage in debates about the appropriation/translation of ideas necessitates an exploration of how theories travel through the North–South axis. An example is given by Francine Masiello’s (2000, 55) reading of the pages of *Las/12*, the feminist supplement of the Argentinean daily *Página/12*, to examine “how materials of cultural theory move from one language to another, and how the screen aura of celebrities can be reread from the Southern margin, how sexuality is resemanticized when it crosses the borders of home and state.” Masiello’s keen analysis of *Las/12* reveals that through the mechanisms of sensationalism and satire, which stress the artifice of representation, and in a playful language aimed at a mass reading public, its editors and collaborators interrogate, through the perspective of a (Latin American) lesbian gaze, the relationship between gender, sexuality, and translation so as to sabotage the normative North–South flow of meanings established by the neoliberal market economy. The cultural translations and (mis)appropriations of market constructions of gender in the pages of *Las/12* (such as, for instance, representations of Latinas in Hollywood cinema, the culture of Hollywood celebrities, the imposition of fashion on the female body) not only offer readers alternative reflections about female identity but also upset the North–South traffic of commodity culture by “dismantl[ing] a sense of ‘woman’ as projected by mass media venues and academic theory” (Masiello 2000, 54): “La mujer no es un suplemento” (woman is not a supplement) (2000, 52).

Turning from daily supplement to literary texts, Nora Domínguez (2000) reads some Latin American fictional narratives⁶ to explore how these texts, by interpellating a nomad subject, construct a space in between different languages — national and foreign, private and political, written and oral, the language of exile and the language of the return — as well as in-between systems of meanings and contact zones (North America, Latin America, Europe). For the novels’

narrators in question, it is from these interstitial spaces and through the metaphor of translation that an appropriate understanding of the mechanisms forging gendered social identities through continuous processes of translation can be built, revealing how “foreign” theories and concepts are brought into friction and dialogue with local experiences so as to enable identifications and deidentifications, as well as configurations of alternative theoretical cartographies.

Another example of the processes of identification and deidentification entailed by strategies of translation is discussed by Kathy Davis (2002). In her scrutiny of the worldwide dissemination of the book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (Boston Women’s Health Book Collective 1971) — considered a North American artifact and at the time one of the most important and progressive references for women’s health both in the United States and abroad — the author probes the extent to which Western (U.S.-based) feminism (under the garb of global feminism) is imposed on the bodies and minds of women situated in other contexts, Western and non-Western. Addressing the “feminism-as-cultural-imperialism” critique, articulated by several U.S. feminists engaged in the deconstruction of the notion of a global sisterhood, the author assesses the pitfalls of global feminism and “the possibilities of transnational alliances for the circulations of feminist knowledges and body/politics” (Davis 2002, 229). Davis (2007) examines the border crossings of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in the West–East, North–South directions to argue that different local material conditions — ranging from availability of funding resources for translators, computer equipment, to publishing houses — coupled by ideological configurations, the presence of philanthropic foundations, international donors, women’s groups, and/or feminist nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) greatly influenced translation strategies of the book to better adapt it to the needs and experiences of different women’s constituencies. Looking at these travels and translations of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (OBOS), Davis concludes that

the translations which emerged in the three decades following the first edition of OBOS indicate that it was not the notion of “global sisterhood” which traveled (y). On the contrary, what traveled was how the original collective wrote the book. The image of a group of (lay)women collectively sharing knowledge about their embodied experiences seems to be what fired the imagination of women in different parts of the world and served as an invitation to do the same. While the notion of “global sisterhood” creates a spurious universality, which denies differences among women, the process by which the original collective wrote their book could be taken up fairly easily by a diversity of women and

adapted to their specific circumstances. It was the method of knowledge sharing and not a shared identity as women which appeared to have a global appeal, making OBOS a case in point for a transnational feminist body/politics based on oppositional practices rather than identity politics. (Davis 2007, 240, 241)

Looking at the travels of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, as well as the gender concept in the Latin American context (more specifically, in Brazil), Millie Thayer (2000) focuses on the complex articulations of political, economic, racial, and ideological factors constitutive of these localities and their relation to larger, more globalized forces. Taking as its point of departure the NGO SOS Corpo in Recife, northeast Brazil, Thayer analyzes the initial appropriation of the book by its feminist constituency and the ways in which, in the span of two decades (1980–1990s) and against the background of military dictatorship, followed by transition to democracy and democratic consolidation, its resemantization responded to varying local social movement practices and discourses around political demands for citizenship rights. The author examines how the concept of the individual body in the pages of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is articulated by the SOS Corpo feminists to the idea of the political body as a platform for demands for basic (citizenship) rights, therefore showing how translations are the result of ongoing processes of negotiation and not one-way impositions. However, as Thayer acutely observes, despite having originated in the context of the SOS Corpo practices and discussions, the local meanings of the concept of citizenship were also influenced by international donors and transnational feminisms. Thayer concludes by arguing that economic and discursive barriers prevent feminist theories and concepts from treading in the South–North direction. It is incumbent on the transnational feminist movement and the diasporic intellectual to open up spaces that would allow for more horizontality and symmetry in the global flux of theories, concepts, discourses, and identities.

In the contemporary scenario of fragmented identities, contact zones, and border epistemologies, it is incumbent on feminist critics to scrutinize the processes of cultural translation of feminist theories/concepts so as to develop what has been dubbed “a geopolitical or transnational ability to read and write” (Friedman 1998; Spivak 1992) toward the articulation of “transnational feminisms” (Grewal and Kaplan 1994a). This task demands mapping the dislocations and continual translations of feminist theories/concepts, as well as the constraints mechanisms of mediation and technologies of control imposed in the transit of theories across geopolitical borders. For example, Rosi Braidotti

(2000, 720), scrutinizing the problematic export of French poststructuralism to the highly commodified U.S. academic market (where it is profoundly depoliticized in its reception), argues that a full-scale analysis of the travels/translations of theories needs to take account of “the nature of the institutions of learning, the centralized status of theory, [and] the norms and taboos of representation” at the point of arrival.⁷ However, as has been previously argued by Robert Stam (2001) and Ella Shohat (2002), to locate the emergence of poststructuralism in the West is itself an effect of translation. For these authors, to ignore the contribution of anticolonial and subaltern theorizing in the decentering of Euro-centric master narratives, thereby occluding how Third Worldist thinking was codified by those associated with structuralism and poststructuralism, is to give this theoretical corpus a white coating and a French accent.⁸ Therefore, a close scrutiny of the traffic in theories or the transportation of texts might also reveal the operations of “intellectual, conceptual imperialism . . . most notably in the forms of racism and colonialism” (Jardine 1988, 14).

One of the pertinent questions to ask of the travels and translations of feminist theories and practices would be the following. By what means and through which institutionalities do feminist concepts/discourses/practices gain temporary (or even permanent) residence in different representational economies? It is well known that texts do not travel across linguistic contexts without a “visa” (translations always entail some sort of cost). Their dislocation can only take place if there is also a material apparatus organizing their translation, publication, circulation, and reception. This materiality—which is at the same time constituted by and constitutive of the contexts of reception—influences in significant ways which theories/texts get translated and are resignified for a better fit with local intellectual agendas. Acts of reading (modes of reception) are acts of appropriation carried out in contexts of power (institutional, economic, political, and cultural).

In the travels of feminist theories in the Americas, there are several “theory brokers” ranging from academics, international, and national donors situated in state and philanthropic organizations, feminist NGOs, and grassroots women’s organizations and movements. These different and diverse mediators—as Thayer (2001) and Sonia E. Alvarez (2000) have convincingly shown (and whose arguments will be explored later)—have a certain agency in the cross-border movement of feminist theories/discourses. In both the United States and Latin America, the academy and feminist NGOs are the two most important locales for the production, circulation, and reception of feminisms. However, ongoing economic crises in Latin America have put serious constraints

in the circulation of feminist theories, and within the United States, Chicana/Latina productions have not always counted on effective apparatuses of dissemination, given the still pervasive dismissal of subaltern knowledges within the U.S. academy.

Translation Practices and the Traffic in Gender

One way of assessing the political gains and/or losses in the traffic in theories within feminism is to look at the uneven migrations of one of its foundational categories, gender.⁹ Some versions of U.S. feminist theories' emphasis on difference (a response, in the social terrain, to political pressures from women of color and lesbian feminists in the United States), together with the deconstruction of identity categories (an outcome, in the epistemological terrain, of the advent of poststructuralism), led many U.S. academic feminists to proclaim the disintegration of gender in light of the fractures of class, race, sexuality, age, historical particularity, and other individual differences constitutive of the postmodern heteroglossia.

Other feminists, contesting the dispersal of both woman and gender, amply criticized what they viewed as a dangerous trend in the 1990s: the emergence of "feminism without women" (Modleski 1991). There are still others, including many Latina feminists, who, when confronting a devastating scenario of volatile bodies and evasive analytical categories—in which everything is reduced to parodic performances—reaffirm the need to fight against the atomization of differences by asserting a positive identity for women through the articulation of differences among women with the structures of domination that helped produce those differences in the first place (Benhabib 1995).¹⁰

While these theoretical debates on gender took hold in the U.S. academy, states and intergovernmental agencies in the Americas amply adopted the gender category in their public policies and social programs directed toward promoting "gender equity." Alvarez (1998a), analyzing feminist incursions in the state during the political opening toward gender, for instance, argues that feminist critiques of women's oppression and subordination become diluted and neutralized in the discourses and practices of these institutions. In her words, "despite the local and global feminist lobbies' central role in advocating for the changed international gender norms that helped foster such apparently gender-friendly State policies and discourses, however, the terms of women's, especially poor women's, incorporation into neoliberal State policies are not necessarily feminist-inspired. One Colombian local government official neatly summed up how feminists' political indictment of women's subordination is too often translated or tergiversated by State bureaucrats when she told me:

‘now things have changed, it’s no longer that radical feminism of the 1970s, now it’s public policies with a gender perspective’” (*políticas públicas con perspectiva de género*) (Alvarez 1998a, 271). However, as Alvarez (2000) points out, in the arena of policy advocacy at a supranational level feminism has proven to be most successful in the task of translation and fashioning local feminist political grammars and symbolic maps. Analyzing Latin American feminist movement’s *encuentros* and international policy advocacy networks, Alvarez identifies two logics intersecting these different, yet interconnected terrains: identity-solidarity logic (oriented toward creating an imagined feminist community, politicized identities, and ideological affinities) and transnational intragovernmental advocacy logic (oriented toward influencing gender policies through venues such as the UN conferences).

These logics feed into one another in complex ways. According to the author, feminist *encuentros* help local activists build international ties of solidarity, political affinities, and shared identities with positive repercussions for their local movement practices and struggles. Participating in arenas such as the UN conferences requires specialized skills at policy advocacy that many feminist activists did not (and do not) necessarily have. However, given that the *encuentros* have “facilitated the formation of transnational social networks and nurtured intense personal and political bonds among feminists in far-flung reaches of Latin America, [thus contributing to] the creation of policy-focused networks and regional advocacy coalition” (Alvarez 2000, 43), involvement in the transnationalized gender policy advocacy has, in turn, reverberated back on the home front in the local translations and deployments of internationally sanctioned political scripts.¹¹ Despite the two-way flows of these logics, these translations, Alvarez alerts, have not always been unproblematic. Often the local appropriations/resignifications of the transnational advocacy logic “exacerbated existing power imbalances among activists and organization” (2000, 56). Asymmetries result when greater local political capital and resources are accrued to activists and organizations with easier access (due to various reasons) to the transnational public spaces of policy advocacy. Notwithstanding these imbalances, more frequently than not we can witness Southern-inspired appropriations of Northern-based women’s lobby. In the words of one of Alvarez’s interviewees, “though she initially found the [advocacy] concept abstract and foreign, It has been mixing with my Latin American *mestizaje* (*mestiza* identity), and I have appropriated it and ascribed it new meaning from Latin America and from my own experience” (2000, 56).

While states and intergovernmental agencies unabashedly embraced gender, the Vatican, during its preparation for the 1995 Conference on Women in Beijing, and fearful of the consequences that the use of the word *gender* might

entail—such as the acceptance of homosexuality, the destruction of the (patriarchal) family, and the dissemination of feminism—was orchestrating an intractable attack to the concept of gender, associating it to a “sinister foreign influence” (Franco 1998). As Jean Franco tells us, in the warning of the auxiliary bishop of Buenos Aires, the use of the word *gender* as “a purely cultural construct detached from the biological . . . would make us into fellow travelers of radical feminism” (1998, 281).

Although it would be a clear exaggeration to say that gender was a “sinister influence” (much to the contrary), as an analytical category it did leave room for depoliticizing moves. Since, in the Brazilian academy, the words *feminism* and *feminist theories* conveyed a radical attitude, many Brazilian feminist academics adopted the gender studies rubric to describe their scholarly activities so as to retain credibility vis-à-vis the scientific community. A focus on gender studies, as opposed to feminist studies, allowed them some modicum of “rigor” and “excellence” (according to positivist definitions) and secured them a (somewhat) safe place in the canon, which in turn was not challenged. In the scenario of gender studies in Brazil, one could study women’s oppression and the unequal power relations between women and men without necessarily being engaged in a feminist political project. In the supposedly neutral terrain of gender, there was no need to politicize theory and theorize politics.

To understand this contextual take on gender, it is important to realize that Brazilian academic feminism remains poised at the crossroads of two very distinct theoretical currents. One road takes us to French structuralism, with its emphasis on complementarity (along with the ideal of equality and denial of difference), whereas the other summons us toward North American poststructuralism, with its emphasis on otherness and the politicization of difference (Machado 1997).

One of the outcomes of this particular mix of theoretical tendencies in Brazilian feminism is that a large number of its practitioners in the social sciences (in contrast to many, if not most, feminist scholars in the humanities) embraced the term *gender studies* more willingly than their literary counterparts, who still held on to the signifier *woman*.¹² For the former group, gender was perceived as being a more scientifically rigorous term than either women’s or feminist studies. Women’s studies seemed too essentialist, and feminist studies sounded too militant, therefore not objective or systematic.¹³ This controversy nicely captures the fact that, to gauge how well gender travels, one needs to thoroughly examine the analytic and historical constraints inhabiting the articulation of difference (John 1996).¹⁴ As Joan Scott herself put it, worried about the ease with which gender had entered the academy, “gender seems to fit within the scientific terminology of social science and thus dissociates itself

from the (supposedly strident) politics of feminism. It does not carry with it a necessary statement about inequality or power nor does it name the aggrieved (and hitherto) invisible party” (1988, 31).

At present this proclivity in gender studies in the Brazilian academy is fully consolidated through the fashionable and rapidly spreading field of masculinities studies (which are not necessarily articulated with a feminist critical perspective), largely due to generous grants from government agencies and national and international philanthropic institutions. However, I should note that there have been other, more politically progressive appropriations of gender in the Brazilian context. One example comes from Thayer’s (2000) incisive study of the North–South travels of the concept. Thayer shows how the discursive migration of gender and its eclectic and contextually specific translations were more radical than allowed by most models of unilateral transmission between North and South of the Americas, hence illuminating the diversity of forces (e.g., financing from international institutions) and discourses (e.g., discourses about citizenship and rights) implicated in such geographical dislocations. She makes evident how these factors complicate endlessly any movement of concepts and categories across geographic, political, and epistemological boundaries.

Translation as Discursive Migration

Owing to the intense migration of concepts and values that accompany the travels of texts and theories, it is often the case that a concept with a potential for political and epistemological rupture in a particular context, when carried over to another context, may become depoliticized. For J. Hillis Miller (1996), this happens because any concept carries within itself a long genealogy and a silent history that, transposed to other topographies, may produce unanticipated readings. However, a theory’s openness to translation is a result of the performative, not cognitive, nature of language (every reading is, after all, a misreading). According to Miller, theories are ways of doing things with language, one of them being the possibility of activating different readings of the social text. When introduced to a new context, the kinds of readings a theory will enact may radically transform this context. Therefore, translations, besides being intrinsically mistranslations, as Walter Benjamin (1969) had also pointed out, will always entail defacement; when a theory travels, it disfigures, deforms, and transforms the culture and/or discipline that receives it.

A theoretical formulation never quite adequately expresses the insight that comes from reading. That insight is always particular, local good for this time, place, text, and act of reading only. The theoretical insight

is a glimpse out of the corner of the eye of the way language works, a glimpse that is not wholly amenable to conceptualization. Another way to put this is to say that the theoretical formulation in its original language is already a translation or mistranslation of a lost original. This original can never be recovered because it never existed as anything articulated or able to be articulated in any language. Translations of theory are therefore mistranslations of mistranslations, not mistranslations of some authoritative and perspicuous original. (Miller 1996, 223)

In the travels of theories in the Americas, one of the recurring challenges for hemispheric dialogue lies in the attempt to translate concepts that resist appropriation. How do we translate ideas and concepts that have not traveled? In the politics of translation, the concern must be not only with the travels and appropriations of terms/discourses but with the extent to which one wants to open the translated sign and to whom should it be open. The “sheer convenience of incomprehension,” as Timothy Brennan notes, punctuates the silence on the other side of the translation process, emphasizing the fact that “acts of translation do not always seek ways to communicate more accurately, but instead to mistranslate meaning subversively in order to ensure an incommunicability” (2001, 53) that, in the last instance, signals the possibility of cultural survival. For Emily Apter, the silence of incommunicability represents an active resistance “against simplistic models of translation transnationalism that idealize the minority language as an object of ecological preservationism” (2001b, 7).

Many feminists, in trying to find productive ways of establishing dialogues across diverse and dispersed feminist communities in the articulation of transnational alliances, have resorted to the practice of translation as a privileged site for the negotiation of difference in a world of increasing cross-border movements and cross-cultural contacts. However, their strategies in negotiating these multiple and discrepant feminist audiences, situated in different “temporalit[ies] of struggles” (Mohanty 1987, 40), have greatly varied.

Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (1994b), for instance, rely on the notion of a politics of location (conceived as a temporality of struggle, not a fixed position) to develop some key practices of feminist deconstructive projects, including scrutiny of the specific social relations that produce location and situated knowledges.¹⁵ Tropes of travel/displacement (such as nomadism, tourism, exile, and homelessness) deployed in modernist critical discourses often romanticize the terms of travel and elide the material conditions that produce displacement in the contemporary world. In assessing how location and positionality need to be explored in relation to the production and reception of knowledge, Lata Mani (2003) calls for a strategy of multiple mediations when

feminists confront the dilemmas of speaking to discrepant audiences within different historical moments. In presenting her work to groups in the United States, Britain, and India, Mani realized how audiences in each location perceived as politically significant entirely different aspects of her work, as well as how diverse agendas in these locations guided its reception. As she puts it, “these responses in turn have caused me to reflect on how moving between different ‘configurations of meaning and power’ can prompt different ‘modes of knowing’” (2003, 367).

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (1997), in a similar vein, has asked how feminists should build alliances “that do not squash diversity.” Drawing on the Benjaminian (and Derridean) notion of “faithless translation” (whereby texts are appropriated and rewritten so that new meanings are forged by the interaction of languages), she details how translation technologies have produced intellectual histories of feminism and environmentalism as intrinsically Western, following a West-to-the-rest pattern of development and, in this process, creating Western histories and non-Western cultures. Her strategy to avoid such history involves embracing three methodological caveats to emphasize how both feminism and environmentalism are continuously forged out of heterogeneous encounters and interactions: “First, instead of tracing a Western history of social thought, we can trace the moves in which lists of Western thinkers appear to be History; second, instead of following Western originals across non-Western cultural transformations, we can follow the narrative contexts through which foci of cultural difference are identified. Third, instead of debating the truth of Western-defined universals, we can debate the politics of their strategic and rhetorical use across the globe” (Tsing 1997, 254). To avoid a framework that relies on West-to-the-rest narratives, feminists should build diverse alliances that, in developing more South-South-oriented dialogues, would rely on processes of continuous (and faithless) translation that “would work with, rather than exclude, each other” (Tsing 1997, 269).¹⁶

A concern for the inclusion, not exclusion, of the other in cross-border dialogues and in the building of communities-in-relation also guides the theoretical project of Ofelia Schutte (2000) and Ella Shohat (2002). Drawing on the philosophical notion of incommensurability and the phenomenological-existentialist concept of alterity, Schutte claims that communicating with the other feminists would require recognizing the multiple and disjunctive temporalities in which all the interlocutors are situated. Awareness of these multiple layers both within the self and between the self and the other, Schutte argues, may facilitate the positive reception “of the richness and incommensurability of cultural difference where the other’s differences, even if not fully translatable into the terms of our own cultural horizons, can be acknowledged as sites

of appreciation, desire, recognition, caring, and respect” (2000, 52).¹⁷ In doing so, the history of identity construction, which will vary geographically and culturally, needs to be highlighted in every process of translation.

For example, as previously pointed out, political labels such as “women of color” are not always translatable in Latin America, especially in certain contexts (e.g., Brazil) and in relation to more “fluid” markers of race and, precisely, “color.” Similarly, our readings of foundational Latin American feminist texts, such as the writings of Chilean feminist theorist Julieta Kirkwood, revealed an engagement with class and “revolutionary transformation” that was incommensurable in a U.S. context. Kirkwood’s writings nonetheless tellingly reproduced the Occidentalizing, universalizing deployments of “women” found in some early “white” feminist theoretical texts in the United States. This same universalizing textual move is also present in many earlier Brazilian feminist texts, as Sandra Azeredo (1994) and Kia L. Caldwell (2000) have pointed out. According to the latter, “it is also important to note the extent to which critiques of feminist essentialism by black Brazilian women have gone unheeded by the majority of Women’s Studies scholars in Brazil. Although Afro-Brazilian feminists have attempted to address the specificities of black women’s lives since at least the early-1980s, their critical insights regarding the intersection of race and gender have not been made central to the research objectives and priorities of Women’s Studies. Instead, if and when the issue of racial difference has been addressed, it has largely been done by black feminist scholars and activists” (Caldwell 2000, 95). Shohat pushes further Schutte’s argument on incommensurability (untranslatability) by asking that feminists analyze how theories and actions are translated from one context to another in building relational maps of knowledge. Instead of subscribing to a cultural relativist framework that positions the other (women) within “tradition” and in need of being rescued, Shohat advances a multicultural feminism as a situated practice of translation in which “histories and communities are [viewed as] mutually co-implicated and constitutively related” (2002, 75), hence countering segregated notions of temporality and spatiality.

The need for translation, troped as cannibalism, is also stressed by Sneja Gunew (2002) in her assessment of the intellectual project undergirding U.S. women’s studies interdisciplinary programs. Asking whether the cultural differences permeating global feminism can be translated so that a common cultural literacy can be found, Gunew contends that to understand the varieties of feminisms and women’s studies projects, we need to explore the slippages between languages and texts through a process of “faithless translation” (pace Tsing 1997). For her, the trope of cannibalism (problematically borrowed from the symbolic framework of Brazilian anthropophagi)¹⁸ should be deployed as

a translating tactic to move us beyond the “paralyzing battles” about identity, difference, and critique. It remains an apt (albeit violent, I would add) metaphor of the power differentials inherent in all translation events, including the translations/cannibalisms that happen in inter/transdisciplinary reconfigurations of our ways of knowing. According to Gunew, “The image of the cannibal, that most abject of humans (indeed, to designate someone as cannibal is to mark her or him as abject, beyond the pale) looking and speaking back to the taxonomists, the legislators or those in the know, could well function as a galvanizing icon or mascot for our future projects and our potential attainment of common cultural literacies” (Gunew 2002, 65).

Finally, as Katie King (2001) reminds us, feminist theories, discourses, and practices travel across different communities of practices. What is considered “theory” in one community of practice may not be seen as “theory” in another, so there are different meanings attached to this word. Therefore, it is important to rethink categories in transnational frames, emphasizing their movement across communities of practice, as well as new ways of creating alliances with, through, about, and over the meanings of “feminist theory.”¹⁹

As this chapter has argued, in the present times, characterized by the deepening of the linguistic turn into the translation turn, feminists in the North and South can disturb hegemonic narratives of the other, gender, and feminism itself through practices of translation that make visible the asymmetrical geometries of power along the local-regional-national-global nexus. It is through translation as “world-traveling,”²⁰ as constant mediation between worlds, that feminists on both sides of the hemisphere are able to develop, heeding Shohat’s call, critical multiaxis cartographies of knowledge in webs of relationality—and not in cauldrons of cannibalism (where the difference of the other is ultimately assimilated into the sameness of the self)—as a first and necessary step toward social transformation. Yet challenges remain. How can we think through the gap of translation and account for the multiple forces that overdetermine translation practices along with its strategies of containment? How can translation produce continuity across heterogeneity? These were just a few of the conundrums that have fueled our efforts to think through the vexing linkages between feminisms and transnationalisms in the translation zone.

Notes

This study was carried out in collaboration with Verónica Felíu.

1. The project behind this conceptual effort began as the result of a Latin American Studies Association (LASA) congress panel in 2000, put together by Sonia E. Alvarez and Claudia

de Lima Costa, and with the participation of scholars from the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), as well as other universities in the Greater Bay Area. Papers from this panel were later revised and published in a special section of the *Revista Estudos Feministas* 8, no. 2 (2000), accessible at www.portalfeminista.org.br. Shortly after the congress panel, a one-day mini-conference was held at UCSC in February 2001, and a UCSC Chicano and Latino Research Center (CLRC) research cluster was constituted to explore issues concerning feminism, translation, and transnationalism. Since then, our research cluster has been meeting regularly in workshops at UCSC under the auspices of CLRC and has organized subsequent LASA panels (Washington, 2001; Dallas, 2003; Las Vegas, 2004; Puerto Rico, 2006). We are currently working on an edited collection on feminist transnational translations. The present chapter is the result of several conversations that took place during these workshops, and I acknowledge the invaluable contributions by the research cluster participants. I am also grateful to Sonia E. Alvarez, Patricia Zavella, and two anonymous reviewers for their incisive readings and suggestions for revisions of earlier versions of this manuscript. I thank the Brazilian government research council, CNPq, for financial support for this ongoing research.

2. The importance and relevance that languages as tools and apparatuses of power have in all processes of translation should not be neglected, of course.

3. Gudrun-Axeli Knapp (2005) observes that these days and in certain regions of the globe, *smuggling* may be a more appropriate term to describe the movement of theories.

4. Discussions of feminist ethnographies have shown that because feminism derives its theory from a practice grounded in the materiality of women's oppression (regardless of the complexity of this category), the political dimensions of the ethnographic text are always already articulated to its emplotment in contingent, conjunctural translations of the other. Ethical, political, and epistemological dilemmas apart—feminist or otherwise—I concur with Judith Stacey (1988) in that the exchange and reciprocity encountered in the fieldwork process will always be asymmetrical, especially if the other being studied finds herself in a situation of utter fragility and powerlessness. However, as Millie Thayer (2001) has pointed out, in other settings—such as conducting interviews with social movement leaders and activists—the geometries of power may be entirely different, and the so-called subaltern may be, after all, quite empowered by her or his engagement in a collective struggle for social rights and justice, self-representation and self-determination.

5. For an interesting discussion of the travels of the concept of race from the North American context to Germany, see Knapp (2005).

6. The Latin American writers examined by Domínguez are Diamela Eltit, Tunuma Mercado, Matilde Sánchez, and Clarice Lispector.

7. In Latin America, however, we have witnessed an opposite trend within feminist circles and in the context of dictatorship and postdictatorship: there have been highly politicized appropriations of so-called Western-based theories such as, for instance, those of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu.

8. Stuart Hall (1996) makes a similar argument concerning the contested space in which the postcolonial operates. To prevent the concept from becoming another way the West appropriates the non-West to think about itself, Hall, instead of jettisoning the concept altogether, suggests that it should be deployed in a way that forces us to reread binarisms (e.g., before/after, here/there, colonize/colonized, center/periphery) as forms of cultural

translation responding to the new relations of power in the aftermath of independency and decolonization. The postcolonial, hence, is a way of rereading colonization as part of a transnational and transcultural global process with the result of producing a decentered account of the imperial narratives of the past anchored in the nation. See also Pal Ahluwalia (2005) for a fascinating discussion of the African roots of poststructuralism through the reading of Jacques Derrida's and Hélène Cixous's autobiographies.

9. In earlier work (Costa 1998b), I reflected on the travels of the category of experience from the context of U.S. poststructuralist feminist theory into the context of Brazilian *sem teto* (homeless) women.

10. For a sampling of pointed theoretical interventions by Latina feminists that revert the trend of some versions of "postmortem" feminisms, see the debates on experience from the perspective of a postpositivist realism as articulated by Moya and Hames-García (2000), Stone-Mediatore (2000), Sandoval (2000b), and Moya (2002).

11. To be true to Alvarez's arguments, there are more dimensions and complexities to these intersecting logics than is reflected in this brief summary.

12. According to Lia Zanotta Machado (1997), French feminism and its foregrounding of difference through deconstruction did not fully enter the fields of anthropology, sociology, and history in France. As in Brazil, its institutional place remained in literary and psychoanalytic studies.

13. For an illustration of these debates, see the "state of the art" article by anthropologist Maria Luisa Heilborn and sociologist Bila Sorj (1999). However, insofar as the problematic of translation is foregrounded here, it is somewhat remarkable that, when writing about the travels of gender studies into the Brazilian academic context, Heilborn and Sorj refer almost exclusively to North American debates on gender and do not offer any reflections on how such debates were interpreted locally.

14. Another crucial constraint, which I explored in an earlier article (Costa 2000), is the fact that Brazilian universities are, to this day, among the most elitist (therefore whitest) of institutions.

15. Lawrence Venuti (1998) uses the expression "ethics of location" in translation as a way of protecting linguistic minorities and counterweighing cosmopolitan literariness.

16. More often than not in debates about the travels and translations of feminist theories in the Americas, a tacit assumption is that there is an original moment in the journey and it is located in the United States, thus occluding the fact that U.S. feminist theories have been deeply informed by other currents as well, making its genealogy far more complex than initially recognized.

17. A similar argument about transnational encounters is advanced by Shu-Mei Shih (2002). Reflecting on such encounters and the subject position of the diasporic intellectual as translator of cultural difference, Shih contends that a way to avoid incommensurability (understood by her as the result of ignorance) is to "practice an ethics of transvaluational relationality" (2002, 119). This entails "to situate oneself in both one's own position and the Other's position, whether on the plane of gender, historical contexts, and discursive paradigms. In practice, this could mean that the Western feminist is asked to speak about China's problems by shifting her position from Western universalism, returning Chinese women to their original contexts and using the multiple and contradictory discursive paradigms used there" (2002, 118).

18. Anthropophagi, especially as conceived by the Brazilian modernist poet and critic Oswald de Andrade, refers to a radical strategy of resistance to cultural colonialism, articulated by the Brazilian modernist movement in 1922, in which artists should digest foreign cultural products and influences, and recycle them in the construction of a synthesis that would represent Brazilian national identity. In short, the colonized artist critically devours the culture of the colonizer (difference) to create a culture that uses and resists what is other to itself. One of the problems with this metaphor, as Heloísa Buarque de Hollanda (1998) points out, is that *anthropophagi* “stretched to the limit the notion that one must not identify with the ‘Other,’ but assimilate only what is worthy from the Other and eliminate what is not. And it specified the way this partial assimilation should occur: it should be done by chewing, processing, and digesting the desired parts of the ‘Other.’ That is, by destroying the Other’s uniqueness. Here we can clearly see the Brazilian’s preference for swallowing difference rather than confronting it.” Another problem is that this “elaborate discursive technology for processing otherness, erasing conflicts and avoiding confrontation,” in a country of glaring racial inequalities and pervasive “cordial racism,” makes the anthropophagic discourse into a ruse for silencing the (racialized and gendered) other. It not only hides “a situation of racial and sexual domination but mak[es] the task of denouncing it even more difficult—if not impossible.”

19. As several participants in my workshops suggested, the problem of translating sexuality across diverse geopolitical contexts serves as a case in point, for depending on the community of practice, sexual categories, identities, and experiences do not translate easily or smoothly (the term *queer* and the challenges its translation into other languages pose come to mind here).

20. See Maria Lugones (1997) for the notion of “world” traveling.