

Multilingual Experimental Literature and Transnational Feminist Solidarities:
Erín Moure and Kathy Acker

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In Erín Moure's *O Resplendor* ('The Shining'), the narrator begins to realize that "we constantly, giddingly, mangle each other's languages, but in mangling them we enter them, we see each other fully, we acknowledge and thus open the possible, entirely *as such*" (33).¹ Moure is one of a series of contemporary women writers using multilingual texts as an aesthetic strategy rather than to express bilingual or bicultural identity.² By her own account, since 2001 her works have involved translation more and more as an aesthetic "in terms of inviting words and phrases, or complete pieces in my other languages, into my books in English" (Kaminski 54). Moure's multilingual repertoire includes writing in French, Galician, Spanish, Portuguese, Portunhol, and Romanian with fragments of Polish, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, and Latin marking the Ukrainian setting in which the Elisa Sampedrín stories take place, as well as quotes in German, some Kanji, and Greek. This use of multilingualism in Moure's writing creates, for Shannon Maguire, "small scale modes of listening" (xix) that tune the reader to languages, identities, and cultures under erasure. Kathy Acker employs multilingualism similarly in her late-corpus works, adding a sophisticated linguistic register that includes French, Spanish, German, and Farsi to the punk-rock cut-up and plagiaristic strategies for which she is most known. Farsi features most prominently in the works that emerge within this multilingual period (1984-1994), both as part of an ironic confrontational writing that challenges the foundations of American imperialism and to create the conditions for subaltern audibility, thereby setting the grounds for transnational feminist solidarities. This paper examines the recent emergence of multilingual writing exemplified in the work of Moure and Acker as an evolution of North American feminist literary avant-garde poetics toward achieving the goals of global feminism.³

¹ Since this is a multilingual text and not a Galician text, the title should not be taken to be "The Shining." It is *O Resplendor*, which may require an act of translation on the part of the reader or may be left unknown in accordance with the poetic politics of the text.

² Some of those most notable include Nicole Brossard, Jhumpa Lahiri, Gail Scott, M. NourbeSe Philip, Carolyn Bervgall, Ulanna Woolf, Josely Vianna Baptista.

³ All translations are my own with much indebtedness and gratitude to Masi Haghighi, Rashin Shayan, Shabnam Dastyar, and the Nassirian family for help with the Farsi translations. I appreciate the patience and earnestness during the many conversations through which I was taught the rudiments of the language, nuances of language use, linguistic details, and cultural particularities.

North American Translational Poetics

Multilingual texts operate according to the tenets of feminist translation practices and in so doing introduce translational poetics as a mode of active listening, a decolonized mode of recognition, and as a process that encourages self-reflexivity toward one's own linguistic position and the global positioning of linguistic communities. Though born in Calgary, Moure is most closely associated with the Montreal experimental writing scene. Her sensibilities derive from her investment in Francophone language rights, feminist politics, lesbian identity, and secular movements that constellate to form Montreal as a hotbed of literary and linguistic experimentation from the 1960s to the present. The impact of these language experiments on the North American experimental writing scene is indelible, though in the words of Canadian poet Margaret Christakos, this is a story "we haven't narrativized very well" (Eichhorn and Milne 118). Fellow poet Sina Queyras attests to the significance of innovative Canadian women writers in a North American context when she notes, "in many ways Canadian feminist poetics has been a model for feminist poetics in the United States" (11). Moure likewise points out that "the relationship between language and structures, culture, and women" ("Notebook") has been discussed in Europe and Québec for decades before becoming popular in the United States. As a result, a nuanced linguistic politics emerged that is distinctly Canadian and most strongly influenced by Québécoise women writers.

While popular sentiment would suggest that it was only Canadian writers who have strived to see themselves published across the border, innovative American women writers often chose to publish and present their work in Canadian venues as well. One of the most highly regarded venues in the 1970s and 80s would have been *FILE Magazine*, a spoof on *LIFE Magazine* produced by the Toronto-based art collective, General Idea. The magazine carried heavy clout in the early punk rock movement as evidenced by covers featuring Debbie Harry (1977) and Tina Turner (1981). Acker herself was published in the Fall 1979 "Special Transgressions Issue," alongside Robert Mapplethorpe, Jean Genet, David Byrne, and others, as well as in at least one other issue, "File NYC edition," published in Spring 1976. It is, perhaps, little known that Acker published the first edition of *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (1978) through Rumour, a small independent press and gallery formerly located on Toronto's Queen Street West. This publication coincides with a period of two months when Acker lived in Toronto and just precedes her first multilingual texts. She was known to give readings in Toronto bookstores throughout the 1980s, as well as performing at the famed club, FOUFOUNES ÉLECTRIQUES, in Montreal in 1986. In addition to spreading her own cachet, Acker inevitably picked up Canadian literary style and philosophy while spending time in Canada and was undoubtedly influenced by the Montreal scene, which was highly regarded in experimental writing communities on both sides of the border.

Québec produced work that was declared "strangely exciting" (Forsyth 91) when first introduced to Anglophone audiences. According to Louise

Forsyth, Québécoise women were “seeing, thinking, and speaking in ways that [had] never before been known” (91). Making original use of French theoretical texts in a variety of disciplines including literature, philosophy, linguistics, psychology, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and political theory, these women writers offered “a vision of the limitless feminine imaginary” (93), marking a new era of feminist poetics in North America. The early influence of women writers from this scene is evident in correspondences with American contemporaries such as one from Kathleen Fraser to Nicole Brossard, saying plainly: “I value so much what you have brought into language” (Brossard “Note from”). On the role of translator-poets in the Montreal experimental writing scene, Karen Gould observes that “the notion of writing to other women as a form of acknowledgement, encouragement, and political identification” (42) is at the core of this writing project. Québécoise writing is deeply conscious of the role of translators due to the need for Francophone work to be translated if it is to be read outside of Québec by lay readerships and, more importantly, if it is to be exchanged with Anglo-Canadian and American allies. As such, many of the province’s key poets are also translators, translating each other’s work primarily to exchange it within broader feminist communities of poets, writers, and activists. Thus, feminist translational practices and poetics emerge as a survival tactic for Québécoise writers that reaches far beyond the province’s borders.

A feminist mode of translation is unique: it is critical of fidelity as it might reproduce mainstream norms and values; it is explicit about feminist goals; it consciously mediates geopolitical positioning relative to the text and communities being translated; it intentionally facilitates cross-border connections and solidarities; it embraces collaboration across different activist and linguistic communities; finally, it is aware of the operations of language hegemony (Reimóndez 52). Many of these revolutionary feminist principles are being more commonly embraced in contemporary translation studies and practice, which has seen a decided shift in scholars, translators, and authors of the last twenty years away from traditional attempts to domesticate translated texts and maintain the authority of source texts. The Québécoise style is even more particular in that these translator-poets are explicit about their interventionist strategies. Nicole Brossard metaphorizes the Québécoise approach when her fictional translator Maude Laures “not only consider[s] the possible meaning and intention behind another woman’s words but will also attempt to rearrange, under slightly different conditions, the scenes and signs [...]” (Gould 97).⁴ While feminist and postcolonial approaches “underlin[e] the translator’s agency” (Vannini 191), the creative and critical approach to translation in Québec goes further by flaunting the translator’s creative work and the translation’s textuality. This approach is clearly expressed in Moure and

⁴ Beyond style, Québec also blazed the trail in feminist language politics as the first French-speaking nation to feminize occupations, functions, ranks, and titles with Switzerland, Belgium, and France following in its footsteps (Secrétariat 27).

Majzels' translators' introduction to Nicole Brossard's *Museum of Bones and Water*, in which they explain:

[u]nderlying every translation, of course, are the relations of power between the two languages and translators of Nicole Brossard into English cannot ignore the Québécoise struggle to preserve and vitalize French language and culture. As well, there are the relations of power between men and women, and the struggle for existence of gay and lesbian people, the struggle for recognition of sexuality's difference and splendour. At the heart of *our* translation we carry her disruptive play into the English museum of language. (viii)

As evidenced here, collaboration and exchange are deeply woven into the fabric of feminist translation, complicating notions of authorship, originality, and systems of recognition based upon these criteria. These topics pervade Acker's work going back to her earliest *Black Tarantula* writing. Reflecting on her process following plagiarism charges, Acker explains: "don't want to be God; have never wanted to be God. All these male poets want to be the top poet, as if, since they can't be a dictator in the political realm, can be dictator of this world" ("Dead" par. 13). Instead, she "liked best of all mushing up texts" (par. 27) and "to use and be other, multiple, even innumerable, voices [...]" (par. 20). Once understanding feminist translation theory, then, it is perhaps unsurprising that Acker's work would eventually move to include multilingualism and translational poetics. In a related vein, Moure's multilingual turn reflects a mode of difficulty that creates "intelligent fissures" (Pato and Moure 169) that encourage readers to enter into translation "as citizen, joyously accountable to the other voices met and created within [the text's] frontiers" (Avasilichioaei and Moure "Translation" 207). Moure's writing has always been invested in difficulty as aesthetically and politically productive. The writer responds to criticism regarding the supposed inaccessibility of her work saying, "accessible reading prepares us for reading the newspaper and going to vote [...] it doesn't help us to interrogate or look at our own experience in any different way" (Stannard 17).

Both Acker and Moure's multilingual turns speak to the ways one is invited into dialogue as the basis for political life. Their multilingual texts represent an "appeal to or 'call' to the 'quite other' (*tout autre*), [...] rendering *delirious* that interior voice that is the voice of the other in us" (Spivak, "Appendix" 294). This call refers to welcoming an other that is not the self-consolidating other—the one "like me" on which liberal frameworks are based—but the radically other with the potential to unseat me. Immersed in a language that is not one's own, "we are faced with our own discomfort at finding other ways to understand" (Aguillar-Amat, Avasilichioaei, Moure and Sales). This results in an "unbordering" of language, as the reader interacts with "the materiality of the language [...] the architecture of page and text and how language, which is sound and music, is handled bodily in the throat and the chest

and the belly” (Avasilichioaei and Moure, “Concordia Pres.”). Williams and Marinkova observe that the materiality of language in multilingual texts encourages readers “to recognize their own corporeal position in the world” (75), as “languages interact with one another, passing through a sentient body, urgently and synaptically in a Mobius strip operation” (76). Moure and Gander explain that this represents “an opportunity for unravelling” (xiv), producing an instability that “might be likened to finding the faces of others in your mirror” (xii). The intention of multilingual literary aesthetics is to let the materiality of language, its sensual presence and effects in the body, open the borders between self and other, enabling unexpected intimacies as the reading subject becomes a translating subject. Just like the Mobius strip, language twists to paradoxically reveal its inside and outside to be one continuous material, challenging the solidity of similar borders between inside/outside, subject/object, self/other on which political allegiances are traditionally formed.

The ‘Herethics’ of Translation in Moure and Pato’s *Secession / Insecession*

In feminist translation, the translator is co-creator and accomplice to the text, moving away from notions of original or source text and copy or reproduction to a co-created third text that exists within and between the two. The experimental style that Moure has long been known for comes together with her feminist translation practices most expressly in her co-poetry *Secession / Insecession* with Galician poet Chus Pato. Angela Carr describes the text as a genre-defying work through which Moure “archives the encounter of translation by introducing a third text into the field of translation: a text that is neither the translation nor the original source text” (par. 2). Moure describes her process in the prefatory pages as her “e(ri)nigmatic” translation practice—a practice that through her wordplay inserts herself into the translation enigmatically. Elsewhere in this text and in other works, she refers to her practice not as translation but as echolation, *trancreation*, *transelation*, *intranslation*. Even in less e(ri)nigmatic texts, this method of translating always “hints at the uncanny presence of the translator’s seemingly original poetic voice” (Aguirre-Oteiza 239). As a result, *Secession / Insecession* is a text with two names, two authors, and a complicated lyrical “I” in which “the translator’s authority turns the signature away from a mark of authenticity and towards multiplicity” (Carr par. 5). Like the slash in the book’s title, feminist translation is a gesture of both bridging and interrupting. Moure’s approach to multilingual writing is drawn from this translation method and recognizes translation as a site of mobility, yet challenges notions of translatability that are premised on reductionist ideas of universal exchange.

Secession / Insecession is structured with Moure’s *Insecession* on the left pages and Pato’s *Secession* on the right pages; the version of Pato’s writing given on the right is Moure’s English translation, not the original Galician text. The pages on the left provide a picture of what Pato’s Galician text evoked for Moure. These pages reflect what Moure was sensing, thinking, feeling, her own

memories and connections activated in the reading of Pato's poetry. For example, Pato's poem "Deserts" becomes "Snow," "Almorfe" becomes "Ottawa," "Jekyll" becomes "Hyde" or vice versa given the way that meaning crisscrosses the texts due to the chiasmus created between the book's form and its title. A "Yard" and a "Garden" are in reciprocal tension with one another: one behind Moure's house tended by her mother from which "we carried ambrosia into the embraced house [...] each [having] small tasks, cutting tops off carrots [...] cutting leaves off lettuce as it grew, so the plants would keep growing" (90), the other "a botanical garden [...] through a pergola of wisteria that gave onto an avenue of African palms" (91) invoking memories of "visits to gardens, graves, monuments with him" (91), Pato's father. Later, Pato's "Daffodils"— evoking Narcissus, news of revolutions past, and the search for "future people" (93) — conjures images of "Kelowna walnuts" and Moure's meditation on "Ukrainian walnuts [...] walnuts of the Carpathians" (92) revered by her foremothers as "ambrosia [...] food" (92) and feared as poisonous, left to rot by a "nor-wester wind" (92). This is a picture of reading as writing, which is perhaps always the case and is especially true in translation. With *Insecession*, Moure makes her translation transparent. She lays bare a third text that normally only exists in the translator's mind, exposing an imaginative text and process that is not usually accessible and is, perhaps, concealed even in the most interventionist translations: this is a true translation. Moure explains that "each text in Canadian English responds to a Pato text, with one added Chinook wind" (6). The Chinook wind is a specific wind that blows across the Canadian prairies where Moure was born. The specificity of the collaboration is an important and recurring point. Moure positions herself as a poet-translator born "in 1955 in a Canada governed by the Liberals under Louis St. Laurent" (178) translating "a biopoetics by Chus Pato, Galician poet from Ourense, Galicia in the green Atlantic climate of the northwest of Spain, Europe" into "Canadian English in Montreal and Kelowna" (7). This insistence on the specificity of the encounter foregrounds the double activity of opening and transmitting that constitutes both translation and the formation of political solidarities. Moure's text is already inside Pato's text via the workings of that text's poetic language, which already holds within it "the possibilities of words, bodies, political and literary space and the construction of ourselves as individual, community, nation, world" (179). This is what is meant by *intranslation*. Likewise, Pato's text is inside Moure's translated writing, co-creating the third text given. The impression is not of source and target but of the "the translator's midway grasp across two languages and locales" (Carr par. 1). Texts written using theories of feminist translation introduce matrixial relationality into their rhetoric. Matrixial relations move beyond linear and dichotomous ones toward a porous and multidirectional exchange emblemized in the late-prenatal relationship from

which the term derives its imagery.⁵ It is a relation that embraces “encounter, exchange and mutual transformation rather than assimilation, displacement or rejection” (von Flotow 138). The “active border space” (Shread 221) of the womb is taken as a model for feminist translation and “herethics” more broadly, through which the autonomy of the text and subject is called into question.⁶ Instead, dependency is taken as a natural and valorized condition of texts that extends to form an ethical value for human relationships.

Moure’s experimentation with form and language in *Secession / Insecession* constituted an experiment with material outcomes as well. The text is part translation, part memoir, part confessional. This mix of genres indicates Moure’s collaborative politics, her notion of subjects as fluid and multiply situated, and her commitment to transnational feminist solidarities. By dissolving the lines between translation and creation, Moure’s feminist approach allowed her to subvert Canadian content regulations as maintained by the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA). According to CCA guidelines, to be eligible for national funding, fifty percent of a book’s content must be written by a Canadian author. This issue of Canadian-ness is already complicated in light of the transnational nature of global citizenship and raises questions about national belonging. This is further complicated for translations as publishing grants are only provided for works in French, English, and Indigenous languages. To subvert this system, Moure includes a final chapter called “48 or 49.” In this ending chapter, Moure notes “I still owe 48 words, 47+1 so the book will be Canadian” (170). Effectively, Moure adds one word over the amount written by Pato and thus she makes this book of Galician poetry “sufficiently Canadian” (170). Moure’s third text challenges the authority of federal systems to determine whose voice counts to the nation and draws attention to the arbitrariness of such systems through which Pato’s work is ultimately translated as Canadian content. This quantification in her work is another way that the political potential within the labor and encounter of feminist translation is made explicit. Limits imposed by the market and funding bodies necessitated that she create a new genre—a hybrid text just under half translation and just over half personal memoir—in order for the work to be produced while the text itself complicates such easy distinctions between the two stories, lives, and works. By creating a new genre, Moure introduces a foreign work into the official Canadian publishing market and subverts ideas around nationality, belonging, and literary authority. This co-created work challenges “the exclusionary mandate of the CCA and related notions of fixed, essentialist, national identity” (Carr par. 18) redefining whose voice belongs in a nation’s conversation with itself. This challenge extends to notions of belonging and identity within

⁵ For more on matrixial subjectivity, see Luise von Flotow and Carolyn Shread, “Metamorphosis in Translation: Refiguring Intimacy of Translation Beyond the Metaphysics of Loss,” also Bracha L. Ettinger’s *The Matrixial Borderspace* and “Metamorphic Borderlinks and Matrixial Borderspace,” upon which Von Flotow and Shread build.

⁶ For a full discussion of Kristeva’s “heretical ethics” (herethics), see “Stabat Mater.”

conditions of transnational global citizenship and imperatives for global solidarities.

In *The Unmemntioable*, Galician, Polish, Ukrainian, and Romanian punctuate larger swaths of text in English and French, quotes in German, fragments of Latin, Yiddish, Hebrew, and traces of Russian in recognition of the embattled history of Moure's mother's homeland of Ukraine. It is Moure's most multilingual book. The book is also loosely autobiographical. It is a chronicle of mourning her mother's death from cancer and of a trip she takes to bury her mother's ashes in the ground of a Ukrainian village that no longer exists due to legacies of territorial conflicts, wars, and pogroms in the region that saw families and neighbors split and relocated by political forces. The text also introduces the shibboleth in its first pages. The shibboleth is set off from words "that can be lost and burned" (*The Unmemntioable* 5). It is "the word that cannot <shibboleth>. The very birth of language" (5). The shibboleth refers to a word that cannot be said except in its own way. It refers to the peculiarity of pronunciation that distinguishes a particular class or group. Historically, it has been a way of detecting persecuted people, and this was the case in the Ukraine as well. This is a successful means of persecution because the shibboleth is ingrained in the body. It is not what is said but how it is said. It is gestural, guttural, habitual, inherited, embodied. In Moure's account it leaves behind "fields where people were once murdered on the basis of an accent. By asking the locals the names for food, *pyrohy* or *pirogy*, they knew which language led at home, which is to say at the table" (7), thus creating "panic. pandemonium. pâine. (broyt). chleb. Хліб. Bread" (7) 'panic [English]. Pandemonium [English]. pain/bread [Polish/Romanian]. bread [Polish]. bread [Yiddish]. bread [English]'.^{7,8} The multilingual sentence is a reminder of the body's need for bread and the words that must be chosen to get it. Moure uses a combination of multilingualism and typographical constraint to show the material way that language is inseparable from the body. She depicts bodies marked by "s_rr_w too/harvested of v_wels/f_r tr_ut" (9) and, ultimately, silenced "by imperial consequence" (9). The harvesting of vowels and particularly the big round "o" sounds that require the exhalation of breath materializes the ways that language exists both outside and inside the body so that as Moure points out elsewhere "with the death of a single body, an entire language, an entire nation and culture can die" ("A Practice" 1). As Anne Quéma observes, by restraining the reading flow, Moure "positions the reader as a subject dispossessed of words and sounds" (154), struggling to speak without a body. Creating words that are disem(v)owelled, Moure typographically portrays the strain of removing the trace of the body in language, engrained as it is in accent, gesture, speech, and

⁷ Translations given in the text will have a parenthetical citation after them, whereas translations that are my own will not.

⁸ Caroline Bergvall's performance piece, 'Say Parsley,' shows the same way the shibboleth was a source of vulnerability and violence enabling the massacre of Creole Haitians during conflict with the Dominican Republic in 1937. For more, see: <https://carolinebergvall.com/work/say-parsley/>

idiom. In this way, she aims “to enfant book and word” (Moure *The Unmemntioable* 5): to remind readers of the origin of language in bodily need and its inextricability from desire.

Gayatri Spivak posits that the act of translation requires cultivating intimacy and love with the languages being translated. When a person translates, they are asking something of the language. They are asking the language to reveal itself as one might make such request of a new lover. Perhaps, then, a translator must be particularly open to the language’s traumas or, at the very least, its past. Moure’s multilingualism “brings us face to face with the traumas and migrations of Western Europe” (Moure, “Chus” par. 3) and imperial agendas that put “not just language under threat but our very linguistic capacity regardless of the idiom we speak” (McLaughlin). Moure’s multilingual idiom seems especially amenable to articulating the untranslatable or unspeakable of historical violence, trauma, erasure, and silences given the subjects of her most multilingual texts: her mother’s convalescence in *O Resplendor*, the effects of the Franco dictatorship that forms Pato’s early life in *Secession / Incession* juxtaposed with tours of Auschwitz and various graves in the same text, the extermination of Poles, Ukrainians, and Jews during wartime in *The Unmemntioable*, and the Holocaust in Western Ukraine in *Kapusta*. Galician is particularly indicative of silences and the unknowable due to its marginalization, so much so that according to Moure, upon publishing her first Galician language text, she was accused by journalists of having invented the language (Aguillar-Amat et al.). The combination of the “invisible language” (McLaughlin) of Galicia and varied languages that have inflected the history of Moure’s maternal lineage invokes the absent presence of the historical subjects at the center of these multilingual stories. The trace of the shibboleth remains in an unmarked village by the Davydivka River where “[t]hey burned those Polish houses, and drove them away” (*The Unmemntioable* 5). This leaves “a pronoun problem / a time problem / a village silence” (5). The pronoun exists merely as an empty placeholder pointing to the problem of “[w]ho this them was. This they. They/this/them” (5). This is the case in *Secession / Incession*, as well. Pato and Moure are struck upon visiting death camps by “*dark lightning*, a perfect oxymoron” (65) to describe the impossibility of writing after Auschwitz. Multilingual writing and the space therein that feminist translation opens between languages appears as a poetics with the potential for articulating what “you can’t possibly say [...] the vision that cannot be borne, is impossible to bear” (59) for Pato and that is “inexplicable” for Moure (56). It is a mode of writing that reaches beyond the stasis of museumization and rhetorics of capture, and more in line with poetry’s attempt, always, “to reactivate the tension between writing and the living organism” (Quéma 151). Multilingual writing is writing with the slash as in the title of Moure’s creative translation with Pato. It is writing that signals both cutting and enjoining, distance and proximity, that resists equivalences, maintains difference without absorption, that recognizes solidarity and translation as sites of both wound and opening, transmission and transmutation. Moure’s innovative multilingual writing

practically and poetically creates new ethics based upon feminist translation principles that promote fissure, fracture, caesura, and conjunction as a model for dealing with nationalistic, generic, subjectivistic, and epistemic boundaries.

Audibility and Difference in Acker's Persian Semantics

Multilingual texts challenge the gatekeeper function of English in world knowledge production, and especially barriers to the circulation of feminist knowledge. As Francine Descarries explains, "Anglosaxon countries extend a virtual monopoly on knowledge dissemination and its evaluation" (564), effectively marginalizing large segments of feminist thought worldwide and relegating non-English-speaking feminist researchers and activists to the isolation of linguistic peripheries. The dominance of English and structural supports given without question to it and other hegemonic languages has the effect of creating an "epistemological impoverishment" (Reimóndez 51) in fields that purport to have a global scope reaching from academia to activism and literary production. In this regard, global knowledge is primarily monolingual inasmuch as what circulates is either already in English or translated because it is deemed marketable to an English-speaking audience or speakers of other hegemonic languages. María Reimóndez explains this as a form of Gresham's Law, bearing down on global knowledge production to the effect that "minority" or "small" languages are treated as expendable while others are centered by mechanisms of political, cultural, and economic domination (44). Tamil writer Ambai (C.S. Lakshmi) explains that consequently, to the chagrin of scholars in the global south, translation into English is taken to be "some kind of 'promotion' [...] like a magical transformation where an ugly frog becomes a handsome prince or a divine blessing where a cursed stone turns into a woman when a divine man steps on it" (par. 14). Translation approached like this erases the ways that theorizing in a particular language brings with it a specific set of values that are then also demoted by default. Reimóndez argues that feminist translation enters global knowledge production as "a transgressive meaning-making operation" (43). Multilingual writing shares this goal, working to expose biases in dominant language use and to elaborate the value of linguistic particularities for dismantling Anglo-hegemony and the systems upheld through the unquestioned dominance of global English. The Persian language, Farsi, features prominently in four of Acker's works, including "A Farsi Lesson" in *My Mother, Demonology* (1993), various sections of *Empire of the Senseless* (1988), the section entitled "Persian Poems" in *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984) and the entirety of Act III in "The Birth of the Poet" (1981). Acker introduces the language of Iran to revalue the forfeited other, abject and erased within hegemonic accounts of both history and language. More importantly, the space created within her multilingual texts encourages a decolonized mode of recognition based on the audibility of global subjects on their own terms.

In much the same way that Erin Moure disperses the “invisible language” (McLaughlin) of Galicia throughout her texts, Acker’s invocation of Persian history by way of Farsi insertions reminds the reader of the role of language as a tool in imperial expansions and as a site for conflict and the revisioning of ideology. Farsi is a fascinating choice for transnational feminist politics due to the history of the language as a response to Arab Invasion. It is a language born of resistance. Acker goes to great lengths to ensure that Persian particularity is kept at the fore rather than treating the language as a kind of abstraction or synecdoche for a generalized subaltern subject. Acker incorporates a variety of Persian historical figures and folk heroes such as Sinbad the Sailor and Sha’harazad, whose oft-overlooked Iranian origin is signaled in the Persian spelling. In addition, Persian characters find hope in the new year because “Farvardin is glowing its light through the dark sea” (“Birth” 102)—a reference to the first month of the Persian calendar in which the main holiday Nowruz is celebrated. Acker’s use of Farsi also draws attention to linguistic and cultural variations in the Middle East that are overlooked from a Western viewpoint, as are historical contributions and exchanges emanating from non-Western regions and those of the global South. Whereas Moure’s use of Galician “brings us face to face with the traumas and migrations of Western Europe” (Moure, “Chus” par. 3), Acker’s use of Farsi expands this discourse to examine the impact of similarly invisible historical global migrations and cultural exchanges outside of Europe’s borders. Acker’s use of Farsi unsettles the reader by pointing more blatantly to the fact of language as a “secret code” (Edwards 5) and its importance as a “concealing, disguising medium” (5) that co-exists with, and perhaps even surpasses, its more obvious communicative role.⁹

The challenge posed by the Farsi code is clear in Acker criticism, with most English-speaking scholars taking the language’s foreignness as sufficient for understanding its meaning to the extent that it is most often mistaken for Arabic. It would seem Acker’s Farsi-speaking characters’ observations are apropos as when *Empire*’s heroine, Abhor, realizes “I could say the unknowable in Persian” (53) because as it turns out she and the Farsi-speaking poet protagonist of “The Birth of the Poet” are right. The poet observes, “[...] har surat in zaban ra nadanad” (100) ‘no one knows this language anyways.’ The general unwillingness to see or probe beyond superficial visual characteristics of the language has led most Acker critics to miss both the nature and potential meanings of the Persian linguistic lineage in her work. As John Edwards explains, “each language interprets the world in a somewhat different way; the unique wellsprings of group consciousness, traditions, beliefs and values are thus seen as intimately entwined with language” (5). By code-switching between English, Farsi, German, Spanish, and French, Acker draws attention to language as a code and holds the English code up to the same scrutiny as that

⁹ Edwards cites Wittgenstein as one of many writers who have made this claim about language (5).

which is invited by the non-English languages. In so doing, Acker reveals myths and priorities embedded in the English language, and the impact of the unprecedented status of English in perpetuating a Euro-American form of Western rationalism and normalizing limited constitutions of both the self and community that are particularly detrimental to women, queer identities, and non-Western subjects.

The French feminists showed the ways that in Western contexts language inaugurates a linguistic subject that is conditioned to prioritize patriarchal values.¹⁰ Acker's Farsi language play goes farther to reveal the ways that different language varieties create distinct linguistic subjects. In "The Persian Poems," a young girl, Janey, writes a book report on *The Scarlet Letter* and teaches herself Persian grammar while imprisoned by a sex trafficker. In teaching herself Farsi, she constructs a series of poems and lessons that elucidate many of the idioms pertaining to the literal act of translation and, by analogy, that of articulating desire across cultural schemas. Janey's translations highlight the fragility of language, particularly within the Persian visual scroll by which the omission of a tick, curve, or dot can render a word meaningless or of a very different meaning than the author intended. For example, in Farsi, the words "hit" and "woman" differ only by a dot, which Janey mistakenly adds, thereby turning the intended word for "to beat up" (*Blood* 84) 'زَد' into 'زَن' (84) 'woman' in a list that she terms "Irregulars" (84). Other words are complicated by their lack of word parity. For example, "cot" has no strong correlative in Farsi as indicated by Janey's own note: "there's no word for cot" (76). The treatment of sexual material within Janey's Persian translations provides another point of contention that shows the effect of the logic of sameness on expressions of desire. Acker replaces sexually charged English words with the prosaic in the Persian text. Farsi equivalents for the English words "cock," "cunt," "prick" (79-80) and suggestive verbs are omitted and replaced with generic nouns such as the Farsi for "پنجره" (79) 'window', "أطاق" (79) 'room', and "صندلی" (79) 'chair'. In this way, Acker implies that models of Western desire flatten non-Western or otherwise marginalized desires by forcing them to conform to an internal logic that they do not share. Simply put, one form of desire cannot be substituted for another without a critical loss.

Janey's detailed attention to Farsi's grammatical structure suggests that the limits of translation can be productive sites for rethinking common knowledge and revisioning the logics framing political categories across linguistic contexts. Janey compiles a lengthy analysis of the *ezafe*—a grammatical component imported from Arabic that determines the subject of a sentence. Janey translates a series of possessive descriptions from Farsi to

¹⁰ While each of the French feminists enacts subtly different responses to Lacan's model of subject formation, the violent repression of alterity that results from privileging Name-of-the-Father logic is a central point of contention for each of them, most notably Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva.

English. The Farsi phrases “شب سرخ/شب جین/شب جهان” (*Blood* 72) literally translate as Janey’s night / red’s night / world’s night. This is translated into English in Janey’s version as “Janey’s night / The red night / night-world” (72). The point of interest is the transparency of the Farsi language versus the presumptuousness of English. Due to English lexical conventions, the Farsi “شب سرخ” ‘red’s night’, or literally ‘red night of’ becomes “the red night” (72). The *ezafe* creates ambiguity that is lost in the English translation. In the Persian script, it is indefinite whether ‘night’ is a quality of ‘red’ or ‘red’ is a quality of ‘night’. The *ezafe* makes visible that the descriptor is not a natural quality of the subject but is applied manually. This is dissimilar to the English language statement, which conflates the variable quality of the attribute with the subject’s state of being. The use of the definite article ‘the,’ in the English translation, implies the subject’s stasis and endows the subject (night) with a finite meaning located in the attribute ‘red.’ The implications are more significant in terms of how this constructs gender differently in the language.

In “Birth of a Poet,” Act III is written with Farsi in transliterated form, followed by the same line in Farsi script and then another line in English. For example, “Jense mo' annasam beto baz ast” ‘My gender is open to you’ / “جنس چنس مؤننم بتو باز است” ‘My gender [female sex of] is open to you’ / “My vagina is open to you” (“Birth” 100), which is followed by “Knse mo'annasam dame dastat ast” ‘My gender is in your hand’ / “جنس مؤننم دم دستت است” ‘My gender [female sex of] is in your hand’ / “My vagina is at your hand” (100).¹¹ Though the phrase might be more easily said in English as ‘my female sex’ or simply using the word ‘gender,’ an important ambiguity is lost when the Persian grammar is anglicized. The ‘of’ in ‘my female sex of’ disallows the easy conflation that occurs in English between the subject and its gendered attributes. In Farsi, it is not clear whether female is a quality of sex or sex is a quality of female. Acker’s explication of Farsi grammar shows a language that inherently recognizes the interrelations of terms and undermines presumed natural associations between subjects and attributes. That Acker uses the Farsi word for gender (*jense*) to stand in for body parts, sex acts, and gendered distinctions is telling, as when one character demands “با من جنس بکن” ‘do gender with me’ / “fuck me” (*Empire* 159). The Farsi word for gender (*jense*) when translated into English becomes “vagina” (“Birth” 100, 101) and “cock” (100) as a critique of the ways gender is read in English as if it points to a crudely defined biological fact. Despite the fact that other words are known to Acker by virtue of a reference she makes to a well-known Persian book of erotic terms, Acker consistently uses *jense* (gender) when translating words for sex acts, sexual organs, and gendered distinctions into English. In so doing, Acker makes clear that while seeming to refer to discrete entities, the English uses of these words all share the same referent— *jense* (gender)—and ultimately point back to a disabling sex-gender system.

¹¹ Acker has changed the conventional transliteration of *jense* to “Knse”

Monique Wittig exposes the sex-gender system as an oppressive regime that rests upon the arbitrary assignment of particular body parts to a person's ontology whereby penises become the literal meaning of men and vaginas become the literal meaning of women. For Wittig, the most insidious effect of conventional language is its ability to produce "reality-effects" ("One" 9-20) that naturalize sexual difference. Similarly, for Butler, gender constitutes a "regime of sexuality" (*Psychic Life* 31) based upon the precarious alignment of "proper" sexual behavior, desire, gender, and sexual anatomy. Acker uses translational poetics to draw attention to the reification of heteronormativity in English while also pointing out that by virtue of being constituted by a set of linguistic rules that exist otherwise in Farsi, the linguistic structure is conventional and not natural. The structural differences between Persian and English are further elaborated by the fact that Farsi does not have gender pronouns. Persian pronouns that translate as 'this', 'that,' and 'it' in English are used to denote what Western discourse sees as gendered subjects. Essentially, gender is determined contextually in Farsi; it does not exist outside a chain of other meanings. It is interesting, then, to consider the ways that gender seems to be moveable in Iranian political life in a way that correlates to the way subjects exist in the structure of the language.¹² On the other hand, gender categories are perceived to be less mobile in Western contexts, which correlates with the ways subjects are divided and constituted as a function of language. In her presentation, "Inclusive Language? A Few Reflections on Queer Feminist Translation," Serena Bassi notes the ways grammar reflects a reified idea of common sense and the ways these norms are then used to push back against linguistic innovation. This is, perhaps, most evident in resistance toward innovations in English pronouns, such as the use of the third-person pronoun by trans, gender non-conforming, gender-fluid, and non-binary people. This push-back limits the kinds of social realities that are validated to those that align with normative linguistic values. Language that is not cis-gendered is considered grammatically incorrect; therefore, the subjectivities associated with linguistic innovation are invalidated in these terms. English linguistic hegemony conceals the operation of this ideology through which grammar takes the shape of a moral ideal. Acker's multilingual aesthetic exposes the ways that dominant ideologies are structurally ingrained and reproduced in language and the kind of linguistic subjects that are thereby made possible or impossible in these terms.

For Judith Butler, identifying the limits in a term's reproducibility is the key to identifying transformable grounds for human livability (*Undoing* 27). In the case of Farsi and English, it is not a term but a structure that is irreproducible across contexts. The divided subject of Western discourse and the grammatical

¹² Observing this phenomenon is not meant to validate a system that forces some queer people in Iran to change their gender in order to live safely with same-sex partners, as this is a clear and violent imposition of heteronormative frameworks, but to note that the kind of linguistic subjectivity innate to Farsi through which gender is derived from context and subjects are not as fixed by attributes correlates to the seemingly paradoxical situation in Iran where gender fluidity is accepted while same-sex love is criminalized.

structures that support it cannot be reproduced in Farsi, just as the moveability of the subject in Farsi provides ambiguity in that language that is inconceivable in English. Acker's use of this gender-neutral language challenges the givenness of sexed identity in the West and its reification through language. The genitive "of" in Farsi makes visible the way in which subjective qualities are layered into linguistic signs by a series of provisional grammatical rules that then become naturalized conventions affecting both language use and linguistic subjects. Butler explains the need to "disrupt what has become settled knowledge and knowable reality [and] use, as it were, one's unreality to make an otherwise impossible or illegible claim" (28). The ambiguities innate to Farsi mean the speaking subject is not dominated by binary logic in the same way as in English and so can think of things and their opposites at the same time, as when in "Birth," Ali sits down to "داخلِ مسجدِ چای و شیرین را میخورند" / *Daxele masjed cay va shirini ra mixorand*" (99) 'eat/drink sweets and tea in the mosque', which is translated into English as "[i]n the mosque they drink tea and sweets" (99). The Farsi verb *mixorand* is used for both eating and drinking; both actions are covered without loss, whereas in the English language either two words are needed for these separated concepts, or one meaning must be sacrificed. Thus, the structure of the language indicates forms of thought not accounted for in Western discourse. The limit exposed in translation's failures provides an opportunity for rethinking the logics through which language and subjects are constituted. Acker's multilingualism provides a model for transnational feminist and queer solidarities based upon hearing that which is untranslatable across linguistic and cultural contexts and questioning when adhering to structural limits might also maintain institutionalized barriers preventing transformation in larger systems of gender, sexuality, and political allegiances.

Working at the Limits of Reproducibility through Translational Poetics

In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler sets the imperative to articulate and find institutional support for lesbian and gay international rights that "assert[s] in clear and public terms the reality of homosexuality, not as an inner truth, not as a sexual practice, but as one of the defining features of the social world in its very intelligibility" (29). For the same reasons, Jack Halberstam views translation as integral to global 2SLGBTQ+ politics both in a practical sense in terms of ensuring local knowledges, experience, and desire are understood in their own terms, and because the act of articulating the conditions for human livability across national contexts like the act of translating meaning across linguistic registers requires examining "a set of categorisations and the framing logics they imply" (289). Butler reiterates this point when they say, "there is no solidarity without translation, and certainly no global solidarity" (Nagar et al 113). This call to understand subjects on their own terms correlates with

Spivak's argument regarding the widow's agency within *sati*.¹³ Spivak provocatively asserts a network of desires in which it might be "possible to want to die by fire" ("Can the Subaltern" 24). In this, Spivak is asserting the need to recognize the complex ways in which subaltern subjects strive for visibility and autonomy within conditions that would seal them in silence. Spivak critiques both Vedic and British Imperial framings of *sati*, with a particular note that *sati* as understood in Britain "commemorates a grammatical error" (57) on the part of the British and inaccurate translations. Spivak further points out that there were frameworks for legitimating self-sacrifice, such as the war hero and the religious martyr, that were not extended to subaltern women. Spivak suggests there are ways to understand *sati* as "(non) suicide" (53). Instead, the widow's actions were compared with "murder, infanticide and the lethal exposure of the very old" (57), indicating British economic and political agendas in India that were built upon saving "brown women" (48-50) as a sign of the nation's goodness and civility.¹⁴

Spivak's argument was not to make a point about the subaltern speaking, but to show that if a person tried to do something outside the confines of dominant discourse, it could not be acknowledged because there was no institutional validation; therefore, "resistance could not be registered" ("Appendix" 228). Quoting Clarice Lispector, Moure muses that "only when the construct falters do I reach what [language] could not accomplish [...] And in a call for **the stranger** (for the neighbour does only what we can already read)" (*O Cidadan* 78). Thus, the stranger is posited as a source of expansive conversations and reading practices. Geneviève Robichaud elaborates that multilingual texts open a poetics of friendship, humility and listening to the effect of enlarging "les cercles d'intimité" (Brossard *Et me voici* 13) 'circles of intimacy'. Building upon the ethics in Nicole Brossard's feminist translation praxis, Robichaud imagines multilingual poetics as a form through which "one lets the other in" (73). Lyotard argues that to do so "a new competence (or prudence) must be found" (13) to make room for "the differend": "the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be" (13). This state is signaled by the feeling one has when "one cannot find the words" (13). In Lyotard's conception, this search is especially pertinent to the expression of harm necessary for the realization of justice. He continues, "what is at stake [...] is to bear witness to differends by finding idioms for them" (13). In Peter Gratton's summation, "the cause of justice means that one phrase regime will need to be rooted out in order for its hegemony to end" (par. 8). In its wake, "new phrase regimes will need to be invented, new gestures or ways of existing together will have to be found" (par. 8). The current dominance of global English produces a situation wherein a

¹³ Sati is "the proper name of the rite of widow self-immolation" (Spivak 60). It is sometimes referred to as suttee. However, this is an early colonial British transcription of the Sanskrit word for widow, which is sati.

¹⁴ The full and oft-cited quote that is repeated in Spivak's article explains the colonial mentality around sati as that of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (48-50).

localized, ethnocentric narrative is being taken as sufficient for explaining all experiences under its domain and, conversely, muting those that cannot make themselves legible within its terms. Multilingual writing challenges Anglo-hegemony and the subsequent spread of an “Anglo-euro-centric epistemology” (Reimóndez 45) that renders other epistemic traditions invisible within global reading practices.

Abdul JanMohamed critically revises Spivak’s original question focusing on its implied concerns to ask, “what are the conditions of possibility that attend the ‘audibility’ of the speech?” (139). In a postscript, Spivak also provides this new framing by asking “who hears the subaltern” (“In Response” 229). Thus, the emphasis must be on modes of receptivity versus speaking, as these conditions are changeable, whereas “the conditions that attend to the production of subaltern speech are historically unalterable” (JanMohamed 140). As Butler has argued persuasively, life is precarious. As such, “politics must consider what forms of social and political organization seek best to sustain precarious lives across the globe” (*Undoing* 23). The answer lies in multilingual and translational modes of engagement and forms of active listening, receptivity, humility, and conversation required therein. According to Claudia de Lima Costa, “to translate is to multiply other ways of existing” (Nagar et al). Similarly, the task of transnational solidarity “is no less than a remaking of reality [...] and a brokering of the question, what is and is not liveable” (Butler, *Undoing* 29). For Lyotard, the damage incurred by wrongdoing is compounded when there is also “the impossibility of bringing it to the knowledge of others” (5). Gratton further explains that in this regard injustice occurs when a localized narrative is taken as a metanarrative that then renders others mute, unseen, and unable to register harm (par. 9). Thus, there is a fundamental connection between livability and audibility. Acker’s multilingual idiom represents her attempt to create a radically new phrase regime with the potential to disrupt the stability of global knowledge structures and the status assigned to Western culture within subsequent hierarchies. The effect of Acker’s multilingual aesthetic and Farsi translations is to undermine the imperialist, Eurocentric, and phallogocentric impulse to reduce all meanings to the self-same, to draw attention to the ways languages are centered or marginalized by the global politics of English, and to elaborate the political consequences of presuming the translatability into English of global thought and linguistic systems. For Moure and Gander, “translation is vital but only in so far as it can oblige us to listen, and not to absorb” (xvi). Drawing upon feminist translation practice, multilingual poetics “mak[es] something available to all yet not losing sight of the specificity of those borders, limits and possibilities” (Moure, “Fellows”). The narrator of *Little Theatres* makes the challenge clear when she admits, “it was hard at first seeing these languages take charge, even frightening a bit. Later we stepped into them like water” (37). Acker and Moure deploy multilingualism as a queer, decolonizing strategy that forces the reader to “feel the surety of one’s epistemological and ontological anchor go” (Butler, *Undoing* 35), but to be willing to invite this unmooring in the pursuit of transnational solidarities.

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