




Interview with Luise von Flotow

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Prof. Luise von Flotow is a Professor of Translation Studies who embarked on her teaching at the University of Ottawa in 1995 and was the Director of School of Translation and Interpretation at the University of Ottawa from 2006 to 2016. Her main research interests are in the fields of feminist and gender issues in translation, political and ideological aspects of translation, audiovisual translation, and translation as cultural diplomacy. She is also a literary translator from German and French into English. She has translated nineteen books so far including her 2023 translation of *The World at My Back* by Thomas Melle. As a translator, she works mainly on texts by women writers. As a scholar, she is best known as the author of *Translation and Gender: Translating in the 'Era of Feminism'* (1997), the editor of *Translating Women* (2011), and co-editor of *Translating Women: Different Voices and New Horizons* (2017) and *The Routledge Handbook of Translation, Feminism and Gender* (2020).

Based on her 1997 book and Sherry Simon's in 1996 we could argue that the first decade of feminist translation studies focuses on the intersection of translation studies and feminism and intends to inform students and scholars of translation on both sides of the Atlantic (1997, p. 2). However, with cultural discourse shifting toward gender studies and queer theory in the later 1990s, feminist studies and feminist translation studies faded somewhat, though feminist thought had been widely translated, affecting the humanities and social sciences in many cultures. The ideas, however, did not have the same impact on the discipline of translation studies: many translators and translation scholars were/are still uninformed of the practices, objectives, and possibilities of feminism and gender studies in translation.

Over a decade later, Flotow declared it was time to write about “women and translation” again, time to “expand on the ‘first paradigm’ of gender studies as applied to translation, revisiting a series of agents” (2011, p. 1) women translators, women writers, and women characters. The book *Translating Women* in 2011 revives the exploration of feminism in translation begun in the 1990s. It provides a wide variety of examples of how feminist theory can be applied to inform the study and practice of translation in unexplored ways in many uncharted contexts.

Translating Women. Different Voices and New Horizons (2017), edited by Flotow and Farahzad, often regarded as a sequel to *Translating Women* (2011), drew on transnational feminist connections and authors from four continents, from Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Sri Lanka, China, Columbia, Mexico, and beyond. Its geopolitical inclusivity distinguishes it from the previous book. The 2017 anthology continues the investigation of women's roles in translation as authors, or translators, or theoreticians, and examines the impact of the translation of Western feminist discourse. It draws readers' attention to the politics of publishing translation by women authors in different cultures and explores the role women translators play in disseminating and developing new ideas. The methodological approaches to questions are also varied. In Flotow's words, this could be the beginning of transnational feminist translation studies and “the first step in countering essentialism” (Flotow, 2017, xviii).

The Routledge Handbook of Translation, Feminism and Gender in 2020 is the outcome of a 2016 transnational feminist translation project. It provides an even more comprehensive and state-of-the-art overview of the history and theorizing of the intersection of translation, feminism and gender. This book brings together the academic research of scholars from more than twenty different countries such as Russia, Turkey, Iran, Chile, Yemen, China, India, Japan, Egypt, Palestine, the UK, Canada, the USA and Europe. This handbook critically probes various aspects of gender in translation and its effects, both local and transnational.

Considering this output and Prof. von Flotow's academic reputation on the study of feminism/gender and translation and transnational feminist translation studies, we conducted an in-person interview with her, also with the intention of further disseminating her views on feminist translation studies, local and transnational.

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Cadernos de Tradução (CT): Hi Prof. Flotow, thank you for accepting our interview. As we all know, you are a well-known feminist or gender translation studies scholar. Could you tell us what brought you to feminist translation studies in the first place?

Luise von Flotow (LvF): I got started on translation as a child, growing up in a German immigrant family in Canada where we constantly joked and talked about the translation mistakes that can occur when newcomers try to function in English. The examples were endless. The feminist/gender aspect of translation came later, when I had small children and experienced the social exclusion and disrespect that young mothers face. Readings of Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* and many other such books that were proliferating in the mid- and late 1970s soon explained the situation for me, and made me laugh as well with their irreverence and the wordplay they invented to take down the ‘patriarchy’. The wordplay was especially entertaining and interesting for me, and when I found similar work in



French-Canadian texts by women writers – Nicole Brossard, Louky Bersianik, France Theoret, and others – as well as publications such as *La Vie en Rose* all of which politicized these feminist experiments with language, I was laughing again. My attempts to translate some of their work over the course of an MA project led me to the work of others who were similarly engaged – Barbara Godard, Susanne De Lotbinière-Harwood – and the considerable resistance they faced in public meetings, translator congresses and academic events. It was all interesting! And political! And in 1991 as a PhD student, I ended up publishing an article on ‘feminist translation’ that summarized this approach to translation, the theories leading up to it and deriving from it, and the socio-cultural contexts allowing it. The pluralization of gender identities and the politics of *queer* have broadened, and complicated, matters – but this field remains a major interest of mine.

(CT): Throughout these years, you have extended your research scope and impact from your original focus on feminist translation practices and research in regard to experimental writing in Quebec toward the wider world and your proposed transnational feminist translation studies, following Tymozcko’s advocacy of involving *other cultures* in translation studies. Would you please talk about the achievements in transnational feminist translation studies?

(LvF): Yes, for years, Translation Studies have been done largely in English, or so it seems. Of course, French, Spanish, Belgian, German, Israeli and other academics were important participants as the discipline developed in the 1980s and 1990s, but English has been the lingua franca, and Anglo-American/European texts have been the main focus of research projects and publications, using largely Anglo-American references and philosophies. But translation takes place all over the world, and Maria Tymozcko is right to say we need to expand the discipline to *other cultures*.

Since my interests lie in the *feminist* domain, the development of transnational feminism and its use of and need for translation have been important to me. Feminisms of various kinds have existed in all cultures over time; women in all societies have expressed feminist ideas and voiced problems to which answers might well be termed *feminist* today. This universal aspect of socio/sexual relations – which is due to sexual difference and societies’ attempts to manage this difference – has affected human life forever. However, the contexts of the twentieth century – with communication power largely in the hands of English media and English academia and publishing – seem to have made mainstream feminist ideology rather one-sided, as women of colour and Chicana women in the 1980s and the queer movement of the 1990s pointed out in North America, and as women activists and thinkers in many other cultures around the world would agree. It is high time to listen to and translate other ideas and experiences of feminism, understand them, share them, and learn from them. That is what *transnational feminist translation studies* is all about!

The process is a little complicated – since, until recently, communications depended on (expensive) print and dissemination methods, basically the publication and marketing of books and articles – but things are changing. With the Internet, with online publishing, with instantaneous communications worldwide and the ongoing willingness that activist academics have always shown to work hard to disseminate the ideas they promote, transnational feminist translation and translation studies have a much greater chance of proliferating.

Recently, in English academia, for instance, a number of books – still in English and still in hardcopy – have appeared that are clearly focused on the transnational aspects of feminism in translation; they



include *Virgin Crossing Borders* (2023) by Emek Ergun, an account and analysis of her translating Hanne Blank's book *Virgin: The Untouched History* into Turkish and then studying the Turkish reception. Similarly, *Translating Simone De Beauvoir's The Second Sex. Transnational Framing, Interpretation and Impact* (2023), edited by Julia Bullock and Pauline Henry-Tierney examines Chinese, Arabic, Spanish, Hungarian, Polish, English, and Japanese translations of Beauvoir's book, the contexts and reception of this text in a clearly transnational framework. And most recently, a collection of essays on translation, *River in an Ocean* (2023), edited by Nuzhat Abbas, is the first book from *trace*, a new publishing house in Toronto, that brings together "emergent and experienced feminist translators and writers, coming from Uganda, Kashmir, Palestine, Rwanda, India, Singapore, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Saudi Arabia to think through translation in various registers" (xi).

In other words, there is a lot of new work afoot, in Asia, the Middle East, and also South America, where two special issues of the journal *Mutatis Mutandis* (University of Antioquia/Colombia), appeared recently, with position papers and articles in Portuguese, Spanish and English all focused on transnational feminist translation. It is all happening now, and promises a fertile development of feminist interactions and solidarity across cultures.

(CT): Is it possible to define *transnational feminist translation and translation studies*?

(LvF): There is no set or fixed definition: I see transnational feminist translation as a broad-minded, open, and interested approach to the stories, texts, lives and contexts of women around the world. The purpose is to develop, hear, read and promote feminist knowledge – via translation – beyond the trends and limitations imposed by the phenomenal reach of the Anglo-American system. This approach recognizes the fact that feminisms have existed and continue to exist in many different cultures – and often involve different ideas and different ways of being and thinking from which others can learn. While universalizing ideas about women's rights have been promoted through globalization – largely by the Anglo-American west – these same ideas have also suppressed or simply ignored and neglected existing feminist work in other cultures and countries. The term *gender-mainstreaming*, for instance, invented for the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995 and imposed on countless international development projects has been shown to be less than successful in its applications. What exactly does it mean?

So, the transnational approach to feminist translation and translation studies focuses on the local – and much less some international generalization. It considers work by feminist groups in Japan, for example, to be of interest to those in Croatia, and mobilizes translation in order to allow communication across those linguistic/cultural borders. In terms of academic transnational feminist translation studies, this approach might describe and analyze a feminist phenomenon in South Korea, and then study how this phenomenon moves to China, via translation. Or, in the South American context, a transnational feminist translation studies project might investigate the many translations, adaptations and contexts in which the Chilean protest song "Un violador en tu camino" (2019) has been performed in translation.

Basically, transnational feminist translation and translation studies seeks out and develops translation projects and translation research in many different parts of the world and many different language pairs, reaching beyond conventional limits of academia.



(CT): In your 2017/2019 article “On the Challenges of Transnational Feminist Translation Studies” you mentioned a number of specific areas of difficulty: “the ‘hegemony’ of English in academic publishing and how this affects the circulation of feminist texts from beyond the Anglo-American Eurozone; the issue of power relations between editors and authors, cultures, and languages; questions of inclusion and exclusion, especially as different religious/cultural backgrounds affect scholarly discussion; and the importance of women’s/feminist diversity as well as the risks/benefits of a universalizing discourse.” Looking back, do you think all the challenges still exist? in your opinion what are the most pressing challenges that transnational feminist translation studies must deal with?

(LvF): Yes, all of those challenges still exist! But in my view, the most pressing issues feminism in Anglo-America has to deal with is the fragmentation of women’s solidarity into various apparently hostile camps that focus on the differences between women, especially in regard to gender identities, but also in regard to race, class, age, and numerous other categories. These differences are portrayed and understood as somehow negative and even hostile, and the fragmentation is made even worse as each group competes for political visibility, power, authority, and so on. The outcome has been for *the category of women* to be considered unacceptable in research projects and official discourse. In English now, it is common to hear about *pregnant people*! It seems women are being phased out. This is a negative, conflictive development of the last twenty years and needs to be addressed and mitigated. Moreover, if this focus on negative difference continues and spreads to other parts of the world (via still powerful Anglo-American academic publishing and other media), it will seriously impact women’s groups, feminist organizations and individual women. That is the most pressing challenge I am currently aware of, and working on.

(CT): Just now you mentioned that the ways of communication have changed from expensive print methods, the publication of books and articles in physical copies. With the advent of internet, online publishing, open access, instant messaging like *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, *Tiktok* etc., it is easier to promote ideas including feminist ideas, such as “Me Too” or the Chilean flash performance “a rapist in your path,” which have swept many nations. What, do you think, can the new online multimodality open up for feminist translation practice and feminist translation studies? And any new challenges too?

(LvF): Yes, digital media has allowed the transfer and exchange of numerous important feminist texts, translations, articles and literatures. It plays a huge role in the dissemination of ideas – and can be put to use for feminist translation transnationally also. Certain essays / academic texts are already available online, easily accessible: for example, all the work published in the special feminist translation issues of *Mutatis Mutandis* and much more, of course. But the other side of the coin is the discourse that can flourish on social media platforms: it can be so vicious! horrendous in its vulgarity, violence, disrespect and hatred of women. One digital platform I know of documents terrifying and very threatening misogynist material that is collected from various social media platforms and shows the massive power on the far side of *civilized* academic discourse on feminist topics. It is a complicated field.



(CT): One of the aims of transnational feminist translation studies is to promote justice and equity. To that end, considering the societal crisis and conflicts so prevalent worldwide, how might translation scholars focus on the study of the agents working in the network of feminist translation research and practice?

(LvF): Justice and equity are wonderful terms, and great goals. They are relative, however, and this needs to be recognized. Translation studies, whether feminist or other, can only do so much, limited as this discipline is by competing academic fields, by many scholars'/people's disinterest in translation and the fact that many are unilingual and can hardly appreciate what it means to translate, or to live in bilingual/multilingual settings. What feminist transnational translation studies can do is work at a grassroots level, promoting research on and translation of feminist texts across all kinds of linguistic borders, recognizing the many different forms of feminist thought and the many cultural influences (political, religious, traditional and other influences) that can be understood and disseminated via translation.

(CT): In the summer of 2023, Şebnem Susam-Saraeva gave a talk based on her research "The Three Faces of Translation in Climate Crisis Discourse" at the University of Ottawa. During the talk, she mentioned that as "one of the most global conversations in history, climate crisis discourse is intrinsically dependent on and intertwined with 'translation'". She argues "a renewed focus on interlingual translation may address some of the issues currently faced by scientists and policy makers." What are your thoughts about it?

(LvF): While I was listening to Şebnem's talk, I kept thinking that the term *climate crisis* that she referred to throughout could easily be replaced by the term *gender* and the same issues would apply: first, the fact that everyone on the planet knows about it; that everyone has some kind of opinion on it; that every government has policies and regulations on the issue that purport to address problems engendered by it; that language issues around the problem abound; that it is very difficult to pin down precise definitions and interpretations ... etc. Like the climate crisis, issues around *gender* – i.e. sexual difference – are rampant and global.

(CT): We recently came upon a book, *Feminism or Death*, written by Françoise d'Eaubonne and initially published in French in 1974. It has been translated for the first time into English in 2022 by Ruth Hottell. It focuses on the politics of ecofeminism which emphasizes on various forms of oppression affecting nature, animals, marginalized people, and women, and the idea that the patriarchal system is intrinsically environmentally damaging. Given the current environment issues the whole world is facing (such as wildfire in Canada, flooding in the US, global warming, the melting of ice glaciers, the rising sea level etc.), what new energies could the intersection between ecofeminism, environmentalism, and translation studies bring to transnational feminist translation studies?

(LvF): Good question! This is a huge area to discuss – but I have not spent much time on it: I agree that *democratic* capitalist but also many other forms of human life have done enormous damage to "nature, animals, marginalized people and women", as you say. The problem is that we are all



involved; we are inextricably part of the system. To hope or think that feminist translation studies or even just feminist policies can make a dent in all this seems unrealistic. What is realistic is continued work in this intersection of climate crisis, feminism and translation: the translation of relevant texts from all parts of the world that deal with the local aspects of these questions: the local needs to be heard within the international, and often even above the international. And that is where translation comes in, in all its forms.

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