1 **Sitting with Discomfort**

A Queer-Feminist Approach to Translating Yu Xiuhua

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Abstract

This essay begins with the author's radical renditions of poetry by Yu Xiuhua, who catapulted to fame when her blog went viral in 2014. She then lays out a queer-feminist approach to translating Yu, which is informed by fiercely intimate textual encounters as much as by the recognition of the poet's and translator's identities in their social and (geo)political contexts, and by translation as discomfort and failure as well as solidarity and collaboration.

Keywords: Chinese poetry, translation, Yu Xiuhua, feminist translation, queer theory of failure, translator's visibility

《我养的狗，叫小巫》

我跛出院子的时候，它跟着
我们走过菜园，走过田埂，向北，去外婆家

我跌倒在田沟里，它摇着尾巴
我伸手过去，它把我手上血舔干净

他喝醉了酒，他说在北京有一个女人
比我好看。没有活路的时候，他们就去跳舞
他喜欢跳舞的女人
喜欢看她们的屁股摇来摇去
他说，她们会叫床，声音好听。不像我一声不吭
还总是蒙着脸

我一声不吭地吃饭
喊 “小巫，小巫” 把一些肉块丢给它
它摇着尾巴，快乐地叫着*

...

(Yu 2015, 4)

Dog I Keep, Called Little Wu

In “The Politics of Translation” Spivak claims that a feminist translation of work by women is one in which “the translator attends to the specificity of the language she translates” (180). One must be a good listener

I limp out of the courtyard time, it follows
We walk the garden, walk the ridge between fields, going north, to maternal
grandmother’s house

I stumble into a field ditch, it wags tail
I stretch hand across, of the blood on my hand it laps clean

He’s drunk, he says in Beijing he has a woman
better looking than me. Doesn’t have a means of survival time, they go
dancing
He likes dancing women
Likes to watch their butts wag back wag forth
He says, they can call bed, voices sound good. Not like me a voice wordless
Still always hiding my face

I voice wordlessly eat
Call “Little Wu, Little Wu” of a few pieces of meat toss to it
It wags its tail, happily barking

I Keep a Dog, Called Xiao Wu

Is it then important that 小 means “little” and 巫/Wu is a common Chinese surname? As a name, it is a unit of sound, a script that marks dog and has no “meaning.” How to truly translate a proper noun? How does the speaker hear her dog’s name? For me, the meaning of the name, like the meaning in the dog, somewhat inscrutable. Instead I hear her voice “Xiao Wu.” I am listening

When I limp out the courtyard, it follows

Yu Xiuhua refers to the dog as 它/it and to the man as 他/he. The sound the same, the pronoun clearly different. Reading in Chinese I think of the dog as “he,” partly because of the aural overlap of 它/ta and 他/ta and partly because Americans would

never refer to a pet dog as “it.” Does the Chinese 它 have the same quality of thingness? Does it indicate a more practical, less intimate relationship between woman and animal? Does it allow the dog to overlap with the “he,” implicating the dog in a lineage of patriarchal violence, or does “it” fully stand between the two, the indeterminacy of 它 also opening into a blankness of possibility, a liminality, a way out?

We walk the garden, walk the ridge between fields, going north,
to my grandmother's house

Chinese, unlike English, has a complex vocabulary for articulating family relationships. The term 外婆 means maternal grandmother, literally “outside grandmother,” so this is the speaker's mother's mother, not her husband's grandmother or her father's mother, outside the patriarchal line of descent

I fall in a field ditch, he wags his tail

I stretch out my hand, of the blood on my hand he laps clean

伸手, stretching out one's hand, is a gesture and also an asking, it moves the body and it speaks,
it asks for, it might even beg

He's drunk, he says in 北京 he has a woman

As in “has”

better looking than me. When he doesn't have work, they go dancing

He likes women who dance

Inhabit their bodies
in motion

Likes to watch their butts wag back and forth

Now dog and women overlap in the verb “摇”

He says, they can call out in bed, and their voices sound good. Not like me
without a word

叫床, one word that means to cry out in ecstasy (during lovemaking).
I wonder if this word is used for the pleasure of both men and women

Always hiding my face

I eat without a word

Call “Xiao Wu, Xiao Wu” toss him a piece of meat

巫 also means “shaman” and Google translates the dog's name as Little Shaman. One of my professors asks me why I haven't translated it as such. She says that to her the poem is very spiritual. Again the dog's role is contested. It stands as a vessel between

The dog wags his tail, barking happily

“Happily” sounds insipid in English. I don't think this is a bad translation

Dog I Raise, Called 小巫

In the context of a feminist mode of translation, Lori Chamberlain suggests the process should be cooperative. Carol Maier says we should “get under the skin of both antagonistic and sympathetic works” and speak *with* the antagonistic work. Do we not also speak with sympathetic works?

When I limp out the courtyard, it follows

I am not a dog person. I tend to think of all dogs as dumb
dudes. Dogs don't understand us, they don't even understand
themselves. Dogs are the shadow of our need to be needed

We walk the garden, walk the ridge between fields, north,
to my grandmother's house

My maternal grandmother is my last living grandparent. A difficult woman who taught my
mother who taught me to be insecure, inconsistent, and impatient with others who can't read
your mind. Or who aren't your son. She used to have a little dog named Dusty. Now she has a
cat she complains about who won't cuddle. She and my mother don't get along well, but my
grandma lives closest to us. We've been three generations of women on our own for over thirty
years. Now, she's beginning to forget things

I fall in a ditch in the field, it wags its tail

I stretch out my hand, of the blood on my hand it laps clean

I joke with my brother that the Nunes blood runs deep. He and
I share a father. Our three uncles, our cousins, we all share a
look, we all brood. We do not ask for help. The violence in us, a
slick seam, a wealth of silence

He's drunk, he says in 北京 he has a woman

My grandmother told my mother she didn't enjoy having sex with her husband, and my
mother told me. We are not women who have taught each other how to take pleasure

better looking than me. When he's between jobs, they go dancing

He likes women who dance

But we do all like to dance

Likes to watch their butts wag back and forth

My father met his current wife ballroom dancing. My mother says, "Your father always wanted
a Barbie doll"

He says, they can call out in bed, and their voices sound good. Not like me
without a word

My mother also told me it took her a long time to learn that
finding your own pleasure is sexy for your partner. I don't know
anything about my father's sex life, but his wife does wear leopard
print and short shorts, and she does speak her mind. She runs
her own business and buys things she likes no matter what my
father thinks. She grew up in upstate New York and hasn't been
to college. Sometimes I think she's jealous of my relationship
with my father, a space where she is of no use. I don't know how
I learned to perform my pleasure, how I learned this one way to
make people feel like I need them

Always hiding my face

I eat without a word

Silence is complicity. Silence, for us, is also the glue that holds us together at the points
we cannot meet without violence

Call “小巫, 小巫” toss it a piece of meat

It wags its tail, barking happily

But the violence is there

Yu Xiuhua 余秀华 became a poetry sensation in China after her poem “Crossing Half of China to Sleep with You” (穿过大半个中国去睡你) went viral via the messaging platform WeChat in 2014. As a woman who lives in rural Hubei province and did not graduate from high school, her poetic talent has captured the Chinese imagination – or the Chinese imagination has captured her poetry. Excitement around her “natural talent” and prolific output intersects with her various identities, including the fact that she has cerebral palsy. Among a number of labels, she has been dubbed “the cerebral palsy poet” (脑瘫诗人) and even when the language is less direct it is clear that many link her disability and poetics: “she walks clumsily and talks haltingly. Yet she is keen on the physicality of language ... the words Yu uses are brutal, free, vivid, angry and violent. Writing poetry is a natural physical impulse for her” (Zhou 2015; Riep 2019 takes a disability studies perspective throughout). Yu herself enters the conversation saying, “label is necessary when you need to promote something ... But my disability really has nothing to do with my poetries. No matter a person is physically healthy or not, when they write poems, their mind and spirit are the same” (*sic*, Yao 2016). Yet, Yu does discuss her experiences with her disability on her blog and in interviews and suggests that poetry is a “spiritual crutch” allowing her to express herself in a way she otherwise cannot. In other words, in relation to her writing, she makes an effort to identify as a poet rather than a female poet or a rural poet or a poet with cerebral palsy, but her construction as a poet in the eyes of the public, and thus the way her poetry is consumed, cannot be disentangled from these labels.

As a key site of cultural exchange, literary translation has the potential to act in concert with transnational power structures, reaffirming global inequalities, but also to radically intervene in existing hierarchies, surfacing a more complex mapping of the transnational present. Yu’s writing together with her status as a public figure place her at a slant relative to both established poetry circles in China and established translation practices outside China, highlighting the ethical issues that translators face.¹ I encountered Yu’s poetry through a Chinese friend who introduced her as a poetry sensation, the Emily Dickinson of China, and I have to admit that a significant part of my interest in translating her work stemmed from “the Yu Xiuhua phenomenon” and the way her writing and her status as a poet have become a compelling nexus in the complex web of cultural, political, and literary forces at play in contemporary Chinese poetry. As a writer myself, I am inclined to embrace my labels – feminist writer, queer writer,

1 For a more direct look at Yu’s life and how she came into poetry, see Li 2018.

“experimental” writer – and I am well aware of the ways my ability and desire to make this choice reflect something about the state of contemporary poetry and our broader historical moment in the US. To put it more bluntly, my own position as a highly educated and able-bodied white woman located both at a university and within the small-press poetry world in the United States does not do much to alleviate the ethical issues surrounding the translation of Yu’s poetry. The violence is there.

It is from this uncomfortable place that I would like to explore the possibilities of a queer-feminist approach to translation. The opening to this chapter is an excerpt from one of Yu’s poems, followed by my translation. Like much of Yu’s poetry, I find “Dog I Raised, Called Xiao Wu” (我养的狗, 叫小巫) compelling because of its unsettling imagery, deceptively simple language, and confessional, intimate mode of first-person narration. These elements work together to create a world that feels grounded and familiar, and yet contains a great depth of complex affective possibility. The calm, direct telling of each moment, as if the speaker were simply listing the day’s chores, poignantly illustrates the casualness, familiarity, and intimacy of domestic violence and the way it can become just one more thread woven into the tapestry of home life. At the same time, the way the poem tacks quickly but deliberately from walking through the fields toward grandmother’s house to the speaker’s fall and her bloody hand and then to her husband’s drunken verbal abuse manifests the complexity of this web of violence, entangled with gender, ability, and class. Now vividly specific, the text speaks to the way the flow of violence in human relationships is shaped by larger social and cultural power structures, hailing me to recall the damaging ways gender identity has traveled across generations of women in my own family.

As one can see in my translations above, my approach interrogates the invisibility of the translator (Venuti 2018). In doing so, I resist imperialist tendencies – violences – in mainstream English translation that can limit the range of styles and voices that enter English literature via this route.² As a disclaimer, I should add that while Lawrence Venuti and other scholars on whose work I draw focus on a transnational Anglosphere and my argument gestures toward translation and literature in general, my intervention is best situated in a US context, because of my familiarity with the state of translation and contemporary poetry in the US. At the same time that I attend to the visibility of the translator, I make room for varied and nuanced consideration of ethical reading practices by those

2 Compare Goodman 2017.

positioned in relative positions of privilege (me) who translate work by those more easily exploited within transnational power structures, where issues of gender, class, ability, and so on are further inscribed with the “otherness” of the foreign.

Specifically, I find that with its attention to female sexuality, domestic abuse, depression, and desire in a disabled body, Yu’s poetry makes both visible and felt certain internal and external landscapes often considered irrelevant to contemporary (Chinese) poetry and therefore not afforded much global movement. Combined with the way the internet frames Yu’s success and simultaneously asks us to reconsider notions of authenticity, access, and authorship, I believe Yu’s poetry allows, even invites, a mode of translation that retains, creates, and sits with discomfort. Therefore, I draw on a queer theory of radical failure and disruption, in conjunction with a “politics of relationality” and women of color feminism,³ to suggest an approach that refuses to produce the singular, fluent translation that is the English norm, in order to contribute to a feminist translation theory of accountability, relationality, and play. Instead of separating Yu’s poetics from her interlocking identities, I attempt to visibly combine these various threads along with those of my own poetics and identities, aiming for a dynamic, collaborative, and subversive iteration of Yu’s work.

But is it possible to subvert or disrupt elements of English translation more broadly while simultaneously attending to Yu Xiuhua’s agency and the particularities of her poems? Would such a non-standard or unfamiliar mode do justice to Yu and her poetry if it were the first translation of her work

3 I have chosen to keep the term *women of color feminism* unhyphenated. This is because I attempt to listen to those who came before me, particularly women of color (for example, Sylvanna M. Falcón and Jennifer Nash, in their 2015 discussion of intersectionality and transnational feminism). I consider this listening important because women of color feminism grew out of a concerted effort by women of color to make their own voices heard in a field dominated by white women. For instance, the term is now used to describe Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, first published in 1981, as a “foundational text of women of color feminism” on Moraga’s website (on the occasion of the publication of the fourth, updated and expanded edition, in 2015: see bit.ly/2M7WUe3) as well as elsewhere on the web. The title of this book makes clear that women of color feminism, as a mode of theorizing, grew directly out of the work done by women of color; and *women of color* as used in American English is a noun phrase, signifying people. It takes up space – just as women of color feminism takes up space in feminist theory. To me, making it adjectival by inserting hyphens collapses its “noun-phrase-y-ness,” removing the personhood the term intentionally speaks into existence. Throughout this chapter I am concerned with an ethics of translation via the use of language. Rendering *women of color* as a mere descriptor tagged to the fraught noun *feminism* does not feel to be in keeping with my push to work across and within difference, even if that might mean (grammatical) discomfort.

made available?⁴ Is it ethical to disrupt the paradigm of English translation through the work of *this* poet? For instance, Yu has repeatedly asked to be seen as a person, a poet, rather than as a disabled person or a woman specifically. Her direct expression of her own sexuality, as a disabled person and as a woman, is a subversive, shocking move in a Chinese context that is at least in part a means of claiming a more normative, visible (hetero) sexuality. In that context, is the application of feminist and queer theories to the translation of her poetry appropriate? Then again, would it be ethical to allow Yu's subversiveness, this move toward visibility, to be dulled in translation? For how does one bring these elements of her poetry across when bold expression of female sexuality and complex female subjectivity is common in contemporary US poetry? And while disabled subjectivities are by no means allowed full range of expression, disability discourse is still more accommodating in the US than in China. My goal for this paper is not necessarily to answer these questions but to explore these points of tension and to consider how remaining in the uncomfortable and vulnerable place of incompleteness, uncertainty, and reflexivity might offer new ways to address such tensions in the future.

The whys: visibility and Yu Xiuhua

Discourses of fluency and the policing of difference

Let me begin by clarifying Venuti's "invisibility of the translator" and how it might be enmeshed with an imperialist world view. This invisibility in mainstream, economically viable English literary translation is partly secured via "an illusionist effect of discourse" founded on the supremacy of fluency, essentially meaning that the style of the English should not intrude uncomfortably on the experience of reading (2018, 1). To put it another way, the translated text is meant to convey the impression that, using one of many flawed metaphors for translation, the reader is looking through a clear window into another world. The mark of the translator or the processes of translation should be undetectable – invisible – to target readers. The

4 At this writing (March 2019) there is yet to be a book-length translation of Yu's work in English. However, *Chinese Literature Today* recently published Elise Huerta and Hangping Xu's translations of twelve of Yu's poems (2018), including their version of "My Dog, Xiao Wu," as part of a Yu Xiuhua feature with other contributions by Michael Berry and Travis Fan (Fan Jian 范俭), Tze-lan Sang and Shen Rui 沈睿, and Steven Riep.

value of fluency has been regularly affirmed through the language chosen by reviewers if they elect to comment directly on the translation of a book at all: “gracefully if not flawlessly translated”; “pleasantly fluent”; “faithful ... if not quite idiomatic”; “fluently translated”; “readable” (2-3; Nabokov 1992, 127). On the other side of the judgment coin, criticism is articulated as “wooden”; “doughy”; and “translationese”; “translatorese”; and “the dull thud of translate” (Venuti 2018, 2-4). This critical language links fluency to quality and thus perceived accuracy, such that regardless of the nature of the source text, anything moving too far away from this standard – anything that stylistically proposes one is reading a work originally written in another language and cultural context – risks being considered inaccurate, or at least flawed and artless.

At the same time, in the US particularly translation as a genre has a lengthy history of being considered second-class literary output, exacerbating “the translator’s invisibility.” This stems from the hierarchical binary of creative-original versus reproductive-copy, where translation work is inferior: “to be a translator is to assume [the] role of a hoaxer, someone who might be undermining the quality and trustworthiness of literature (and taste)” (Göransson 2014). I am reminded of a poetry professor who refused to teach us work in translation because “you can’t close-read a translation.” The text has become too “untrustworthy” and can no longer be considered a creative work. This general attitude works in tandem with the discourse of fluency and current economies of translation to limit the number of texts being translated and the parameters of viable translation: is the excerpt of my own work at the beginning of this essay actually translation... or is it something else? And if it is something else, what value does it have?

It is this situation that encourages the policing of difference as it enters an Anglophone consciousness. Who and what gets translated is informed by economic, ideological, and cultural forces in the target culture that favor certain expressions of difference over others. In the case of the US and Chinese poetry, this tends to mean an emphasis on the imagistic and a certain political affinity. For instance, building on T. S. Eliot’s claim that Ezra Pound “invented” Chinese poetry for the English-speaking world, poets and scholars have noted Pound’s emphasis on “visuality” in classical Chinese poems, and his version of Chinese poetics has had a lasting influence on which Chinese poems are considered translatable and how those poems are translated (Eliot 1928, xvi; Weinberger 2016, 49; Yeh 2004, 251, 605). In terms of the political, not all that much has changed since 1996, when Yang Lian 杨炼 observed: “it still seems that Chinese literature has to be ‘Red’ (or, rather, ‘anti-Red’) in order to be noticed” (14). And because of the

importance of English-speaking markets and their significance in terms of accruing cultural capital in a transnational literary sphere, these forces can even have an impact on what gets written in the first place (Bruno 2012, 268). In other words, because translation is widely undervalued and the fluency paradigm occupies a hegemonic position, the invisibility of the translator continues to be reaffirmed and the way difference enters the US literary sphere is limited.

Yu Xiuhua: “phenomenon” and poet

Of course, I do not intend to imply that transnational geographies of literature are organized solely by English-language standards and ignore “the many lives that literary texts lead beyond their place of origin and the diverse literary canons and values that, depending on the place and time,” might rise to the forefront of “world literature” (Edmond 2012, 97). Nor am I implying that nothing is getting translated into English that does not fit neatly into certain preexistent categories of “Chineseness” or “poetry.” This very book attests to the complexities of (Chinese) poetry and translation. Yet, I still find Venuti’s argument relevant as it asks us to reconsider translation’s evaluative tools and how those tools might inform the way difference moves across borders. Are the mainstream varieties of these tools suitable in all cases?⁵

Let me pose a more specific question: why call on a queer-feminist theory to translate the poetry of Yu Xiuhua? While the scope of my argument for pushing the boundaries of English translation is bigger than one poet, one genre, or one avenue of exchange, I believe that Yu’s trajectory as a poet combined with her poetics and the way her work has been received in China alongside my own positionality as translator all point to the need for a mode of translation that is not “standard.” A mode that actively works *not* to smooth over the various tensions in her writing and around the propagation of her work. I propose an approach that embraces cultural translation (in the sense of culturally inflected interlingual translation [van Crevel 2017b, 247-248]), creating a space where Yu’s poems are not sheared of context – including the context of the work of translation.

To begin with, the internet is a publishing platform that does not fit neatly into a print paradigm where texts are relatively stable, authorship is authenticated, and “the original” can generally be traced. Yu’s presence on the internet thus complicates notions of natural talent, authorship, and originality, opening up a space for engaging “the original” of her work in new

5 Compare the discussion in Nick Admussen’s essay in the present volume.

ways. For instance, even though she did not finish high school and was not previously a member of any poetry group, online or off, she has been actively posting and discussing poetry in online forums since 2008 (Zhou 2015). And while she may have started writing poetry before she started reading it, regardless of her geographic and socio-economic location, her poetry is certainly now informed by various textual exchanges and “dependent on other, preexisting materials” as facilitated by the internet (Zhao 2017; Venuti 2018, 265). Moreover, the internet, which supports constant recontextualization of text and images, asks us to reconsider what we mean by “authorship” and how we locate and ascribe value to an “original.” For example, looking at the “Quake Poetry” that emerged after the 2008 Sichuan earthquake, it is clear that anonymity and a collective performance of cultural identity are part of online Chinese poetry discourse, demonstrating how poetry, like anything else posted online, can become the property of all (Inwood 2014, 168). That is not to say Yu’s work is *not* original or that she has no claim to it. Rather, my approach to reading her poetry takes into consideration how its online origins complicate the authority of the print versions of her poems and ask us to reconsider whether the texts she produces are fixed and permanently placed.

Furthermore, Yu’s blog as a platform for publication creates a hybrid collection of textual production that includes her poetry as well as various contextual discussions, readings, responses, revisions, and so on. Yu’s poetry is already part of a larger textual project, including her contributions to critical discourse, discussions of her own poems in response to their circulation and critique, personal entries about her life and experiences, and responses from readers. Her poems are visibly enmeshed in a dynamic, multi-textual landscape. In that sense, reading Yu’s work through her blog is not wholly different from reading my translations. Just as the materiality of the internet as a means of presentation and circulation in combination with the varied content of Yu’s blog inflect any reading of her poetry, so my translations also contextualize, recontextualize, situate, and unsettle her writing in English.

In addition to her position as an “internet poet,” neither Yu’s poetics nor how they intersect with her reception fit preexisting molds. For one thing, rather than coming up through one of the hip poetry “live scenes” that have flourished on the Chinese internet, Yu’s rise to prominence was facilitated by the simple fact that her poetry has gone viral (Inwood 2014, 17). That is, her poetry demonstrably speaks to a broad audience – unlike the “avant-garde” (先锋) poetry that is predominantly written by educated, urban, male “members of a cultural elite” (van Crevel 2017a, par. 84). Although movements

like the Lower Body (下半身) and the School of Rubbish (垃圾派) have loudly aligned themselves with a “Popular Standpoint” (民间立场), they have in fact been invested in conversations and poetics that lie at a far remove from “popular” sensibilities, and remain an elite product. Yu and her popularity explode this paradigm. Unsurprisingly, her poetry has not necessarily been endorsed by the avant-garde, where Shen Rui’s 沈睿 characterization of Yu as China’s Emily Dickinson did not land well, triggering debate about the quality of her work and her status as a “phenomenon” (Shen Rui 2015; Shen Haobo 2015). At the same time, Yu has been embraced by the “official arena” (官方诗坛) of more or less state-sanctioned writing, winning poetry awards and joining the Chinese Writers Association; but she continues with her frank attention to topics like female sexuality and the unpleasantness of rural life, rather than slipping into establishment rhetoric.⁶

In other words, Yu is difficult to place or pigeonhole. To quote Maghiel van Crevel (2017a), she has “crashed the party all by herself,” and it is not just her persona but also very much her poetry that sets her apart (par. 112). Her deceptively simple use of language, unsettling imagery, and intimate first-person voice tear holes in the familiar narratives, both romantic and political, that construct rural landscapes as well as women’s work, emotional labor, and desire, and create entry points that re-envision and challenge that very familiarity. As a farmer and an “uneducated” woman with cerebral palsy writing about female sexuality, domestic abuse, depression, and desire in a disabled body, Yu makes visible a subaltern consciousness in a way that is both tender and confrontational in its directness, not only “upending conventional images of avant-garde poethood” but upending the binary of art for art’s sake versus art for society (par. 110). Her poetry might be “popular” but that does not mean it is “standard” or has no teeth.

Finally, it is because of my affinity for Yu’s poetry and my sense of her as a person that I want the translations of her poetry and my process of engaging it to do more than sit still on a page. Like many others, I was struck by her poems when I first read them. At the same time, I feel that extracting those poems from their context – poetry in China today, how Yu has entered this dynamic sphere, the reception of her work, debates around its quality and necessity, and how I have been affected by reading her – is at best a

6 Poet Shi Zhi 食指 has criticized contemporary poets, and particularly Yu Xiuhua, for not having the proper political consciousness in their poems: “How can a poet not spend a moment considering the fate of humanity, or thinking about the future of her nation? How can a poet from the countryside not speak of the miseries of rural life or their dreams of prosperity? How can they just forget everything?” (Xu 2018).

shame. At worst, it is another kind of violence, one that dehistoricizes her writing, making it an object of easy consumption, smoothed to match the target culture's template for Chineseness, poetry, Chinese poetry. Does an established mode of translation, then, do more justice to Yu and her writing than one that looks like mine? Or, again, a more specific question: how does my queer-feminist approach to translating Yu Xiuhua work?

The hows: the “acid tools” of deconstruction and ethical “*be longings*”

The possibilities of queer failure

My method of translation includes putting into play a host of strategies including multiplicity, foreignization, and heavy use of paratextual elements that explode textual cohesion. I am aware that within a paradigm of invisibility, where manipulation of the source text does not count as such if it is undetectable to target-language readers, this deconstructive move toward multivocality may appear to be at odds with an ethics that recognizes Yu's agency as an individual poet. I am aware that while I frame my intervention as the intentional disruption of a normative mode of translation, I could also be judged to have failed as a translator. I have failed at creating a familiarized and easily consumable object that appears “natural” in English in terms of style and form. And perhaps I have thus failed to “accurately” convey the author's intentions by unmistakably inserting my own. These translations do not look like the source texts. They proliferate. Appendages protrude. The lineage – from singular “original” to singular “copy” – appears harder to trace. Perhaps I have failed to do justice to Yu and her poetry. But rather than bemoaning or denying failure, it is within failure that I locate resistance and possibility.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam explores masochism, pain, passivity, and failure as alternative forms of expression that refuse to work “within the same logic as the normative regimes against which they struggle” and are therefore powerfully subversive (2011, 129). Translation has long been implicated in gendered notions of passivity, whether in terms of the more “feminine,” reproductive work of the translator as opposed to creative, “male” productivity or in terms of the text as a passive woman that must be “penetrated” and whose paternal lineage is all-important (Chamberlain 1988, 461, 462). Rather than simply flipping or upholding this passive/active binary by claiming (feminine) translation is equal to (or as masculine as)

creation, maybe a queer-feminist perspective allows me to reclaim passivity and in doing so to disrupt how agency and value are defined in this context. If radical passivity can be a means of “opt[ing] out of certain systems built around a dialectic between colonizer and colonized” (Halberstam 2011, 131), then it might be a viable means of disruption that does not simply swap the terms of oppression but moves toward an ethics of translation by moving outside of the colonizer/colonized framework altogether. This passivity and failure – residual Chinese characters, multiple attempts, uncertainty, etc. – create translations that occupy a liminal space, refusing to commit to preexistent US cultural and literary expectations. Cultivating this inbetweenness and its resistance to definition allows translation to become an embodiment of cultural rupture, unafraid to *be* foreignness, alterity, difference walking among us, but an embodiment that is not so different as to be illegible and thus without power.

Recalling an earlier collaboration with Joyelle McSweeney (2012), Johannes Göransson calls translation “the deformation zone” where “the versioning and contagions of the foreign are part of the poem, not something that must be abjected in order to keep the poem whole” (2016). McSweeney and Göransson draw on notions of excess and kitsch to embrace translation as a knock-off, a hoax, the site of hybridity, contamination, and rupture. And yet we enjoy reading translations. Göransson argues that this enjoyment in reading a “knock off” threatens to destroy the supremacy and the very notion of “authentic” poetry to begin with. What is the specific value in an original if its knock-off is equally, if perhaps differently, enjoyable? What possibilities does this confusion reveal? Translation demonstrates how any text can generate versions, and these versions need not be put into place, one better than another, separated wholly from the original. Instead, the poem and its translation are constantly in motion, constantly hailing us to respond, constantly becoming. In my case, “the translator’s take” is in part a leaning toward excess and an active becoming that enables my translations of Yu’s poetry to flaunt numerous contaminating factors, including other texts, my own subjectivities, my own lyrical response, and Chinese script and syntax.

As such, embracing the failure in translation is a queer intervention that returns the translated poem as well as the “original” to its place “located in between ... permanently in transit, a continuous escaping from the boundaries of meaning” (Ruvalcaba 2016, 7). By creating a hybrid work that does not claim to smoothly transfer meaning from one context to another, and as such reveals how the “original” text is not a container for meaning but its own web of interpretive processes, queer translation challenges “the phallogocentrism of the West, with its worship of the monotheistic,

phallic, authoritative, and singular work, the unique and perfect name,” and “the assumption that we were born to ‘segregation, separation, isolation, competition’” that is at the heart of a Western construction of subjectivity as individuality (Haraway 1991, 175; Rowe 2005, 16). A translation that embraces and is thus conscious of the ways it is “permanently unclosed” can then potentially attend to difference and the pleasure in confusion *and* construction of boundaries in a more responsible way (Haraway 157). Gaps between myself as translator and Yu Xiuhua as poet appear, and yet the line between our distinct voices and poetics becomes blurred – this blurring made apparent by the places where the line, the gaps, are clear. In a sense these are both failures, the failure of the translation to perform accuracy and authority and its failure to uphold the notion of originality and “the unique and perfect” text. The queer translation thus marks the current limits of translation, the limits of our ability to speak through difference, and also refuses to abide by those limits, embodying in its very strangeness the possibility of greater territories of understanding.

“Womanhandling” a translation and an ethics of collaboration

In order to expand on how an ethical practice might emerge from a disruptive mode and to address Yu’s agency more directly, I now turn to several strands of feminist theory. First, I would like to point out that the history of feminist theory and translation is a history of feminist intervention and political engagement. Because women and translation have long shared a secondary status, women have found work in translation since the Renaissance, even when “to publish or appear in print was considered aggressive behavior for females,” and many women used translation, including paratexts and manipulation of the text itself, as a means of entering literary and political conversations from which they were otherwise barred (Simon 1996, 46). The feminist translator continues to act with a deep “distrust of traditional hierarchies and gendered roles, deep suspicion of rules defining fidelity, and the questioning of universal standards of meaning and value,” even if the author being translated is not necessarily writing from this place (8). However, that does not mean one should be “speaking for” women writers, ultimately perpetuating a cycle of cultural domestication (Sharoni *et al.* 2015, 654). One of the ways the feminist translator is able to avoid doing this is by intentionally making visible the manipulation in translation. As Barbara Godard proposes,

the feminist translator, affirming her critical difference, her delight in interminable re-reading and re-writing, flaunts the signs of her

manipulation of the text. *Womanhandling* the text in translation would involve the replacement of the modest-self-effacing translator.”

(Quoted in Simon 1996, 13)

This womanhandling looks much like my own “excessive interference” in Yu’s poetry, including supplementation, “hijacking,” and a foreignizing style that attends to the style of the author and source language (von Flotow 1991, 79; another contemporary example of this kind of translation practice, which I highly recommend, is Chantal Wright’s translation of Yoko Tawada’s *Portrait of a Tongue* [Porträt einer Zunge] [2013]). Nor is this interference based on creating excess alone.

Lori Chamberlain suggests a feminist theory of translation “governed by ... the double-edged razor of translation as collaboration, where author and translator are seen as working together, both in the cooperative and the subversive sense” (1988, 470). While I have not yet had the pleasure of directly collaborating with Yu Xiuhua, I believe it is still possible to approach translation within a framework that constitutes *an ethics of collaboration*. So I turn to women of color feminism, and in particular the work of Aimee Carrillo Rowe (2005) and Maria Lugones (1987, 1994), who articulate approaches to working across and within difference that are rooted in a critical mode of intentional awareness. I see their theorizing as the foundation for a framework where “collaborative” also means that any work – future theorizing, activism, translation – is done with constant recognition of and attention to one’s position within a greater community, or as Rowe puts it, within “a ‘politics of relation’” (16). If subjectivity is a discursive process wherein the “self” (and any experience of a written text) is configured differently in any given moment depending on where one is situated within shifting communities and how one is currently being hailed by existing power dynamics embedded in our relationships with each other, then it is possible for us to “be longing” or to engage “a process that places oneself at the edge of one’s self ... leaning and tipping toward the ‘others’ to whom you belong, or with whom you long to be – those who are ‘you’” (Rowe 17). This “longing” suggests a collaborative concept of being rooted in a certain ethics of active self-awareness and recalls Göransson’s deformation zone, where contamination is not only unavoidable but desirable. It is, in fact, our true state of being and creating.

On the one hand, this could mean moving toward Yu Xiuhua such that my use of English takes on certain aspects of Chinese syntax – “I limp out of the courtyard time”; “their butts wag back wag forth” – or it might mean that I resist the pressure of a US poetics to “improve” on the word-choice

“happily,” or it may look like an attempt to speak to the way Yu’s poem works on my own emotional landscape – “we are not women who have taught each other how to take pleasure.” On the other hand, this means maintaining a certain vigilance regarding my ability to understand Yu’s intentions – how might my concept of a pet inflect my translation of language around the dog in this poem? What might be the effect of my use of Chinese syntax in Yu’s writing but not my own? It is by practicing the playfulness Lugones proposes as a way to begin to move toward another’s “world” – an “openness to being a fool ... not being self-important, not taking norms as sacred and finding ambiguity” through creativity – that I resist the normative “rules” of translation and make evident many of the various belongings and “be longings” that hail Yu Xiuhua and myself (1987, 15-17). By refusing to leave behind all markers of difference or foreignness in my translations, refusing to sever Yu’s poems from their greater context in China, refusing to silence my own participation in the process of translation, by letting all these things remain at play, I enact Lugones’s concept of “curdling” (1994). This lack of clean separation, my resistance to purity, homogeneity, and the fragmentation of a complex whole into discrete parts, removes the possibility of keeping myself at a distance, where I or my reader can perceive and engage the poem arrogantly, and lends my translations the potential to disrupt the kinds of creative domination that can be the result of the translator’s invisibility (470).

I believe this extreme visibility aligns with the kind of critical awareness that Lugones and Rowe propose as necessary steps toward accountability and the disruption of sedimented lines of power, where we must keep in mind that our current ability to step outside of those lines of power is limited:

by rendering visible the conditions and effects – both oppressive and liberatory, and more often both – of belonging, the multiple sites and communities to which we belong or don’t belong become apparent. This awareness pushes us to consider the political, social, and spiritual effects of our choices to belong.

(Rowe 2005, 36)

Because it is often quite clear within the translations themselves to which communities I belong and at what point my ability to know Yu’s “worlds” is circumscribed, my own longing itself becomes apparent as an unrelieved tension. It is thus possible for someone reading my translations to have a sense of how I myself function within the work and how they the reader and I the translator must also work together to long towards Yu and her poetry.

This longing is not about what is “lost” in translation but about creating space. The goal is not to make the translation about me, but to create a textscape where the work Yu and I do becomes visible in its various entanglements and invites the reader to become entangled as well. In so doing, I attempt to do justice to Yu as a being with agency, with the power to affect me, and who I can neither speak for nor refuse to listen to.

Conclusion

At its most basic level of intervention, my approach is meant to realize and further encourage an ecology of translation or a diversity of approaches that does not strive for the “authoritative” best. Starting from there, I attempt to expose my own processes of translation as well as many of the contexts and power dynamics that complicate that process, including how Yu Xiuhua writes, is read, and is received as a poet in China and how I write, read, and receive her as a poet in the US. My translations may look intrusive, but I posit that this approach is able to make palpable my yearning toward intimacy, and how as I “surrender to the text,” it in turn works on me (Spivak 1993, 183). The failure in my work is an attempt to stay at play as Lugones defines it, and in doing so to move toward Yu Xiuhua’s worlds without assuming an intimacy with her or an understanding that I have not fully earned and could never completely arrive at. It is a means of making myself open to what is different both in Yu’s poetry and in myself.

I do not claim a mode of translation that is ethical in that it erases transnational power differentials, nor do I claim the best mode of translation. Instead, I have adopted a practice of vulnerability that attempts to work with the difference manifest in our various positionalities and the power dynamics embedded in that difference. As such, the tension between attending to Yu Xiuhua’s style and poetics and making visible my own layered engagement with her poetry is not relieved but presented as an integral part of the translation. This queering of the understanding of the translator as authoritative expert, a nonbiased and technically inclined craftsperson and an eraser of difference, might appear to undermine my authority and claim to the role of “good” translator. But I believe that by making the tension visible, I hold myself and my readers more accountable for the kinds of violence we inflict in our readings of Yu Xiuhua while at the same time making space for voices that do not easily fit into the most well-worn channels of cultural and literary exchange. The result is translations that sit with discomfort. It is a means of posing an ethical reading practice

where I make myself continuously vulnerable, and as such I hope it has the effect of encouraging vulnerability in the reader as well. By that I mean a desire not to judge, compare, or categorize either my translation work or Yu Xiuhua's poetry in any definitive way, but instead a desire to experience, to wonder, and to stay curious.

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