The Translation Memoir: An Introduction

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The usual meaning of the word memoir implies not only that it is about memory but that it is about one person's memories, that it tells a coherent, if personal and subjective, story about a person's life or a significant moment in that person's life. What happens when that usual meaning meets not only with the translator, whose job it is to occupy several subject positions, but with translation, which is always fragmented and splayed across more than one language, culture and time? Building on existing scholarship such as Paschalis Nikolaou and Maria-Venetia Kyritsi's collective volume Translating Selves: Experience and Identity Between Languages and Literatures, this special issue on the translation memoir is an exploration of translation from the perspective of the 'translating selves' and its experiential knowledge of translation practices as a way of thinking and engaging with life writing through the practice of translation (Galasso, Allen, and Bernofsky Citation2013; Karpinski Citation2012; Nikolaou and Kyritsi Citation2008). Our starting point for this special issue is the recent publication, in experimental memoir form, of translation narratives told from the perspective of translators and their practice (Kavita Bhanot and Tiang Citation2022; Kate Briggs Citation2017; Jennifer Croft Citation2019; Mireille Gansel [Citation2012] Citation2017; Corinna Gepner Citation2019; Madhu Kaza Citation2017; Gregory Rabassa Citation2005). Reading this genre of writing as a form of practice-based engagement with translation, we organised a conference in 2021 entitled 'The Translation Memoir/Translation as Memoir' which invited participants to explore the forms of authorial self-retrieval from within the dominant identity discourses of authorship, nationality, gender and the self. How do translation memoirs translate the self out of these dominant paradigms? How is translation itself reconfigured beyond existing 'instrumentalist' models of translation (Venuti Citation2019) and beyond the national and imperialist gaze which underpins what Sakai calls the 'regime of translation'? (Sakai Citation2017)

Each of the contributions to this volume examines this question of what happens to the story of one (subject, language, culture, text) as it unfolds into the multiplicity of translation. The consequences of this go far beyond the mathematical, even if the mathematics of 'interpretive potential' (always exponential, always leaving a remainder, often incalculable), as Erin Nickalls writes in her contribution, are part of the operation of what happens to the one in translation (one voice, one story, one text etc.). This is a co-contamination of a reflection on what it means to be a subject in translation, of what happens to a subject in translation, with another way of approaching a text through the winding pathways of its memories, voyages, potentials, its readings, rewritings, past, and future.

For this reason too, the translation memoirs studied in this volume are read as another way of getting into texts, of thinking about translation and even of doing research as creative-critical practices (Grass Citation2023; Robert Foley Citation2024). These are not static practices that take a text as an object for hermeneutic study, but active engagements wherein the work of translation gets entangled in the lives of translators and their works. As put by Grass in her work on translation memoir as autotheory, the translation memoir is also the enterprise of rewriting translation research from the perspective of practice, of finding a literary form which sidesteps current epistemic maps of translation and overcomes the dichotomy between theory and practice. As a figuration of the

translating ‘I’, the autotheoretical translation memoir makes it possible to inaugurate new subject positions of critical enunciation outside of more omniscient academic forms of writing (Grass, 10)

In this way, these practices also make visible for study many of the hidden avenues of translation that get passed over in silence or eclipsed in invisibility: the archive of hesitations, doubts, and errors, the personal and political negotiations that must happen in the record of translation subjects’ travels between languages while their eyes are trained on specific texts in specific contexts. But the translation memoir also voices an anxiety about translation that is ‘cultural, political and linguistic’ and seeks to re-assess and challenge the way that ‘the subject and their national belonging […] are articulated in language’ (Robert Foley Citation2024, 183). It can be read, especially in the context of feminist translation memoirs such as Noémie Grunenwald’s featured in this special issue, ‘as an articulation of a response, an anxiety of whose voice is getting heard, of who is translating whom and who is speaking for whom, from what location on the staircase’ (Robert Foley Citation2024, 183–184).

For it is a common maxim that the translator must disappear, become ‘invisible’, as per Lawrence Venuti’s well-known work, The Translator’s Invisibility (Venuti Citation2014 [1995]). This maxim has been repeatedly challenged in translation scholarship, and this volume seeks to respond to this challenge and further it to see what happens when that invisible, silent subject position gets written out in full, untangled and unwound, its memories shared and multiplied. In other words, to explore what happens when we approach the literary from the situated and experiential perspective of ‘the translator’s gaze’, which Madeleine Campbell and Ricarda Vidal define as ‘the intense looking of the translator, which includes the full immersion of the translator in the text, with eyes, ears, skin, nose, limbs and heart’ (Campbell and Vidal Citation2019). The meeting of life writing and translation sets in motion a wide range of avenues to explore as not only the presumption of textual unity is challenged, but of the proliferating subjective unities that go into the action of that text: its writing, its translating, its reception, and our ways of presuming and critiquing positionalities.

Indeed, it is perhaps an increased visibility of translation and language difference that has led to an explosion of translation memoir writing over the past decade or so. These have engaged creative-critical reflections on the affective, political and transcultural work of translating literary texts, questioning the literary conventions which separate reading and writing, writing and translation. As well as highlighting the forms of silenced cultural contribution of translation in cultures (we are thinking here particularly of Gansel [Citation2012] Citation2017), other more recent works have also traced the work of translation as cultural activism and decolonial practice. To reclaim translation as an intimate act through the translation memoir, then, is not to depoliticise it, but, on the contrary to acknowledge how translation is part of our collective and individual subjective experiences even as we are not translating. In her introduction to Kitchen Table Translation, a collective volume of memoirs and essays which, as its title suggests, explores the intersections between personal and political decolonial translation practices, Madhu Kaza recalls:

At some point I began to understand that my discomfort with translation was connected to the trauma of immigration. Something went quiet in me when I was brought to the U.S from India as a child. Although I assimilated and lost my accent, a vital part of me got stopped at the border. My inner life remained untranslated, its contours beyond what the receiving culture wanted to or could comprehend. […] What does it mean to be a translated self, I wondered? What does it mean to live with this untranslatability, this silence between languages within you? (Kaza Citation2017, 15)

The translation memoir, as we see it, is therefore also a rewriting of cultural representations of translation from the perspective of the translated, a re-calling and re-searching of lives and matters

marginalised in and as translation through the recentring of translation as cultural discourse and action. The translation memoir is also a form which lends itself to self-reflection on how translation is socially and historically experienced from the perspective of the colonised, the displaced and of those, including women, who are more often used to being the objects, rather than the subjects, of dominant literary discourses. By highlighting the fluidity of national and cultural identities (Jhumpa Lahiri Citation2016), then, translation memoirs investigate otherness from the perspective of 'translatedness' and its treatment in dominant cultures, interrogating the limits of national and gender narratives through the practice of rewriting the text and the self in other languages.

Perhaps another way to get into this discussion of translation memoir is to say a few words about the situation and relationship between the co-editors of this volume—both translators and creative writers in their own right, as well as academics. Delphine Grass and Lily Robert-Foley met in 2017 at a conference organised by Delphine at her home University in Lancaster devoted to creative-critical practices in translation, called The Space in Between: Thinking Translation in Creation. Delphine had extended an invitation to members of the international group of experimental translation, Outranspo (Ouvroir de translation potencial), to participate; Lily was one of those members, along with Irène Gayraud and Santiago Artozqui, who came to Lancaster to lead a workshop of collective homophonic translation (what Outranspo playfully calls a traduit partouze or 'translation orgy'). During Lily's stay in Lancaster, she also had the chance to spend a night a Delphine's house, and meet her family, be welcomed into her home. We walked along the river in Lancaster, chatting in hopscotched fragments while attempting to chase after Delphine's eldest daughter, Elsie, as she followed ducks along the bank. No small feat for a six-months-pregnant woman, as Delphine was at the time. From these memories, there began to be built, not only the beginnings of a collegial collaboration, but the beginnings of a friendship.

We kept up our collaboration over the course of the next five years, in spite of the social limitations of COVID and the birth of Lily's first child, and when Delphine invited Lily to co-organize an online symposium on the translation memoir towards the end of COVID confinements in June 2021, Lily gladly accepted. Many of the contributions in this volume arose from that symposium—and the ones that didn't gave rise to another volume, Unending Translation, devoted to creative-critical experiments in translation memoir writing. Finally, in 2022, when travel and in-person colloquia had started up again with more vigour, Delphine came to Montpellier to lead a workshop in a park with Zoë Skoulding, 'De materia medica: mode d'emploi', translating plants during a conference of which Lily was the lead organiser: What's the Matter in Translation?/Traduction et matérialités. At that time too, Delphine stayed for a few days at Lily's house and met her family, saw the circumstances of her living. From there, again, not only our working relationship but our friendship grew and strengthened. Lily and Delphine stayed up discussing how to handle noisy and difficult neighbours, and the challenges of living busy lives in a busy city with a young family. During her stay, Lily received news her demand for French citizenship had been finally approved, which they celebrated. They talked over the various multiplications, conversions and transformations of their lives and the discussion always seamlessly led back to wider issues of translation, subjectivity and belonging. Lily's oldest son Félix often plays with the set of colourful movable puzzle pieces Delphine brought as a gift, rearranging them to form different object likeness: a caterpillar, a house, a ladybug, a robot. As he does so, Lily always thinks of Delphine.

We include this brief, dual memoir on translation and friendship not only to break through the veneer of the presupposition of neutrality that too often leads to blindness rather than insight in scholarship—a presupposition that is challenged by all the contributions to this volume—but also

because these themes of feeling, friendship and embodiment in translation are part of what is at stake in the translation memoir as we are hoping to explore it here.

An excellent example of this is Jennifer Calleja's contribution to the volume, devoted to the themes of hospitality, kinship and complaint in Maureen Freely's Angry in Piraeus and Mireille Gansel's Translation as Transhumance, translated by Ros Schwartz. This reflection begins with the physical embodiment of the translator in time and space. This immediately broaches the political constraints placed on bodies and languages, specifically when they are trying to navigate between borders, and thus the question of hospitality. But hospitality is not just a question of passports and nation states, it is also a question of intimacy, of intimacy between translator and author, of a translator with her languages—not always easy and fluid relationships, as Calleja shows. All of the discussions bring to light the physical and affective embodiment of the translation in real, lived time—something, again, that has traditionally never been the purview of the translator's mode of discourse. Calleja goes on in her article to highlight the relationships, the kinships, that inhabit and animate translational choices and practice. Translators live kinships through their languages, the familial relationships and associations that structure them and give them memory, but also in their relationship to their texts and authors, which can take the form of intimate embodiment, almost like a possession. Again, this embodiment has traditionally been restrictive, dominating perhaps, and the translator's resistance, or complaint, is another way for the translator's body to break free and express itself—as difficult or even impossible as it may be for translators to complain—for example about the author they are translating, as Calleja shows.

This embodiment is often a roving one, and that is where the complexity and tension comes in. Ida Klitgård's article performs a deep dive into the life and work of literary translator, Anne Marie Bjerg, a Danish born translator of both Swedish and English language literature into Danish. This journey explores the fertile crossover zone between travel writing and translation. Klitgård's paper engages rigorously with theorists such as Damien Searls, Loredana Polezzi, Michael Cronin, Federico Italiano and Sherry Simon to set up the parallel and intersecting lines between the two activities of travel and translation—and the writing that has been done on them. But the heart of the paper is devoted to Bjerg's own writing on her life and her travels between geographies, languages and texts, and gives a fine example of a translation memoir little known outside of the Danish language.

Another aspect to embodiment and kinship can be found in the reflections on gender that can be found in most of the contributions to this volume—which are also all authored by women scholars. As Grass points out in her monograph Translation and Creative Critical Practice, which dedicates a chapter to 'the translation memoir as autotheory', translation memoirs are predominantly written by women (12), and there is a recurrent red thread of feminist perspectives taking place in these works. This is related to a critique of positionality, in terms of power relations, representation, but also methodology in translation theory and in theory more generally. Indeed, the translation memoir can be thought through in the context of the autotheoretical turn theorised by Lauren Fournier, specifically as they are related to 'histories of feminist practice' (Fournier Citation2021, 43; cited in Grass Citation2023, 18). One of these critiques has to do with whose voices get heard and why, and the fact that many bodies have been historically overdetermined as bodies—traditionally the bodies of women and people of colour—and therefore not as minds or voices, in a Cartesian metaphysical mind/body split. To insert the body and personal affective lived experiences into theory, as the examples in this volume do, is thus in some sense, to do the work of writing in a feminist mode. This feminist critique also relates to the challenge to singularity in the subject, of kinship and of thinking about translation—and authorship—as collective practice, something that translation already does as it calls into question the very foundations of authorship as original genius and proprietorship.

Erica Lima's contribution to this volume carries out both of these critiques through the lens of the affective responses and writings of the translators involved in a collective translation experience of a feminist text. Lima's article offers insight into the somatic and emotional experiences of student translators of the Brazilian version of the famous 1970s feminist, women's health book Our Bodies Ourselves. Drawing on student testimonies as a form of collective memoir, she shows how translator engagement can be both personal and political. This is accompanied by rich reflections on how translations of women's bodies and health must be tailored and adapted for different cultural and linguistic contexts, and also on the role that emotion plays in these translations. Crucial to this is an understanding of gender in translation and how it is deeply site specific and influenced by the positionality of translation, translator, publication and reading context. In the case of the Brazilian OBOS, this impacted both male and female translators and had an impact on how to bring visibility to women in Brazilian Portuguese but also to how language gets in the way of undoing both misogyny and harmful gender binaries in general. It is a compelling case study of the power and potential of collaborative translation and the way that translation memoir can come into play to underscore, reflect upon and transmit the process of these collaborations.

Yan Wu's piece on interpreters' memoirs broaches the question of the affective response of translators in their lived, embodied experiences from another angle. Looking at writings from three different interpreters, An-Chi Chen, Mariko Nagai and Valeria Luiselli, Wu examines the relationship of empathy that can be born out of an interpreter's experience translating for a subject experiencing strong feelings, and calls into question the presumed neutrality of the interpreter's station. Indeed, if the speaking subject being interpreted is showing and undergoing strong emotion, isn't it also the interpreter's job to relay and relate this emotion? Is effacing or attenuating emotion under the pretense of neutrality really the interpreter's mission? But beyond that, Wu's piece asks deeper questions about the empathy and affect shared between subjects in the translational relation: when one is charged with speaking the emotions of another in one's own tongue, is it possible, or even desirable to avoid or even separate feelings on the personal level in one's own body? What kinds of feelings belonging to the translator are called up in this relationship? Where is the dividing line between a speaking subject and their translator?

This relates to the excess and remainder that gets created in the translation process, which is also the creative playground of the translator. Erin Nickalls's paper, cited above, takes the translation memoir as a site to carry out a discussion of the incalculable mathematics of translation—giving way to what theorists before her have figured as the remnant, the remainder, or the residue. Michael Cronin, as she writes, has imagined translation as a fractal, a proliferating structure whereby the whole is reflected in each of its parts. These metaphors challenge a simple mathematics of translation which would represent it as a relationship of 1 = 1—an equation that is as naïve in the field of translation as it is in mathematics itself. Nickall's contribution goes on to read this challenge across an impressive array of heterolingual writers, translators and self-translators who encounter a multiplication of personal and political realities in the encounter with the infinite potentiality of texts in translation.

The poetic and social fallouts of translation and the lived experience of the translator are likewise explored in Elsa Court's contribution on an autofictional novel relating the story of the translation of Vladimir Nabokov's Pale Fire. The novel, Deux étés (Two Summers), written in French by Erik Orsenna, a Paris-born author of Cuban origin, tells of the encounter between Orsenna and Gilles Chahine—the real-life translator of Nabokov's work—and also of the other inhabitants of the island of Bréhat, an island off the coast of Brittany. As Court tells it in her reading of the novel, the work was so difficult to translate, and Chahine under such pressure from editors to produce the

translation in time for Nabokov to be considered for the Nobel prize, that Orsenna, along with the other residents of the island, all become involved in the translation. These interactions bring up a host of other questions relating to Nabokov's work and relationship to translation, as well as to the politics of language at stake in the passage between French and English, and the status of the French language globally, and also internally, within the Francophone landscape, which is not so unified and homogenous as French national linguistic politics would paint it. Court's piece is a reflection on what it means to translate an author who had such a dim, paternalistic view of translation—Nabokov is famous for maligning the losses and betrayals of translation, as Court analyses—and to tell that story in a playful, proliferating way that explores the twisting avenues of language politics, translation, and collaboration.

The question of the embodied situation of the translator as representative of the tension between the politics of language, globally, nationally and in terms of national oppression, notably of regional languages, as they play out in the intimate, lived experience of the translator, is also the subject of Lily Robert-Foley's case study on Erín Moure's Secession/Insecession. Secession/Insecession is a translation and echolation of Chus Pato's Secesión, written in Galician, a regional language of Spain famously repressed by Castilian policies. Moure's work is an experiment with form, another recurring theme in translation memoirs, as they play with disciplinary boundaries and experimental approaches to writing and theorising. In Moure's experiment, her 'faithful' translation is printed on odd numbered pages while facing it is her 'echolation', a rewriting of Pato's text from the perspective of the translator. Robert-Foley theorises this as a kind of modulation, and examines how Moure rewrites Pato's text as a record of her own work of translation, modulating author for translator, translation for writing, Galicia for her own home in Canada, Pato's lived experiences—both personal and political—for her own. Robert-Foley's experiment includes a final dimension which is that of her own playful practice-based fan fiction that connects her theoretical, academic reading of Moure to her own lived experience reading and living with Pato, Moure, and all the motley characters of Moure's translational, sometimes fictional, sometimes autotheoretical, always rigorously historicised and situated universe.

This question of where the subject is situated with regard to broader historical, political and linguistic boundaries and tensions is crucial to our project on the translation memoir. This is brought into high definition in Jhumpa Lahiri's many pieces of personal writing on translation and in her memoir, In Other Words. Benedetta Cutolo analyses Lahiri through the lens of her writing in terms of the complex subject position she occupies as a hybrid subject living between multiple identities and languages, both in terms of Lahiri's own lived experience and in terms of the reception of her work and Lahiri herself as a literary figure—a representation that is far from unproblematic. Lahiri, as a woman born in the United States to Indian parents from West Bengal, negotiates a complex set of contradictory, hybrid identities, both privileged in terms of class, geographical situation, language etc., but also having to contend with the various stereotypes and prejudices relating to the representations read onto her body by the literary world, as a woman of colour, treated on numerous occasions as a 'native informant' as Cutolo theorises with reference to the work of Gayatri Spivak. Lahiri also negotiates a complex relationship to her languages as she navigates between her native English, the Bengali of her parents, and her adopted third language, Italian, the language of her memoir—a choice that, as Cutolo shows in her readings of Lahiri's writing on translation—is not always easily received.

The final piece in the volume consists of a translated extract of one chapter from Noémie Grunenwald's translation memoir written in French, Sur les bouts de la langue: traduire en féministe/s, which Robert-Foley could not figure out how to translate, at first, and translation as well

as a translator's note at the end of this volume is a record of these sorts of doubts and hesitations that inhabit any translation. Indeed, Robert-Foley purposely chose a chapter that would present some interesting translation challenges, representative of the work as a whole, as they unfold in the work of translation. Likewise, as Grass puts it in her monograph, '[Grunenwald's] method of translation is also a method of self-intervention, a way of engineering different subject positions from the perspective of translation by reimagining writing, often thought of as a solitary practice, into a collective practice.' Grunenwald's book tells the story of her becoming-translator, and also the story of the works she translated—feminist works, and their passage into the French context (not always a simple one)—and serves as a creative-critical investigation into these pieces, but also into the ecology of actors involved in translation, telling the story of many discursive positions that often get eclipsed, conglomerated or subsumed into the presumed unity of text under the sole signature of an author.

Notes on contributors

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Delphine Grass is Senior Lecturer in French and Comparative Literature at Lancaster University (UK). Her most recent academic publications include Translation as Creative-Critical Practice (2023, Cambridge University Press) and two forthcoming collective volumes on translation and experimental life writing she is co-editing with Lily Robert-Foley. Her current academic interests are in translation, creative-criticism, multilingual literature and the environmental humanities. She is a poet and author of three bilingual poetry chapbooks: Feuilles Doubles (A Verse, 2017), La Traversée (Les Céphéides, 2013) and Oyster, Oyster! (Contre Histoire de l'Huitre) (Les Céphéides, 2013). She is also a poetry translator working from French and the Alsatian dialect.

Lily Robert-Foley

Lily Robert-Foley is Associate Professor in the English department at the University of Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3. She is the author of Experimental Translation: The Work of Translation in the Age of Algorithmic Production (forthcoming from Goldsmiths Press 2024). She is also the author of four books of poetry including m, a book of poetry-critique collage (Corrupt Press, 2013), graphe machine, a chapbook of visual poetry (Xerolage, 2013), Jiji, a novel in prose poems andconceptual writing (Omnia Vanitas Press, 2016), and The Duty to Presence, a book of poetic autotheory, forthcoming from the To collection of the Presses Universitaires de Rouen, along with its translation by Anne-Laure Tissut. She has translated two books of poetry, by Claude Ber and Sophie Loizeau, and she is a member of the Outranspo, an international group of experimental translators.

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