

Event 3: Pedagogies of Feminist Translation  
Thursday 6 February – Friday 7 February 2025

### Event report

The third event of the Feminist Translation Network (FTN) took place at The Queen's College, Oxford, and online, and was organised in collaboration with [The Queen's Translation Exchange](#) (QTE) and the [Stephen Spender Trust](#) (SST). Prior to the event, SST had run two creative translation workshops about feminist translation with Key Stage 5 students in Oxford. On Thursday evening we held a translation slam, while Friday morning was dedicated to a symposium. Our aim was to continue exploring the Network's overarching questions, e.g. what is feminist translation? Is it a matter of identity or practice? If it is a matter of practice, is it the process of translation or the resulting text which can be described as feminist? However, we also wanted to focus specifically on teaching, and in particular to ask why and how students might be introduced to 'feminist' literary translation practice in universities and schools.

#### Feminist translation slam

The translation slam enabled us to explore the FTN's overarching questions in a new way. A translation slam involves a pair of translators presenting and discussing their different versions of the same source text, giving insights into the creative thinking behind their work. Our translators were Michelle Geoffrion-Vinci, Ph.D. and Lawrence Schimel. A teacher and scholar of Spanish language and literature, Geoffrion-Vinci is the Thomas Roy and Lura Forrest Jones Professor of Languages and Literary Studies at Lafayette College, Pennsylvania. Her first published translation appeared with Fairleigh Dickinson University Press in 2014: an English translation and critical edition of Spanish-language poetry by nineteenth-century Galician writer Rosalía de Castro, which is described on the cover as 'A Feminist Translation'. Her second published translation, *The Angle of Horror: An English Translation and Critical Edition*, appeared in November, 2024, and was produced in collaboration with Professor Jessica A. Folkart of Virginia Tech University, Virginia. This critical translation of Cristina Fernández Cubas' 1990 short story collection *El ángulo del horror* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1990) was also published under the auspices of Fairleigh Dickinson UP. Schimel is an author and literary translator who translates into and out of Spanish and English, among other language combinations. His publications include Trifonia Melibea Obono's *La Bastarda*, the first novel by an Equatoguinean women writer in English translation, published by the Feminist Press and Modjaji Books. The slam was chaired by Gabriela Saldanha from the FTN Steering Group.

Geoffrion-Vinci and Schimel had decided between themselves on a text to translate but had not seen each other's translations in advance. The organisers did not prescribe any particular approach to translation – i.e. the translators were not explicitly asked to produce a 'feminist' translation – but the translators knew that the event was advertised as a 'feminist translation slam' and were aware of the questions being explored in the FTN project. Unlike a poetry slam, where poets give live performances and are typically judged by the audience or a panel, the slam was not set up to be competitive but rather as an event which might shed light on the FTN's questions through creative practice.

In the first part of the slam, Geoffrion-Vinci and Schimel discussed their choice of text, a chapter from Leticia Costas' YA novel *Verne y la vida secreta de las mujeres planta* [Verne and the Secret Life of the Plant Women] (2016). Costas' novel is a self-translation from the original Galician and has not yet been translated into English. It imagines author Jules Verne arriving in Vigo in 1884 to uncover the secrets of the mysterious 'plant women'; the chapter chosen for the slam begins with a meeting between three generations of plant women – Melisa, her daughter Azucena who is Guardian of the Forest, and Azucena's daughter Violeta – when two humans suddenly appear and Azucena charges at them bearing a sword. The translators explained that the book seemed suitable on account of its female-centred or feminist-orientated subject matter; according to Schimel, a feminist reworking of a Jules Verne-type adventure story is quite unusual in YA fiction. The translators had been in touch with Costas and her literary agent to obtain consent to use the text.

In the following part of the slam, Geoffrion-Vinci and Schimel read out their versions and discussed how they had approached the task. Both suggested that they had taken a 'feminist' approach to *Verne y la vida secreta de las mujeres planta*. For example, one of the striking features of Schimel's translation was his decision to reinstate Galician words and phrases (e.g. Geoffrion-Vinci: "My dear girl"; Schimel: "*Miña querida filla*,"; or Geoffrion-Vinci: "Violet, my daughter," said Azucena; Schimel: "Violeta, filla," Azucena said). In Schimel's view, giving visibility to less translated languages is a feminist strategy because it challenges power dynamics: feminism is about breaking down cis-heteropatriarchy and here the same is being done on a linguistic level.

As for Geoffrion-Vinci's rendering, it soon became clear that she was employing what she has described elsewhere as a '[feminist translation toolkit](#)'. Her toolkit draws on the work of academic practitioners such as Françoise Massardier-Kenney and Luise von Flotow, who experimented with linguistic strategies for making women – or the female, feminine, and feminist – visible through translation, and on Kwame Anthony Appiah's concept of 'thick translation', i.e. using annotations to show how a text is embedded in a distinct cultural context and to point out cultural differences. Geoffrion-Vinci had added nine endnotes to her chapter including extra information on the author and the nineteenth-century context and explaining certain translation choices; if the translation were to be published, Geoffrion-Vinci said, she would supplement the text with introductory material as well. Furthermore, at certain points in the text she intentionally emphasised 'feminist' themes such as female kinship, female agency and matriarchal positionality. Examples picked up in the discussion included the phrases 'On her shoulders she bore the weight of twin duties' (endnote 5: 'I deliberately selected language to suggest maternity here: 'to bear' as in to withstand something painful or difficult; and to bear as in to give birth to 'twin responsibilities'; Schimel: 'Upon her shoulders she bore a double responsibility') and 'These were the limbs of an Amazon warrior' (Schimel: 'those were the legs of a warrior').

## Symposium

The symposium consisted of two panels. The first panel, 'Teaching feminist translation', focused on post-18 education. It featured Peter Auger, Michelle Geoffrion-Vinci, Rosalind Harvey and Lawrence Schimel, and was chaired by Olga Castro, Co-Investigator on the FTN

project. The participants brought different professional experience to the discussion: Auger, Geoffrion-Vinci and Castro are academics working in the disciplines of English Literature, Modern Languages and Translation Studies respectively, while Harvey and Schimel are professional literary translators. Harvey holds teaching roles, e.g. as a mentor and as a tutor on a literary translation module at the University of Warwick, but most of her activities take place outside academia.

Castro began the discussion by pointing to the interest among university students in practice-based feminist translation projects, particularly at MA and PhD level. Although not involved themselves in teaching translation, Geoffrion-Vinci and Schimel appeared to agree that there should be a place for feminist translation on the curriculum. Geoffrion-Vinci had found feminist translation theory useful as a springboard for her translation practice: her translation of poetry by Rosalía de Castro and her recent co-translation of short stories by contemporary Spanish writer Cristina Fernández Cubas both employ 'feminist' strategies such as adding paratexts and, in the case of Castro's poetry, deliberately re-ordering the source material. (Though the Cubas project had been more problematic from the publishing standpoint: it had not been called a 'feminist translation' on the cover as Cubas rejects the label 'feminist', likening it to a 'corset' and as such overly restrictive as a description of her body of work). Schimel noted that the question of 'why teach feminist translation?' could be turned around to ask 'why are we still teaching cis-heteropatriarchy?', suggesting for instance that practitioners should be bolder about advocating for projects which reflect diversity. He mentioned his Midsummer Night's Press and its newest imprint Periscope, which publishes translations of poetry by women; he has described A Midsummer Night's Press previously as '[a very feminist press](#) [...] actively championing women's voices across all our genres'.

As for Auger, he had encountered resistance among his English Literature students to the concept of 'feminist' translation as many students had internalised the ideal of translator invisibility. Auger described his final-year undergraduate module on the art of literary translation, which aims to increase students' appreciation of translators' agency and creativity: while students had in the past been keen to read Emily Wilson's *Odyssey* as a lone translation of Homer's poem by a woman, Auger indicated that his teaching has come to place less emphasis on identity and instead encourage students to read translations with more awareness of their purposes and contextual factors such as the fluid boundaries between 'originals' and translations.

For Harvey, teaching feminist translation was 'very real-world focused'. A feminist approach to translation choices might be appropriate in some cases but not in others. She explained that translators have to work through different lenses: you need to have a range of lenses to do a good job, and if your text is a 'feminist' text then you need to respect that lens. But decisions about a translation approach vary according to context, for example whether you are translating for an academic or commercial press. She also remarked that some examples of 'feminist' translation practice could just be labelled 'good' practice; other strategies such as thick translation were a privilege not afforded to all translators. In the end, feminist translation in Harvey's view is primarily about the real-world application of feminist practices in the translation industry. Translation remains a precarious profession, and as most translators are women, this is a feminist issue. Feminist practices might include

initiatives such as [#TranslatorsOnTheCover](#); making students – as future colleagues – aware of the invisibility of translation work in terms of status and pay; and building a community of translators who can support each other in negotiating good contractual terms.

The second panel focused on ‘Feminist Translation in School’ and the panellists were Stacie Allan (SST Project Manager and Consultant; professional translator) and the two SST Associates who had run the school workshops on feminist translation, Sophie Lau and Beth Caygill. SST Associates are members of SST’s community of practice: a group of translators and multilingual writers trained and resourced by SST to design and deliver creative translation workshops for young people. The panel was chaired by Charlotte Ryland, Director of SST and QTE.

Allan began by giving an introduction to SST’s Creative Translation in the Classroom programme. She explained that SST is increasingly collaborating with academics to make research accessible to young people, and described the format of a creative translation workshop. Initially, SST had planned to trial one workshop on feminist translation with French A Level students but then decided to run an extra one with a Spanish A Level group. During the initial stages of preparation, they had met with colleagues from the FTN and also drawn on the Network’s research outputs, notably Event Report 1 and an article co-authored by Hilary Brown and Gabriela Saldanha on ‘Feminist Positionalities in Translation Studies’ (forthcoming 2025). Allan thereafter drew up a brief of what a feminist translation workshop for young people might look like. Caygill and Lau had then chosen a suitable piece of literature for the workshops and devised classroom activities. While Lau had free choice, the Spanish teacher at the participating school requested that Caygill use an A Level set text.

Lau and Caygill each gave an account of their workshop. Taking a short foreign-language text as the starting-point, students typically work through three core stages: Decode, Translate, Create. Lau had chosen the poem ‘La forme de ma forêt’ by contemporary writer Laura Vasquez which raises questions about the relationship between women, the body and nature. For the opening ‘Decode’ phase, Lau began with a discussion about what a ‘feminist’ text or ‘feminist’ language might look like before comparing the book covers of the same texts in French and English. After having translated the text in groups, students explored how they might render the gendered language found in Vasquez’s poems such as a ‘chienne’ [female dog]. When they reached the ‘Create’ stage, students composed poems about their own bodies inspired by the text, with many opting to write their poems in French. Caygill focused on Laura Esquivel’s novel *Como agua para chocolate*, an AS/A Level set text. Caygill explained that the novel is about the Mexican Revolution but is also a ‘very feminist narrative’ as the protagonist Tita has reclaimed control of the kitchen. In the ‘Decode’ phase, students identified feminist features of the text – e.g. by looking at the role of women as depicted on different front covers and focusing on the idiolect of Tita’s world – before moving on to translate a longer section and formulate creative responses.

At the end of the morning, Hilary Brown, Principal Investigator on the FTN project, emphasised the value of the collaboration between the FTN and SST/QTE. This joint venture was designed to engage young people in a wider community of practice, giving them the opportunity to explore what feminist literary translation means in practice and to generate new creative work. The school workshops in Oxford will form the basis of two sets of

classroom resources which will be made available in due course on the SST website. These resources will help teachers explore feminist translation with their students through creative translation activities and prepare students to enter the translation prizes run by SST/QTE, i.e. the [Stephen Spender Translation Prize](#) and the [Anthea Bell Prize for Young Translators](#).