

THE CHANGING PROFESSION

Liberation's Love Language: The Politics and Poetics of Queer Translation after Stonewall

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From circa 1969 to 1991, from the Stonewall uprising through the AIDS pandemic's first decade, gay and lesbian liberation activists trusted language's power to establish new social and political commonality.¹ Poetry, especially, was admired for its metaphoric translation of queerness, its ability to move LGBTQ+ desires and identities out of the closets of private, isolated experience into collective minoritarian language communities, even national public discourse. After Stonewall, American activist poetry also was translated literally to be used for consciousness-raising groups and grassroots mobilization. Take the example of a reader from West Germany who wrote to the lesbian feminist magazine *Amazon Quarterly* that after encountering Judy Grahn's now-classic poem "A Woman Is Talking to Death" (1974) in an earlier issue, she was so moved she translated it for rape survivors. "Finally some poetry to identify with!" she celebrated. Grahn's poem proved a valuable resource for her community since "[g]ay consciousness in Germany is not yet [developed] far enough to really produce its own culture" (Barbara).

Despite such early testimonials about queer poetry and translation's healing power and agency-producing potential, only recently have scholars begun to address "theory, practice, [and] activism" as "thoroughly entangled" in queer translation, particularly of academic, theoretic, and political texts (Baer and Kaindl 4). Such work, as Michela Baldo argues in relation to translating queer and feminist theory, is performative, an "act of producing and making new discourses [about LGBTQ+ experience] visible" and thus generating new forms of politicized subjectivity and community (43). Though overlooked, the translation of queer poetry historically has similarly connected theory, practice, and activism. Lyricism, common to most

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post-Stonewall liberationist verse and translations, is already a performative speech act.² Gay and lesbian liberationists appreciated this quality, though they did not name it as such. The historian Michael Bronski, once a member of the Boston Gay Liberation Front, recalls that poetry “defined and transfigured the moment” by “broker[ing] a seamless reality in which text, performance, and lived experience came together in a common language.” Activists believed it the most democratic art form. “Anyone could write a poem; the act itself was an expression of selfhood and freedom.” Consequently, poetry “became the *lingua franca* both of the movement and the larger gay community.” *Fag Rag*, the zine Bronski helped produce, spotlighted queer poetry, as did many other liberationist periodicals—including *Come Out!*, *Amazon Quarterly*, *The Furies*, and *Gay Sunshine*. Though English-language poems were featured most prominently, translations of foreign language poems also appeared in their pages. Both domestic and foreign poems were prized for channeling desire, intimacy, and sex in revolutionary ways, by moving these dimensions of queer existence from personal and private idioms into public and political discourse. That flow was believed to transform individuals’ self-identifications as well as what activists dubbed “sexism,” the sociopolitical system of “male supremacy and heterosexual chauvinism” underlying various, interrelated oppressions—homophobia, patriarchy, gender conformity, heteronormativity, white supremacy, and imperialism (Young 7). Poetry and poetic translation constituted the politicized love language of gay and lesbian liberation.

Even before Stonewall, foreign predecessors—from ancient lyricists like Catullus and Sappho to modern ones like Arthur Rimbaud, Constantine Cavafy, and Federico García Lorca—provided American writers linguistic tools for constructing LGBTQ+ identities and histories.³ As gay and lesbian liberation emerged, activists continued to turn to other literary traditions to prove sexual and gender nonconformity’s ubiquity. As a reviewer wrote about *In Praise of Boys: Moorish Poems from Al-Andalus* (1975), “these poems remind us as

gays that there are cross-cultural heritages from which we can draw delight, inspiration, and strength” (Bush). Winston Leyland, the publisher of *Gay Sunshine*, where this review appeared, was particularly invested in such translation efforts. He devoted two special issues of his magazine to Latin American homosexual counterculture and literature, and he regularly featured translations of poems with themes of gay sex and love by authors like Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine (France), Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Kuzmin (Russia), Yukio Mishima and Mutsuo Takahashi (Japan), António Botto (Portugal), and Dinos Christanopoulos (Greece).⁴ That publishing mission resonated with other liberationists’ connection of poetic translation to a politics of LGBTQ+ visibility and representation. In 1974, the educational activist Rictor Norton identified poetic and other literary translation as a component of his pioneering vision for a new field, gay and lesbian studies. Translation could construct a worldwide tradition of sex positivity, a means both of counteracting shame and internalized homophobia and of disproving “our dubious assumption that universal truth is exclusively heterosexual” (Norton 676). Norton judged “translators who make erotic innuendo appear to be spiritual admiration” to be as bad as scholars and instructors who erased queerness from writers’ biographies. Both deployed kinds of “censorship” reproducing a heteronormative sociopolitical order (676). To be politically effective, queer poetic translation needed to counteract such erasures.

The Beat generation poet Harold Norse trailblazed such a restoration of homoerotic content in a two-decades-long translation project. In “On Translations of Catullus” (1955), an *ars poetica* dating from the start of his endeavor, he took to task “the pedagogues” who “can’t take you [Catullus] straight”—straight in the sense of directly rendered—without masking the ancient Roman’s same-sex relations (Norse 76). Norse neither hides nor spiritualizes his subject’s same-sex desires, as we see in the portions of “Catullus for Real (Translations)” included in his liberation-era collection *Carnivorous Saint* (77–81). His 1976 rendering of poem 16 opens:

I'll fuck and rim you both and suck your cocks
 faggot Aurelius and fairy Furius
 who believe I am immodest because of my verses
 which, admittedly, are quite voluptuous.

(77)

Compare that with Charles Martin's politically liberal rather than liberationist version, originally published a few years later, in 1979:

I'll fuck the pair of you as you prefer it,
 oral Aurelius, anal Furius,
 who read my verses but misread their author:
 you think that *I'm* effeminate since *they* are!

(Catullus 19)

Norse does not merely use vulgar diction. He undercuts sexism. Despite using the colloquial *fuck*, Martin invokes oral and anal sex clinically, ascribing to each of Catullus's addressees fixed preferences for either act. Worse, his Catullus uses sex to police heteronormative and homophobic gender binaries, to challenge others' perceptions of the poet-narrator's effeminacy. Sex is not a weapon in Norse's "immodest" and "voluptuous" translation. Instead, he closes the gap between life and art to render sex an intimate pedagogy. He thus updates the function of pederasty in Catullus's day to suture divisions wrought by modern butch gays' oppression of more effeminate men. Like the self-described "effeminate" consciousness-raising groups the Flaming Faggots and the Radical Fairies, Norse reappropriates the epithets *faggot* and *fairy*. He does so not to denigrate some queer men's gender nonconformity but instead to mark his Catullus's erotic appreciation of other body types, other gender expressions, and a versatile range of same-sex sexual acts. At the time, claiming such diverse tastes was considered radical.

Other translators, spurred by the psychopathologization and criminalization of homosexuality and gender nonconformity, linked sex and eroticism to critiques of the psychiatric-prison complex. Although the French writer Jean Genet distanced himself from gay liberation, his work provided the material for some American translators' activist efforts.⁵ Paul Mariah's poem "My Mother Genet"

(ca. 1964), written while Mariah was imprisoned for same-sex activities, praises Genet for giving incarcerated queer writers a language for "our hurt." But, Mariah adds, "It is for my generation / To build you a world of freedom / And to acknowledge those indented footsteps." As part of that world-building effort, he presented *The Complete Poems of Jean Genet* (1981) as the final issue of his magazine, *ManRoot*. The volume, consisting of Mariah's and others' translations, is prefaced with "Un chant d'amour" ("A Song of Love") as rendered by the New York School poet Frank O'Hara (d. 1966). This pre-Stonewall version conveys the homosexual intimacies of both Genet's long poem and its 1950 film adaptation, the latter banned as obscene by US authorities upon its release. O'Hara opens with the narrator, a prisoner, attempting to fellate his love object: "If your sex under my breath is still covered with frost / Dawn will loose it from that fragile dress" (Genet, *Complete* 4). Mariah's version, in the same issue of *ManRoot*, ups the sexual and amorous ante: "Under my breath still if your cock is of frost / Aurora loosens it from this fragile robe" (97). Instead of being dispelled by the rising sun, the partner's frigidity vanishes with a Greek goddess's proximity, perhaps the narrator in classical drag. Mixing a literal rendering of Genet's *aurore* and a vulgar, colloquial version of *ton sexe*, Mariah's translation, though more awkward than O'Hara's, embodies the lovers while heroically mythologizing their relationship (96). Such romanticization, infused with explicit desire, is not spiritualization. It strategically challenges the state's construction of gay love and sex as deviant and sinful criminal behavior.

Queer social justice projects can still benefit from the legacy of liberationist poetry and poetic translation. The lesbian feminist poet Judy Grahn exemplifies this possibility. In the early 1980s, her student and Jungian analyst Betty De Shong Meador translated the Sumerian priestess Enheduanna's poems about the ancient goddess Inanna. The poem-cycle about finding one's powers "constitutes a great psychological drama with profound meanings for modern people" (Grahn, *Queen* 163). Grahn adapted Meador's translations,

combining them with her own verse, to create *The Queen of Swords* (1987), a verse-play set in a lesbian bar. Her play culturally translates the myth of Inanna's descent into the underworld. The adaptation climaxes, politically, when Helen, Grahn's version of the goddess, becomes conscious of her own divinity after recovering a traumatic memory. She recalls having beaten back a motorcycle gang's sexual and physical violence by invoking her foremothers, unknown women, goddesses, even high school friends, "till I had chanted every / woman's name I knew" (89). Helen opens her eyes to find that "I stood in the asphalt field / alone— / and not at all alone" (90). This dramatic and poetic summoning of a virtual community of woman-identified women recalls the performative healing and consciousness-forming power other readers had long found in Grahn's work, as in the West German reader's letter to *Amazon Quarterly* mentioned earlier. Revisiting the Sumerian poems in a recent work, Grahn explains the appeal of Meador's translations and this myth as rooted in their representations of sexual autonomy and woman-centered community. "Inanna's love poetry celebrates her vulva, source of sacred power. 'I rule with cunt power,' she says, 'I see with cunt eyes'" (*Eruptions* 13). For over four decades, Grahn has adopted that perspective in her engagements with and her adaptative retranslations of the myth. To translate the ancient story into new forms usable by modern readers, she substitutes the suspect "scholar's eyes" with "my poet's interpretations" (4, 3), which we, admiringly, could call her own "cunt eyes."

"Translating the language of sex or pleasure . . . is not a neutral affair but a political act, with important rhetorical and ideological implications, registering the translator's attitude toward existing conceptualizations of gender/sexual identities, human sexual behavior(s), and moral norms," argues the critic José Santaemilia (12). Translation studies and queer studies should further explore how activist-poets, in different geopolitical contexts, language-communities, and historical moments have imagined language's power and political effectiveness, its relationships to consciousness, selfhood,

alterity, and world-building. We should treat erotic verse as a democratic literary form and study popular verse and agitprop alongside the "highest" literary poems. We must work archaeologically, using digital and physical archives to rediscover traces of queer linguistic sensibility and consciousness lost among activist periodicals and ephemera. Let's not shy away from intentionality, for conscious motivation drives both political movements and activists' writing and translation practices. And we must act with urgency to make visible these lessons of radical poets and translators, past and present. Women's and LGBTQ+ rights are increasingly under attack worldwide, and our lives are ever more precarious. Poetry and translation might not solve our immediate threats. Yet, to trope Audre Lorde, neither poetry nor translation is a luxury. Together, they will continue to serve us as tools for dismantling the master's house and building the solidary consciousness of lovers who survive and fight in this inhospitable, dying world.

NOTES

1. Although the phrase "gay and lesbian liberation" invisibilizes transgenderism and bisexuality, I follow historians' convention of referring to this moment as activists had. See Stein 5–9.
2. On lyric's performative nature, see Culler 125–31.
3. On pre-Stonewall queer poetic translation practices, see Keenaghan, "Jack Spicer's Pricks and Cocksuckers."
4. For selected English-language poems and translations from *Gay Sunshine* and its book imprint, see Leyland 593–698. On the AIDS-era politics of Rick Lipinski's translations of Luis Cernuda, published by Gay Sunshine Press as *The Young Sailor and Other Poems* (1986), see Keenaghan, "Recognizing Forbidden Pleasures."
5. Genet once admitted he did not believe his own queerness was informed by a "homosexual politics" since he first experienced same-sex attractions while "still a child," at "the age of thirteen or fourteen" (Interview 259).

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