

# Writing Aloud: Translation in Three Dimensions

Beverley Curran

Living in three dimensions, and perhaps writing in three dimensions is my quest and daily challenge.

-Nicole Brossard

Nicole Brossard is one of Quebec's most important literary figures, and a crucial feminist writer and theorist. Since 1965, when she published her first volume of poetry, *Aube a la saison*, and co-founded the influential journal, *La Barre du Jour*, Brossard has been prolific, publishing more than 30 volumes of writing, and working in every genre from poetry to film. Her work has been translated extensively and with particular enthusiasm by women, but until this year has been unavailable in Japanese translation. As a result, Brossard is virtually unknown in Japan. In a collaborative effort to introduce her work to Japanese readers, we decided to translate Brossard's *Journal intime* (1984)<sup>1)</sup> This transgressive diary, written in the wake of Brossard's novel, *Picture theory* (1982), alludes to and examines some of the key issues of that earlier complex work, but in a more accessible way. Translator and critic Barbara Godard calls the diary less a record of intimate details of a personal life than a representation of an important decade in Quebec literary and feminist history.<sup>2)</sup> As the autobiography of a generation of writers, then, *Journal intime* seemed an ideal work to provide a context for Brossard's writing project.

In 1983, *Journal intime* was commissioned by the French-language national radio corporation, Radio Canada, for a series of broadcasts. As such, it was listened to before it was published and read in print; it was never a private document. The project proved frustrating for Brossard. She was resistant to the genre of the diary, and in its pages expressed her dissatisfaction: "Le journal ne me suffit pas [...] C'est une forme d'écriture qui exige trop de moi et pas assez de ce que je suis" (74) / The journal does not satisfy me [...] It is a form of writing that demands too much of me and not enough of what I am.<sup>3)</sup> Elsewhere she wonders, "Que peut-on dire dans un journal qu'on ne le pourrait ailleurs? [...] Qu'y a-t-il de si intime dans un journal qui ne saurait être partagé, entame par la lecture de quelqu'un d'autre?" (17) / What can be said in the diary that cannot be said elsewhere? [...] What is so intimate in a journal that it cannot be broached or broken by someone else's reading?". In the process of writing her 'diary', Brossard's preference for poetry over prose, and for the erotic over the

personal, dislocates the genre from the clutches of chronology and its preoccupation with 'me' by re-writing the world "autour d'emoi" (around excitement) instead of "autour de moi" (around me). Repetition allows her to assume a variety of writing "postures," from which to engage reality in debate; as she says in a 1982 interview, "You have to see yourself, or reproduce yourself in many guises to be able to argue with reality" (145). Brossard plays with a reader's expectations by playing with the ear, making it imperative that the reader, especially the translator, listen carefully and read aloud to hear the connections being made through auditory association rather than argument.

The process of translation fascinates Brossard<sup>4)</sup> "as an act of passage [...] from one language to another, but also, for me [...] as passing from reality to fiction, or from fiction to reality," and as a process which engages a woman as both a reader and a writer, negotiating meaning in an open space of ontological enquiry:

La question qui se pose en traduction comme en écriture est celle du choix. Quel signifiant privilégier, élire pour animer en surface les multiples significés qui s'agitent invisibles et efficaces dans le volume de la conscience? (23)/ The question posed in translation is one of choice. Which signifier should be chosen which will stir up the multiple meanings that act invisibly and efficiently on the consciousness?

As "an explorer in language" (Huggan & Seimerling 96), Brossard finds translation interrogates the links between language and identity, as well: "Être traduite, c'est être enquêtée non pas seulement dans ce que l'on croit être mais dans sa façon même de penser dans une langue, de même que dans la façon dont nous sommes pensées par une langue. C'est avoir à s'interroger sur cette autre que je pourrais être si je pensais en anglais, en italien ou en toute autre langue [...] Comment le mot kimono, s'il m'eût été quotidien, eût-il modifié ma façon de séduire et de travailler?" (22-3) / To be translated is to be questioned not only in what you believe exists but also in the very way you think in a language, as well as how. This is to ask oneself, how would I be if I thought in English, in Italian, or in some totally different language [...] how the work 'kimono' if it had been part of my daily life would have modified my method of seducing or working? Brossard is especially interested in the positive potential of lapses in translation because "it is in the aura of words that feminist consciousness and lesbian emotion can be found [...], that which we like to express does not enter into the spirit of 'official' languages that we speak" (*Lesbia* 25). The writer's purposefully political misuse of grammar and linguistic structures forces new meanings from the symbolic systems that pre-program our thoughts and words. Throughout the process of translating Brossard, we had to view each choice we made as a risk and a commitment, just as Brossard reminds us in *L'Amer (These Our Mothers)*, "To write I am a woman is full of consequences" (23).

Translating *Journal intime* into a language as 'totally different' as Japanese was a challenging

and inspiring project which engaged languages and writing systems and multiple dimensions of meaning within the text, within our active reading, in our re-writing in translation, and in our lives. The diary is a brief work consisting of five chapters. Each chapter begins with a series of “entries,” followed by a posture, and then a poem, both of which double back as Brossard re-reads her entries and rewrites them by ear, exploring their possibilities anew. Brossard also reshapes the temporal framework that typically structures a diary, disrupting the insistence on the present in the daily entry and instead, dispersing time, to give the diary an impression of an archipelago of entries which superimpose time, place, and the process of writing. It is not temporal passage but the performance of reading that motivates the diary. Code switching and intertextual references are frequent throughout the text. Echoes of other work by Brossard and that of other women writers resound throughout and certain words behave like *kanji*, their form fully charged with meaning. It was important that these words form a resonating network and that the reader might recognize them as distinct Brossardian vocabulary. In this paper, I would like to describe some of the challenges of translating a writer like Brossard whose writing performs its meaning in both erotic and cerebral registers; and how we, as readers immersed in the text, swam with the words.

Because *Journal intime* is a lesbian diary, one of our earliest considerations was how to make the translation explicitly gendered and women-centred. In Japanese, a gender distinction can be made in the first-person singular pronoun, so we chose the colloquial *atashi*, used more or less exclusively by female speakers, instead of the usual *watashi* or *watakushi*. In cases of the second person, and there are many since this diary is intimately engaged with a woman reader, we used 貴女/*anata*, a special reading of the *kanji* for ‘noble or precious’ and ‘woman’, to address a feminine ‘you’. In Japanese, the second person is generally avoided; that is, instead of saying ‘you’, Japanese speakers prefer to use names or titles. The feminine ‘you’ can be seen but not heard, since pronunciation is not affected by the distinctive form, but this usage draws a reader’s attention to the intimate and loving relationships between women. Certainly a woman reading is intended to be included in the intimacy of that address; as Godard points out in “A Translator’s Diary,” it matters to Brossard “that it is a woman (re)reading the fiction” (75) of this woman writer. Thus the use of an unambiguously female second-person constitutes “a transgressive act of linguistic address to another woman, which in turn invites yet another woman-centred address” (Gould 239).

In a similar way, we chose to let words “call each other up, evoke each other, provoke each other, nudge each other into utterance” (Marlatt MMT 45) in our translation, using association to attract us to the choice of a particular word. In many cases, it was important to read aloud, listening to a word or phrase to know what it meant. For example, in the posture at the end of the first chapter, there is a profusion of ‘o’ s which is evocative and erotic: the appearance of the vowel in such words as ‘nom’ (name), ‘jour’ (day), ‘bouche’ (mouth), and ‘kimono’ draws us to these words, and

draws these words together. Brossard adds the vowel to the verb ‘commencer’ (to begin); ‘ocommencer’ seems to evoke a woman’s body’s creative labour, “a mouth working its own inarticulate urge, opening deep” (Marlatt AH 124). Brossard further foregrounds the ‘o’ by isolating it; standing alone within the posture, ‘o’ expresses both symbolic and essential somatic desire. The repetition of the sound and the image of the letter attract the reader to the mouth. “The eroticization of the oral cavity” (Benstock 35) interrupts the meaning of the text and the reader’s concentration, setting both adrift. In translating this passage, we drifted from ‘o’ to ‘aa’, keeping the erotic echoes in Japanese by associating the vowel sound with the *あたしたち/atashtachi* of two women attracted to each other. The usual verb for ‘begin’ in Japanese is *始める/hajimeru*, so we added ‘aa’ to that verb and added a character so that ‘opening’ was inscribed within the *kanji* of ‘to begin’. In this case, the ability to mix characters and phonetic writing in Japanese seemed to augment the French. The repetition of a character in different combinations provided visual collations alongside the auditory echoes resonating through the text. At other times, the entrenched meaning of a *kanji* made it necessary to find another. For example, *結末/ketsumatsu* means ‘outcome’ or ‘conclusion’ and would seem an appropriate translation of ‘une issue’, which also means ‘exit’ or ‘outcome’. However, the character *末* signifies an ending or termination, whereas Brossard clearly is seeking a ‘way out’ through an opening rather than closure. Thus our search for a character that did not suggest closure led us to *出口/deguchi* which means ‘exit’ but consists of two *kanji* which mean ‘go out’ and ‘mouth’.

Alice P. Parker states, in *Liminal Visions of Nicole Brossard*, that the “seductive aspect of writing and translation derives in part from the affective qualities of words and texts, but more importantly from what they conceal” (213):

When the translator invests her own desire in the process, [...] “she has a burning desire to ask the work personal questions [*Lesbia* 25]. Desire drives both writer and translator to abandon delicacy and propriety, to reveal what is hidden between the lines, to transgress conventions in an effort to find a satisfying match. This is where we encounter the lapse, in manners, in taste, in style. (213)

Brossard uses a bold range of register in her writing. Curves, angles, and tilted perspectives inform her reader that her intentions are not straight. In other words, Brossard is not reticent about lesbian love: mouths and tongues merge; there is sweat, hair, gushing wetness, and the grimaces of passion. In Japan, noises made by a woman’s body can be so troubling they need a disguise. Go into a women’s toilet in a department store or hotel and you will often find a device called an *音姫/otohime*: if you press the button, it will simulate the roar of a flushing toilet to camouflage the sounds the body makes. My Japanese colleague resisted the explicit language of sexual activity in *Journal intime*, and preferred to deflect the full-frontal effect of Brossard’s words in negotiating the transla-

tion. As a result, the translation's sexual register may be rather subdued in spite of its directness, while the suggestiveness of erotic language is constantly in play.

In *Gender in Translation*, Sherry Simon points out that code switching can be “a way of inscribing multiplicity in a text governed by universalizing modes of representation” (35). In *Journal intime*, Brossard code switches, mainly between French and English, and plays with fonts and styles. Translating this textured diary into Japanese, we added a further dimension by taking advantage of a writing system which uses three distinctive scripts: (1) *kanji*, or Chinese characters, which combine form, sound, and meaning; and two syllabic scripts, (2) *hiragana*, for the phonetic representation of native Japanese words, and to write grammatical elements, such as inflectional verb endings; and (3) *katakana*, the phonetic representation for words of foreign origin, mostly Western loanwords. The roman alphabet can be used in combination with these three scripts, as well, too. All were used in translating *Journal intime*, but not always with the same emphasis. For example, the Japanese phrase, *mono no aware*, appears in an early entry in the first chapter; in Brossard's text, it is italicized as a foreign word and its meaning explained as “the moving intimacy of things” (17). The term is a familiar one to Japanese readers, though it might be understood in more prosaic terms as appreciating the beauty of nature, but to keep its significance, we left it untranslated: it does not appear in *kanji*, but remains in italicized letters. ‘Kimono’ is given similar treatment to privilege its position in the imagination of the writer who considers a woman's ability to project herself through revised signs a crucial survival tactic (Parker 134). At the same time that ‘kimono’ critically evokes the rigid constraint of a garment that was part of a Japanese woman's daily life, and an exotic ‘Oriental’ costume that fascinates the Western male gaze, the kimono becomes the garb of a woman writer, sitting in a donut shop in Tokyo at 5 a.m., writing:

Je suis une Geisha assise devant son ordinateur, tenant dans ma main gauche un beigne au miel et dans ma droite un stylo que je tiens à la verticale pour, en quelques signes, tracer la sensation de vertige que j'ai éprouvée hier matin du haut de Tokyo Tower (24)/ I am a Geisha sitting in front of her computer, holding in my left hand a honey doughnut and in my right a pen that I hold vertically to somehow trace the sensation of vertigo that I experienced yesterday at the top of Tokyo Tower.<sup>6)</sup>

The image of the kimono is translated, but the appearance of the word ‘kimono’ on the page remains a site of surprise for the reader, interrupting the habitual patterns of reading, by remaining in romaji, untranslated.

Compounding and derivation are the processes most often used in Japanese to form new words. Since *kanji* are easily combined to generate new words, Brossard's creation of new vocabulary is a pleasurable aspect of translating her work into Japanese. Meanings accrue to a word and drift in a

number of directions. Such open and creative suggestiveness excites the mind, imagination, and the emotions of a reader, and allows the translator to engage actively in language, to make her own choices. There are words like 'cruelirecueil' which evoke such words as *crue* (flood), *cruel* (cruel), *lire* (read), *recueil* (collection), and *ecueil* (danger). We combined four *kanji*: 障害物読む /*shougai*butsuyomu, or reading as an obstacle course; 障害/*shougai* refers to impediments to speech, as well. Other times, derivation is based on aural association and can drastically change meaning. The '[quatre] cents pages' / [four]hundred pages in a diary entry echoes in 'sans pages' / without pages. Although the sound play was between French phrases, we were able to produce a similar one in Japanese, and extend the play visually. Using the characters 百 (hundred) and 白 (white) there was slippage in the translation, as 'without pages' became 'blank pages', but these oblique echoes somehow seemed to tilt the translation towards Brossard rather than away from her. As she has remarked, to mislead is the function of a text:

The text misleads sense, that is, text is "a trickster" or, if you prefer, it "seduces by an engaging appearance of reality." The more a text tricks the sense of what we have learned by heart in our lives, the more it seduces, captivates, the more it brings us closer to writing. (*Aerial Letter*, 151)

Brossard's writing defies the view of translation which understands the task as that of "a servant, an invisible hand mechanically turning the word of one language into another" (Godard "TFD" 91). Her feminist writing demands feminist translation strategies such as the supplementing and commentary.

In her discussion of the problematic translations of the French feminists, Simon noticed that in their reluctance "to draw attention to their task, [...]to encumber their translations with notes or other visible signs of "interference" with the text," the translators reproduced "conventional attitudes toward language transfer" (106). In choosing fluency over disruption, and transparency over obscurity, they created "a clearly false assumption of easy access to the text" (107). Brossard, who has been criticized for the difficulty of her texts, has said that she "enjoys making space in language for my differences" (Huggan & Siemerling, 98), and if her writing is "full of rupture," she explains, "it is [...] my way of creating new spaces for new meaning which could not appear in a linear way" (Williamson, 69). Since our translation was to introduce the fiction and theory of Brossard to Japanese readers, it included a preface, critical essay, and annotations: there were 98 endnotes in a translation of the 94-page book. The notes expanded numerous intertextual references to writers that have inspired Brossard, such as Djuna Barnes or Clarice Lispector, and to other works by Brossard herself. They also focussed on the importance of such images as 'une femme en train d'ecrire,' a woman writing, and such key terms as the moving metaphors of 'spiral', 'vertigo', or

'hologramme' and how new meanings emerge in the recycling of these terms and images in different contexts, "collecting new energy and affect" (Parker 46). And as we extended our translation into notes, essay, and preface, the cerebral excitement of the process deepened and, sitting at our writing tables, we recognized our own inclusion in the intertextual spiral of *Journal intime*.

"The question posed in translation is one of choice," says Brossard, and in that awareness of alternatives forms the suggestive dimensions of and for a new way to live. As readers participating in conversations with writers, simultaneously translating their texts and creating our own, we must, in the process of living, keep asking ourselves, "Reality has a meaning, but which one?" and choose how we read ourselves into the page ahead.

#### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Aichi Shukutoku University for the support of the publication of our Japanese translation of Nicole Brossard's *Journal intime*. I would also like to thank the university for its support of my research into media translation, such as radio and video "translations" of Canadian literature. A version of this paper will be presented at the KATHA UTSAV 2000 International Conference on Translation in New Delhi, India, in December, 2000.

#### Notes

- 1) This was not the first translation project undertaken with my colleague, Mitoko Hirabayashi. In 1992, a Japanese translation of Margaret Atwood's *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (Tokyo: Kokubunsha) in collaboration with Mitoko Hirabayashi and Sachiko Kuno was published.
- 2) From correspondence dating 25 November 1997.
- 3) *Journal intime* has yet to be translated into English, except for excerpts. English translations of *Journal intime* in this paper are my own.
- 4) In Brossard's last three novels, *Le desert mauve* (1987), *Baroque d'aube* (1995), and the bilingual *Elle serait la première phrase de mon prochain roman / She Would be the First Sentence of My Next Novel* (1998) with English translation by Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, the translator is inscribed within the work, and the process of translation used as a subversive narrative strategy.
- 5) From an interview which took place on April 23, 1996, in Montreal.
- 6) This description inspired a *kiri-e*, or paper cutting, by French artist Beatrice Coron, which was used as the cover illustration for the Japanese translation.
- 7) This is the question posed by Melanie in Brossard's novel *Le desert mauve*, which consists of a book and its translation (from French to French).

#### Works Cited

Benstock, Shari. *Textualizing the Feminine: On the Limits of Genre*. Norman, London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

- Brossard, Nicole. *Baroque d'aube*. Montreal: Hexagone, 1995. *Baroque at Dawn*. Trans. Patricia Claxton. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1997.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Elle serait la première phrase de mon prochain roman / She Would be the First Sentence of My Next Novel*. Trans. Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood. Toronto: The Mercury Press, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Journal intime: ou Voilà donc un manuscrit*. Montreal: Les Herbes Rouges, 1984. *resubian nikki*. Trans. Mitoko Hirabayashi and Beverley Curran. Tokyo: Kokubunsha, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *La Lettre aérienne*. Montreal: les éditions du remue-ménage, 1985. *The Aerial Letter*. Trans. Marlene Wildeman. Toronto: The Women's Press, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *L'Amère ou Le chapitre effrite*. Montreal: les Quinze, 1977. *These Our Mothers or: The Disintegrating Chapter*. Trans. Barbara Godard.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Le désert mauve*. Montreal: l'Hexagone, 1987. *Mauve Desert*. Trans. Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Les Défis de la traduction." *Lesbia* 101 (January 1992): 24-5.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Picture theory*. Montreal: Nouvelle Optique, 1982. Second Ed. Montreal: l'Hexagone, 1989. *Picture Theory*. Trans. Barbara Godard. Montreal: Guernica, 1991.
- Godard, Barbara. "Theorizing Feminist Discourse/Translation." *Translation, History, & Culture*. Eds. Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevre. London: Cassell, 1990. 87-96.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Translator's Diary." *Culture in Transit: Translation and the Changing Identities of Quebec Literature*. Ed. Sherry Simon. Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1995. 69-82.
- Gould, Karen. *Writing in the Feminine: Feminism and Experimental Writing in Quebec*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990.
- Huggan, Graham & Winfried Siemerling. "US/Canadian Writers' Perspectives on the Multiculturalism Debate: A Round-Table Discussion at Harvard University." *Canadian Literature* 164 (Spring 2000): 82-111.
- Marlatt, Daphne. *Ana Historic*. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Musing with mothertongue." In *Touch to My Tongue*. Edmonton: Longspoon Press, 1984. 45-49.
- Parker, Alice P. *Liminal Visions of Nicole Brossard*. New York: Peter Lang, 1998.
- Simon, Sherry. *Gender in Translation: Cultural identity and the politics of transmission*. London, New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Williamson, Janice. *Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993.