

Translating Women's Silences¹

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Anita Desai's latest story collection, *The Artist of Disappearance*, includes a novella titled "Translator, Translated." In it, a naïve young woman begs a former classmate, who now runs a publishing house, to give her the chance to render a beloved Odia² author into English: "She is such a great writer and no one here even knows her name. It is very sad but I am sure if you publish a translation of her work, she will become as well-known as – as – Simone de Beauvoir!" (Desai 58).

It is no accident that the great feminist theorist is referenced here; gender and translation have long been closely linked. In times and places where women have been routinely excluded from published authorship, they have frequently turned their hands to translating as a socially acceptable creative outlet. Over the past couple of decades, feminists have usefully addressed what it means to be a woman translator, in cases where the source author is male and his text explicitly or even implicitly misogynous, but also where the source author is female and previous critical response has been unfairly dismissive or even non-existent. Translation has rightly been proposed as a means for resisting overly restrictive social constructions, and thus for re-evaluating and challenging the status quo. Feminists have argued that, since women have always had to "translate" a hostile patriarchal discourse in order to express experiences unrepresented in mainstream literature, they are uniquely sensitive to the role language plays in constructing power relations as well as meaning. This leads to the notion that women occupy a privileged space from which to critique the limits of a given discourse, especially one based on harmful binaries, and to articulate previously silenced views. Based on these and related ideas, a variety of ways have usefully been explored of increasing awareness of women and women's writing.³

The fact that translation has traditionally been conceived of as a lesser act of procreation or reproduction rather than the more valued autonomous production that an original text may represent necessarily problematizes many of the positive connections suggested above and underscores a range of complex political implications (see, e.g. Chamberlain 1988, discussed below). Desai's story is a cautionary one: her fictional translator ultimately oversteps the mark, rewriting her source text to an unwarranted degree: "I had never felt such power, never *had* such power, such joy in power" (61). But she follows up this statement with the much less confident "Or such confusion."

¹ An earlier version of this article was first presented as the keynote lecture for the St. Jerome's Day Conference, September 30, 2014, at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.

² The Eastern Indian state previously known as Orissa is now referred to as Odisha, the earlier spelling being considered a legacy of the colonial period. Similarly, the language is now called Odia rather than Oriya. Anita Desai uses the earlier spellings in her short story, as did Supriya Kar and I in our 2010 collection, *One Step towards the Sun: Short Stories by Women from Orissa*, although a second edition currently being prepared will update this.

³ This introductory material is drawn from a forthcoming book chapter; see Henitiuk forthcoming.

The publisher doesn't praise her sufficiently; the author seems unappreciative of her efforts; reviews are scarce. Does she have a voice? Should she have a voice? Is she an artist or a mere copyist? Visible or invisible?

The act of translation has always tended to prompt such existential questions, but all the more so where the focus is on women as translators or women writers around the world who for all intents and purposes do not exist unless and until they have been translated into English or another hegemonic language. Desai's fictional author is unprepossessing in the extreme, reserved and rusticated, not the feminist powerhouse her translator wants her to be and indeed demands that she become, and thus the translator begins to take liberties. A fraudulent, overly rewritten text is eventually published, but just as quickly exposed as a mistranslation, and the would-be translator-author fades back into her unhappy life teaching literature to classes full of bored and ungrateful students. The failed act of translation functions here as a metaphor for a failed act of writing oneself out of an unfulfilling life; the hoped-for transformative experience has not quite come to pass. This story offers a deeply pessimistic reflection on the limitations of art as well as a meditation on gendered roles and self-effacement.

Again, it is surely no accident that Desai's translator does violence to her text. Translation has sometimes been likened to rape, to an act of colonizing brutality perpetrated on a text: a translator must capture and penetrate the original in order to possess it (see, e.g. Lotbinière-Harwood 1991, Arrojo 1994, and Chance 1998; also see Mezei 1986 and 1988 on "translation as betrayal" and Henitiuk 1999 on male translators' deliberate or inadvertent stifling of women's voices and themes). This rhetorical figure, while seeming to preclude women from successfully translating anything at all, has nonetheless proven to have great subversive potential. Feminist translators have paradoxically located their challenge to patriarchal oppression in aggressive appropriation (sometimes termed "womanhandling"—see Godard 1984) of an otherwise recalcitrant text. Lori Chamberlain's important⁴ 1988 article titled "Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation" details how the inferior status of both women and translation has given rise to metaphors that are overtly sexualized and inherently biased. Drawing on notions of fidelity as a conceptual framework, coinages such as the 17th-century "les belles infidèles," which suggests that only the ugly can be counted on to be faithful, not only characterize translations as untrustworthy, but also point to a misogyny underlying the theoretical discourse. Authority and originality remain highly problematic concepts in translation studies overall, informed by questions of difference and dominance, but because of their double marginalization, women translators are well positioned self-consciously to write and act transgressively.

Canada has long been a leader in this area: two major scholars are Luise von Flotow of the University of Ottawa, and Sherry Simon of Concordia University, whose 1996 *Gender in Translation:*

⁴ How easy it is to be unintentionally complicit with male-dominant discourse: I had initially typed "seminal" here, before thinking better of it.

Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission is frequently (and helpfully) cited. In *Translation and Gender: Translating in the “Era of Feminism”*, published only one year after Simon’s book, von Flotow identifies two gender-related paradigms having powerful implications for translation. The first was developed in association with the 1970s women’s movement and subsequent feminist debate over socially constructed sex roles. Gender was newly defined as a set of conventional behaviours and characteristics that function to create an individual and limit that individual’s identity as either masculine or feminine. The focus was on biased treatment of women within a patriarchal system that governs translation as well as other areas of culture and society, and the onus on women translators as well as writers to correct the then-prevalent representation of their sex. The second paradigm, dating from the 1990s, rejected simple binary oppositions and destabilized gender itself as a meaningful category. Recent work has instead emphasized diversity (of sexual orientation, class, ethnicity, race, and so on), underscoring the vast range of socio-political factors that construct gendered identity as discursive. Translation began to be understood as a performative act, with serious attention being paid to how contingency and instability are encoded in language.

But I would like, as suggested by the fictional anecdote from Anita Desai with which this article began, to focus here on the concrete rather than the theoretical: namely, which texts, authored by whom and translated by whom, circulate beyond the narrow confines of language and culture, and how do they manage to do so? As a Canadian living in 21st-century Canada, who has lived in the US, Europe and Japan, reading only such languages as English, French, and Japanese, what authors can I hope to have access to? Translators informed by feminist thought have begun to bring to light a wealth of previously unknown women’s writing from around the globe, and I will now to turn to a brief discussion of three instances from my own work related to real women’s voices.

Only a few years ago, I had the rare and wonderful opportunity of co-editing a volume of short stories by women from Odisha (one reason why Desai’s story so struck me), originally published from the middle of the 20th century up to the present day. *One Step towards the Sun* gathers together in English, in the majority of cases for the first time, a wide variety of often surprising voices.⁵ Given that I have no Odia myself, I remain profoundly indebted to my co-editor, Supriya Kar of Bhubaneswar, India, as well as to each of the translators whose invaluable contributions allowed this work to reach beyond a narrow readership. It is thanks to their linguistic and cultural mediation, their craft and sensitivity that I and other readers have been able to gain access to these tales of poverty, violence, oppression, the mystical... and, yes, also self-assertion and joy.

The women writers of Odisha have been doubly disadvantaged. As noted in the introduction to *One Step towards the Sun*, this Eastern Indian state “has a documented history stretching back three thousand years and a literature dating from as early as the eighth century [...], and it was in fact

⁵ Again, one catches oneself in unconscious acts of colonizing complicity—I had originally typed “new and often surprising voices,” when of course they are new only to those of us who are ignorant of Odia.

through translation of Sanskrit texts that the language itself came to be standardized” (Henitiuk “Introduction” 6). Further, while translation **into** Odia dates to the 14th century, the exchange in the opposite direction is much more recent:

Although a collection of poems by Sachi Rout Roy appeared in an English version in 1942, most consider the arrival of Oriya writing on the world stage to begin with Gopinath Mohanty’s novel *Paraja*, originally also published in the forties but brought out by Oxford University Press only in 1987. (Henitiuk “Introduction” 7)

In a brief article introducing this translation history to the broader British literary translation community, Kar writes that Bikram K. Das’ translation of Mohanty has been termed “a decisive turning point in the history of transmission of Oriya literature, opening up new vistas and drawing the attention of critics and readers outside.” (Kar *Oriya* 18)⁶

Odia literature in translation is part of a much larger movement, of course, that has lately seen Indian literary culture as a whole shifting from a relatively marginal position on the world stage to becoming part of what Rita Kothari has called “a pervasive trend [that] begs attention” (2).

Alongside Indian writing in English (IWE), represented by such well-known authors as Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy or Aravind Adiga, the past couple of decades have seen a rapid rise in the distinct phenomenon of Indian literature in English translation (ILET). The audience for ILET is two-fold: while audiences worldwide gain access to these texts through the efforts of translators, so too do other groups within India itself, in that English has long served as an essential “link language” in this most multilingual of nations. (Henitiuk “Introduction” 7)

Until very recently, authors in Odisha have had few English-language outlets for their writing, and so much more still remains invisible to those who cannot read them in the original. Rupantar, the original publisher of *One Step towards the Sun* (*rupantar* is Sanskrit for “a change of form”), is to be applauded for its tireless work in helping these and other writers “circulate beyond what are unnecessarily restrictive boundaries of language and culture, and become accessible to other Indians as well as to audiences farther afield” (Henitiuk “Introduction” 14).⁷ Desai’s fictional translator at one point defends her work against charges that she’s merely been pandering to Western readers, by arguing rightly that even within India it is through translation into the globally

⁶ For a different, more negative but nonetheless compelling, reading of the implications of this English translation of Mohanty, see Paul St-Pierre 2008.

⁷ Supriya Kar and some of her colleagues are now in the process of developing a quarterly online journal called *Indian Literature Today*, with a view to “honor[ing] the art of translation and recogniz[ing] its cultural importance in a multilingual country like India” (personal communication). They are already actively promoting Indian literature, especially from Odisha, via a similarly titled group on Facebook.

dominant language that native literatures circulate and are read.⁸ Translation is a uniquely valuable means for promoting and preserving cultural diversity: these particular stories now stand a greater chance of being read and even subsequently re-translated into other tongues.⁹ In the best-case scenario, they will inspire certain readers to learn Odia in order to explore the literature further. In any case, the recent gains in and awareness of English translation activity, whether for a domestic or international market, suggest the possibility of “a more dialogic, mutually profitable relationship” (Kothari 26) among previously isolated cultural communities, especially women’s communities. Of course, a more negative reading (such as that suggested by St-Pierre) would see me, even though working with an Indian colleague, as yet another in a long line of imperial colonizers—ignorant of the language and culture, how arrogant an act is it for me to become involved in this project of reclaiming female Indian voices?

One Step towards the Sun contains 25 heterogeneous stories¹⁰ filled with powerful imagery and unforgettable characters and storylines, which “will prove enlightening to English-speaking readers, both those who are already familiar with the literary tradition of Orissa and those (like me) approaching it for the first time” (Henitiuk “Introduction” 6). As the title suggests,

female writers in particular have only recently emerged from the shadows to become visible beside their longer established male colleagues. The fact that we do not even have years of birth for our first two authors, Sushila Devi and Suprabha Kar¹¹, is telling: women here as in so many other nations have faced (and in certain cases continue to face) significant challenges to being recognized as individuals, artists and worthwhile contributors to society as a whole. (8)

No significant amount of writing by the women of Odisha was published until the 1970s (economics come into play here—namely, the ability of these women to make a living from their writing), and it was only much more recently that their work began to be translated for foreign audiences. Accordingly, Supriya Kar and I intend our book to play its own small role in the ongoing ILET dialogue, helping to establish mutually beneficial relationships between Odisha’s women writers and both male and female readers (within India and globally).

⁸ I was recently (in September 2014) corresponding with my co-editor Supriya Kar, and she pointed out that Anita Desai may have been referring in “Translator, Translated” to one of the authors we had included in our compilation: Sarojini Sahoo, who in recent interviews has compared herself to Simone de Beauvoir. Kar also suggested intriguingly that Desai is responding negatively to those Indian writers who do not write in English, looking down on those who write in Indian languages and try to get wider publicity through translation; she pointed out the increasing number of awards for translated works from South Asia, with prize money equaling that doled out for works originally written in English—something that has displeased a certain group of writers and critics. “Sad, surprising, but true,” Kar writes.

⁹ Interest has been expressed in translating this book into Italian, and I hope that it will eventually be taken up in other Indian languages.

¹⁰ The second edition will include five additional stories.

¹¹ No relation to my co-editor, Supriya Kar.

It should go without saying that the authors selected for inclusion in *One Step towards the Sun*, born for the most part in the first half of the twentieth century, “do not speak with anything like a unified voice and the varied translations make that abundantly clear” (Henitiuk “Introduction” 13-14). As Kar remarks, “Our idea was to present to a non-Oriya speaking audience short stories dealing with different themes and revealing different styles of narration by women from Orissa” (Kar “Afterword” 271-272). All are women writers from the same state on the subcontinent’s Eastern coast, but there is nothing essentialist about the idiosyncratic stories, nuanced characters, and range of motifs that they have crafted. Kar continues:

One cannot help noticing how these short stories echo experiences embodied in the existing body of women’s writing from different parts of the world. While depicting women’s gendered experiences, these also shed light on the shifting dynamics of Orissan history and culture. Put together they reaffirm old and established facts, but simultaneously explore contours of new realities. (Kar “Afterword” 274)

Revealing the contours of new or previously unrepresented realities—this is the invaluable service translation performs. Translation makes it possible for those artists who have long been invisible to be seen, but the act of transmission or “transcreation” (to borrow the term coined by the Brazilian concrete poet Haroldo de Campos) is admittedly complex and often very problematic. While literary culture is a supremely mobile artefact, it is nonetheless dependent on interpretive acts of mediation profoundly bound up in aspects of culture; countless acts of rewriting and repackaging must be performed before a given work of literature can enter and have a chance to influence the global informational flow. The aim of my own research broadly speaking is to consider how the process of globalization re-imagines and constructs literary works so as to make possible their international presence, and to explore the fundamental and wide-ranging effects involved, for both text and readers.

But what of those voices that have been silenced forever? Readings we do not and can never have? Because women have been denied the opportunity to learn languages, to publish, or to travel, even to read widely, who knows how many potentially revolutionary readings we are denied? In 2008, I published an article titled “Going to Bed with Waley: How Murasaki Shikibu Does and Does Not Become World Literature” (based on the papers I had given at the first two St-Jerome conferences held at the University of Alberta) in *Comparative Literature Studies*, positing Virginia Woolf as the absent, impossible translator of the great Japanese masterpiece, *The Tale of Genji*. My argument was that her reading might have opened up for us an entirely other—not to mention immensely enriched and enriching—Murasaki Shikibu (author of the *Genji*, she served in Japan’s imperial court in the early 11th century).

For daring to offer this thought experiment, I have twice been taken to task. Once in an email from Royall Tyler, who produced the most recent English version of this 1000-year-old tale.¹² His email (dated 2011) reached me, ironically, at the Brontë Parsonage in Howarth, just as I was about to stride off across the moors in a fit of passion in impersonation of everyone's favourite sister writers. What, he demanded, could Woolf have noticed that he did not? Where could she have possibly improved on his translation, as a well-trained, highly reputed scholar of Classical Japanese? Well, I tried to explain, it's sort of like the mathematical concept of zero—you don't know you lack it until you have it.... My article had pointed out that:

The author of *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando* did, after all, review the first part of Arthur Waley's rendition in 1925, but suppose she had actually set about to learn Japanese and offer her own translation? Woolf learned Russian well enough to collaborate on English versions of several works from that body of literature, and it was therefore not unfeasible for her to have done the same with Japanese. (Henitiuk "Going to Bed" 41)

I wanted to focus attention on "what has not been available to be read in the existing versions of Murasaki Shikibu's great tale—the lacunae or what Lawrence Venuti has called the remainder, namely those aspects of a text that, for a variety of reasons, do not get 'carried across'" (Henitiuk "Going to Bed" 41; emphasis added).

In exploring the four extant renditions in English of the scene where the marriage between the hero Genji and his child bride¹³ is consummated, I couldn't help but wish we had access to a self-consciously feminist reading of it.¹⁴ In the initial Victorian-era translation by Suematsu Kenchō, what Murasaki Shikibu wrote is almost completely elided, as the scene itself is significantly curtailed to suit prevailing mores. Arthur Waley's translation from the 1920s presents it as a straightforward seduction—a little louche, perhaps, but nothing to be at all alarmed about, despite the young girl's tears and stubborn silence. In the 1960s, Edward Seidensticker makes it clear that we are reading about an act of violence, but he still manages to downplay what I see as the real and more widespread pathos of the text, and while Helen Craig McCullough does state in her translator's introduction that Genji "does not realize, or does not choose to understand, that Murasaki's view of the marriage is very different from his" (qtd. in Henitiuk "Going to Bed" 57), my argument is that neither her training nor her inclination gives readers access to the Japanese author's scathing societal

¹² A brand-new translation, by Dennis Washburn, is due to appear this year with Norton.

¹³ This character is named Murasaki, but should not be confused with the author herself.

¹⁴ "The background for this episode is as follows. A motherless girl of about ten years of age (known as Murasaki) is stumbled upon by a young man (known as Genji) some eight years her senior, who while roaming about the countryside, spies into an isolated house. This child bears a striking resemblance to her aunt, who happens to be the young man's stepmother, with whom he has had a secret affair and fathered a son, but who has recently made herself inaccessible to him. [...] Genji simply marches in during the night and carries the young girl off, installing her in his own house. Over a period of some four years, they play dolls; practice poetry, calligraphy, and music together; challenge one another at *go*; and enjoy a cozy platonic relationship. She matures, and he starts to drop hints of a sexual nature, which do not seem to be understood. Then one night, shortly after the (post-childbirth) death of his official wife, he rapes the girl... or does he?" (Henitiuk "Going to Bed" 48-49).

critique. In another bit of irony, I do actually praise the most recent translation by Tyler for his more indeterminate presentation of this particular scene. Similarly to what we encounter in Woolf's own writings, the *Tale of Genji* never takes the easy route by spelling things out bluntly or crudely. But my overall argument was that an even more nuanced approach and understanding is needed. Since translation "can operate as a form of Western aggression and colonization," it is vital to take seriously how the effect can be "aggravated several times over when a Japanese court lady writing women's lives and women's selves a millennium ago is rendered for an English-language audience [primarily] by men, and [those] who possess varying motivations as her mediators" (Henitiuk "Going to Bed" 41). And my title, "Going to Bed with Waley" (intended as a light witticism), paraphrases Woolf who, in a letter to her sister, had written of her busy day that concluded "home to bed with Waley" (i.e. to read his famed translation)—what a shame, I commented, that she had not been able to go to bed with Murasaki Shikibu herself, to know her sister author (or mother author—as Woolf famously wrote: "for we think back through our mothers" (*A Room* 113)) more fully, in an unmediated and more intimate way.

The second harshly critical response¹⁵ also appeared in 2011, in a new comparative literature journal published in China. Again, a senior male scholar, Zhang Longxi, has taken issue with my argument, in this case claiming that I had said that knowing Russian somehow automatically qualified Woolf to translate Japanese, and more seriously, that I had committed an act of terrible indiscretion and indelicacy in daring to suggest that Murasaki Shikibu could possibly have been a lesbian! True enough, sex and orientalism have long been intertwined (and a not insignificant amount of my published work has dealt directly with this fact), but surely it takes a deliberately cloth-eared misreading to see my title for that particular piece as a dismissive eroticization of Japanese women writers.

My third and final example relates to a project that preoccupied me for several years: the seeking out, compiling and glossing of roughly 50 readings over a period of some 150 years of the most famous passage from another great Japanese classic, the *Makura no Sôshi* or *Pillow Book of Sei Shônagon*. This is in fact arguably the single most famous passage from any work of Japanese literature, modern or pre-modern. The search led me to versions in 14 different European languages published between 1875 and 2008, which I analyzed and published with University of Ottawa Press in 2012 under the title *Worlding Sei Shônagon: The Pillow Book in Translation*. (For comparative purposes, I included two versions in Chinese as well as four Japanese modernizations, and even a musical score for cello.) The translators of this woman-authored work of literature have been overwhelmingly male, needless to say, some 40 men to 16 women (and six of these women were involved in co-translations, so the solely female translated versions actually numbered only 13).

¹⁵ I should point out that the positive, enthusiastic responses to "Going to Bed with Waley: How Murasaki Shikibu Does and Does Not Become World Literature" have greatly outnumbered the negative, and in fact one of the leading scholars of the *Genji* in Japan translated and reprinted my article in her own book (Midorikawa, M., ed. *Heian bungaku no kochubaku to juyou* [Heian Literature, Old Commentaries and Reception]. Vol. 3. Tokyo: Musashinoshoin, 2011).

The *Makura no Sôshi* is a collection of personal reflections, anecdotes about life in the Japanese royal court, and idiosyncratic lists composed around the turn of the eleventh century by a woman known today as Sei Shônagon. It has captured the Western imagination with its lyrical style, compelling images and the striking voice of its author, and been translated countless times. By comparing the translations of the opening passage, which begins “haru wa akebono” or “spring, dawn,” I reveal how its features have challenged each translator. Far from exhausting the wealth of meaning and nuance to be found in the source text, these widely varying versions underscore its creative inexhaustibility and prompt further interpretations that advance our literary understanding.

As I explain in the introduction to *Worlding Sei Shônagon* (the explanation supplied here also helps contextualize the *Tale of Genji*, discussed above):

This period in Japanese history was one in which women’s writing was uniquely privileged. Barred, at least theoretically, from the Chinese learning that their male counterparts were expected to acquire and employ, women of the aristocracy nonetheless received an extensive education in Japanese literature, as well as in music and other elegant arts such as the blending of incense. In the highly literate salons that formed around the imperial consorts, and even in private life, they also enjoyed tremendous freedom to read, write, and critique the writings of others. Written Japanese was in fact then known as *onna-de*,¹⁶ or “woman’s hand,” and this rare opportunity to shape and refine the native literary tradition was turned to full advantage. (Henitiuk *Worlding* 5-6)

Faced with this undeniable female talent, not a few of the (male) translators found themselves at a loss. The Victorians could recognize that this was a work of genius, but were taken aback at Sei Shônagon’s lack of feminine modesty. As I note:

[...] Sei Shônagon does not shy away from referring to her romantic affairs, and accordingly our author’s reputation has come down to us as that of a woman with somewhat loose morals. In the centuries after her death, Japanese Confucian scholars would also find themselves discomfited by those females who circulated so confidently in the public sphere through the proxy of their texts: for example, a commentator in 1670 explains that “... Sei Shônagon, Murasaki Shikibu, and Izumi Shikibu ... were all accomplished writers and skilled in waka composition, and it was probably for that reason that they were all strumpets” (qtd. in Kornicki 159). Legends that have our outspoken author being brought low in later life likely arise from similar misogynist attitudes, which are also in evidence in the translator’s notes or prefaces accompanying many of the translations [...]. (Henitiuk *Worlding* 7-8)¹⁷

¹⁶ This is written in Japanese characters as 女手.

¹⁷ These paratextual comments are analyzed in more depth in my chapter “Prefacing Gender,” included in von Flotow’s *Translating Women*.

Worlding Sei Shônagon brings together versions from the both complete and partial translations that have appeared in a great many languages ever since the mid-19th century “discovery” of Japan. My hope is that readers will be as fascinated as I have been by the great variety of interpreters that this unique text has attracted, from

Victorian scholar-diplomats such as W.G. Aston; to Zhou Zouren, younger brother of the major Chinese modernist Lu Xun; to Lydia Origlia, prolific Italian translator of both classical and contemporary literature; to world-renowned literary figures such as Jorge Luis Borges—each has brought an individual sensibility to the task of recreating in another language what our author wrote a millennium ago. (Henitiuk *Worlding* 18)

Again, I readily admit to not knowing all of the languages compiled in *Worlding Sei Shônagon*, relying instead on native informants and skilled translators who generously supplied me with the glosses and answered my many questions. Is this further imperialism? I make no apologies for wanting to bring these many voices, all separately “ventriloquizing” Sei Shônagon, together into a single study, in the hopes that other, more linguistically gifted scholars could then make new and more insightful discoveries through the juxtapositions my inchoate work has established. And in fact my graduate students have done just that: one of my MA classes at the University of East Anglia in Norwich, UK, after having studied the existing translations, went on to jointly publish an article containing their own inspiring and creative versions, some of which I reproduced in the book (Henitiuk et al.; in Henitiuk *Worlding* see, for example, p. 25).

While wholeheartedly welcoming the availability of more women’s writing from around the world, there are more than a few questions we still need to be asking. And asking again. For example, who chooses what gets translated? Into which languages? From which languages and cultures? Who dares speak for whom? The translation of female-authored texts must not be an exercise in appropriating them to serve unrelated purposes, or disrespecting the original in any way. It is vitally important that we privilege sensitive, informed readings—whether by men or by women—of these too-long absent voices. With their recent work, dedicated, talented translators and editors such as Supriya Kar and her Odia-speaking colleagues help us hear those previously unheard, reversing at least some of the effects of linguistic, cultural, economic, and gendered obscurity. Taking the time to imagine what could have filled the gaps or lacunae caused by the lack of opportunities historically available for women to write or publish, or even to learn other languages, can also prove important. And conducting a full survey of the many who’ve tackled, whether completely in good faith or not, such female-authored classics as the *Pillow Book*, and then taking each version seriously for what it really says (and then encouraging others to respond with their own, differently informed readings), gives today’s readers a chance to reflect fully on the issues and attitudes involved. Through the many and varied acts of translation and speaking (for), many silences can be, are being broken and deserve our ever more careful heeding of what is said and what remains unsaid.

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