

# Writing-Translating (from) the In-Between: An Interview with Gail Scott

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Résumé de l'article

While Gail Scott is well known in Canadian and American avant-garde literary circles as a writer of experimental novels, short stories, and essays, she is perhaps less well known as a literary translator of Québec fiction. Since 1998, Scott has published four literary translations of works by contemporary Québec authors whose writing reflects many of her own aesthetic concerns: *Laurence* by France Théoret (1998), *The Sailor's Disquiet* by Michael Delisle (2002), *Helen with a Secret*, also by Michael Delisle (2002), and *Mile End* by Lise Tremblay (2002). Although she has often addressed, in her essays and interviews, the importance of writing "in translation" when one lives at a linguistic and cultural crossroads, Scott has been less explicit about her work as a translator. This is the first interview in which she reflects on her conception of literary translation, as well as on the function, strategies, and liberties of the English language translator, notably in the context of Québec. She also considers the ways these issues at once "intersect" with and "intervene" in her writing, her role as public intellectual, and her world view.

# Writing-Translating (from) the In-Between: An Interview with Gail Scott

SCL/ÉLC INTERVIEW BY GILLIAN LANE-MERCIER

WHILE GAIL SCOTT IS WELL KNOWN in Canadian and American avant-garde literary circles as a writer of experimental novels, short stories, and essays, she is perhaps less well known as a literary translator of Québec fiction. Raised in a bilingual community in Ontario, Scott came to Montréal in 1967 as a journalist, attracted by the spirit of political and cultural rebellion that had been gaining momentum since the beginning of the decade, as well as by the possibility of writing “with the sound of French in her ear.”

A founding editor of the left-wing political review *The Last Post* (1970), the feminist review *Des luttes et des rires des femmes* (late 1970s), the cultural magazine *Spirale* (1979), and the bilingual feminist journal *Tessera* (1984), Scott left journalism in the early 1980s to devote herself to writing and teaching. A first collection of short stories, *Spare Parts* (1981), was followed by a volume of collected essays, *Spaces Like Stairs* (1989), and three experimental novels, *Heroine* (1987), *Main Brides* (1993), and *My Paris* (1999), in which questions of translation, multilingualism, and cultural porosity are omnipresent. An expanded second edition of her collection of short stories appeared in 2002 under the title *Spare Parts Plus Two*.

Since 1998, Scott has published four literary translations of works by contemporary Québec authors whose writing reflects many of her own aesthetic concerns: *Laurence* by France Théoret (1998), *The Sailor's Disquiet* by Michael Delisle (2002), *Helen with a Secret*, also by Michael Delisle (2002), and *Mile End* by Lise Tremblay (2002). Although she has often addressed, in her essays and interviews, the importance of writing “in translation” when one lives at a linguistic and cultural crossroads, Scott has been less explicit about her work as a translator. This is the first interview in which she reflects

on her conception of literary translation, as well as on the function, strategies, and liberties of the English language translator, notably in the context of Québec. She also considers the ways these issues at once “intersect” with and “intervene” in her writing, her role as public intellectual, and her world view.

*GLM:* When and why did you decide to turn to literary translation?

*GS:* You’re going to get the answer any Montrealer would expect. From the very beginning of my journalistic career, translation was part of the job. In fact, my first job was at Canadian Press in the late sixties, and one of things I had to do was translate parts of *Le Devoir* publisher Claude Ryan’s editorials for English Canada. This was at the very beginning of the independence movement. And the other part of my job — because I spoke French and there weren’t that many Anglo journalists around who did — was to go to the meetings of the independence groups and translate what they said into English for the wire services destined for the Anglo provinces. Inversely, writing for *Spirale* a few years later, I saw my job as bringing interesting Canadian works to Québécois readers. So there’s never been a time when translation has not been a part of my work. I grew up in a bilingual community, so even there there was always the attempt to translate, as I was often the only English kid who played with French kids. All of my life has involved translation. It gets very hard to separate translation and writing. Every novel that I’ve written involves a doubleness, and recently a multiplicity of languages. It’s about the way I intersect with the world in so many ways.

*GLM:* Why did you choose to translate the novels you have translated?

*GS:* The translation of *Laurence* was the result of a long collaboration and friendship with France Théoret. I think that many of our ideas about writing in the feminine — l’écriture au féminin — were very significant in my choosing *Laurence* as a first book-length translation project. I felt that I wanted to engage the inner workings of some of these texts that I really loved. I’ve only translated writers whose work I feel some proximity with. I mean I didn’t pick, say, Nicole Brossard, who is probably the person that I’m aesthetically the closest to, because she’s had so many other translators; it was more fun for me to explore new territory.

France’s work — at least *Laurence* — was actually also very hard to translate, because of her little, minimalist sentences and “tableaux.” To get

the same distancing effect in English rendered by the “tableaux” in French, I had to turn around her sentences, slice them up differently.

The other translations kind of fell into my lap. I did *Mile End* at Lise Tremblay’s request, even though Lise and I don’t have much in common aesthetically, because it was about the neighbourhood I lived in. As for Michael Delisle, he is one of my favourite Québécois writers. He began as a young writer of formalist leaning and has maintained this consciousness of language.

*GLM*: Was the desire to bring new, unknown Québec authors to the Anglophone world a conscious part of your decision to translate these authors?

*GS*: I believe writers have a role to play as public intellectuals, whether it’s doing journalism, editing literary journals, teaching, or making accessible work that otherwise would not be. We need to think more about the role of poets, of writers in society: do we actually really have a role outside of writing? I’ve always thought of myself as a socially aware writer; I’m that kind of person. My first writing pals were self-described surrealists; from them, I learned to see my work as intervention. There’s a shock value that goes along with that notion, and you have to take the music afterwards for speaking your mind, especially in Canada where everybody’s “nice” — which niceness is a good way to dampen down discussion. My belief in the importance of intervention, in the search for contiguity between issues of everyday life and art means I’ve been involved with a lot of literary and political periodicals and contexts. Early on, I was co-founder of a review that was begun around the October crisis, *The Last Post*, and of the feminist review, *Des luttes et des rires des femmes*. Public intellectuals tend to be associated with the academy now, and a lot of academics do make public interventions. Few journalists can be called intellectuals these days. There’s a gap between critical analysis and “fait divers” where writers can sometimes make themselves heard.

*GLM*: Although translation is omnipresent in your work, you began translating novels quite late on in your writing career. I am curious: why did you wait so long?

*GS*: I suppose a period came along when I wasn’t so taken up with other public stuff — the nineties were strange, politically. Translating was the manifestation of the desire to engage with a certain process, the mechanics of writing, to see what I could learn from these writers.

*GLM:* And do you feel you did learn?

*GS:* It troubled me and concerned me during the nineties that when I had first started writing, everything in Québec was so avant-garde, I mean, the writers of that generation. Then those who immediately followed them kind of moved away from experimental work, in which I have a huge investment. Michael Delisle is an example of this, and so is France's later work. I knew that there were really brilliant, intelligent thinking, thoughts and devices in these novels, and a really good way of getting at them would be to translate them. That was definitely a part of it, and I think now I probably understand France's work better than I ever have, and I particularly see that even though she's not writing a *Bloody Mary* any more, or any of those very experimental works of her early career, her writing is very interesting, almost philosophical; I'm very, very interested in how she changed her way of writing. With Michael, it's interesting to me how he's taken the kind of cut-and-paste tactics that he used in works like *Fontainebleau* and other early work published at P.O.L. in France, and applied them to almost a fluid narrative strategy that is really coherent and really constructed by a brilliant awareness of language. I don't think it would have been easy for me to see that if I hadn't translated him. But here I am talking about writing again!

*GLM:* You have often defined writing as exploration and discovery as well. Is there a perfect equivalence between writing and translation in this respect, or is there something that makes discovery through translation a bit different from discovery through writing?

*GS:* I don't think there's a perfect equivalence. When you translate you have an obligation to the writer of the original text. It seems to me there's a gesture of respect and honour between writers to really try and get as much understanding of their text and their purpose into the other text. But I would say, taken as an entire practice both in writing and in translation, that yes, definitely it's a process of discovery. If I hadn't landed at Canadian Press being able to speak French when I did way back when I was a baby journalist, and been required to translate Claude Ryan's editorials about the troubles in Québec, I might be writing — I don't know — genre novels or something else altogether. So yes, I think it completely changed my life to be in this posture.

*GLM:* What I would like to get at now is the relationship between your writing project — or projects — and your translation projects on the aesthetic level. Would you say, for example, that your aesthetic concerns as a

translator are similar to your aesthetic concerns as a writer? And if they are, do they run the risk of being displaced during the translation process?

GS: You know, that's a good question. The answer is: sometimes I actually felt that risk when translating *Helen*, which is a short story collection. I think that's because, with the short stories, every story has a slightly different voice, and when you read them in French, they're all Michael, and when you read them in English, I'm not sure I got all Michael into the English. In very difficult work, the writer/translator summons her own writing devices to solve problems.

I actually learned something from that, which is that novels are a lot easier to translate than stories. Even Mordecai Richler says this: every word in a good story counts, whereas most novels are sloppy and have too many words; the emphasis is less on language and its working than on narrative. But short stories are just perfect if they're good, and Michael's are perfect, mostly. His writing is so complex that actually maintaining his "voice" — i.e. keeping the translator's out — in a collection like that, which has so many different styles, so many different stories, and so many different tones, was an amazingly difficult thing to do.

GLM: Does that mean your voice at times comes in beside his in your translation?

GS: There is something of the writer/translator's voice in every translation. Recently I was reading a translation of one of Nicole Brossard's books and I had to put it down because — although it was a perfectly fine translation — it didn't project the "voice" I imagined. There are an infinite number of layers that you can get in a translation; somewhere in a story collection is a layer that joins it all together. Yes, maybe my voice comes in sometimes.

The thing about Michael — and this is very important — is we're sort of opposite sides of the same coin. He has a Franco-Anglo background and I feel I can hear the English under his French in a way that I feel you can hear the French under my English. So for me, he's like a literary brother. We don't come from the same background exactly, but we're both gay, and we're both from working class milieux: these are all things that inform our language. The first story in that book is better in English than it is in French, in my view. I did a masterful job!

GLM: Now why do you say that?

GS: Perhaps because it was originally written in French for Ontario edu-

ational TV — i.e., already it was a gesture towards an Anglo-Canadian audience. The one that has been picked up and published and commented on the most is the story set in the Saguenay, called “Prayers for Edmond,” and I think that’s because it goes back to a kind of Roch Carrier take that many Anglos have been CBC-trained to have on Québec. Certainly that’s part of it.

*GLM:* This leads us from the question of the translator’s role to that of the translator’s freedom. To what extent is the translator free with respect to the original text?

*GS:* Because I’m a writer myself, I wouldn’t dream of writing my own text over somebody else’s — unless it were understood by both parties that that is what we wished to do.

*GLM:* That’s one conception of translation, however: translation as creation.

*GS:* I know it is. When Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood translated *Heroïne* into French, it was at the height of that period where anything goes, and she would say oh, I’ll just write my own novel and I would say ahh-hhhh! No way! No, I wouldn’t dream of that. For me — and I think this is where writers in some ways make superior translators to translators who aren’t writers — the job is not only to translate, but to create language in such a way that the work in the other language has the same impact on its audience the original language has.

*GLM:* Do you think affect is something that crosses boundaries more easily than other aspects of a work?

*GS:* No, I don’t. Language and experience construct affect. In different cultures, the joint or the juncture operates at slightly different places, and language must sometimes be hugely manipulated to find that place.

*GLM:* Something that struck me when reading your translation of *Laurence* is — and I’m wondering if this is conscious or if it’s an effect of the way you turn the sentences around — Laurence as a character seems to have more agency in the translation than she does in the French original. The English narrator doesn’t have the *emprise* the French narrator has, often because when you switched the sentence structure around, Laurence went from a passive position in the French version to a more active position in the English one.

GS: That's very interesting.

GLM: Another thing you do systematically is that when, in the French version, it is difficult to know whether the narrator is narrating Laurence's thoughts or using free indirect discourse, you opt in your translation for free indirect discourse.

GS: That's not very conscious, but I do think that as we move towards English there's a tendency, especially in North American English, to move towards more agency in the sentence and also towards more direct discourse. So I don't know if that's a cultural thing or the effect of my turning the sentences around, which I had to do, because otherwise they were run-on sentences, or grammatically incorrect — even too incorrect for me!

GLM: It wasn't a feminist project?

GS: Writing and translation can not be based on single-issue exigencies. The reason that I turned the sentences around was a grammatical one; that is, the grammar and the syntax had to be manipulated to achieve a kind of equivalence. A run-on sentence in English with three, four or five commas, where there should be a period, doesn't work for me, and I didn't want to write a text full of semi-colons because they're pretty deadly. Too heavy for the diction of *Laurence*.

But was there an unconscious desire to turn that character around? You know, once I tried to translate France's *La marche* for a talk I was giving in New York. It had already been translated but I wasn't satisfied with the translation. It gives a hyper-feminine, French concept of what female is, but English cannot convey that figure in the same way. So when one is writing in the feminine there is a difficulty there. In English, the notion of the feminine doesn't exist in the same way at all. I was almost certainly thinking about the feminine in both languages, and how it gets deployed.

GLM: You mentioned that translators who are also writers are perhaps better able to translate affect. Do you see other differences between translators who are writers and those who are not? Is their whole approach to translation quite different?

GS: I think it depends, again, on the kind of writer you are. I myself don't see language as transparent. I work a lot on language in my own writing, so I'm particularly sensitive to the different directions words can take you in. I think that writers might be more able to get across the different layers that are available in the original text than people who see language primarily as



communication, which I do think happens sometimes in translation. Then of course the other thing is I'm much more aware of sound, rhythm, tone, diction, all those things, as is the case with most writers, than somebody who doesn't have that approach toward using language. Of course, there are some people who don't write and who are fabulous translators — Linda Gaboriau comes to mind. You can't generalize. The down side of writer-translators might be that we see so much that maybe we don't always communicate the surface as limpidly as somebody who's looking at language more pragmatically.

*GLM:* I'd like to link the role of the translator to the status of the translated text. Given that you don't see the translator as someone who should adapt the original, do you see the translated text as derivative, or secondary, with respect to the original?

*GS:* Can you generalize about the translated text? I think there are all kinds of translations and they play different roles. I could imagine a situation where I had a privileged relationship with a writer in another language and we decided that we were going to create, in our translations of each other's work, a middle ground, which would be fascinating. But I don't think that's the mandate I had doing the above-mentioned books. Really I wanted to communicate as much of the juice as I could to the Anglo-Canadian audience. I think translation is a reach, a gesture. It's a displacement, a Deleuzian kind of movement in a way, but it's a displacement more than anything else. A bad translation is "less." I don't think a good translation is "less"; I don't think it is "more," either, because there's always loss.

*GLM:* Yes, that's something you bring up early on in your essays, about the losses and gains of translation. What are some of the losses you found inevitably occurred?

*GS:* Perhaps your question is more valid for people who do not live in the culture from which they are translating. I actually think that Anglo-Québécois translators manage, fairly miraculously, to bring an awful lot with us into the translated text.

*GLM:* You say writing for two different publics has always been a problem for you.

*GS:* More of an interesting challenge than a problem. I find being an Anglophone in Québec a lot easier than being a Québécoise or an Anglo-

Québécoise in the rest of the country, where you have to explain yourself so much.

*GLM:* In your early essays, you refused to see translation as a bridge between two languages and cultures because the translating “I” disappeared under the message. I was wondering if, since you have been doing literary translation with the intent of helping certain Québécois writers become known outside Québec, you have had to rethink your thoughts on the relationship between translation and bridge.

*GS:* But I was speaking of my writing practice in which, as in everyday life, there is an automatic, almost unconscious back and forth between languages. You have to differentiate between my relationship to translation in my own writing and my relationship to translation when I’m doing literary translation. When I translate another work, even if I’m interested in doing things such as letting Gallicisms slip into my English to give the actual flavour of how English is spoken here — it *is* different —, I’m very conscious of the milieu toward which the translation is going and what to present to that milieu in order for it to be read in that milieu.

So for example with *Laurence*, when I was making Americans aware of the work, I didn’t choose, for publication in literary journals, the little *tableaux vivants* of rural life, such as when the narrator first moves to the country doctor’s, but picked some of the urban scenes or the chapters with strong textual references, such as the chapter where Laurence is reading about Victor Hugo, which people found absolutely fascinating. You have to think of the audience. Promotion is an aspect of translation, part of the job.

*GLM:* One question we try and think about both in literary theory and translation studies is that of the writer’s ideal audience and the translator’s ideal audience. Because you talk so much about audience with respect to your writing, I was wondering: who are your ideal audience as a translator? Are they bilingual, bicultural, multicultural? Are they in Québec, or are they more in English Canada, or now are you thinking more of an international anglophone audience?

*GS:* Again you are asking if what I say about my writing also applies to translation. I really try to write in a way that will intrigue both francophone and continental anglophone audiences. I would say that what I’m aiming for is an audience that asks itself the same intellectual and theoretical questions about writing that I do. So in other words, people I communicate with,

who are writers and who are, I guess, in a way a certain kind of writer and a certain kind of student. With translation the first factor in determining audience is the choice of the book to be translated.

*GLM:* You speak in one of your essays of the locus of your writing, which you situate in the in-between. You articulate this in several ways: writing over the top, writing over the edge, writing over the cusp. Do you see the locus of your translations to be the same as the locus of your writing?

*GS:* I'm talking about "d'où j'écris."

*GLM:* Right. However, you make an interesting remark somewhere that when English Canadian critics are reading your novels, they do not read them as novels germinated in French, then written in, or translated into, English. In other words, they do not read them as translations, which is how you wrote them. Conversely, when these same critics are reading your translations, they are reading them as translations. So their rapport with your novels and with your literary translations aren't quite the same, I would imagine. Does this have an effect on the locus of your writing with respect to the locus of your translations? Put another way, does the in-between get articulated differently in your literary translations?

*GS:* I don't think I've actually thought about it in that way. I think it's true that when I write prose I have the impression of going back and forth. Recently, my writing-from-Québec has been frequently in conversation with Americans in the Narrativity movement. This has led me to think about notions of citizenship, which get trapped into the writing subject. The desire for republic that exists in Québec may sometimes make it easier for me to talk to experimental writers in the States than in Canada; this is because I am thinking a lot about the writing subject as citizen-projection. Every time your *rapport d'adresse* changes, there is a shift in posture. But I feel uncomfortable thinking about big shifts. Everything happens like dots on a line.

One thing I would say about translation versus my own novel writing is that when I'm translating somebody else, I have a little more distance from the product. I can stand back more easily and look at it and say okay, this is going to be taken that way or this is going to be taken this way; therefore, for it to have the impact that I want it to have, I have to do this or that. I'm not that strategic with my own writing.

Sometimes I think that my writing is becoming less concerned with the local; i.e., I think I am moving more and more in a kind of Beckettian direction, after starting out at a very specific moment in Québec. One of the

choices I made about writing early on was that I was going to be a writer like Picasso was a painter, that is I was going to allow myself to have different periods. And I'm keeping on doing that, so every one of my novels is actually extremely different formally, and the one I'm working on now is also very different from the others.

*GLM*: I see a definite swing from a focus on doubleness in *Heroine* to a focus on multiplicity in *My Paris*. This is due not only to your involvement with the New Narrative movement, which is centred in San Francisco, but also to the different ways you deal with language issues.

*GS*: Right.

*GLM*: You mention in one of your earlier articles that you felt your creative writing, at the time, was “very Montréal,” just as Betty Goodwin’s art is “very Montréal” as opposed to art from Toronto, say. Would you say the same about *My Paris*? Is it still “very Montréal,” even though it’s opened out onto so many more international and global issues?

*GS*: I think it’s very Montréal — for a book about Paris —, notably as regards the question of the very reduced narrative voice. I always say to my American friends that I come from a country with no organizing principle! The narrator is small, she’s very porous, she’s very absorptive. She’s not Gertrude Stein imposing her big — though experimental —, very confident figure on the horizon. I think that particular awareness definitely comes from living in a place like Montréal, where you can’t look at anything without thinking, “I’m on the cusp here and somebody else is coming at me from a different direction.”

*GLM*: I’d like to quote a passage from Frank Davey’s article on *Heroine*, because I was wondering to what extent you agreed with his view: “Neither Canada nor Quebec have large roles in the imagination of *Heroine*. English Canada is a place of banishment when the F-group is warned by the police to go there during the Olympic Games. Quebec at first glance is an exotic foretaste of international culture and avant-garde politics, a place that becomes however much less exotic once the condition of women within it becomes evident” (70). In other words, he’s reading *Heroine* as having a very global dimension rather than a local dimension. Do you agree with that or is it more of a latent characteristic?

*GS*: I would say more latent, actually. I don’t think that was exactly the vibe I was getting at about English Canada and Québec at this time, the idea

of English Canada being a country of banishment. But I suppose he's talking about the passion for the European intellectual tradition which comes through in *Heroine*, and that's what it was like in Québec in the 1970s and 1980s. If you look at all those avant-garde Québec films that came out in the seventies, they're so French: that's just the way they looked.

*GLM*: At first I thought that maybe what he didn't take into account was the stylistic dimension of *Heroine*, the way English has been minoritized, which has very much to do with a local project.

*GS*: Yes.

*GLM*: But then I started to think about this, and I was wondering — in the context of going from a local perspective to a global perspective that nonetheless is still, as you just said about *My Paris*, very Montréal, even though it's working in both directions — whether this cosmopolitan dimension that he sees in *Heroine* and that comes very much to the fore in *My Paris* can also be applied to the use of minoritizing, in the sense that minoritizing can be seen as a possible response to cultural and linguistic globalization.

*GS*: Well, I think a lot of people feel that way, don't they?

*GLM*: Then minoritizing — and this maybe could go along with what Frank Davey is saying about the international scope of *Heroine* — can perhaps no longer be seen only as a very localized problem. It doesn't just have to do with English and French in Québec. It also has to do with the whole global dimension of English eroding local cultures and languages, and with the potential erosion of English by these same local cultures and languages. Could this be seen then as not only linked to the Canadian and Québec scenes, but also to something that is a very general response to what's happening on the global scene? Minoritizing has shifted in its focus from the binaries of the 70s and 80s.

*GS*: I would second that. It's obvious in the way writers are identifying very much with where they speak from, even as they are open to what's happening globally.

*GLM*: Yes, it seems that the whole notion of where minority lines can be drawn has been reconfigured to become more of a global issue than just a local Canadian and Québec issue. The evolution of your writing, I find, reflects this. My next question is this: do you see literary translation as the negotiation of difference or as the negotiation of sameness?

GS: Neither. I see it as both a dialectic and a dialogic process — the constant clashing and working out of difference. I'm not trying to emphasize one thing or the other at all: it's both at the same time.

GLM: *My Paris* makes this clear. However, if one conceives of translation as the negotiation of difference, then the question becomes: do you accentuate that difference, do you try to find commonality or, as you say, do you do both? You would say both, but is it a dialectic or a dialogic?

GS: On one level it is a movement between languages and grammars and formal solutions, I suppose, that brings opposites together and tries to find, momentarily, a site of synthesis, to use the classical Marxist notion of dialectics. But if the speaking subject is non-unitary, porous, it absorbs the contradictions along with the rest of the cacophony: more physical things are involved in the dialogic aspect, like multiple bodies and languages intervening in the text. I can see both things working in different ways, and I think as a prose writer I don't want to give up either of those ways.

Nor would Walter Benjamin, who has been a huge influence. My work, at least from the *My Paris* period, is engaged with the way he thinks about the pull between Marxism and messianism. I think he opens up spaces in aesthetics in a way that no other left-wing critic has.

GLM: In your interview with Corey Frost about *My Paris*, you say: "Small-r republicanism — the dangers of a notion of Equality where everyone is the same — is a metaphor for the endless thrust of the Imperial power towards hegemony of ideas and culture."

GS: I mistrust "equality" where it means sameness, levelling.

GLM: Hence the comma of translation....

GS: Yes, hence the comma; hence I'm clearly a Canadian and not an American.

GLM: But you're also wary of liberal pluralism insofar as it fosters inequality.

GS: Absolutely....

GLM: So coming back to the question of the translator's voice with respect to the author's voice, but also with respect to the writer's voice — the writer as translator — and to how all these voices get — or don't get — articulated within the translation, there's a lot of theoretical work in transla-

tion studies on the translator's presence versus the translator's invisibility in the translated text. One of the current dominant views is that the translator is always present as voice in the translated text, the question being, where? And how does it dialogue with the author's voice?

*GS:* When I translate an author, I try to show equal respect for the source culture and the intended audience's culture.

*GLM:* The whole notion of respect, however, gets caught up in different paradigms. One viewpoint is that the translator's role is to bring the cultural other — text, author, culture — to the translator's own culture, so that the audience can learn about the other culture. And then there's another viewpoint that sees this as ethnocentric, as subjecting the other to the self: on the contrary, as a translator you should take your audience to the cultural other.

*GS:* Yes. The problem with that question and that theory is that they're not entirely suitable to one's situation as an Anglo-Québécois translator. When I translate from Québécois to English-Canadian, the English-Canadian culture is more foreign to me than the culture I'm translating from. So I can't answer the question that way.

*GLM:* Yes, I definitely see you in the in-between, whether it's dialogical or dialectical, and one of the interesting things about your translations is that the dichotomies created in translation studies do not hold up for translators like you.

*GS:* This reminds me of a review of one of my translations by a very smart young woman in the *Montreal Review of Books* — *Helen*, I think. She was talking about how there were a lot of Gallicisms in the translation, but there are a lot of Gallicisms in my English. Less actual Gallicisms per se than a certain cadence. For me, that's the flavour of the language I speak and the language I'm writing into, and I don't know how else to do it. Look what Faulkner did with English. English is one of the most porous and elastic languages on the face of the earth — you just have to look at how African American English has totally altered mainstream white American English in the States. Why should we repress the Gallicisms?

*GLM:* Right. We already talked about minoritizing English in your novels. However, it's not so radical in your translations.

*GS:* To repeat what I said earlier, my deference to the author comes into

play. That's my project, the one of essentially gallicizing English when I write my novels, but obviously when I'm translating somebody else, I also want their book to do well on its own terms. On the other hand, the English I write is the English I write — not the English, say, Ann Carson writes —, and people know that when they pick me as their translator. I keep as close aesthetically as I can to the original, while still feeling I'm getting the French across in the English.

*GLM:* Yes, and this is why I think the locus of your translations is not the same as the locus of your writing; nor is your translation project the same as your writing project.

*GS:* You're right, this is very interesting, in a way. Their creative process is not my creative process; but I like the idea of the paradigm of the other text as a constraint. However, my translations and my writing are parallel processes, and there is a certain amount of bleeding from one to the other.

*GLM:* Returning to what you just said about knowing the Québécois culture better than you know the English-Canadian culture, how does this play out in literary translation when you have to deal with that English culture and audience expectations? What are the problems — or the advantages — of having a far better knowledge of the culture you are translating from than of the culture you are translating into?

*GS:* It's true that, being Anglo-Québécoise, I'm not invested in the rest of Canada in the same way as if I lived in Toronto. We are in our own peculiar space here, for better or for worse. With writing, there is that big question mark: to whom am I speaking at the end of the line? It's true that I don't really know who, and sometimes I think that my translations, like my writing, are of more interest five years after they're done than they are right away, when people are able to absorb the complexity of what I'm actually doing. Happily, in English Canada right now, there are so many writers of colour and varied origins who are bringing their own cultural and linguistic particularities into English. In a funny way this makes my own translations more readable.

I really believe in rigour and excellence, and that's always the fine line you walk with experimentation: I want my work to be very, very, very good and very good for the author I'm translating, so I have to make choices sometimes that are different from those I make in my own writing.

*GLM:* There could, however, be an advantage, as an Anglo-Québécoise



translator of Québec literature, to not knowing the Canadian culture as well as an Anglo-Canadian translator of Québec literature. Are you perhaps in a better position to debunk stereotypes about Québec?

*GS:* Hopefully.

*GLM:* But are you consciously doing this? Do you think it might be part of your translation practice?

*GS:* My writing practice feeds my translation practice; I'm not somebody else when I translate. I remember thinking very clearly, when I was writing *Heroine*, that it would be so easy for me to give English Canada what they want, the clichés about a certain kind of so-called Québec low-life, an almost kitsch view of Québec, which is not so much the case now but was more the case in the seventies. For awhile Québec got presented as a spaghetti western. I was also resisting the highly sentimentalized, hockey sweater, Roch Carrier kind of image of Québec that still gets projected on the morning shows. I didn't want to take that route; I didn't want my French friends to be ashamed of me.

*GLM:* Can you think of specific examples from your translations of an image or a view that you knew was going to go against the grain of Anglo-Canadian preconceived notions?

*GS:* I try and convey, every chance I get, in my work, what the Québec people and French culture have been through, and why it's very important to francophones to be heard for who they are, which they still aren't. There is still, in some quarters, an underlying contempt, clouded over by a sheen called multiculturalism. I think this underlies many of the discourses that you hear in the Montréal Anglo community. I see it in the newspapers, although less and less, it's true. You see it still in English Canadian media as well.

What I aim for does not involve a specific strategy, but it's certainly something that's in the back of my mind that probably reinforces the choices that I make every time I work.

*GLM:* I'm getting a sense from what you're saying that you have a feeling that Anglo-Québécois literary translators are conveying a different image of Québec than literary translators situated in Toronto, Winnipeg or Vancouver.

*GS:* I don't know about Anglo-Québécois literary translators. I know

myself. I'm not sure what you're saying is always the case, either way. I've read excellent translations from English Canada and from the U.S. But one can say "d'où je traduis" as one says "d'où j'écris."

*GLM*: Maybe you could talk a little bit about Anglo-Québécois literature. You consider it to be a cultural reality. Some people, though, resist this. I'm referring, for instance, to remarks made by Gilles Marcotte.

*GS*: It's above all a linguistic reality. The most important thing, in terms of how the term relates to my own writing and possibly my translations as well, is that the best Anglo-Québécois writing sounds different; its diction is different from anything you find in English Canada. You can say it about Klein, you can say it about Leonard Cohen, you can say it about Richler's best work, which in my opinion is *The Street*.

*GLM*: Could you say it about someone like Hugh McLennan?

*GS*: No. I think his work is important as a social document, but this is why I choose to teach Morley Callaghan instead of McLennan. I don't particularly like how Callaghan writes about Montréal — it's very exoticized —, but probably because he hung around with the avant-garde in France before he started trying to write about here, he gets the sound better, he gets something about it that Hugh McLennan didn't get. There's really a very Montréal tradition, although it's uneven. Two or three excellent younger writers, such as Heather O'Neill, Corey Frost and of course Catherine Kidd, who's like a literary cabaret star, are carrying it on. But they are different from my generation, which was caught up in a very radical time, aesthetically and politically.

*GLM*: I'm very interested in literary translation insofar as it potentially fosters not necessarily bilingualism, but perhaps biculturalism and even multiculturalism. I see this as very much a part of your writing, and I wanted to know if, generally speaking, you see, within the Canadian context, this being an element of translation. Translation isn't something that people tend to think of as a "noble" activity, even though it's engrained in our way of life. What is the importance of translation in the process of cultural exchange in Canada?

*GS*: It's vital. But, although there are exceptions, with the way the book industry is right now, much translation work is wasted; all this work is done, all this money is spent getting the book published in another language, and then the translation is not reviewed. After two or three months you can't

even find the book. It's a tragedy. Translation should foster better understanding, but does it? The poor recognition of translated work in English Canada shows that even though we live in a so-called multicultural society and there are many people of "other" mother tongues, language assimilation reigns. The aboriginal population has been culturally genocided. Why do we never address this genocide for what it is? I think assimilation is one of the structuring notions of our society, whatever we say about the mosaic. Coming from Québec, the Canadian discourse seems hypocritical. Québec will probably always have to fight — within Confederation — for its national status. As for Aboriginal cultures, count the times you hear people saying "Everyone in this country is from somewhere else." The Aboriginal presence is often erased or treated like folklore. The fact that more research is being done on translation may help raise some of these issues. But will anybody want to hear?

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