

## **Caragh Barry**

University of California Santa Barbara  
ORCID 0000-0002-0511-7211  
caragh@ucsb.edu

### **Gender and Translation Theory in Fiction: Andrés Neuman's *El viajero del siglo***

By deliberately choosing a female-identified translator character as one of the protagonists, Argentine author Andrés Neuman in his award-winning novel *El viajero del siglo* (2009) [Traveler of the Century] engages with often-overlooked aspects of translation that are central to feminist translation theory and those who work with gender and translation. This article examines this phenomenon as seen in Neuman's novel and focuses on the identity and portrayal of the character Sophie Gottlieb, who defies expectations set for translators in previous works of fiction. This unique portrayal of the translator-character through Sophie exemplifies three main trends in translation theory when explored through a gendered lens: the idea of translation as an expression of agency (Simon 1996; von Flotow 1997; Maier 1998); the metaphors of translation and the concept of production *versus* reproduction (Chamberlain 2012; Godayol 2013); and translation as collaborative, creative, and transformative (Littau 2000). By choosing to create an aristocratic female character in what would become modern-day Germany in the nineteenth century, Neuman both shows how women historically gained a form of agency through translation as well as defies previous expectations for what topics a translator character could be used to explore.

Keywords: translation; fiction; gender; metaphors; agency

### **Introduction**

Despite the importance of more well-known works of what Klaus Kaindl and Karlheinz Spitzl refer to as “transfiction,”<sup>1</sup> which thoughtfully

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<sup>1</sup> Kaindl and Spitzl, *Transfiction. Research into the Realities of Translation Fiction*. The term “transfiction” refers to works of fiction that heavily feature translation and translators as subjects.

consider many of the problems and paradoxes that translators must face when performing their work, many of these feature male translator protagonists and only offer a pessimistic portrayal of translation. These works often rely on negative, gendered tropes and showcase a tragic ending as one of the only possible outcomes for these characters. However, several more recently published novels like *El viajero del siglo* by Andrés Neuman are challenging these narrative outcomes. Many of these works feature female translator protagonists, and while they also lay bare the paradoxes and power struggles involved in the translation process, their final tone is decidedly more positive. Instead of the translator being doomed to voicelessness, a tragic death, or failure as a result of feeling the need to leave the profession, through these more recent characters and the concerted development of their identities in relation to their work as translators, these works promote an understanding of translation that is creative, communal as opposed to isolating, and individually and linguistically transformative.

As scholars of transfiction such as Rosemary Arrojo,<sup>2</sup> Kaindl and Spitzl,<sup>3</sup> and Nitsa Ben-Ari<sup>4</sup> have noted, translators are often portrayed in fiction as powerless, weak, wannabe writers subjected to the whims of the more powerful author. These portrayals often appear in gendered terms, where the weak, symbolically castrated translator is feminized, or he is portrayed as a treacherous womanizer, not to be emulated. As Lori Chamberlain demonstrates in her 1988 article “Gender and the Metaphors of Translation,” and Pilar Godayol confirmed in “Metaphors, Women and Translation: From *Les Belles Infidèles* to *La Frontera*,” for centuries gendered metaphors were applied to the practice of translation. These metaphors established parallel hierarchies between that of man to woman and author to translator; father to child and original to translation; as well as father/husband/protector to woman and translator to “virginal” original text. When the text itself is gendered as female, the translator (gendered as male in this case) is charged with bringing it into another language, but while doing so he must protect

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<sup>2</sup> Arrojo, *Fictional Translators*.

<sup>3</sup> Kaindl and Spitzl, *Transfiction*.

<sup>4</sup> Ben-Ari, “Representations of Translators in Popular Culture”.

the text's "integrity," much like how in traditional patriarchal societies it was the duty of the father or brother to protect the chastity of his daughter/sister until she could be married and (re)produce *legitimate* offspring, recognizable as belonging to the father. In these metaphors, women are not given any agency (symbolic or otherwise), and are equated to the reader, who the translator seduces away from the author, or to the virginal text that must be protected at all costs. However, once the translator character is a woman, as is the case of Sophie Gottlieb in *El viajero del siglo*, the "traditional" gendered metaphors of translation no longer seem to apply. While these traditional metaphors outlined by Chamberlain and Godayol emphasize a negative connotation of being female and of being a translator, through characters like Sophie, we see how translation can be transformative, empowering, and a means to exercise individual agency. Sophie's character and the gendered metaphors employed throughout the novel exemplify three important trends in translation theory in relation to gender: translation as an expression of historical and political agency, the power and pervasiveness of gendered metaphor in translation, and translation as a collaborative, creative, pleasurable, and transformative endeavor. By including these three important trends, *El viajero del siglo* stands in stark contrast to other, previous works of transfiction that ultimately portray translators and translation in a negative light.<sup>5</sup>

### ***El viajero del siglo*: Political, historical, and individual agency through translation**

Refreshingly, Andrés Neuman's *El viajero del siglo* challenges these tropes about gender and translation in fiction by presenting important elements of feminist and gender studies in translation theory through the plot elements and metaphors employed throughout the novel. The first of these elements is a historical one that shows how, contrary to the portrayal of translation in previous writings where male translators are

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Julio Cortázar's "Carta a una señorita en París" and Rodolfo Walsh's "Nota al pie", in which the translator-protagonist dies by suicide, or Moacyr Scliar's "Nota ao pé da página", Italo Calvino's *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore*, and Carlos Fuentes's "Las dos orillas", all of which feature a traitorous and unreliable translator, to name just a few notable examples.

notably feminized and stripped of their patriarchal authority as creative writers,<sup>6</sup> translation has been a way for women to gain and exercise their agency as writers.

As Sherry Simon,<sup>7</sup> Luise von Flotow,<sup>8</sup> Susanne Stark,<sup>9</sup> Christina Zwarg<sup>10</sup> and other translation scholars have shown, translation has historically been an empowering activity for the (wealthy, white, aristocratic) women who were able to use it as a means of entry into the literary world. Because these women were supposedly just repeating the works of male authors in another language as opposed to writing their own pieces, it was considered more permissible. However, many women subversively used their translations to write introductions in which they expressed their pro-women views, advocated for women's writing, or simply dared to comment on the text itself. In this way, translation presented women with a sort of literary agency that had previously been denied to them. In Simon's groundbreaking work *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission*, she dedicates a chapter to analyzing how several different historical female translators have not only expressed their agency through translation but also left their mark on literary and cultural history. Simon argues that "translation has at times emerged as a strong form of expression for women – allowing them to enter the world of letters, to promote political causes and to engage in stimulating writing relationships."<sup>11</sup> While she acknowledges that the opposite argument could be made, that translation is constricting rather than liberating, the plethora of cited examples demonstrates that translation indeed could provide a literary outlet for women. For this reason, Simon explains the importance of studying their translations along with other writings and

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance Jorge Luis Borges's "Pierre Menard, autor del *Quijote*", Isaac Babel's "Guy de Maupassant", Jacques G lat's *Le Traducteur*, etc., all of which feature weak, effeminate translators who are wannabe writers. For a metaphorical discussion on gender, the author as patriarchal authority, and how these relate to translation, see Lori Chamberlain's "Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation."

<sup>7</sup> Simon, *Gender in Translation*.

<sup>8</sup> Von Flotow, *Translation and Gender*.

<sup>9</sup> Stark, "Women and Translation in the Nineteenth Century".

<sup>10</sup> Zwarg, "Feminism in Translation: Margaret Fuller's 'Tasso'".

<sup>11</sup> Simon, *Gender in Translation*, 39.

paratexts: “The productions of women translators are to be studied for what they can tell us about their intervention in cultural and intellectual movements of their times, and for the ways in which they themselves construe their gendered identities as relevant.”<sup>12</sup> Based on the translated texts themselves, several scholars tentatively began to speculate about the female translators’ lives and how their identities as women may have influenced their translation process. While this method of psychoanalytically analyzing the translations of historical women to hypothesize about their personal lives and opinions may be criticized for being too speculative for nonfiction, fiction can step in to explore the personal lives of these women where history and psychology cannot. In this way, transfiction that features female translators (*El viajero del siglo* in particular) is especially useful. Instead of picking apart translation products, these works provide a space to speculate on the private lives of these translators, as well as to demonstrate how the process of translation leads to a greater and increased expression of individual agency.

While the fact that Sophie Gottlieb in Andrés Neuman’s *El viajero del siglo* may fit the transfiction “stereotype” of an aristocratic woman who begins translating as a form of intellectual entertainment, her character differs from the earlier portrayals of translators in fiction in several ways. In the novel, Sophie is the daughter of a wealthy merchant in the fictional town of Wandernburgo (in modern-day Germany) and the hostess of Wandernburgo’s premiere salon. Setting the novel in Romantic Germany provides the perfect environment to examine translation in a positive, creative, and transformative light, as the German Romantics viewed translation as a means to add new genres to the repertoire of the German language and therefore form a new, nationalistic canon. As a wealthy, aristocratic woman, Sophie is therefore able to use translation to express her personal and political agency. She is able to participate as a translator in the political process of nation-building and related canon-forming that was the backbone of the intellectual experiments behind the formation of the German

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<sup>12</sup> *Gender in Translation*, 42.

nation-state in the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to other prevalent notions of translation that thought of translation as a lack or a degradation of the original text, the German Romantics had a positive understanding that effectively cemented the importance of translation as an integral part of German culture. As Antoine Berman notes, there was “a tradition in which translation henceforth, and up to the present century, has been considered an integral part of cultural existence and, furthermore, as a constitutive moment of Germanity (*Deutschheit*).”<sup>14</sup> In this era, translation had an air or mutuality<sup>15</sup>, and there was an emphasis on “play”: “It can be said that, to a certain extent, Romantic translation seeks to *play* with languages and their literatures, to make them ‘fall into’ one another at all levels.”<sup>16</sup> Both of these ideas were a far cry from the previous hierarchies between authors and translators, and essentially elevated translation to the level of cultural production.

From the moment the reader encounters Sophie it is apparent that, while not totally unheard of for the time,<sup>17</sup> she has rather progressive views for the nineteenth century on the public role and rights of women. In her position as hostess, Sophie often expresses and argues in support of her views that women should be allowed a more active role in political life, and she maintains that this role can be gained through “subversiones privadas”<sup>18</sup>. Sophie defends these political activities, citing Mary Wollstonecraft and Friedrich Schleiermacher, to whom she frequently refers.<sup>19</sup> Sophie even seems to foreshadow her own,

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<sup>13</sup> Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign*. For a detailed analysis of the importance of translation and how translation theory was shaped in Romantic Germany, see Antoine Berman’s 1992 *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*.

<sup>14</sup> *The Experience of the Foreign*, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign*, 64.

<sup>16</sup> Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign*, 15 (emphasis added).

<sup>17</sup> Stark, “Women and Translation in the Nineteenth Century.” Stark points out that, despite Virginia Woolf’s insistence on the need to kill “The Angel in the Home,” women who translated and produced important work in the nineteenth century despite gender roles of the time were much more common than previously thought.

<sup>18</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 80.

<sup>19</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 195-196. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the Prussian theologian and philosopher who at times promoted ideas friendly to a feminist

independent future when she discusses the freedom to choose to be happy that she would like to see in fictional female characters:

Amiga mía [...] le confieso que tanta tragedia femenina me alarma. Los cronistas y los lectores aman a las heroínas, pero las aman muertas. Y las pobres van de aquí para allá con la obligación de inmolarsse. ¿No podríamos tener heroínas un poco más felices?<sup>20</sup>

All these moments and character traits serve as a baseline to set the stage for Sophie's future personal growth and increased confidence through her journey with translation. Despite these progressive proclivities, Sophie is not as independent as she would like to be. Hans comments more than once on the fact that despite her apparent worldliness, Sophie has never left Wandernburgo. Additionally, for most of the novel she is engaged to Rudi Wilderhaus, a wealthy member of the Wandernburgo elite. Since her father's businesses are not faring well, he supervises and pressures his daughter into marriage with Rudi so that she may live comfortably. In order to ensure that she goes through with the marriage and that Sophie maintains her honor before the wedding, she is chaperoned and followed by the servants who work for her father, and there are numerous situations in which she cannot speak directly or freely. As a result, Sophie frequently complains about the restrictions that the Church and society place upon her as a woman.

Right from the moment Sophie begins to translate, the positive ideas of translation at the forefront of German Romantic thought and methodology are present in the *Zeitgeist* of the novel, and lead to an almost immediate transformation in Sophie. Already a confident character in expressing her beliefs, she becomes even more sure of herself as she progresses:

Sophie le formuló a Hans tres o cuatro *tímidas* objeciones que él encontró asombrosamente atinadas. [...] Se pusieron manos a la obra y, a pesar de que

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agenda, and is well known in the field of translation studies for his foundational 1813 lecture "Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens" ("On the Different Methods of Translating").

<sup>20</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 172.

Sophie insistía en que el inglés no era su fuerte, Hans se quedó prendado de la facilidad con que ella reordenaba las frases, alternaba los adjetivos o se atrevía con licencias razonables: parecía una niña *jugando* con objetos *que manejaba a su antojo*. Viendo la *avidez* con que Sophie releía los textos, su *deleite* al detenerse en los pasajes difíciles o recitar en voz baja los versos, Hans tuvo una idea que lo llenó de deseo y entusiasmo.<sup>21</sup>

Sophie's timid, tentative beginnings soon give way to a confident and playful mastery. As the novel progresses, the reader sees more of how this process of translation leads to Sophie asserting herself even more and participating politically in the German Romantic process of nation and canon formation, inserting what von Flotow refers to as a "female frame"<sup>22</sup> into the conversation. When it comes to choosing which authors to translate, Sophie more than once advocates for women writers and criticizes male writers who espouse misogynist views. Sophie advocates for including Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz's sonnet "Al que ingrato me deja, busco amante", a poem that is both about and an expression of female agency, and contrasts the poem with Garcilaso de la Vega, about whom she remarks, "siempre con esa espantosa idea de fondo: te amo si te callas, eres perfecta porque apenas te conozco, ni falta que me hace."<sup>23</sup> The inclusion of Sor Juana's poem is particularly poignant because of Sor Juana's "feminized use of the discourses of courtly love, patronage and morality as a sign of subversive activity."<sup>24</sup> Sophie's insistence on translating and including female authors in her work with Hans demonstrates her attempts to contest the dominating male narrative of literature at the time. With the German Romantic understanding of translation as a way to bring new genres and literatures into the German canon, Sophie's translation of this poem and the inclusion of several female poets writing in German (including Jean Paul, Karoline von Günderrode, and Bettina von Arnim) marks the canonization of critical female voices in German literature. As Carol Maier explains in "Issues in the Practice of Translating Women's

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<sup>21</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 294 (emphasis added).

<sup>22</sup> Von Flotow, *Translation and Gender*, 74.

<sup>23</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 362.

<sup>24</sup> Von Flotow, *Translation and Gender*, 69.



Fiction,” this selection process is a critical expression of agency. She notes:

[Translation as representing an author] can also prompt a sense of responsibility not unrelated to power, especially if one accepts performativity’s paradox and endeavours to exploit it, bearing in mind particularly that representation is inherent in translation, and not only in a theatrical context. For to translate an author is to represent that author in a new language and tradition, and such representation involves agency. [...] Not only do they decide which works they translate and how responsibly they carry out their translations, their understanding of gender-related issues (including their feelings about their own gender identifications as well) to a large extent determines an author’s appearance in another language.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, in this way, Sor Juana and Garcilaso de la Vega would then be brought into German literature through a lens that is keen on the equal representation of women. Sophie’s repeated and increasing insistence on including female voices in her translation and editing work with Hans demonstrates an increased confidence in Sophie to advocate for more female representation and participation in German cultural and political life, as well as the desire to include these women in the creation of the new, Romantic German nation- and canon-building processes. These translations effectively become Sophie’s “subversiones privadas”.

By the end of the novel, the reader can see how these experiences of translation allowed Sophie to express her agency personally, sexually, culturally, and politically. Despite some of Sophie’s hesitancy about being a woman translator and her frustration regarding the societal restrictions placed on her as a woman, these experiences of expressing her agency translate into personal growth. Sophie ultimately ends up alone, unlike the typical fairytale heroines or angel/mother of the home. As she explains in her last conversation with Hans, “Pero eso, dijo él, también es tu vida: traducir, escribir, ¿no? Esos, contestó ella, sólo son mis sueños. [...] Con gesto desolado pero firme, Sophie contestó: Es mejor no seguir

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<sup>25</sup> Maier, “Issues in the Practice of Translating Women’s Fiction”, 103-104.

a nadie, ¿no te parece?”<sup>26</sup> Rather than leaving with him to translate, she knows that she must stake out her own path based on her principles. For this reason Sophie finally leaves Wandernburgo alone for the first time in her life, presumably to travel and to translate, as the reader last encounters her following the wind that takes a three page-long detour through Wandernburgo: “[S]e marcha del camino del puente donde ahora Sophie, de pie con dos maletas, sujetándose el tocado para que no se le vuele, espera la llegada del próximo carruaje, dos maletas llenas de ropa, papeles y dudas.”<sup>27</sup> Through this entire process of expressing political, personal, and sexual agency through translation, Sophie is able to practice what she preaches and live as an independent woman, and the reader is offered a positive, non-tragic ending for Sophie.

### **Revisiting and reimagining the gendered metaphors of translation**

Beyond the elements of the plot that explicitly demonstrate a change in how translators are portrayed and how they express their agency, *El viajero del siglo* is also unique in how it revisits and reimagines the metaphors commonly used to describe translation, particularly the most commonly used metaphors having to do with gender. In her article “Metaphors, Women and Translation”, Pilar Godayol takes on the task of categorizing and describing the various types of metaphors historically employed in translation discourse. Godayol dubs the oldest and longest phase of metaphors “The First Age or *les belles infidèles* (the age of sexist and androcentric sexual metaphors).”<sup>28</sup> Because of its age and duration, it comes as no surprise that these sexist, gendered metaphors would also appear in transfiction. In *El viajero del siglo*, the reader repeatedly encounters two such commonly used metaphors from the First Age with the motif of faithfulness or fidelity, as well as the supposedly hierarchical concepts of production vs. reproduction. In her famous essay “Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation,” Lori Chamberlain describes the more common use of these metaphors

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<sup>26</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 516.

<sup>27</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 531.

<sup>28</sup> Godayol, “Metaphors, Women and Translation”, 99.

throughout historical discourse as one that equates men and authors with the superior function of “production,” and women and translators with the inferior “reproduction”.<sup>29</sup> On fidelity, Chamberlain explains:

The sexualization of translation appears perhaps most familiarly in the tag *les belles infidèles* – like women, the adage goes, translations should be either beautiful or faithful. [...] [W]hat gives it the appearance of truth is that it has captured a cultural complicity between the issues of fidelity in translation and in marriage. For *les belles infidèles*, fidelity is defined by an implicit contract between translation (as woman) and original (as husband, father, or author). However, the infamous “double standard” operates here as it might have in traditional marriages: the “unfaithful” wife/translation is publicly tried for crimes the husband/original is by law incapable of committing.<sup>30</sup>

As in earlier discourse on translation and fidelity, this burden of remaining “faithful” in *El viajero del siglo* has been primarily placed on the female protagonist. (Although one could argue that Hans could also be considered a *traduttore traditore*.) Much of the novel’s plot has to do with the fact that Sophie is quite literally being unfaithful to her fiancé, Rudi. Fidelity comes to the forefront when Hans and Sophie begin their relationship and Hans is suspect of Sophie’s actions. In the salons where Sophie, Hans, and Rudi are present, Sophie is first described through Hans’s (male) perspective:

Para los enredados sentimientos de Hans, los viernes Sophie era dos mujeres. Una, la deliciosa cómplice con quien intercambiaba fugaces murmullos. Otra, la que el espejo duplicaba, era la anfitriona impecable y dueña de sus secretos que no eludía las atenciones de Rudi ni evitaba corresponderlas.<sup>31</sup>

Here, Sophie is described as two-faced and duplicitous, literally as being two different women. However, the novel does not stick with this stereotypical characterization of Sophie as the dubious, untrustworthy

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<sup>29</sup> “Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation”, 254.

<sup>30</sup> “Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation”, 255.

<sup>31</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 167.

woman/translator for long. The narration suddenly shifts to explain the more nuanced situation from Sophie's perspective:

Este comportamiento, que tan contradictorio le resultaba a él, era para Sophie el único modo digno de mantener la coherencia: Hans era su amigo, probablemente ya el más íntimo de todos, y no pensaba renunciar a la corriente entre ellos, a ese hormigueo que tanto la deleitaba y al que, ¡faltaría más!, tenía y seguiría teniendo derecho fuera cual fuese su estado civil; pero Rudi iba a ser su esposo, viviría con él a partir de octubre y no estaba dispuesta a despertar sus celos ni a fingir irresponsablemente que no tenían el importante compromiso que tenían.<sup>32</sup>

The narrator then continues to explain Sophie's relationships and relative position with regards to all the men in her life, as well as her personal attitudes towards marriage which, again, are much more skeptical than the fairytale, happily-ever-after variety. In this way, the reader sees that rather than being a seemingly inexplicable fickle duplicitousness in Sophie, Sophie's behavior is the result of the nuanced and complex situation in which she finds herself. It prompts the reader to question the idea of "faithfulness" and to wonder: faithful to whom or to what? In terms of her personal life, is being faithful to her promise of marriage to Rudi the only valid definition of "fidelity"? What about being faithful to her emotions and desires? Her dreams? Is "faithfulness," in any sense of the word, even possible? In the end, the truth of this reality of the nuanced nature of love and fidelity is explained once Sophie reveals her true relationship with Hans to Rudi, and there is catharsis rather than rancor:

Ella había caminado durante meses sobre una cuerda floja y, como era previsible, había terminado cayéndose. Pero ahora podía mirar a Rudi sin ningún fingimiento. Y empezaba a notar que había más fortaleza en su sinceridad de mujer infiel que en la indignación rabiosa de su prometido.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the fact that she is a "fallen" woman according to the quote, Sophie is comforted by the truth of her infidelity, rather than

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<sup>32</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 167.

<sup>33</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 513.

the impossibility of maintaining a traditional notion of “faithfulness” to any of the men in her life.

The explanation for Sophie’s apparent treacherousness and “infidelity” is important in unveiling the nuances inherent to any complex situation. More importantly, however, these nuances parallel the complex nature of the translator’s relationships and responsibilities, as well as the impossibility of maintaining “faithfulness” to the original text in the sense of complete equivalence from one language to another. Just as how a flesh and blood translator must juggle responsibilities toward the author they are translating, responsibilities to their readers in the target language, responsibilities towards the text itself, towards the original and target cultures, towards the publisher, etc., Sophie must adjust her behavior in light of her situation with each other character. Both situations reveal to the reader that the definition of “faithfulness” – either in the case of romantic relationships or translation – is not as neatly demarcated as previously thought or depicted.

Additionally, the novel itself consistently reminds the reader that Sophie is constantly thinking about her situation and the various nuances of fidelity, especially for women: even the works she chooses to include in Hans and Sophie’s writings and translations feature this theme. Of all the works that are mentioned and quoted in translation within the novel, Sophie suggests two that emphasize and highlight the nuances of fidelity in love and translation. The first is the aforementioned “Al que ingrato me deja, busco amante,” a sonnet that also emphasizes the complicated and nuanced position of a female speaker when it comes to love. The second is “Ob ich Dich liebe, weiß ich nicht,” a poem written by Bettina von Arnim that deals with the uncertainty of whether the poetic voice is truly in love, and ends with the lines:

Si es fiel tu niña, no sé.  
Aunque ella ruega a los cielos  
que tu amor nunca esté lejos,  
si es fiel tu niña, no sé.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 403. Translated into Spanish in the novel by the author, this translation notably seems to emphasize the female voice in the poem.

Much like the fact that the actual task of translation cannot involve an impossible, blind and total “faithfulness” to the author of the original text, or even to the idea of the original text itself, translation is necessarily a task of mediating various, and oftentimes competing, factors: the linguistic possibilities available to the translator in the target language, the needs of the publisher, the desire to maintain some type of “equivalence” with the original, the adventurousness of the reader, the cultural contexts and histories of both texts, etc. By demonstrating nuance through Sophie’s situation and the recurring motif of fidelity in these translated works, the idea of faithfulness itself is questioned, and the hierarchical dichotomy between original/translation and man/woman as described by Chamberlain and Godayol is upended. The novel even addresses the issue directly during a debate about translation when Hans explains:

[C]reo que esa fidelidad es una paradoja [...], quiero decir, en el fondo es una paradoja, porque en el mismo instante en que aparece en escena otro texto la fidelidad es inalcanzable, el poema ya es distinto, se ha convertido en otro. [...] Tal como la entiendo, una traducción no se compone de una voz de autoridad y otra voz que la obedece, es más bien un encuentro entre dos voluntades literarias.<sup>35</sup>

Therefore, as Hans explains it, translation (and by extension romantic relationships) should not involve a relationship of domination and subjugation, but rather one of an equal partnership.

### **Pleasure and present over production vs. reproduction**

In addition to demonstrating the invalidity of the male/female author/translator hierarchical dichotomy, the novel also upends the gender/sexual hierarchy of production vs. reproduction through the sex as translation metaphor. Rather than placing the emphasis on the lack or loss that is inherent in translation, or worse yet, equating translation to a masculine, penetrative, violent, and exploitative activity as George Steiner<sup>36</sup> and other theorists have done, *El viajero del siglo* takes a

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<sup>35</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 316-317.

<sup>36</sup> Steiner, *After Babel*.

different approach. Along with her cultural and political contributions in *El viajero del siglo*, Sophie also flouts the reader's expectations of an aristocratic woman's sexuality and demonstrates individual agency through her sexual liberty and experience. Unlike the typical "angel of the house" or "virgin" stereotypes attributed to women (and especially aristocratic ones) Hans (and the reader alike) seems surprised at her assertiveness, authority, and strength:

Pensó en la honestidad casi brutal de los instintos de Sophie, en su inesperada fuerza física. Al contrario de lo que él había supuesto, ella no se limitaba a recostarse lánguidamente y dejar que él tomara decisiones: saciaba su deseo con la naturalidad de un jarro que se vuelca.<sup>37</sup>

This sexual aspect of the novel is significant not only for its exploration of language and intercourse, in all the senses of the word, but also to intimately demonstrate translation as a joyful, collaborative, and connective activity. This extended metaphor underscores the idea of translation as "play" rather than an isolating and destructive activity as previously seen in other works of transfiction.

While the ways in which *El viajero del siglo* employs sex as an extended metaphor to discuss translation still remain in what Godayol refers to as the "Derridian 'double bind' (the age in which Derrida presents a model of metaphor which, despite using sexual language, defends the woman and translation)",<sup>38</sup> as Littau points out this more feminist metaphor promotes thinking about translation and its inevitable impossibility of equivalence in terms of the Derridean "undecidability": "[U]ndecidability then is not conceived in terms of a loss, but a potentially unstoppable gain."<sup>39</sup> By constantly intertwining sex and translation, the novel emphasizes a positive portrayal of both: that of play, mutual pleasure, collaboration, and potential gain. As the novel first describes Sophie and Hans's sexual and working relationships:

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<sup>37</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 292.

<sup>38</sup> Godayol, "Metaphors, Women and Translation", 99.

<sup>39</sup> Littau, "Pandora's Tongues", 26.

Hans y Sophie pasaban de los libros al catre y del catre a los libros, buscándose en las palabras y leyéndose los cuerpos. Así, sin proponérselo, fueron alcanzando un idioma común, reescribiendo lo que leían, traduciéndose mutuamente. Cuanto más trabajaban juntos más se daban cuenta de lo parecidos que eran el amor y la traducción, entender a una persona y trasladar un texto, volver a decir un poema en una lengua distinta y ponerle palabras a lo que sentía el otro. Ambas misiones se presentaban tan felices como incompletas: siempre quedaban dudas, palabras por cambiar, matices incomprendidos. Ellos también eran conscientes de la imposibilidad de lograr la transparencia como amantes y como traductores. Diferencias culturales, políticas, biográficas, sexuales actuaban como filtro. Cuanto más intentaban mediar en ellas mayores se volvían los peligros, los obstáculos, las malinterpretaciones. Pero al mismo tiempo los puentes entre las lenguas, entre ellos mismos, se volvían más anchos. [...] Y aunque Sophie que ningún temblor, ningún poema podía traducirse con otras palabras, porque aquella totalidad era inalcanzable, lo único que deseaba al terminar era empezar de nuevo.<sup>40</sup>

While the previous quote realistically acknowledges the imperfections and impossibilities inherent in translation, as well as the differences that are always present and impossible to overcome when working on translating a text or in an interpersonal relationship, the conclusion is not that translation is futile, quite the opposite, in fact. By ending with the image of widening cultural and interpersonal bridges as well as the excitement of starting fresh with a new translation or making love again, Neuman emphasizes the importance of connection, excitement, and enthusiasm in both translation and sex, not focusing on loss or indecision, but on infinite possibilities.

A key scene in the novel that ties together these themes of translation, fidelity, sex, and production *vs.* reproduction occurs when Hans and Sophie engage in sexual intercourse while Sophie is menstruating. The issues of gender and biological sex are at the forefront as Sophie complains, “Por un lado me siento, o en teoría me sé, más mujer que nunca. Pero por otro lado esto me interrumpe, limita mi plenitud.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 301-302.

<sup>41</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 416.



She wants to make love with Hans, she wants to be independent, but her biology and her social position limit her. However, Sophie also begins to question these natural laws, these “mandates” seemingly given by nature when she thinks to herself, “Difícil ser sincera cuando la naturaleza te da una orden y la conciencia otra. ¿Pero es realmente una orden? ¿O es una maravillosa posibilidad que tengo el privilegio de rechazar?”<sup>42</sup> Immediately in the next paragraph, the reader sees Sophie asking Hans to not pull out, as a way to not only reject the “command” from Mother Nature to not have sex while menstruating, but to also reject the “biological” hierarchy of production vs. reproduction. As a woman, and metaphorically as a translator, her traditional role is to reproduce, to passively provide “legitimate” offspring to the husband/father/author. Yet menstruation, with its related taboos associated with blood and death, cannot be the site of creation or procreation. The novel upends the associations of gender and production vs. reproduction with translation when it describes:

De pronto le pareció natural y profundamente verdadero: ahora, cuando él se volcara en su interior, quedarían unidos por el mutuo deseo de *no* fecundar, de liberar juntos un placer que nacía y moría entero en su propia duración. Si el pasado es una especie de padre [...], el auténtico hijo vendría a ser ese presente absoluto, no el futuro.<sup>43</sup>

As the narration emphasizes, the goal here is specifically to *not* impregnate Sophie, not to reproduce, but to unite the two of them in an authentic, pure present filled with mutual pleasure. There is no male author/father figure, just two translators (“dos voluntades literarias”) whose focus is not on the “legitimacy” of the offspring, but the pleasure of translation, the pleasure of sex, the pleasure of wordplay, the pleasure of the present text. In this way, the hierarchy of production vs. reproduction is rendered irrelevant, as the translator is seen not as a vessel for reproducing a “legitimate” text, but an agent with the

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<sup>42</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 416.

<sup>43</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 417.

freedom to take pleasure in the process of wordplay without concerning themselves with the so-called faithfulness of the “product”.

This scene is also significant because it shows Sophie’s desire not to completely reject all things considered feminine, but rather her rejection of the idea of an imposed mandate on her life because of her biological sex. After Hans and Sophie finish, she once again emphasizes the issue of “reproduction” when she expresses her fears surrounding pregnancy. She draws a clear distinction between wanting to have children and not wanting to be a mother. Aside from the physical worries that come with pregnancy, she also wonders “¿Se puede ser una chica egoísta y una madre generosa?, ¿cómo haces cuando te gustaría ser las dos cosas?”<sup>44</sup> Seemingly, Sophie wants to reject the “mandate” of all that comes with the archetype of motherhood, where motherhood means rejecting herself and dedicating her life to her children and her family, maintaining the legitimate family line for the father. Metaphorically extended to the realm of translation, this preoccupation again exposes the impossibility of being a truly “faithful” translator, a “mother figure”<sup>45</sup> that is tasked with bringing the legitimate translation into the world and to nurture it, but never to interfere with it or leave her mark. Like a good mother, the translator must be selfless, and her own creativity should not be visible in the translation, only the father’s genius and artistry. When Sophie muses about whether it is possible to be both selfish and a generous mother, it once again reveals the impossible situation traditionally placed on both women and translators.

Sophie then emphasizes her desire to reject this biological/social mandate imposed on her as a woman a third time when she begins to criticize Kant. Sophie complains, “Según Kant, dijo Sophie, asesinar a un hijo bastardo es menos grave que una infidelidad,”<sup>46</sup> again bringing up the motif of infidelity and imposing the moral and emotional burden of society’s standards on women. Sophie criticizes Kant’s main emphasis on duty and the categorical imperative by rejecting this standard, rejecting the idea of needing to be a mother, needing to be a faithful

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<sup>44</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 417.

<sup>45</sup> Arrojo, *Fictional Translators*, 114.

<sup>46</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 417.

woman/translator. While Kant's ideas and teachings on morality were intended to be about freedom, for women they are quite the opposite. In the case of killing the bastard child, they are controlling and deadly: "Y así nuestra moral, señor culo bonito, se vuelve lo contrario de la vida. Nos enseñan una moral para restringir nuestra vida, no para comprenderla."<sup>47</sup> Sophie is against these standards and mandates, which is partially why she uses her newfound agency and authority to defend her "illegitimate offspring": the texts that she translates together with Hans. In this way, the novel criticizes these restrictions placed on women as well as questions the hierarchy of author/translator man/woman. Through the extended metaphor of translation as sex and Sophie's character, the novel ultimately places the emphasis on mutual play, pleasure, and possibility rather than on a lack or on a concern for posterity.

### Conclusion

While Andrés Neuman's *El viajero del siglo* is remarkable in several aspects, it is particularly noteworthy because it breaks new ground in transfiction, bringing to life several important themes and discussions previously confined to translators' and academics' circles. Translation and the fidelity of translators are not as cut and dry as one might first assume. As we have seen, by taking the old association of translators and women and translation as an act of romantic love, Neuman pushes the reader to question the traditional hierarchies of man and woman, author and translator by showing us two equal partners engaged in a pleasurable activity that is about the joy of the moment, rather than the faithfulness or legitimacy of the offspring/text. By using the nuanced position of Sophie in particular, the reader can see the parallels between her romantic and social position and the position of a translator, thereby better understanding some of the complexities of translation. Of particular concern to feminist theories of translation and theories relating to gender and translation, through Sophie's political participation in the process of German nation- and canon-building the reader is exposed to how translation can become a way to express agency and involve

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<sup>47</sup> Neuman, *El viajero del siglo*, 418.

female voices in the conversation, rather than as a way of perpetuating the secondary or lower status of women. *El viajero del siglo* is unique in its extensive, careful, and nuanced portrayal of translators, and particularly of women-identifying translators. The novel demonstrates to readers that translators are more than just solitary, secondary, wannabe writers. *El viajero del siglo* lovingly portrays translation as the nuanced, complex, satisfying, and enjoyable activity it is.

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