

The Third Coming of French Critical Geographies: Afterword to a Translation

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Abstract

Critical translation between languages requires consideration not only of the meanings of words, but also of the translator's embeddedness in worlds which assign those meanings. Especially when working with geographic texts, reflecting on the places and spatial experiences that shape our understanding and use of words can be pertinent to creating authentic translations. In translating Yann Calbérac and Marianne Morange and Cécile Gintrac's texts that present an overview of French critical geographies, the translator reflects on ways her own history in French, American, and Canadian academic spaces effects her ability to transfer the nuances of French critical geographies to an Anglophone audience.

Keywords

New Babel, translation, critical translation, French critical translation, French critical geographies

It is common to conceptualize the spaces that languages construct as distinct realms – sprawling metropolises evolving in response to their speakers' histories, circumstances, and values, spaces separated from each other by chasms of meaning. The work of the translator becomes that of the engineer. Her task is to build a structure strong enough to allow meaning to flow between the constructs of language. In their article "Géographies critiques 'à la française'", Marianne Morange and Yann Calbérac (2012) speak to the importance of decompartmentalizing critical French geographies kept isolated by a lack of publishing



opportunities. Translating their article and Cécile Gintrac's (2020) article "Le foisonnement récent de la géographie critique en France" into English offered a bridge for these important perspectives to reach new audiences situated in farther realms.

Constructing flawless bridges of meaning inevitably proves to be an impossible task. Translation studies posits that there is no perfect transfer of meaning from one realm to another. Translations will always be "hybrid texts, born of the inevitable shifts in meaning involved in the translation process... [which] include the cultural and ideological systems of representation, the purpose, aim and strategy of the translation as well as the insight, knowledge, standards and ability of the translator" (Germes & Hussein de Araújo 2016, 4). So much of language is unspoken, and so much of the unspoken is lost in translation.

The work of translation is a compressed space - a flyover zone - that is rarely considered as the texts themselves are offered up for analysis. Yet, much as feminist geographers encourage a situated examination of the places that exist between major metropolises (Massey 1994), looking more closely at the process of translation offers an opportunity to better understand the marginalized spaces that exist between and within languages. For example, both the original and translated texts are published in publicly funded open-access journals, *Carnets de géographes* and *ACME*, respectively. Unpacking this work of translation allows us to consider not only the particularities of French critical geographies vis-à-vis their Anglophone counterparts, but also the transnational commitment to public scholarship shared by critical scholars across language. The collaboration of scholars publishing in these two journals illuminates a space within academic publishing where a politics of coalition that refuses monolingual global hegemony is forming.

Working on this translation also allowed me to examine the space between my own French and English realms and assess my "ego-geography" (Levy 1995), to pull from Camille Vergnaud's (2012) self-reflexive article. I was a first-year undergraduate in the French public university system in 2007, the year the Sarkozy administration passed the neoliberal Liberties and Rights of Universities law (LRU). This is the policy Morange and Calbérac (2012) refer to when they describe the French academy being forced "to redefine its social function while developing budgetary autonomy using an entrepreneurial framework... to offer professional training, evaluate 'competencies,' and produce applied research." It was also in the aftermath of the LRU that academic geographers founded the explicitly political *Carnets de géographes*. Morange and Calbérac identify this moment as an inflection point in the resistance to axiological neutrality in the French academy which critical geographies à la française continue to grapple with today.

Their inflection point was, for me, a starting point. The student body began its strike in protest of the LRU in October 2007. I developed a geographical understanding of academia based on protest routes traced around barricaded university buildings (Fig. 1) and gathering sites for weekly student general assemblies (Fig. 2) where we chanted "education is not merchandise." For me, French geography has always been political. Only in translating the words of my former professors and colleagues from the language of my geographic initiation into the language of my birthplace did I realize that my understanding is partial, temporal, and embedded in my American perspective.



Figure 1: Student barricades in front of the Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris III, where student protesters altered the university's name to read "Good news: Paris fights back", November 2007

Source: Author



Figure 2: Students at a general assembly voting to continue striking against the LRU, December 2007

Source: Author

This realization led me to pose two questions. First, in translating for English-speaking readers, how do I incorporate the history of resistance built into the words chosen by French authors writing to a French audience? What choices could I make that will evoke the unseen background that orients the authors while remaining true to the original text? When Calbérac and Morange explain why they chose *Carnets de géographes* to publish a collection of critical French geographic works, they take for granted that their Francophone audience is already aware of the French academy's neoliberal shift in the early 2000s. The original text does not contain the background information that explains the place of *Carnets de géographes* in French academic publishing today. As translator, I chose to add words to the authors' original text to tease out the history woven into the words. My objective is to retain cultural context in translation; my challenge is to find it in places that remain true to the spirit of the original.

The second question I posed after acknowledging my own embedded perspective on French academic geography was how to treat elements of the original text that revealed French preconceptions embedded in this discussion of critical geography. The authors detail the specificities of French critical geographic thought – its genealogical independence, its political ambivalence, its commitment to field-based empiricism. Unexplored is how this French critical geography remains patriarchal in its references while refusing a genealogy – only male geographers are cited as pillars in the Anglophone tradition. Furthermore, French critical geography eschews the mosaic of geographic subdisciplines that form the image of English-language critical geographic thought and instead proposes the subdiscipline *géographie des minorités* to encompass spatial experiences influenced by race, gender, sexuality, and subalternity (Gintrac 2020). This refusal to subdivide difference seems in line with traditional French values of universalism (Creton 2007; Hancock 2016) and the belief that “the recognition of diverse ‘communities’ in society is detrimental to social justice rather than an integral part” (Hancock 2011, 5).

I first attempted to translate *géographie des minorités* by referencing the Anglophone academy where scholars work within the fluid but clear contours of Black geographies, Indigenous geographies, queer and trans geographies, postcolonial and subaltern geography, and other intersections of identity and space. “Geography of minorities” seemed a clunky translation that emphasizes otherness over difference when understood in English. I proposed to my co-authors replacing the term with “Black geographies,” which I considered more accessible to an Anglophone audience. In the conversation that ensued, we rapidly decided that Black geographies was not an easy substitute for *géographie des minorités* as, on the one hand, it leaves out other groups considered by the subfield (notably sexual and gender minorities) and, on the other hand, Blackness and anti-Blackness are simply not that central to research being done in the subfield.

Our conversation about how to translate *géographie des minorités* revealed another history hidden beneath the words. According to Yann Calbérac, the first work produced under its guise grew from certain French geographers' interactions with Anglo-American geography and experiments with sociological methods. These soon-to-be-critical geographers began to examine gender and indigeneity, but issues of race and postcoloniality arrived later in French debate. While these remain controversial topics, the situation is slowly changing. In an attempt to preserve this history and the specific way that *géographie des minorités* fits into critical French geographic thought, we ultimately decided not to translate the words. In working through the nuances of the untranslatable, specificities

of culture catch the light. In the words of Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch, “the fact that a loose subfield groups different kinds of minorities is in of itself telling about the structuration of French critical geographies” (in conversation with author). Indeed, the work of translation offers a space to reflect on how the words we choose define the worlds we study.

The translator is also choosing words, of course. Each decision on how to reveal tacit cultural background or unexamined positionality in the original text points to a power structure inherent to the work of translation. Translation is only necessary when access to the tools of language is unequal, and unequal access is foundational to power. As translator, I attempted to challenge this power relationship by inviting the authors to reflect with me on the preconceptions I observed in the texts. Our conversations allowed me to better represent the authors’ underlying meaning in my translations. Simultaneously, these discussions situated between French and English created a space for us to examine the contours of power drawn around Francophone and Anglophone critical geographies. The process of translation highlights the exclusion of French scholars confronted with the hegemony of English in academic publishing. Likewise, it calls attention to the colonial overtones of *géographie des minorités*. In bridging languages, translation creates new incisions into the structures of power that may undermine and undo their domination.

In the pursuit of building a sturdy bridge between languages, the work of translation often seeks to achieve a type of linguistic purity that quickly carries the reader from one realm to the other, from one way of understanding the world to another. I am curious, however, about what happens if we cross the bridges more slowly and notice the fissures in translation. Currently, I live in Montréal, Québec. The presence of English and French in the city (not to mention Kanien'kéha and other indigenous languages) requires a constant slowing down, rewording, and rethinking. I see translation in this place not as bridging between distinct spaces of understanding, but of holding a palimpsest up to the light to see the ungainly overlaps of language and culture that create entirely new ways to conceptualize the places we live.

Other scholars have spoken about the opportunity of lingering in the space between languages. In their review of Francophone feminist geography produced in Québec since the 1980s, Patricia M. Martin and Anne Latendresse (2019) explain the invisibility of this scholarship as a tension between “the marginal place accorded to feminist geography in Francophone (Québécois) geography [and] the marginality of Francophone geography in Anglophone (Canadian) geography.... Yet such a reflection also provides the means for imaging strategies for gaining greater visibility” (984).

Beyond the Québécois context, Myriam Houssay-Holzschuch (2020) reflects on the ethical opportunity that European linguistic marginality presents. In considering the confrontation between European scholars and the hegemony of English in academic publishing, she suggests that “continental geographers should not lament our provincialization in the global geographical world as a recent demise but maybe embrace it, as a worthy, if challenging, political project” (41) situated in the legacy of European colonization. Timur Hammond and Brittany Cook (2023) propose “imbrication” as an alternative metaphor to translation as a bridge, as “imbricated means that translation is an act of building multiple relations, a project that can both close down and open up different understandings of political, ethical, and social relationships” (798).

It is common to conceptualize the spaces of languages as distinct realms, but in the space of translation these distinctions and the power structures that uphold them can break down. In conversation with linguistic marginality, provinciality, and imbrication, I return to the image of the palimpsest. We exist in spaces where layers of language, experience, and culture have built up over time, alternatively covering up or revealing what is underneath. In holding our critical geographies up to the light of translation, we might better observe potential futures that exist under the surface of language.

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