

HUSTON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM... (OR WHAT ON EARTH IS “CANADIAN SELF-TRANSLATION” SUPPOSED TO MEAN?)¹

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Introduction

In an early footnote from an article discussing his experiences with translating his own literary work, Daniel Gagnon (2007, p. 165) writes:

J’ai été le premier au Canada à écrire dans la langue de l’Autre, du français vers l’anglais,² et à m’autotraduire ensuite dans ma langue maternelle, de l’anglais au français. Quelques années plus tard, chez le même éditeur, l’anglophone albertine Nancy Huston a entrepris une expérience similaire, mais dans l’ordre inverse.³

However brief, this comment offers valuable insight into Canadian self-translation⁴ and, more particularly, into certain conceptual and methodological problems that Nancy Huston currently (ex)poses for research into this topic. Using Gagnon’s statement as a springboard for analysis, I will explore the presence and impact of Nancy Huston within research related to Canadian self-translation. First, with a view to highlighting inconsistencies in the way Canadian self-translation is defined, I will illustrate how Huston’s Canadianness is variously perceived, subsequently contrasting her identity with that of 19 other self-translators. I will then discuss the repercussions of such inconsistencies, arguing that scholars should be wary of readily classifying Huston—or any other self-translator with a similar sociological profile—alongside writers who have self-translated in Canada. Ultimately, I underscore the importance of

¹ This article has not been presented before.

² The formulation of “du français vers l’anglais” [from French into English] proves somewhat confusing here, since no explicit language transfer occurs at this writing stage; Gagnon seems to allude to the process involved in mentally preparing the text in his mother tongue and subsequently writing it in English (cf. “interior” or “mental” (self)-translation in Oustinoff 2001, p. 46-7 and Jung 2002, p. 27).

³ I was the first in Canada to write in the language of the Other, from French into English, and then to self-translate into my mother tongue, from English into French. A few years later, with the same publisher, Albertan Anglophone Nancy Huston (1993b, 1993a) had a similar experience, but in the reverse order. *My translation*.

⁴ As the concept of Canadian self-translation will be problematized throughout this article, no definition for the term is offered at this time.

clearly and mindfully defining research criteria for national belonging, particularly at this juncture in the evolution of “Canadian self-translation studies.”⁵

Conceptual problems: definitional inconsistencies

In the excerpt quoted above, Gagnon and Huston are unequivocally identified as peers: both are deemed to occupy (comparable) positions within the field of Canadian literature. Here, Huston’s Canadianness is plainly asserted through reference to her native province of Alberta. Yet, whereas Canadian-born Gagnon has remained in Canada and has thus written and translated his works within that space, Huston (Canadian by birth) moved to the United States at the age of 15 and has lived in France since 1973—i.e., for the past 40 years, or two-thirds of her life—producing her self-translations (indeed, producing *all* of the works in her considerable œuvre⁶) there, acquiring French citizenship and winning several French accolades (e.g. prix Femina, 2006). Nonetheless, as recurrently corroborated by anecdotal evidence, academics predominantly consider Huston a Canadian author and—by extension, as far as her Canadianness is concerned—a Canadian self-translator; moreover, the general public is encouraged in significant ways to share this perspective.

Among academics

Consider, for instance, references by professors Álvaro Faleiros (2007) and Jane Koustas (2001). In discussing Brazilian translations of Quebecois poetry, Faleiros comments on Hanciau, Campelo and Santos’s 2001 publication, which brings together translations of works written by “des auteures canadiennes” (Canadian women writers) (p.103). In a footnote, Faleiros proceeds to list a sample of these writers: Nicole Brossard, Lucie Lequin, Louise Dupré, Barbara Godard, Mary Jean Green, Barbara Havercroft, Helen Hoy, Nancy Huston, Linda Hutcheon, and Lori Saint-Martin (p. 103). Citizenship aside (although, like Gagnon, and except for Green, these writers are also Canadian-born Canadian citizens), the writing practices of nearly all 10 of these authors are based in

⁵ This is an adaptation of Anselmi’s “self-translation studies” (Anselmi 2012, p. 17).

⁶ “C’est en français aussi, à Paris, que j’ai osé mes premiers pas dans l’écriture” (Gazier et al. 1997, p 43, quoted in Achour 2006, p. 42). [It’s also in French, in Paris, that I dared to take my first steps as a writer. (*My translation.*)]

Canada. Green and Huston are the exceptions; yet their membership in this group of writers—a group explicitly defined by national belonging (in addition to literary production and gender)—is in no way called into question or nuanced. A misapprehension may well explain why Green, a professor of French and Comparative Literature at Dartmouth College (Hanover, New Hampshire), has been included in this list; it is far less likely, however, that a similar misunderstanding explains the reference to Huston.

In a piece featured in the University of Toronto Quarterly and focused on “[t]he year in translations among Canadian literature for 1999” (Koustas 2001, p. 271), Jane Koustas devotes significant and thoughtful attention to two dozen or so authors, translators and scholars (specifically scholars who have written *about* authors), including Anne Hébert, Marie-Claire Blais, Gabrielle Roy, Suzanne Jacob, Michel Tremblay, Luise von Flotow, Patricia Claxton, Sheila Fischman, David Homel and Daniel Poliquin—in short, something of a who’s who sample of Canadian (French-language) literature and (into-English) translation. The fact that Huston (again, the only individual whose writing practices are not framed within Canada⁷) also figures among them signals not only that she is received as Canadian but also that she is perceived as among our ‘best,’ which reinforces the seeming legitimacy of her belonging.

It is important to note that, in her article, Koustas explicitly recognizes Huston’s work as a self-translator (“she herself translated, or rewrote as she would claim, *L’empreinte de l’ange*” (p. 272)) as well as her status as an expatriate (“Canadian-born, long-time resident of France” (p. 274)). Koustas also reflects on how this self-translator status affects broader literature, how it challenges the way we understand writing and, more specifically, how it contributes to “blur[ring] the distinction between the original and the translation” (p. 272). She does not, however, touch on the ramifications of Huston’s considerable and uninterrupted residency in France, or how this might challenge

⁷ It is worth noting that only one other literary figure who is not based in Canada is mentioned in Koustas’s review: Milan Kundera (incidentally, also a self-translator). However, discussion does not revolve around his writing or a translation of his writing; instead, Koustas addresses a scholarly text written by one Canadian and translated by another: Lin Burman’s English translation (*Kundera, or the Memory of Desire*) of Quebec professor Eva LeGrand’s study *Kundera ou la mémoire du désir* (2001, p. 283).

the way we understand so-called ‘Canadian’ literary production or belonging⁸. This is particularly interesting given that, later in the article, making an appeal consistent with the principles of Skopos theory and of the cultural and sociological turns of Translation Studies, Koustas asserts that “[t]ranslation scholarship needs to consider who is translated by whom when and *where*” (2001, p. 274. My emphasis.).

Among the general public

While Koustas’s article is an example of the way Huston and her Canadianness are appreciated among scholars, the reason Huston appears in the 1999 critical survey at all is that she was nominated for that year’s Giller Prize⁹. Indeed, given her associations with literary awards like the Giller¹⁰ and the Governor General’s Literary Awards¹¹ (the latter of which she was nominated for several times and won once¹²), which are the most prominent awards for Canadian literature, these honours offer insights into how the more general public—at least as far as those interested in (Canadian) literature are concerned—is likely to understand Huston’s literary status as a Canadian. In spite of the fact that, as Davey (2004, p. 17) has pointed out, Huston herself is not altogether comfortable with her “Canadianness”, and English-speaking Canada “has been similarly wary about claiming her”, these awards confirm her belonging.

⁸ In a later publication, however, Koustas raises a related question: “Can a Canadian-born, Anglophone author writing from France, in either French or English, qualify for Canadian French or English-language literary awards?” (Koustas 2008, p. 59)

⁹ She and Anne Hébert were the first writers to have French-language works—in English (self-) translation—nominated (Koustas 2001, p. 271).

¹⁰ Established in 1994 in memory of the late Doris Giller, the annual Giller—known, since 2005, as the Scotiabank Giller Prize—is the handsomest literary prize in Canada: from the outset, the first-place winner was awarded \$25,000, an amount that increased to \$40,000 in 2005 and to \$70,000 in 2008 (<http://www.scotiabank.com/gillerprize/0,5821,00.html>).

¹¹ The Governor General’s Literary Awards (est. 1936) are issued by the Government of Canada through the Canada Council for the Arts and conferred on recipients by the Governor General, i.e., the representative of the Canadian monarch. Currently, the winner in each of the seven literary categories receives \$25,000 (<http://ggbooks.canadacouncil.ca/en/about-apropos.aspx>).

¹² Her *Cantique des Plaines* won the French fiction award in 1993 (generating controversy because the work is a self-translation of her English text, *Plainsong* (see Koustas 2008, p. 62)); she was also nominated in 1996 for *Instruments des ténèbres*, in 1998 for *L’Empreinte de l’ange*, and in 1999 for the self-translation of the latter, *The Mark of the Angel*.

According to eligibility requirements, which effectively define Canadianness, these prizes are open to citizens and permanent residents¹³ alike: on the one hand, the Scotia bank Giller Prize stipulates that, “a book must be a first-edition full length novel or short story collection, written by a Canadian citizen or permanent resident of Canada” (<http://www.scotiabank.com/gillerprize/0,5825,00.html>); in the case of the Governor General awards, the fact that the writer need not live or write on Canadian soil is underscored:

Books must be first foreign or first Canadian edition trade books that have been written, translated or illustrated by Canadian citizens or permanent residents of Canada (*they do not need to be residing in Canada*). In the Translation category, the original work, written in French, must also be a Canadian-authored title. (My emphasis.)¹⁴

Thus, in the nation as a community both imagined and constructed by these awards—both within and outside of Canada, since the prestige and renown of such awards have some international reach—Huston’s belonging to Canada is determined through a kind of performative tautology: she is eligible for the Giller and the Governor General’s award because she is a Canadian citizen; when she is then nominated for or awarded one of these prizes, her Canadianness is reinforced because these accolades are (known to be) specific to individuals who are defined as Canadian. The awards and their eligibility criteria illustrate the pervasiveness of the public’s perspective, the extent to which, and the potency with which, such mechanisms create and reinforce Huston’s Canadian identity, thereby effectively branding her as Canadian.

Yet these eligibility requirements are ambiguous: on the one hand, Canadian membership is based on residency; on the other, it is determined by citizenship (though this does not preclude residency). While eligibility criteria for awards can readily conflate these two prongs of how “Canadian” is defined, thereby allowing nominations for literary works by both Hébert and Huston, research(ers) cannot afford the luxury of adopting the same approach for defining such labels. Scholars must acknowledge the ambivalence

¹³ Similar to the U.S. Green Card, the permanent resident card in Canada has legal currency, allowing permanent residents most of the same rights as Canadian citizens, notably excluding the right to vote (<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/newcomers/about-pr.asp>).

¹⁴ Taken from the web page of the Governor General’s literary awards: <http://canadacouncil.ca/council/prizes/find-a-prize/prizes/governor-generals-literary-awards>.

associated with national belonging (cf. Hari et al. 2014) and, therefore, must also grapple with the fact that, if defined according to residency, Huston would be excluded from eligibility for these prizes. Doing otherwise—i.e., promoting, however inadvertently, these conceptual inconsistencies—amounts, as we will see, to comparing apples and oranges.

Comparatively speaking

In order for us to better understand the conceptual problems that Nancy Huston poses, it is critical that we consider her in relation to other writers who are studied *as* self-translators and who might be defined by scholars and the general public as *Canadian*. Research into Canadian self-translation per se is, at best, in a fledgling state: with the exception of a conference that took place at the University of Udine (Italy) in 2010 on self-translation in Canadian migrant literature¹⁵, existing literature on the topic can be boiled down to a limited number of articles focused, in more or less significant and usually isolated ways, on the following 19 writers¹⁶:

1. Antonio d'Alfonso
2. Honoré Beaugrand
3. Nicole Brossard
4. Robert Dickson
5. Mario Duliani
6. Blanca Espinoza
7. Jorge Etcheverry
8. Margarita Feliciano
9. Daniel Gagnon
10. Alberto Kurapel
11. Dôre Michelut
12. Marco Micone

¹⁵ This conference (*l'Autotraduzione nella letteratura migrante del Canada*) led, in part, to the 2011 special issue of *Oltreoceano* (5), on self-translation in migrant literature more generally.

¹⁶ These writers have been identified based on publications listed in the 17th edition of the Self-Translation Bibliography; Reimers and Saravia were identified within *Oltreoceano*; Dickson and Whitfield were identified in Gagnon 2012.

13. Felicia Mihali
14. Gianna Patriarca
15. Camila Reimers
16. Carmen Rodríguez
17. Gabrielle Roy
18. Alejandro Saravia
19. Agnès Whitfield

Because of this gap in research, there is scarce opportunity for us to observe Huston being studied alongside other Canadian self-translators and as part of an investigation into Canadian self-translation. Indeed, only one publication (i.e. Gagnon 2012) involves a comparison between any of these self-translators (namely, Dickson, Gagnon, Whitfield) and Huston, and it clearly frames the discussion in relation to “Canadian and Québécois contexts” (Gagnon 2012, p. 237). Otherwise, there is little to no opportunity for us to observe Huston being classified with self-translators whose profiles are sociologically distinct from hers. However, without needing to go into great detail about personal history or self-translational production, we can begin to appreciate the potential for such distinctions by examining certain aspects of these profiles. Two general observations can be made about this group of self-translators.

First, they represent a range of (inter)national backgrounds. Several, namely d’Alfonso, Beaugrand, Brossard, Dickson, Gagnon, Roy and Whitfield are Canadian-born and remained in Canada (although Beaugrand lived in Mexico, France and the United States, where he would even acquire American citizenship (Grutman 1994, p.46)). Others eventually migrated to Canada, including Mihali who arrived in 2000 from Romania, and Saravia who relocated in the 1980s from Bolivia (Hazelton 2007, p. 156). Such migrants groups also include writers who were born in Italy (Duliani, Feliciano,¹⁷ Michelut, Micone, Patriarca) and Chile (Etcheverry, Espinoza, Kurapel, Reimers and Rodríguez). Each of these migrant writers ultimately (thus far, at least) settled in Canada; whether or not they remained in Canada, however, is of little importance for understanding how Canadian self-translation is defined. What *is* critical, however, is the

¹⁷ Feliciano, however, identifies more with Argentina, where she grew up, than with Italy (and thus is typically considered a Hispanic-Canadian writer, rather than an Italian-Canadian writer), making her way to California before settling in Canada (Hazelton 2007, p. 51).)

second observation: that each of these writers was in Canada when they produced (one or more of) their self-translations.

In light of these observations, we can conclude that, irrespective of their uniquenesses or of additional similarities between the writers, these 19 self-translators form a cohesive group relative to their Canadianness as self-translators and, meanwhile, are collectively distinct from Huston. Yet, as the discussion in this article indicates, we have every reason to believe that Huston would readily be lumped in with any or all of these 19 as part of a study of Canadian self-translation. Gagnon's footnote, quoted at the outset of the present article, validates this likelihood by foreshadowing it.

Methodological problems: misrepresentations

As we have discussed, Gagnon misrepresents Huston when he focuses exclusively on her status as an Albertan and thereby completely obscures her long-standing status as a Parisian and Paris-based writer. This rhetorical strategy, whereby he manufactures a Canadian self-translation realm that features himself and Huston alone, allows him to create an apparently level playing field between the two writers so that he can retroactively establish a self-translational race between them and beat her at (what he seems to deem) her own game. In the process, he also misrepresents himself and, consequently, our understanding of Canadian self-translation. He self-identifies as one of the pivotal figures, claiming to be the *first* to have self-translated into his mother tongue, the endeavour constituting an “aventure pionnière” [pioneering venture] (Gagnon 2007, p. 165); however, Franco-Manitoban Gabrielle Roy, for one, did the same long before him (Harvey 2006, p. 213-214)¹⁸, as did Honoré Beaugrand, who back in 1900 published French, English and even bilingual editions of *La Chasse-galerie* (Grutman 1994, p. 47-48). Gagnon further misrepresents Canadian self-translation by presenting Huston not just as another self-translator or Canadian self-translator but as the *benchmark* for Canadian self-translation. Yet how can or should other Canadian self-translators be evaluated in relation to her given, as we have seen, the nature of the others that have so far been identified?

¹⁸ Roy self-translated from English into French at least once: the short story “Jean-Baptiste takes a wife” (*Toronto Star Weekly*, December 1936) translated as “Bonne à marier” (*Revue moderne*, Montreal, June 1940).

In a recent study, Grutman (2013) sketches the sociological profiles of Nobel Prize winning self-translators, highlighting the fact that Samuel Beckett—the very prolific, very popular and amply studied nihilist-absurdist—proves much less representative of the other award winners than might have been imagined, particularly considering the proportion of studies devoted to him and the frequency with which he is used as *the* example of self-translation. There is a risk that Huston will become the Beckett (whom she is often compared to, even by herself¹⁹) of Canadian self-translation studies. Even if we ignore for a moment the nature of her Canadian identity and consider only a few variables, Huston proves quite different than the other Canadian self-translators identified:

- in terms of language: whereas Huston works exclusively between English and French (at times, varying the direction), many of the self-translators work with Spanish or Italian;
- in terms of process: whereas Huston regularly engages in simultaneous self-translation (i.e. where both texts are produced through a back-and-forth exchange of writing and (self-)translating (Grutman 2009, p.259)), few of the others have done so;
- in terms of frequency: whereas Huston is quite prolific as a self-translator, only a small number of others have even several self-translations to their name (e.g. Micone).

Given the various ways that Huston fails to reflect other Canadian self-translators, her inclusion among them in research ultimately threatens the validity of related findings.

Conclusions

Explicit, mindful definitions

In this article, I have sought to illustrate how pervasively Nancy Huston is understood as Canadian, how that Canadianness applies to her as an author and/or self-translator, and how this understanding creates conceptual inconsistencies and, consequently, methodological problems for research into Canadian self-translation. Since so little research into the area exists, the term “Canadian self-translation” presently has

¹⁹ See *Limbes/Limbo: un hommage à Samuel Beckett*.

little to no academic currency; however, its meaning is easily interpreted, and apparently in potentially divergent ways. Thus, as the term gains traction, we had best define it with a view to clarity and rigour. Pooling “everyone” together may make for research that seems more impressive, on account of the fact that the group studied is more substantial and that certain self-translators are well-stocked with symbolic capital. However, this all-in approach is also less precise, less rigorous and, ultimately, less relevant to our understanding of writers who translate their own literary works within a particular part of the world.

Canadian self-translation: definition(s)

In the interest of subsequently launching a working definition of Canadian self-translation, I submit the following argument: that, in the context of this area of study, nationality alone proves an arbitrary criterion for belonging, and that it is more useful to circumscribe these writers within a space that is, first and foremost, geographical and thereby shaped by specific linguistic, cultural and political realities. Particularly when the reasons to translate one’s own writing into a subsequent language are so often of scholarly interest, and when these reason(s) are invariably predicated on the time and the space occupied by the self-translators, we must—as Koustas underscored—account for the *where* of their writing practice.

Accordingly, although she is indeed Canadian by virtue of citizenship and commonly held perception, and while she is also a self-translator, Nancy Huston is not a Canadian self-translator. A Canadian *émigré* self-translator, yes²⁰; but, otherwise, Huston is no more a Canadian self-translator than she is a Canadian parent or a Canadian consumer. Rather than an incidental collision of descriptors, Canadian self-translation refers to any instance in which a writer translates his or her own writing into another language while residing in Canada. Otherwise, I suspect we will have even bigger problems to deal with.

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²⁰cf. Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour’s *Alien Tongues: Bilingual Russian Writers of the ‘First’ Emigration* (1989), and Koustas’s *Les Belles Étrangères: Canadiens in Paris* (2008).

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