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(Re)translating Colette: Reflections on gender, performance and feminism

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How does Colette sound – and look – in twenty-first-century English? A shapeshifter herself, French writer Colette performed on stage and wrote autofiction *avant la lettre*. Her work and persona have since been interpreted and reinvented through retranslations, performances, and adaptations, while her ambivalent relationship to feminism has been repeatedly reframed. In this article, I reflect on the challenges of "performing" Colette anew in my translation of her novel *La Vagabonde* (OUP, 2025). I situate the translator's work at both the macro level of cultural context and the micro level of word choice, asking: What role does translation play in the repackaging of an author for a different moment – particularly amid shifting norms around gender, sexuality and racial identity? I argue for a translational practice that works in doubles rather than binaries, and I conclude with key insights from my process of inhabiting Colette's voice today, which may be useful for translators and scholars navigating similar dynamics.

Introduction

French writer Colette is in the spotlight again. In 2023, the literary world celebrated the 150th anniversary of the writer's birth; in 2024, 70 years after her death, her oeuvre in French came out of copyright; in the post-MeToo era, in the anglophone world, we've seen the release of several new English translations of her works, including two of *Chéri* and *The End of Chéri* (Careau; Eprile), *The Cat and the Masked Woman* (Constantine), my translation *The Vagabond* (Egan) and more forthcoming in 2026, together with the making of the British biopic *Colette* (2018). The independence, 'shame-free sexuality', and 'gender fluidity' that Colette lived and portrayed are perhaps more resonant now than ever (Holmes).

This context and renewed demand for Colette tells us something about the wider culture that shapes translation – from the macro questions of text selection to the micro choices on the page. I came to translate Colette's *La Vagabonde* seemingly by chance. I had pitched an obscure and untranslated author to Oxford University Press; the publishing house rejected my proposal but said they wanted to commission new translations of Colette – was I interested? Of course I was! Who wouldn't want to immerse themselves in Colette's world? Still the question must be asked: why another translation of Colette? There are already three English translations of *La Vagabonde*: Charlotte Remfry-Kidd's in 1912 (long out of print), Enid McLeod's in 1954 (in widespread use) and Stanley Applebaum's in 2010. Why not commission a new author, one not yet heard by Anglophone ears?

There are different theories on *re*translation; some argue that translations age faster than originals; some that each retranslation moves closer to the source text (ST) (Berman); some that retranslating is the work of 'continuance and variation', but not 'progress' (Briggs 47). I like Susan Bernofsky's (in Hond) take:

> I am not convinced that a good translation 'ages' as fast or as fully as some like to claim. I love the early-twentieth century feel of Helen Tracy Lowe-Porter's 1927 translation of *The Magic Mountain*. When I think about 'updating' it, it's less because the language needs replacing than it is that I, in the twenty-first century, see different things in Mann's text.

Where every translation is a rewriting of the ST in some way in line with target culture ideology and demands (Lefevere), each reveals some new angle of the ST *and* tells us something about

the society and culture of the translation's production. Whether translations are seen as timeless or not can tell us something about whether a culture grants value to them as objects in themselves. Enid McLeod's 1954 translation of Colette's *La Vagabonde* for example, still offers a pleasurable read and a fascinating study: it opens a window onto Colette, her protagonist, and Belle Epoque France, but also stages a particular relationship – between McLeod and Colette, French and English, 1910 France and 1950s England – and offers a snapshot of British cultural mores and translation trends.

Which hidden parts of Colette's *La Vagabonde* can I see from my positionality, époque and language today? Which aspects of her work jump out, seeking the spotlight, and which rub at uncomfortable angles? In this article, I ask: What is the role of translation in the repackaging of an author for a different time, specifically in the context of changing gender and cultural norms? I will first introduce the author and the text in question, exploring both the heart of *La Vagabonde*'s appeal, which translation needs to recreate, and its shifting value for readers from different contexts. I will then turn briefly to translation theory on performance – what can help us understand the translator's task? – before elaborating some sticky questions, particularly in terms of identity, and articulating key insights from my process.

Colette and *La Vagabonde*

La Vagabonde was published in 1910, first in serialized form in the magazine *La Parisienne*. The novel is a work of autofiction *avant la lettre:* a fictionalized account of Colette's own life immediately after her divorce in her early thirties, when she performed on stage to make a living. We follow protagonist Renée Néré backstage in the music-halls of Paris and wider France, getting an unprecedented woman's perspective on theatre work and people, and accompany her as she alternately avoids and basks in the attentions of a new suitor. Renée's indecision and difficulty reconciling love and financial and social independence as a woman in the Belle Epoque has had lasting resonance with readers. Indeed, Judith Thurman describes *The Vagabond*, in her introduction to the 2001 edition (McLeod translation) as 'a novel that anticipates, by ninety years, the contemporary fashion for wry, first-person narratives by single, thirty-something women'.

Ahead of its time – or timeless? Central to Colette's appeal, and nowhere more so than in *La Vagabonde*, is the way readers have explored their own fears, complexities, passions, and contradictions through identification. From Americans Vivian Gornick, Erica Jong and Alison Bechdel, to Turkish-born Elif Shafak, to later French thinkers and writers like Simone de Beauvoir and Mona Chollet – so many in different times and places have turned to Colette to better understand a woman's place in the world, and to explore feminisms and queer experiences. Colette had a complex relationship with feminism. On the one hand, she famously detested the suffragettes, saying: 'Me feminist? Oh no! You know what the suffragettes deserve? The whip and the harem.' (Colette, Paris-Théâtre, 1910) And, initially, in France, she was celebrated for her anti-feminist, yet 'feminine' writing, with 'instinctive' descriptions of nature, people, and love (Antonioli 68). On the other hand, her life and writing are transgressive, full of complexity and play with gender roles; she's always been a feminist in the domestic and social sense, if not in the political.

In response to shifting norms, gender politics and audience demand, new editions are released, with new paratextual material; new translations are commissioned. Kathleen Antonioli has articulated the repackaging of Colette in the US context: from the way *The Vagabond* was first received as a trivial novel in the thirties; to being sold as feminist (complete with promotional material in places like Ms Magazine) with the emergence of second wave feminism, where it responded perfectly to new calls for sexual liberation and an understanding of the personal as political; to being depoliticized again as romance (with quotes from the right authors on the cover) in the eighties. While a full look at this packaging in different contexts is

beyond the scope of this piece, a quick snapshot reveals how much reception and interpretation of Colette and *La Vagabonde* are tied up in shifting cultural and gender norms. Today, headlines in the Anglophone press for the 2018 biopic, and the 150th anniversary, are unequivocal; Colette *is* a feminist – feminine and 'racy' too, since these are no longer at odds – (Waxman), though cracks might appear under an intersectional lens (Dize).

Our edition – from OUP, myself, and Helen Southworth, who wrote the critical introduction to the volume – of *The Vagabond* enters this context. Our notes, mediated through marketing, produce a backcover that describes the novel as 'unambiguously feminist and unabashedly sensual', and the translation as 'highlight[ing] Colette's depiction of gender, race, class'. The cover image evokes both Renée's time – a man's (André Derain 1906) vision of a dancer/sex worker at a club – and captures the modern demand for an insight into the subject's interiority, as the woman gazes intriguingly back. So how then to understand the translator's task, within this paratextual, and sociohistorical context? To what extent does/should this wider packaging and expected reception shape translator choices?

Translation as performance

As a translator, I am first a reader, and second a mimic, interpreter, performer. The translator must jump between: bridge the distance between worlds and minds and bodies, to inhabit and speak the author's voice. From Australia to France, 2025 to 1910, from the quiet shadows of translation to stage and spotlight, from my writing voice and my feminism to Colette's. On the one hand, Colette, Renée and I have things in common: gender, age, questions and experiences. I grapple with my own indecision as Renée hesitates over big life choices. I find the gaps between my world and Colette's narrow in certain parts of the text and yawn open in others, as the voice jumps from poetic, meditative, dialogic, epistolary, argotic. Colette's lyrical descriptions of colour and nature feel almost outside time and place, like they can be captured in my English, if I just work hard enough. But other aspects are rooted in bodies, neighbourhoods, milieus, and resist materializing in my voice. Language that feels old-fashioned, offensive, or unintentionally strange (danses nègres, faire la grue, vieille fille); terms of endearment (mon ami, mon vieux) which I can't quite feel or hear in my text. I search for reference points, the voices of other anglophone writers, rummage through my vocabulary repertoire: old chum, dear friend, my love. Translation choices loom large.

Edith Grossman (11-12 qtd. in Bermann), describes translation as performance: 'Like an actor, a translator might be said to 'perform' a source text for her new public, hearing the 'voice' of the author and the sounds of the text in her own mind and then interpreting through different words, in her own voice.' Similarly, Brian Nelson (2023) describes it as 'an art of imitation' which 'involves a multiplicity of exact choices concerning rhythm, register, sound, syntax, tone, texture'.

My goal is textual, on the one hand. I seek to replicate Colette's voice by imitating her rhythm, underlying patterns, word order. I don't read the earlier translations, until I have a solid draft of my own, wanting to hear Colette's voice inside *my* head. I make sure the natural and abstract have agency in my English, like it does in Colette's French (it's the spring that winds back time, the thoughts fleeing across the rooftops, the dawn 'bursting naked and blushing out of a milky sky'); I search hard for the perfect colours, like Renée does, as a writer within the narrative ('the words to describe the yellow of the sun, and the blue of the sea'); I copy the excitable form that holds the protagonist's spirit (Oh, to write!)[1]. I use what English can do, compensating somewhere for an aspect lost elsewhere, switching order where necessary, changing punctuation, but never losing the essence. I love this play with words to get the sounds

[1] This paper builds on my "Translator's Note", further contextualising and elaborating examples and challenges within a theoretical framework.

and images right. And in those timeless and placeless parts of the text, getting it 'right' seems possible. The choices will still bear my mark in some way – *my* preference for certain words, *my* way of speaking, what *I* hear in Colette – but I can find the perfect alliteration, le mot juste, the patterns that make Colette the writer she is.

And yet, voice is not only on the page. In a performance, there are also bodies, a stage, an audience, a location, a society. Michaela Wolf describes the 'performative turn' in translation studies as marking a 'movement away from words, artefacts and textual research towards the understanding of the performative processes of cultural practices'. The text alone does not have all the answers. As we move to slang, dialogue and letters, decisions loom large. Which English does Renée speak? How will distinctions be made, in this new context, between the troupe of vagabonds, whose speech is embedded in their class, gender, milieu? What does replicating register and outdated – now sometimes offensive – language mean, with such huge asymmetries in tools and readership (see Bala on moving away from equivalence)? Getting it 'right' is thrown into question: right for whom? According to which criteria for success? And my intuition doesn't necessarily seem like the right guide, in this realm of the political, where stakes are high.

I bring up tricky terms, controversial references, to everyone: friends, colleagues, family, passing acquaintances, my class of students. I can't help myself, being so ensconced in the text for a time. I raise dilemmas – *danses nègres*: should it be 'Negro dances', 'black dances', the name of a dance that is associated with black culture from the time? People often respond from intuition, their *sense* of the right answer, or justifiably turn the question back on me, to what I want to achieve and to the 'done thing':

- Do you want the reader to enjoy the text, escape into a readable novel, or teach them about Colette, her writing, her time?
- Modernize it or evoke the period feel?
- Censor, or give readers the gritty, raw, problematic truth?
- What does the editor say?
- What does the translation community/scholarship/profession say?

Translation theory has often been spoken about in binaries: Venuti's foreignization and domestication, or Nida's dynamic or formal equivalence. But scholarship has always complicated these poles, as has practice, and there is no one 'done thing'. None of the binary questions make sense to me anyway: I keep wanting to answer *both*. My voice and Colette's, our place and hers. Sandra Bermann (360) discusses how 'translation as performance' implicates a range of voices: not only a 'me' and a 'not-me', but also intertexts, previous translations, and an invitation for audience response. Similarly, Gabriela Saldanha (167) describes a 'conscious embodiment of doubleness', and Kate Briggs asks: 'What is it about this activity, in its difference from single-handed original authorship – the way it complicates the authorial position: sharing it, usurping it, sort of dislocating it.' (20)

When I'm revising my draft, I go to France, I trace Colette's footsteps. Walk to the Palais-Royal, jog in the Bois de Boulogne, take a photo of the Bataclan, flâne along the Canebière in Marseille. Renée's world is both close and distant. I can picture her in the bois, alongside her dog Fossette, but my experience is in 21st century activewear, and there are crowds of people having parties in the park. The Bataclan has been marked by tragedy; a sign in the Palais-Royal announces Colette's former apartment, as a celebrity figure of the past, not a day-to-day presence. A palimpsest. Is this experience of doubling what the translator should evoke for the reader?

How can translation give readers access to the immediacy of Renée's emotion, mindset, and day to day, in their terms, but equally stage the distance, guiding them to Belle Epoque

Paris and that encounter with otherness, with lives that have come before? I play around with finding terms that can do double work: words that were in use in the period, but don't jar too much for readers today ('prudishness' say, instead of 'chastity'; 'acting coy', instead of 'being a harlot'…); French terms that are also accessible to English readers, particularly in context ('soirée', 'centime', 'banlieue'). I avoid terms that pull us out of Renée's world ('penny', say) or that locate us too narrowly or obviously in one region of the Anglophone world. But questions of gender and race remain sticky.

Gender and translation

Patriarchal and gender norms have often shaped translation practices. Feminist translation scholarship has highlighted these trends and sought to revive forgotten voices, revisit previous translations, and even intervene in the gender politics of the ST (see von Flotow, for example). Working on an author like Colette means one pays close attention to the portrayal of gender roles in translation. Past gender norms have informed previous English translations of *La Vagabonde*. Enid McLeod, for example, translates 'collage' (a slang term for living together without being married) as 'living in sin'; 'terrible petite noceuse' (where 'noceuse' is the feminine version for someone who likes to party) as 'terrible little tart'; and 'sacrées petites charognes' (where 'charogne' means a carcass or corpse, but is equally slang for someone disgusting and vile) as 'wretched little sluts'. The mores of 1950s England come through, especially in the sexualization of insults for women, a common trend outside translation too (Montell).

I notice my own biases – albeit different ones to McLeod's – coming through inadvertently at first. For example, when the narrator describes the behaviour of Renée's suitor Max as 'un peu catin' (where 'catin' is an outdated word for prostitute), the first term I try is 'sleazy': a word I associate with masculinity. However, a masculine descriptor erases Colette's subversion of gender roles. My next try, pushing the English towards gender neutral at least, is 'flirtiness' (the phrase: 'with that sly flirtiness men have'). I consider old-fashioned equivalents to 'catin', with terms like 'harlot', 'trollop', 'strumpet', or perhaps the more timeless 'whore', but none work in my sentence, and feel much more jarring for my readers than 'catin' was for Colette's. Even so, I can't help but wonder if my rendering is too soft, if I've sanitized the text by not explicitly referring to prostitution.

I am conscious of working within, and often in resistance to, several tendencies, including:

A. The normalizing tendency of a standardized language (Berman), which would flatten Colette's playful and often unexpected use of gender roles. Elsewhere, for example, Max is described as the 'courtesan' and 'tart', his eyelashes 'feminine, long and glossy'.
B. The pull of default masculine and patriarchal culture, which has at least historically denigrated that which is feminine and favoured and universalized that which is masculine.
C. A (misguided) feminist instinct to soften degrading gendered language, which would negatively affect Colette's complex and raw depiction of gender relations.

In my translation practice, I aim first to avoid sexualizing, denigrating, or exoticizing what is neutral or intentionally ambiguous in the original, even if readers of the ST could interpret certain connotations from context and culture. For example, the narrator describes the young women who are often hanging around Montmartre, wearing skimpy clothes and 'working'. The reader understands the work to be sex work, but the text uses neutral terms, like 'girls' and 'women', to describe those in question. When the narrator notes how the men call them 'sacrée petites charognes' (explained above), since 'they're the kind who don't give in, who don't admit to being hungry, or cold, or in love, who die saying, 'I'm not sick'...", I seek an insult

that readers can interpret themselves. I use ‘witches’ for ‘charognes’ which, like the ST, is gendered feminine but not sexualized, and which evokes the sense, important to this context, of resisting death through mysterious wiles or fierceness.

Second, I don’t gender what would often be neutral in English. Since no language expresses gender in the same way, the different possibilities of English mean sometimes changing the grammatical gender of the ST produces similar cultural resonance. Nouns describing people are inescapably gendered in French – not so in English. ‘Noceuse’ (explained above), for example, could be a ‘party girl’ (Appelbaum), could connote promiscuity, which McLeod interprets for the reader with ‘tart’, and could be the neutral ‘partier’ of my text, since the rest of the passage contextualizes the character’s womanhood and rowdy behaviour. Following my strategy of using terms that could work in Colette’s time and ours, I don’t opt for something like ‘party animal’, whose use can only be dated to the 1970s (OED). With pronouns too, I translate masculine pronouns with masculine pronouns where the signified is clearly a man, but not where it’s an object (eg. the personified ‘love’ is ‘him’ in McLeod’s version, and simply ‘Love’ in mine), or where the default ‘il’ clearly refers to people of different genders (eg. in the context of an unnamed and hypothetical artiste on stage, I use ‘they’). Some might argue that I’m introducing a strange or anachronistic neutral but, as Baron notes, the singular ‘they’, where the gender of the antecedent is unknown or irrelevant, dates back to the 14th century.

My translation grapples with the gendered norms of its language and time to replicate another dynamic. Berman’s (368) work on ‘performing translation’ interestingly highlights how translation enables gaps, slippages, openings in the repetition of gender norms:

> While translation is hardly drag, it can enact a similar theatrical repetition and questioning of social and historical norms. Using the citational potential of its mode, it can exaggerate, highlight, displace, and queer normative expectations across genders and cultures as well as languages.

This perspective reminds us that there is rarely a neutral approach, or one-to-one relationship; rather, translation calls everything into question. It creates space for Colette’s play with gender to infiltrate and shift normal use in English, but also for English responses to Colette’s text to offer new angles on our understanding of the source culture, and form new synapses between French and English.

Race, identity and offensive language

In 2023, when I was working on my first draft, controversy over new bowdlerized English editions of Roald Dahl was in the news. Editors had cut words like ‘fat’ and ‘ugly’ from his writing, and replaced ‘female’ with ‘woman’. With this backdrop of outrage over political correctness, I mulled over certain decisions. There are big differences between my task and the new editions of Dahl of course. For one, Dahl wrote children’s books, where education and socialization are key considerations, and reading critically is not always understood as a given, even if it is desirable (Smith 2023). For two, there is already a perfectly readable text available, which the audience can understand. In my case, I’m working from the French, not from previous translations, and targeting a readership who can’t access the source. Interlingual translation makes everything a decision. The notion of ‘changing’ or even ‘censoring’ the ST in translation can start from a false assumption – that there was a neutral default to begin with, from which to diverge. Even with the closest of language and culture pairs, subtle differences create choices.

Coming back to what to do with ‘danses nègres’: is ‘nègre’ ‘Negro’ or the n* word? Both are options in the bilingual dictionary. Does ‘nègre’ simply mean ‘black’? Would it make

more sense to start with the signified: what dance are we describing, and how can we evoke it in English? The context and intention of use is of course critical: whether the writer is purposefully depicting racism, claiming the label or, as in Colette's case, simply using the normalized language of the time. But none of this information gives us one answer. Different words for black have taken on connotations – with slavery and racism, art movements and négrophilie – which constantly shift; no term evokes the same thing for different readerships, in different contexts.

Informally, I gauged reader response, from non-translators and translators alike, from professional writers and editors, and students. There was the lay reader: the friend or family member, often white, often Australian, who instinctively reacted negatively to terms like 'Negro', even 'black' ('couldn't you describe the dances another way?'); the professional translators who conversely warned me off 'sanitizing' or 'censoring' the text. Later, I read Kaiama L. Glover's nuanced discussion of her English translation of Haitian author René Depestre and her complex attention to audience*s*. Recognizing the heterogeneity of (in her case a post-colonial) readership and the problems of only gauging a Western and urban reader's response', Glover decided to purposefully *not* give value to how a 'non-professional' anglophone reader would react, and to target an Afro-diasporic readership in translation and packaging. Glover's (41) analysis shows how going with instinct, or what has 'a nice ring to it', can be hugely problematic, depending on translator positionality, articulating examples where translations have unintentionally exoticized blackness through a colonial lens.

Colette's lens on blackness and race is of course different – already an exotic, colonial viewpoint, which romanticizes the Roma and so-called primitive art – as is the Oxford World's Classics target readership of undergraduate students studying Colette, likely in the UK and US. But the postcolonial scholarship offers important insight into the potential problems of privileging what sounds right *and* of foreignizing (see Davies 378-379 on the potential pitfalls of a foreignizing approach) – and the need to navigate a tightrope between 'opening a window into an "Other(ed)" culture' and staging stereotypes (Watts 11). Finding language to replicate the racial and cultural relationships in *La Vagabonde* is complex. In the end, I choose 'black' for the dances, as it keeps the racialized language, rather than obscuring it, but does not increase the slur with a seeming equivalent (which has picked up new connotations in time and through the US influence on English) or jarringly offend, in a way at odds with Colette's work. 'Black' aims for the 'doubling' effect I've been seeking, through a term in use in Colette's time and in ours. I'm lucky to be able to embrace footnotes, given the publisher and the objectives of the Oxford World's Classics series, and put layers of history, race relations and art world context there.

In a different example, the French word 'chaloupée' (from 'swing') is used to describe a violent dance between pimp and partner. Other words circulated at the time to describe this dance, including 'danse apache', which was used in both Francophone and Anglophone contexts. 'Apache', from the native American term, entered the French in a meandering way, complete with problematic connotations of savagery, to eventually mean a Parisian gangster. Despite this racialized history, I use 'danse apache' in my translation, as it signifies a specific cultural artefact, which Anglophone readers can find out more about, and critically read into the social structures of *La Vagabonde'*s demimonde backdrop. This term doesn't have the looseness of 'Negro', where shifting meanings could lead the reader who looks no further down the wrong path; 'danse apache' can only take the reader closer to Colette and Belle Epoque France.

As a final example, the narrator describes herself as a 'romanichelle', and a 'bohème'. Previous translations have rendered these 'gypsy' and 'bohemian' respectively. To describe Renée in English today as a 'Romani' person is jarring in terms of cultural appropriation; while this does not necessarily rule it out, with notes of course, the term also fails to effectively evoke

now the romantic connotations of wandering that Colette is calling upon. 'Gypsy' does better but the jump from 'romanichelle' to 'gypsy' is far from straightforward. Critically, choices made in translation produce relationships between languages and cultures, as much as reflect them. I go with 'bohemian' for both terms, since the word came to English through French, and picked up the artistic and European connotations, for Anglophone readers, that suit Renée. Not only is the historical link with the Romani there, for those who know the history, but so too is the French *artiste* and 'vagabonde' with an unconventional lifestyle.

Conclusion

What is paralyzing and liberating in translation is that it throws doubt on meaning. The ways we understand people, society, gender, race, are up in the air, open to slippage, reconfigurations. My goal, embracing 'thick translation', notes, polysemy, and those doubling tactics, is to stage some of that relational work that translators themselves navigate, to evoke Colette's world and ours for the reader. For the reader cannot reach Colette on their own, and is not of her time – what they can access is Colette from our English and culture today. What this means is replacing the binary questions with something more multiple and relational.

- Are you modernizing or keeping the period vibes? Both, with phrasing that works for Colette's time (at least from our vantage point) and ours.
- Anglicizing or Frenchifying? Attentive to the range of Englishes, and multiplicity in the French ST
- Making it sound natural/good or strange? For whom?
- Sanitizing? From which starting point?

My choices are complicated, messy. So I'll end with some of the takeaways, which sum up my strategies on identity, gender, and race.

- Replicate the gendered, racialized, dynamics. (careful of unintentionally increasing the slur with seeming equivalents, and of flattening).
- Avoid sexualizing, denigrating, exoticizing what is neutral, even if readers can interpret these connotations from the ST .
- Question naturalized equivalents or shortcuts, even those in the dictionary, or well established in existing translations.
- Keep connection to original context, yet don't be lazy – work to capture immediacy for new readers.

These are not meant to be prescriptive, rather strategies I developed to guide my own work on Colette. Even so, they may be useful to others navigating sticky questions of identity, if adapted to the specific text and context at hand.

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