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**Reformulating the Problem of Translatability: A Case of Literary  
Translaboration with the Poetry of Francisco Brines**

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**Abstract**

Forms of collaboration are particularly prevalent in translation of literature, especially of poetry, whereby the synergy of different perspectives of co-participants may be among the essential ingredients for creative success. In this study, we explore the dynamics of a collaborative translation into English of the contemporary Spanish poet Francisco Brines, addressing how certain key questions of translational practice, including the translation of gender values, can be fruitfully problematised and resolved in a theoretically grounded collaborative approach. In elucidating these dynamics, including those which destabilise and generate knowledge, we use the notion of translaboration, synthesising concepts drawn from activity theory and communities of practice theory. We illustrate and review this notion through a critical narrative of selected aspects of the translational work.

**Keywords:** literary translation; collaboration; translaboration; Francisco Brines; activity theory; community of practice

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## **1. Introduction: Rethinking Collaborative Translation**

In their study of a collaborative translation of Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day* into Polish, Jan Rybicki and Magda Heydel (2013, 708) suggest that "A translated work of literature is a collaborative effort even if performed by a single translator, always haunted by the ghost of the author of the original as well as other spectres, namely those of all other intertextualities." While this view of collaboration suggests an elusive, diffuse phenomenon, it also invites us to think of collaboration as an expansive, even all-embracing concept. For to think of collaborative working in terms of ghosts is not to trivialise matters but to accord translational practices the power to challenge and disturb which translators frequently experience as part of their everyday working lives.

Recent decades have seen a proliferation of literature on modes of collaborative translation with diverse understandings of what 'collaboration' includes. Liang and Xu (2014) have drawn attention to the problem of differentiating various modes of co-translation in the light of the increased opening up of the term in response to crowd-sourced translation, online translation and 'community' translation. Studies of variously termed paradigms, including collaborative translation (O'Hagan 2011; Rybicki 2010; Lesch 2014) and joint or cooperative translation, the latter drawing on theories of cooperative (often small-group based) learning, have gathered pace in

recent decades, albeit more in connection with computer assisted language learning (Yang et al. 2016) than literary translation (Liu 2012). Collaborative forms of translation are particularly prevalent in the translation of literature, and notably of poetry where it is not uncommon for a professional translator and a verse practitioner to team up, to form a working partnership of varying type and duration (Wechsler 1998, 181-216). However, collaborative translation of poetry has attracted comparatively little attention in the literature in comparison to other types of collaborative translation; a likely factor in this neglect is poetry's marginal status as economic capital (Venuti 2011).

In this study, by a professional English-to-Spanish translator whose first language is Spanish (CT) and an English-language poet with professional working proficiency in Spanish (SC), we explore the dynamics of 'translaboration' (Alfer 2015) in translating into English poetry by the contemporary Spanish poet Francisco Brines. As we interpret it, the term 'translaboration' describes an approach to collaborative translation as socio-cultural learning (Engeström 1999) and social praxis (Wolf 2010, 341), as distinct from more functional approaches to collaborative translation (Nord 1997). Specifically, we aim to explore how certain key questions of translational practice, including ethical, cultural and linguistic implications of translating gender values, can be fruitfully problematised and resolved in a theoretically grounded 'translaborational' approach.

## **2. Translation as Collaboration: Translaboration**

The notion of translaboration, according to one of its formulators, refers to “the practical and conceptual confluence of translation [...] and collaboration as an allied and equally applied notion, raising questions of power, equality of participation, and mutuality of influence as intrinsic aspects of practice” (Alfer 2015, 26). We adopt this notion of translaboration in preference to the aforementioned models of collaborative translation because of its emphasis on the intertwining of translation and collaborative working, theoretically and practically. Within the confluence of types indicated, we have interpreted translaboration as a concept which allies itself particularly to activity theory (AT) (Engeström 1999) although, as we will suggest, it has features distinguishing it from AT.

AT springing from the earlier researches of Vygotsky (1978) and other Soviet educational psychologists is a descriptive meta-theory or framework about social reality that seeks to encompass environmental factors, personal history and motivations, the role of culture and the artefact, and complex real life activity (McCaslin and Hickey 2001; Roth and Lee 2007). AT aims to bridge the gap between the individual subject and social reality by studying both through the mediating activity, for example the translation process, as it co-opts individual subjects and technologies and evolves over a period of time. AT has been used widely in translation studies and sociolinguistics to address cognitive aspects of translation (Risku and Windhager 2013), application of

artificial intelligence to translation (Risku, Windhager, and Apfelthaler 2013), translator agency (Kinnunen and Koskinen 2010) and second language development (Lantolf, Thorne, and Poehner 2015). Studies of AT in the field of literary translation are, by contrast, less common (Sokolovsky and Razumovskaya 2011).

We view translaboration as akin to AT in that both explore some of the characteristics of productive joint working and learning in a particular translational context. Specifically, we inflect translaboration through AT's interest in community, rules and division of labour, and on the closely associated ideas of situated learning and 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991), while at the same time holding to AT's fundamentally descriptive stance. Translaboration, like AT, is not a 'how to' or predictive tool, but one for developing insights into and further questions about the nature and conditions of collaborative translation. In order to pinpoint the potential added value of this notion, it is worth first considering how we think it coincides with and diverges from notions of AT and community and practice before exemplifying it in an account of the translation work itself.

As author(s), translator(s) and others come together by being involved with one another in activities, they may become a 'community of practice' wherein they learn to construct shared understandings amid what may be at times confusing and conflicting interpretations of the work and its context. Lave and Wenger's work has attracted interest among researchers and

practitioners in translation studies and sociolinguistics (Eckert and Wenger 2005; Garner and Wagner 2005), including in relation to digital communities (Liang and Xu 2014) and user-generated translation (O'Hagan 2004). Schwimmer (2017, 60) observes that in the interstitial networks which, she argues, pose a radical alternative to traditional networks of translational knowledge and transfer, "knowledge is not conceived as something detached and transferable, but as a living thing that develops through interrogation, reflection and conversation." We take this claim a step further, suggesting that this living knowledge is a characteristic not just of networks but pre-eminently of communities of practice, provided it avoids, in the process, becoming "instrumentalised and [...] a tool of knowledge management," a potential hazard against which Wenger (1998) himself has cautioned. A prime challenge posed for participants in a community of practice is to avoid viewing it as a predetermined means to an end. Contributors to an authentic community of practice endeavour to avoid routinisation and one indication of such authenticity is participants' willingness not to take refuge in the known but instead be "destabilised by the complexity of their task" (Schwimmer 2017, 60).

Literary translators might argue that their livelihoods are precarious enough without inviting further professional destabilisation. What is meant is a destabilisation that serves a positive function in developing professional knowledge. It entails the foregrounding of destabilisation by complex (rather



than routine if complicated) tasks – that is, by tasks which raise principled rather than procedural challenges as a prerequisite of growth, learning and action – which comes to the fore in the notion of translaboration. The “interrogation, reflection and conversation” (Schwimmer 2017, 60) on which it depends presuppose three ingredients: a focal interest in language as a constituent of social reality; a concern with questions of collaborative agency as intrinsic aspects of practice (Alfer 2015, 26); and a shared recognition of an activity-related concern or problem. It is this reflexive type of translaborational conversation which, as Schwimmer (2017) implies, provides one of the more effective safeguards against an inappropriate instrumentalisation of ideas of translational community and action.

In pursuing the implications for theory and practice of this notion of translaboration, we follow Lave and Wenger’s emphasis on the community of practice as something which represents multiple points of view, traditions and interests, including the idea that members may move back and forth between core and periphery of participation. In this dynamic interplay, knowledge is returned back into its various contexts (‘trans’) in ways that those contributing to it can learn from. Action (‘laboration’) is the arena to which participants bring into consciousness and focal awareness individuals’ and/or the group’s tacit understandings and working practices. In our account of these epistemological and agentic aspects of translaboration, we adopt a retrospective sense-making (Weick 2001) approach that involves a process of

circling attention among certain key elements. We focus initially on the arrangements underpinning working relationships of the translaborational community of practice during the pre-publication stages, to look at the dynamic interplay between core and periphery. We then explore the triadic collaboration between the two co-translators and the author at an advanced stage of drafting, discussing micro-practices of translation as these exemplify rules and division of labour. Throughout we highlight points of destabilisation, anticipated and otherwise, and their variable effects on collaborative working and learning.

### **3. A Translaboration Community of Practice**

The project was the first translation into English of selected poetry by the contemporary Spanish poet Francisco Brines (born 1932) and the resulting publication *De purísimo azul: Of Purest Blue* (Brines 2010) was the outcome of translational activities occurring over a seven-year period. While there was some degree of movement over time from core to periphery and vice versa in the translaboration community, seven people formed its core membership: the author, the two co-translators, an artist, a critical reader, an adviser, and the publisher. The makeup and stability of the core was determined in part by the aim to produce a dual language version, a book in its own right in multilingual contexts, in which original artwork would also play an integral (not merely illustrative) part. Achieving this aim required a range of talents unlikely to

reside in a small number of individuals (the one condition set by the poet was that at least one of the co-translator be a poet). Peripheral members included the translation funder (a national ministry of culture), page setters and designers, two photographers (for the cover art), printers and distributors, and others involved in the publicity, reviewing and marketing of the publication.

Pre-existing and evolving friendships and relationships were significant in terms of the working and communication patterns created in the core membership. The author's friendship with the adviser went back some forty years and with the artist some ten. Four members were in life partnerships with each other. However, only two of us had worked together previously on a publishing project of this scope. We were widely dispersed geographically and never met as a complete group at any one time: hence we operated as a virtual translational community of practice maintaining itself over long distances rather than as a loosely coupled virtual network (Risku and Dickinson 2009). Multiple points of view, traditions, and interests were represented by two members being novelists, four poets, one an artist, one a professional translator and one a cinema archivist; the cultures we were brought up in included English, German, Spanish Valencian, Argentinean and Irish. Moreover, the co-translators in particular had to learn to construct shared understandings as well as unlearn certain others (such as what might constitute a same-sex love poem in Spanish and English), as discussed further below. Our shared and distinct personal histories and motivations (McCaslin and

Hickey 2001) sensitised us to the distribution of roles and decision making that would be required to triangulate our proposed translational activities and justify these to an external funder as well as translation colleagues and the book-buying public. We can best illustrate this point about roles and decision making with the following examples.

### *3.1 Roles and Decision Making*

Rules and division of labour (who worked with whom on what, how, and by when) were determined and mutual learning was enhanced to a great extent by the varying levels of translational competence (Neubert 1994): three of the team were native Spanish speakers, one had professional translational competence while one spoke no Spanish and one no English (the author's familiarity with the English language, and English literature in translation, was minimal). Who was advising, supporting or working with whom about 'what works' in Spanish- and English-speaking and literary contexts represented a complex, at times shifting pattern of communications and devolved responsibilities for any given task; moreover 'what works' was a criterion we sought to discover *through* the work rather than impose *on* it. For example, the critical reader, an established academic authority on both English and Spanish literatures as well as a creative writer (in English), was able to advise the co-translators on some finer points of semantics – such as the nuances of the Spanish noun “tiempo” (“time”) within Brines's philosophical world view –

and this proved essential in finding an appropriate register in the English version that avoided what might otherwise come across as ‘flat’. Hence the word was translated variously as “time” or “time passing”<sup>1</sup> and, as importantly, attended to in terms of the word or phrase’s place in the overall rhythm in the original and in translation, depending for example on whether it occurred at the end of a short line or was embedded within a longer one. The critical reader was also skilled in communicating semantic issues in a way that was comprehensible for the potential funder, providing the rationale for why Brines might benefit from being translated in this particular way for English-speaking audiences.

### 3.2 *Core and Periphery*

The above examples were instances of the dynamic interplay between core and periphery: knowledge gained was returned back into its various contexts (translation work, briefing external stakeholders) in ways that contributed to members’ learning by bringing to awareness their own tacit understandings. Arguably the acknowledged additional time, effort and ingenuity needed to translate poetry (Dastjerdi, Hakimshafaaii, and Jannesaari 2008) were factors that prompted critical attention to the particular embodiment of our working practices. We could be said to constitute a self-regulated community of

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase is probably associated by English poetry readers with T. S. Eliot’s philosophically inflected treatment of time in *Four Quartets*.

practice (Wenger 1998), although this does not mean we did not work to external deadlines and expectations, that we were not project-managed and that there were not written contracts as well as verbal agreements.

#### **4. Pre-Publication: Paratext and Destabilisation**

Agreeing on the choice and running order of the poems with the poet involved all seven core members in a series of conversations in various combinations over a period of a year in face-to-face, electronic and written communications before a final choice was presented to the publisher and thence to the potential funder for the translation. Key considerations were what would work as poems in English and for a specifically English readership (several of the poems selected were written in and about the England of the 1960s).

The notion of 'paratext' (Genette 1997) is pertinent here since it focuses attention on some key aspects of the collaborating group's working practices at the pre-publication stage. The paratext includes those elements both within the book (peritext) and outside it (epitext) that mediate the text to the reader: the author's name(s), the title and subtitle, foreword or introduction, cover blurb, epigraph, notes, and so on. Genette states that how a text is 'framed' as a printed object conveys certain assumptions about how the text is intended to impact on the reader, including ideologically (Kovala 1996). Peritext and epitext are often perceived as liminal features; for translators, they tend to be more central, not just because they translate these elements but

because they often augment them. Indeed, the paratext may provide one of the few legitimate means by which “the translator gives up her/his invisible position and allows his/her voice to be heard openly to address to the reader” (Toledano-Buendía 2013, 149).

Negotiation of paratextual elements formed a significant part of our collaborative work pre-publication, and these included epigraph, foreword, acknowledgements, translators’ and cover art notes, footnotes, bibliography, artwork and title. Many of these required translation from written English into Spanish, and interpretation verbally to the poet.

When it comes to choosing a title, questions usually arise about the extent to which this should aim to strike the right note, be marketable, and mediate the original text. Venuti (2008, 284) cites at least one example where knowing the allusion in the title of a poem may not necessarily help to fix the meaning of the text itself. ‘Is this a title that makes sense before or after you read the book?’ was the question posed (in Spanish) by Brines during a telephone conversation when we first relayed the rest of the group’s suggestion of using the Spanish-English title *De purísimo azul: Of Purest Blue*. The phrase was drawn from Brines’s introduction to his *Selected Poems (Selección propia, 1999)*, where it represents a characteristic elegiac sense of place. His late poem “El azul” (“The Blue”) was the first poem of his we had co-translated in 2004 and our subsequent thinking on the title was also influenced by the ‘serene irony’ of Mallarmé’s poem “L’azur” (1864), with its

haunting evocation of the transcendental. Our response to Brines’s question (‘Hopefully both’) was frankly hedging our bets; more positively, it expressed our desire to see translational sense-making and reading as open to change, enlargement and enrichment through the process of attending to, and living into, the text. However, the disarmingly gentle questioning of the title was the first perceptible test of our openness as co-translators to being “destabilised by the complexity of [our] task” (Schwimmer 2017, 60).

A more severe and unexpected destabilisation occurred for the team with the sudden death of the artist, some months after we had agreed the final selection. If working on the main text with its repeated refrain of loss had underscored the theme of life’s impermanence here was an unwelcome reminder of loss and ‘incompletion’ at its most personal.<sup>2</sup> Work on the project was halted by an unspoken mutual agreement to give us all, and most of all the artist’s partner, the project adviser, space to grieve. Self-organising communities of practice can be fragile and prone to destabilisation of a negative kind. Perhaps the notion of *‘living knowledge’* (our emphasis), together with the increased solidarity that sudden adversity can create, helps to

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<sup>2</sup> “In this business of living, what I perceive above all is loss” is a quotation from a Spanish newspaper interview with Brines reproduced on the book’s back cover, chosen deliberately in recognition of the artist’s death.



explain how the translation project resumed in despite of, and in recognition of, an experience of shared grief.<sup>3</sup>

The plan to integrate the artwork, which would have enabled it to be a core rather than peripheral participant in the translation, was, however, reluctantly abandoned because we were unsure of the artist's final intentions: an earlier fresco of his was used instead for the front cover art. This image, showing an unlocalised male figure reaching up into a clear blue, became the clinching argument for the final agreement over the book title, mediating this to the reader visually.

### **5. Translation Drafting: The Example of “Causa del amor”**

As co-translators, we had to learn to co-construct shared understandings as well as unlearn certain others. This was illustrated by a further example of destabilisation, which occurred in a late stage of drafting, and was occasioned by a questioning and re-thinking of assumptions we had about what might constitute a legitimate ambiguity in a love poem in Spanish and in English, in this case the gender of the beloved. This required us to discuss these understandings with the author in a way we had not anticipated and produced some unexpected learning about rules and division of labour.

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<sup>3</sup> “The task of translation is an endless one, a work of tireless memory and mourning” (Kearney 2004, 20).

Brines’s “Causa del amor” [“Reason for Love”] from his collection *Palabras a la oscuridad* [*Words into the Dark*] (Brines 1966) is one of his most celebrated and anthologised poems. Table 1 includes extracts from the poem in Spanish and our final draft of the English translation. These extracts focus on the text’s use of pronominal gender discussed further on.

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INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

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As its title intimates, this is a poem which seeks to explain why the speaker has loved a particular (unidentified) person. It is a love poem but not in the traditional, romantic sense. Instead of offering fulsome praise of the beloved, the poem sets out to subvert romantic conventions by refusing to idealise or excuse the beloved’s putative ‘faults.’ The poem plays gently with the conventions of Western love poetry (Paglia 1993), seeking to articulate the unique blend of qualities which inhere in the beloved. Accordingly, the poem’s final line (10), in which the speaker’s love is ultimately directed towards a “limited perfection” in the beloved, is not a case of damning with faint praise; it constitutes the deepest avowal the speaker can make.

### 5.1 *(In)visible Genders*

About whom, or rather about which gender(s), does the poem revolve, and what are the implications for translation into English? Issues emerge here between the source and target languages due to the different ways each operates by means of agreement structures in connection with noun-modifications, pronoun uses and pronominal references (Nissen 2002). The poem's authorial 'I' conveys no information about semantic gender, that is, whether the speaker is biologically or socially female or male (Romaine 1999). The unidentified others who have posed the poem's initial question (line 1) and who constitute the poem's putative audience (directly addressed in the second person plural 'you' of the verb in the indicative and imperative moods in lines 2 and 8) likewise have no semantic gender.

The poem's dedicatee might seem to offer a clue about the unidentified loved one: Detlef Klugkist is a male name and Brines has issued a limited collection of poems entitled *Poemas a D. K.* (Brines 1986), who we might presume is the same person. This collection includes the reprinted "Causa del amor" and it has been argued that the book as a whole constitutes "Brines's sole verse collection dedicated entirely to male love" (Cavallo 2001, 206). However, such paratextual evidence needs to be handled with caution. Readers and translators should beware of equating poetic texts with autobiography in the literal sense and notably so in love poetry where, it has been contended, "we must first ask [...] Is the poet speaking for him- or herself, or is the voice a persona? [...] A love poem cannot be simplistically read as a literal journalistic

record.” (Paglia 1993, 706) When Cavallo (2001, 208) states “I want to stress that Brines has never written a love lyric in which the erotic object is a woman,” one is bound to ask, “How do you know?” Aside from the question of whether this assertion is factually correct about Brines’s published output, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

Equally debatable is whether the notion of the erotic object can be hypostasised in the way implied here. Cavallo (2001) cites Lorca in his *Poemas del amor oscuro* [Poems of Dark Love] as drawing with Brines on a common source in a Mediterranean male homoerotic tradition going back to the classical Greek. Brines indubitably calls on classical sources in which the beloved is idealised in terms of Greek homoerotic norms. But the efficacy of his recourse to the classical past to modulate a personal heterodoxy is something about which Brines (2013) has latterly expressed a degree of reservation.

Another kind of evidence about gender is provided by the poem’s main text, although this turns out to be fluid, from an English perspective, on account of the potentialities of the language and the poem’s rhetorical devices. While gender is central to the grammatical system of Spanish, particular gender values may depend on semantic, syntactic and contextual factors (Corbett 1991). For example, if a speaker in Spanish says “estás enamorada” (“you are in love”) or “estás enamorado” (“you are in love”) it will be evident from the gender displays or indices in the Spanish here that the person

addressed is female or male respectively (Romaine 1999). Additionally, in Spanish the verb ending (*estás*) indicates that the speaker is addressing the other in intimate second person singular. In this poem, however, as in other poems by Brines, there are few if any ostensible gender values, displays or indices which convey the gender of the persons either in the predicate constructions or in the possessive pronouns. Whether non-specificity of gender in “Causa del amor” is accidental or constitutes “a defensive response to the virulent homophobia of the Franco regime” (Carvallo 2001, 208) is a largely unanswerable question (perhaps only the poet himself could legitimately answer it); suffice it to say that for the native Spanish reader the gender identity of the persons in this poem is not necessarily problematised. For the translator into English, on the other hand, it is.

### *5.2 Problematising Gender in Translation*

Gender issues first became widely problematised in Anglophone translation (Simon 2003) and literary studies (Goodman 2013) during the 1970s, that is, post-“Causa del amor.” At around the same period influential poets and poet-translators, such as Allen Ginsberg and Jack Spicer in the USA, began to claim a number of modern male foreign-language poets (among them Lorca, Cernuda and Cavafy) as constituting part of a gay or queer global canon of poetry. As discussed earlier, Brines has since been seen as drawing on a long-established male homoerotic tradition (Cavallo 2001). He has been included in

an anthology of lesbian and gay poetry published in Spain (de Villena 2002) and has acknowledged a particular artistic debt to the candidly homosexual Cernuda (Brines 2006). If a lack of perceptible gay signifiers leads some to regard Brines *qua* poet as being in the closet (Mayhew 2000) the door is well ajar.

Here the suggested parallel between Brines and Lorca (Cavallo 2001) is instructive, particularly if we consider the poet-translator Jack Spicer's free version of Lorca's *Poeta en Nueva York* [Poet in New York] (Spicer 1974). In this text, Spicer takes considerable licence with the original to make explicit the poem's homoerotic undertones which Lorca was presumptively unable to bring to light because of society's homophobia, to an extent also internalised by the poet himself. An intended function of Spicer's translation is to avoid misplaced ambiguity or euphemism, to confront readers with the poet's hitherto covert or suppressed meaning, even if this involves lexical divergence from the source text in the target text and ventures at times beyond the bounds of decency in the target culture, in the spirit of *épater la bourgeoisie*. By this logic, Spicer might have translated the title of the Brines poem "Historias de una sola noche" as something like "Tales of a One-Night Stand", to highlight an otherwise overlooked gay subtext and thence to "translate homosexuality into visibility" (Keenaghan 1998, 273). However, Lorca was long dead by the time Spicer's translation appeared and the poet's estate were not consulted: we questioned whether this kind of revisionary strategy was ethical and would

foist an inappropriate agenda on a living author, albeit one who unlike Lorca has lived into a time in which less oblique forms of writerly self-presentation are relatively more socially permissible. Hence, we opted to translate the title of the above-mentioned poem as “Stories of a Single Night.”

The Spanish pronominal ‘su’ (plural ‘sus’), which recurs throughout “Causa del amor”, specifies no particular gender and can, depending on context, refer both to second (formal) and third persons in the singular and likewise in the plural. The Spanish faces no equivalent quandary to that of ‘either/or but not both’ gender(s) of the English. We considered a number of alternative translation strategies for the gender values in English and reduced these to three:

- 1 The use of the third-person plural (‘their’) for the beloved. This would cut the Gordian knot but could create an inadvertently impersonal tone.
- 2 The use of the second-person pronominal (‘your’) for the beloved. This would work in places but require substantial alteration to the other pronouns to avoid a confusing plethora of ‘you’ and ‘yours’. Who is speaking to whom about whom would need clarifying.
- 3 Bestowing a specific third-person gender pronominal (‘his’, ‘hers’) on the beloved. This would be the most literal translation and have

the potential for foregrounding the possibility of a homoerotic reading, depending on the presumptive reader.

Clearly, option 3 constitutes a more provocative choice, though much less so than Spicer's approach. When we debated the versions outlined above, we felt we needed a third viewpoint. We could have canvassed the critical reader. In view of the sensitivities of option 3, however, we decided to share options directly with the author. Brines was asked to take on trust what we judged to be the impracticability of making an equivalent translation in English without either introducing semantic gender or making radical changes to the interplay of pronominal genders.

From this discussion two main points emerged. Firstly, Brines would not object to the use of 'his' if it were genuinely the case that this was the best or indeed only option for creating a more successful poem in idiomatic English. He did not state that this was because "Causa del amor" is a poem about a man talking about another man. But he did not exclude this possibility either on the grounds that such an interpretation belongs reasonably to the createdness of the poem; indeed, he welcomed a plurality of interpretations provided these did not violate the sense of the original. Secondly, Brines stated that where we saw linguistic 'ambiguity' he saw poetic 'universality': whatever course of action we decided upon as translators (he was not prescriptive), it would in his view be a pity to lose this latter.



As a result of this exchange, we rejected option 3 of a semantically gendered version, disregarded option 1 as mechanistic, and pursued option 2: we thus recast the entire draft in as ‘universal’ a mode as we could. Where semantic gender seemed unavoidable we rejected bias-free alternatives, thus retaining “man’s imperfection” (line 7) instead of, say, “humanity’s imperfection,” which we judged to be an inappropriate retrospective application of inclusive language. “Man’s imperfection” might strike some English-speaking readers as a discordant remnant of non-inclusive language. The Spanish “hombre” is, however, relatively more gender-inclusive than the contemporary English sense of “man.”

### *5.3 Ambiguity and Authorial Control*

According to Landers (2001, 100), “As with any translation, if you can get the author’s input, by all means do so. This is especially vital in poetry, where ambiguity is often a conscious objective.” Of course, much depends on whether the poet’s participation is core or peripheral (Wechsler 1998) and the kind of authorial involvement expected or welcomed. Acting on this maxim in our own case led us to question our assumptions both about what constituted the author’s input (division of labour) and about literary ambiguity in translation (rules). The author’s ‘input’ was already there, in the published text, as the exchange with Brines implied. Yet while Brines made it clear that for him ambiguity was a non-issue in the Spanish, this could hardly be the case

for us in the English. The conversation still left room for divergent interpretations of the meaning of the text and the reader's response (Tompkins 1980) in different linguistic and cultural contexts, a space which the author declined to occupy to the exclusion of others. Our conversation with the author thus led us to question Landers' (2001) assertion about the extent to which ambiguity in poetry is a conscious objective under authorial control. While modern and contemporary poets often set out to write deliberately 'ambiguous' poems, it is possible that the most effective sorts of ambiguities are unconsciously perpetrated: the author may be no more knowledgeable on this score than the translator.

Naturally enough, the particulars of semantic and pronominal gender mattered less to the author than to us translators although he would have been aware of a debate on this issue from extant English-language critiques of his work, notably by academics in the USA with whom he was familiar.<sup>4</sup> In an Anglophone context, in the wake of feminist and queer theory and other literary critical debates about 'gender anxiety' (Pollak 1984), 'gender identity' (Goodman 2013) and 'gender performativity' (Butler 1999), pronominal

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<sup>4</sup> Brines did not mention to us pronominal gender being raised by his other translators: into Catalan, Portuguese and Italian (which have comparable pronominal systems to Spanish) and Greek and Flemish (which do not).

"Causa del amor" currently has no other translations in English we are aware of.

gender ambiguity has been substantively discussed by critics of Brines, for example in relation to the deconstructive effects of language (Nantell 1989, 203; Nantell 1994) and the presumptively heterosexual reader (Mayhew 2000, 142).

Of course, gender ambiguity and gender transgression have a rich tradition in Hispanic literature since the early modern period (Soyer 2012) and the cultural and ideological challenges of ‘translating sex’ have been explored by researchers in Spanish-English translation studies, including from feminist perspectives (Santaemilia 2005). Where ambiguity is explicitly discussed by Brines’s Spanish-language critics, however, this is not so much in connection with gender identity as with the interpretation of experience or conceptual expressiveness, for example by Andújar Almansa (1999, 41) and Jiménez (2001, 144). We recognised, therefore, that on this issue in the translation constructing a shared understanding among ourselves and with the author about the nature of creative reading and reader response (Tompkins 1980) required us to surface and mediate differing cultural perceptions about ambiguity and universality, ensuring we did not privilege Anglophone perspectives, including on the politics of gender in gay male literature (Woods 1999).

## **6. Translaboration: Reformulating the Problem of Translatability**

Poetry translators, acutely aware of poetry's notorious reputation for untranslatability, need little reminding that this latter is a premise rather than a conclusion, including when they subscribe to the notion made popular by Valéry (1933) that the poem (like its translation) is never truly finished but abandoned. This was certainly the premise of the micro-practices of translation considered here. Reformulating the problem of translatability in response to wider social, cross-cultural and practitioner challenges requires us to continually re-assess cultural assumptions and collaborative working practices in translation as integral aspects of the task. The type of translaboration discussed here was not simply a question of the division of labour: indeed, intermittences, administration and technologies that formed part of our working practices sometimes increased the labour or slowed down or halted processes, for example, the loss of a core member discussed earlier and the more prosaic issue of using postal mail for communications between those of us preferring not to use email. While we cannot claim that mutuality of influence was always evenly balanced, for instance in our discussion with the poet about the significance of gender values, a commitment was shared to seek and defend principled solutions to translational problems rather than win an argument.

The 'social turn' in translation studies highlights the translation dimension of social praxis (Wolf 2010, 341); yet relatively little attention appears to have been devoted to understanding 'concrete practices' (Fuchs

2009, 29) as these are integrated into the everyday work of translators of poetry. This relative neglect is possibly because poetry translation tends to be widely regarded as an amateur activity, as indeed does the writing of poetry.

Reflecting on the function of translaboration's destabilising 'living knowledge', we suggest that this carries certain advantages (major personal setbacks aside), not related solely to specific linguistic, cultural and literary knowledge and competencies. Putting a translaborative approach into practice, or rather discovering this through collaborative practice (for it is not always a given), requires sustained commitment but it potentially places practitioners in a more expansive, shared space in which they can rehearse with others those repertoires and anticipate those circumstances under which problems of translatability in literature might be dynamically related between source and target languages (Even-Zohar 1990, 75). If the ingredients of a translaborative approach discussed earlier can be assembled and sustained, including in projects of differing type and duration, professional translation work has, we suggest, the potential to become more than a project to be costed, planned and delivered; it creates a community of 'living knowledge' and learning through practice. This conclusion may seem merely truistic, but it is surely equally true that much practitioner knowledge about concrete practices remains tacit, perhaps stubbornly so; translaboration – translation *as* collaboration – renders knowledge more explicit and may indeed create new knowledge. For instance, the practice knowledge we have gained about gender values in Spanish and

English is something we have sought to apply to work-in-progress on translating other Spanish-language texts with an erotic dimension, for example a book based on a uniquely Hispanic form of flirtatious male-to-female compliment, the *piropo*: this non-literary form of indirect speech act has a long tradition in discourse practices in Spanish-speaking cultures (Achugar 2001), but it can strike Anglophone ears as sexist and socially beyond the pale (Cranfield and Tedesco 2013, 7).

## **7. Conclusions**

This is a selective account of an individual, at times unstraightforward translation project. It is inevitably shaped by our own perceptions and interpretations of the community of practice of which we were part and which continues to the present, including in periodic discussions with the author. While we have shared these interpretations with fellow members and in public fora (Brines 2013; Cranfield and Tedesco 2015), our conclusions about the notion of translaboration are speculative. To discern the scope of its applicability and to further sharpen its conceptual parameters, we propose exploring this notion with others in different collaborative translational contexts.

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**Table 1****“Causa del amor” [“Reason for Love”]<sup>5</sup>**

	<i>Spanish</i>	<i>English</i>
1	Cuando me han preguntado la causa de mi amor	When people asked me the reason for my love
2	yo nunca he respondido: Ya conocéis <b>su</b> gran belleza.	I never replied it was your “well-known stunning looks.”
3	(Y aún es posible que existan rostros más hermosos.)	(More handsome countenances may exist, it’s possible.)
4	Ni tampoco he descrito las cualidades ciertas de <b>su</b> espíritu	Nor did I regale them with certain qualities of your spirit
5	que siempre me mostraba en <b>sus</b> costumbres [...]	made ever manifest to me in your idiosyncrasies [...]
6	La verdad de mi amor ahora la sé:	The truth of my love I now know:
7	vencía <b>su</b> presencia la imperfección del hombre [...]	your presence overcame man’s imperfection [...]
8	La verdad de mi amor sabedla ahora:	The truth of my love, let it be known now:
9	la materia y el soplo se unieron en <b>su</b> vida [...]	matter and breath came together in your life [...]
10	Amé <b>su</b> limitada perfección.	I loved your limited perfection.

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<sup>5</sup> Line numbering according to extract, not complete poem. Spanish pronominal ‘su’/‘sus’ highlighted.