

**INTRODUCTION** soundings issue 12 summer 1999

# Transversal politics and translating practices

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and Lynette Hunter

'Transversal politics' is a term that does not have wide currency in English. It has reached us from Italian women peace activists, networking with women in other countries, who talk about their practice of *politica trasversale*. But, among the projects described in this thematic section of *Soundings*, its use has been



growing. It seems as if it has fallen, clunk, upon a meaning that has been waiting for a signifier. It answers to a need to conceptualise a democratic practice of a particular kind, a process can on the one hand look for commonalities without being arrogantly universalist, and on the other affirm difference without being transfixed by it. Transversal politics is the practice of

creatively crossing (and re-drawing) the borders that mark significant politicised differences. It means empathy without sameness, shifting without tearing up your roots. Nira Yuval-Davis has more to say about this in 'What is "transversal politics"?' (p94).

These pages bring together writings invoked by two consecutive conferences held at Gresham College, London, on 29-30 January 1999. The first day was called 'Doing Transversal Politics' and the second 'Translating Words', 'Translating Practices'. The link between the two days was of itself something of a conceptual boundary crossing, a sideways leap in the dark.



**T**he 'Doing Transversal Politics' conference marked the conclusion of research by Cynthia Cockburn, begun in 1995. The title of the research was *Women Building Bridges*, and it involved studying how certain women's projects, in countries where there was war, created and sustained their alliances across difficult ethno-national differences.<sup>1</sup>

The three projects sent representatives to the Gresham conferences. The first, Medica Women's Association in Bosnia-Herzegovina, is a therapy centre that responds with medical and psycho-social care to women and children traumatised by war and post-war violence. In Medica the Bosnian Muslim majority have worked throughout the war and the ensuing uneasy peace alongside a remaining minority of women who are of Bosnian Serb, Bosnian Croat and mixed backgrounds. From Medica, Ajli Bajramovic and Rada Stakic-Domuz attended the seminars.

The second project is Bat Shalom, a group of Israeli Jewish and Israeli Palestinian Arab women living in northern Israel, who campaign together for

1. The Women Building Bridges research project was funded by City University, the E. and H.N. Boyd and J.E. Morland Charitable Trust, the William A. Cadbury Charitable Trust, the Community Relations Commission of Northern Ireland, the Global Fund for Women, the Lipman-Miliband Trust, the Network for Social Change, the Niwano Peace Foundation, the Scurrah Wainwright Charity and Womankind Worldwide.

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justice and peace in the region. Bat Shalom was represented by Samira Khouri and Sonia Zarchi, accompanied by Vera Jordan.



The third project of Women Building Bridges is the Women's Support Network, Belfast, represented by May McCann and Maura McCrory, accompanied by Marie Mulholland, the former coordinator. The Network is a cross-community alliance of women's centres and other women's organisations that have come together to get working-class women's needs voiced in the political system and the peace process of Northern Ireland.'

During 1998 the three projects made a further transversal move, exchanging visits across state boundaries to see what could be learned from each other's experience.<sup>3</sup> It was the findings of this series of transnational visits (we called this continuation of the project Bridge Between Bridges) that were presented at the 'Doing Transversal Politics' conference. Representing the workings of an ethnically mixed project is difficult. But representing a prolonged interaction between such complex unities is more challenging yet. So we tried to do this at the conference by showing analytical videos of the exchange visits, each one framed by a panel discussion with some of the women involved (see 'Crossing Borders' (p99)).

This however does not exhaust the transversal steps we were into here. The first day was in fact a partnership between Women Building Bridges and Southall Black Sisters. SBS was founded twenty years ago by Asian and African-Caribbean women and has become well-known for practical and campaigning work on issues of domestic violence and racism. They are today effectively an

2. Photo-narratives about these three projects were published in *Soundings* as 'Different Together', Issue 2, Spring 1996; 'Refusing Ethnic Closure', Issue 3, Summer 1996; and 'Wrong and wrong again', Issue 5, Spring 1997. The research is reported in full in Cynthia Cockburn, *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict*, Zed Books, London 1998.
3. For the funding of this second phase of the research we are indebted to Gresham College, the Global Fund for Women, the Network for Social Change and the Scurrah Wainwright Charity.

alliance of women of Hindu, Moslem, Sikh and other cultural backgrounds. Their transversal moves, explored by Pragna Patel in her article 'Difficult Alliances' (p115), involve handling conflictual ethnic differences constituted in the Indian sub-continent and reformulated in Britain. They describe the tactical alliances they have to make with, among others, conservative community leaders and an often misogynist anti-racist movement.

**I**n stepping into partnership for a day, Southall Black Sisters and Women Building Bridges were attempting to share experiences of holding together alliances in different violent contexts. For Medica, Bat Shalom and the Women's Support Network the situation is one of war or its aftermath. Southall Black Sisters are surviving situations in Britain of diasporic tension and urban racism that sometimes seem like war. Both fields of violence are of course gendered.

The art of transversal politics is a perennial scepticism about 'community'. It means knowing that when community is invoked it is often to plaster over cracks and deny differences within. At the same time it also means refusing to let go of the idea that constructive dialogue and shared actions are possible. It is a tolerance of distinctiveness which is at the same time an intolerance *of* non-communication. Metaphorically and actually this means multi-lingualism. It is about foregoing the dream of finding a common tongue (because, given power relations, that is bound to be an imperialism) and instead taking up the challenge of learning each other's languages.



**S**o it makes sense that the conference that was twinned with 'Doing Transversal Politics' was about 'Translating Words' 'Translating Practices'. And our participants, a healthy mix of activists and academics, seemed to have confidence in a meaningful connection between the two days, for more than half of those who came to the first day were also present at the second.<sup>4</sup>

4. Gresham College was both the sponsor and the host of the two conferences described here. (Lynette Hunter is current holder of the Gresham College Chair of Rhetoric). They also funded a partnership between Lynette and Cynthia Cockburn in the context of which the latter carried through the Bridge Between Bridges exchanges.

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The 'Translating' conference resulted from a collaboration between Lynette Hunter and Rebecca O'Rourke. Lynette's focus is new writings in English, and as a teacher she is concerned with democratic access to communication. Likewise Rebecca's experience is in community writing and publishing and in adult education. They share a belief that good communicating is a strong mode for political agency. Whether in writing or speaking, we use words to write or speak ourselves into existence. They would ask: what encourages and enables communication across difficult differences of location, culture and political belief? How can we communicate to someone differently situated what it is like to experience war, survive uprooting or torture, or live in a society of ingrained violence and brutality? Can we translate into another language or culture, or from the spoken to the written word, without differences of power between us distorting what we say? They talk about their work in 'The Values of Community Writing' (p 144) .

**T**he 'Translating' conference included speakers with experience in devising verbal strategies for dealing with ethnic, religious, cultural or political differentiation, division and oppression. There was Theatre and Reconciliation, an innovatory community theatre project developed in Northern Ireland, Eritrea and other African countries. Rather than making a speech, Gerri Moriarty and Jane Plastow involved the participants in a demonstration of how theatre can be used for empowerment, for gaining a voice. (See Theatre and Reconciliation' (p153).

There was MAMA, represented by Amina Souleiman and Saynab Osman. This is a story telling and writing project from which several books have issued, involving women who are refugees from Somalia and other East African countries now living in Sheffield. (See *Sharing Stories* (p163). Sonia Linden, writer in residence at the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, read an account by Nasrin Parveez, who was sitting beside her, of the brutality inflicted on her during imprisonment in Iran. It seemed that no-one in the room was able draw a breath as they took in this narrative. But having found words to tell about the torture, it no longer, Nasrin said, invades her sleep as nightmare.

Other presentations at the 'Translating' conference included Celia Hunt and Urmila Sinha, both developing and teaching the therapeutic use of creative writing, and East Side Arts, a bookshop-based community arts and people's history project based in Whitechapel, in East London. They told how they have found working

with words can help individuals, small groups and migrant communities deal with urban racism and domestic violence. Emily Clark and Fran Duncan came from a Gypsy and Traveller project in Cleveland and spoke at the conference about how storytelling is used by women to deal with the discrimination and violence inflicted on the community by the wider society. They talked about links they have forged between non-settled peoples in the UK, France, Sweden and Denmark.

The women who came to the 'Translating' conference share a belief that skills of reading, writing and speaking, which are also part of daily life, are an important strategy for agency for those who are persistently muffled and marginalised. The same skills are needed for handling difference. In the 'Transversal Politics' event the day before, Pragna Patel had



told the story of the moment when inter-communal violence in the Indian subcontinent had increased tensions between Muslim and Hindu women in Southall Black Sisters to the point of rupture. The words she found to describe that crisis were, precisely: 'We were lost for words'.

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