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Beauvoir, “French” Feminisms, and “Translation Work:” A Roundtable Conversation

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Abstract: This conversation featuring four scholars—Sandrine Sanos, Judith G. Coffin, Lorraine Delavaud, Marine Vaslin—took place on zoom on December 1, 2023. It was organized, transcribed, and edited by Sandrine Sanos who also wrote the introduction to contextualize the conversation. The roundtable reflects on the making of the translation of Judith Coffin's book on Beauvoir; and how it became a collective object, and the challenges and productive limitations that it involved, showing how such a project helped forge and relied upon transnational, transdisciplinary, and transgenerational feminist solidarities. The ways Beauvoir became a transatlantic object sheds light on the ways that the book and its translation allow us to see Beauvoir anew.

Keywords: Simone de Beauvoir, French feminism, translation, gender, archive

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Introduction

“French feminism” is as much an invention as it is a body of thought or political movement. In the United States, “French feminist theory” is an object that came into being in the late 1980s in reference to a collection of theorists—Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva—that few feminists, in France, would have recognized as such.[1] For long, the term obscured the heterogeneity and diversity of thinkers and activists who had fashioned a critique of gender, sex, and patriarchy, from novelists Assia Djébar and Maryse Condé to feminist materialists Christine Delphy, Colette Guillaumin, Nicole-Claude Matthieu, and literary author and thinker Monique Wittig among others. One might argue that the “French” of French feminisms has always been made through encounters, migrations, and returns with other linguistic, political, territorial, and affective spaces. It involves what Monique Wittig named “translation work,” namely a praxis that is expansive, transformative, and experimental (Sanos, 2023). For Wittig, who famously wrote in both French and English, and moved to the United States in 1976 after her deep disenchantment with and alienation from the French “women's movement,” the circulation of texts across borders and languages enabled the accumulation of “political density” (Eloit 2019; Sanos, 2023, 34). For, it is a fact that, over the years, many of these feminists read and found themselves in conversations with texts and feminisms from the Americas and the Global South.

What does “translation work” mean in the case of Simone de Beauvoir, one of the most well-known figures of twentieth century French feminism and the author of *The Second Sex*, whose own work has been translated worldwide? This roundtable reflects on this praxis of “translation work:” what might it mean to translate Beauvoir back into French? How might this return help transform encounters with her work and speak to a different cultural and political horizon?

Philosopher and author Simone de Beauvoir holds a unique place in both France and the world. She is perhaps the feminist writer who has had the greatest influence among French readers. Her global resonance is also striking, as evidenced by the work undertaken and published by the bilingual *Simone de Beauvoir Studies* journal since 1983. When historian Judith G. Coffin encountered the incredibly rich, almost overwhelming and still-being-catalogued archive of thousands of letters written to Beauvoir during her lifetime, she began to think about the meaning of what, elsewhere, I call an "encounter without dialogue" (Sanos 2023, 38). Readers wrote to someone they imagined—vividly so—as readers sometimes do. Their letters reveal "the drama" of this "outpouring of projection, identification, expectation, disappointment, and passion" from "men as well as women" (Coffin 2020, 1). Coffin finds in these letters a "dense exchange of ideas, feelings, fantasies, experiences," a form of intimacy "enabled by absence, distance, and the epistolary" (2). The "intimate publics" that Coffin examines bring to life the ways this author's work resonated in deep and unexpected ways (10). Coffin could not actually recover this "dialogue," for Beauvoir's responses are not in the archive, but she reconstructs it, tacking between the letters and Beauvoir's writing. Her book beautifully charts the ways Beauvoir's work inhabited ordinary people's lives.

Beauvoir is present everywhere in Coffin's book. We find her philosophy, her insights, and her comments about and to her readers. But the book is not a history of Beauvoir's feminism or of twentieth century French feminism. One might say that, with Beauvoir, Coffin traces an expansive history of twentieth century France and of an "unfamiliar intellectual world" (16). The range of topics is breathtaking—from sex, queerness, marriage, and abortion to the politics of the Algerian War of Independence and the affective dimensions of feminism. Coffin sheds a new and different light on the role of books and reading in creating new publics and on the "powerfully gendered dynamics of the commerce and culture of print" (13). She explores the ways these dynamics and Beauvoir's own works are both symptomatic of and help shape what she terms "midcentury sex," that is how "sex" emerged as a "quintessentially modern topic" that defined the human and the social (15). Most strikingly, she examines Beauvoir's own wrestling with the wars that devastated Europe and the world and her relation to "anticolonial revolt," unearthing the powerful emergence of "shame as a political feeling" that has haunted discussions of the Algerian War (15, 128). This book is not a biography. It offers a different encounter with a figure and an era we thought we already knew.

In 2021, French editor Lorraine Delavaud discovered *Sex, Love, and Letters* and decided that it had to be published in French. With her collaborator, professional translator Marine Vaslin, she set out to translate and edit the book for a French publication. Later, Coffin asked me to join and participate in this translation project. We were from different generations, and different feminist genealogies, located differently across the United States and France, and with different intellectual training and commitments inside and outside the academe. What may often be a source of disagreement or even conflict became here a source of mutual engagement and exchange, forged in part by the urgency of publication deadlines. In fact, what emerged from this endeavor was a transnational, transgenerational, and transdisciplinary feminist collective. The prize-winning book became *Sexe, amour et féminisme: Quand on écrivait à "Madame de Beauvoir"* and was published in France in 2023 with the prestigious Plon publishing house.

The reception of Coffin's *Beauvoir*, which as we discuss below, has starkly illustrated some of the tensions at work in French culture and society today. Some critics and journalists have focused on the translation's use of inclusive writing, asking in an endlessly repeated title, whether Beauvoir "indirectly served the case of the *point médian*" (AFP 2023). It has been hard to dislodge Beauvoir from her status as a cultural icon. One critic, for instance, explains that, though the book had been "captivating," he was "disappointed" not to find Beauvoir's own responses—an archival absence that both Coffin and other journalists explain (Cosnard 2023). Similarly, the historical nature of Coffin's book, which both refuses and avoids the pitfalls of the biographical, has been often ignored and her book categorized a "literary essay." At the same time, the book has indeed captivated readers. The reviewer in the prestigious left-leaning

cultural magazine *Télérama* called the book's argument "passionate et striking" (Cerf 2023). Meanwhile, the book was also a feature on social media, as in young student Lola's *La bibliothèque de poche*'s Instagram account that proposes summaries and reviews of books she has loved.

I suggested that we come together again to think about the ways that, as the special issue co-editors Erin K. Krafft and Caroline De Souza explain, translating Beauvoir embodied a "practice of inscribing collectively-built visions of feminist world-making into practices of solidarity" (2023, 2). For our particular project is rather unusual.

It is now widely known that the original translation of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* into English in 1953 (only four years after its original publication) willfully erased the philosophical dimensions of her writing and her thought. As feminist theorist Toril Moi has discussed, "it contained mistakes and omissions on every page" (quoted in Sanos 2016, 5). That, as I (Sandrine) found out myself, was not confined to *The Second Sex*. After writing a short historical biography of Beauvoir, *Creating a Feminist Existence in the World* (2016), the editor asked me to include English rather than French quotations. As I painstakingly tried to find the corresponding page numbers in the original American translation, I discovered that Beauvoir's memoirs had been revised in the same manner as *The Second Sex*. For example, separate paragraphs had been combined into a single one. Other translation choices undid the force of her statements. As in *The Second Sex*, phenomenology, feminism, and literary style had been erased in one form or another. Coffin reminds us that Beauvoir herself paid little attention to the translations of her work. In many cases like this, translation can obscure as much as it reveals. As the articles in the 2020 *Simone de Beauvoir Studies* special issue on "Reading and Translating *The Second Sex* Globally" illustrate, translation opens up the possibility of new encounters. But what is being encountered can be far from clear.

Bringing Beauvoir back to French readers proved exciting. But it was also unexpectedly different and even transgressive. A number of feminist philosophers, scholars, and critics have wrestled to move? Beauvoir's work from the place in which it was frozen, showing different ways to encounter her work, philosophy, and life. Through the work of Sonya Kruks, Toril Moi, Margaret Simmons, Ingrid Galster, or Danièle Sallenave, a younger generation today reads Beauvoirian thought anew. Feminist philosophers and thinkers like Meryl Altman, Kate Kirkpatrick, Lori Jo Marso, Elaine Stavro, and Skye Cleary argue that her philosophy "is still good to think with" (Altman 2020, 5) especially on questions of sex, race, and the body. My own book *Simone de Beauvoir: Creating a Feminist Existence in the World* situated Beauvoir historically, tracing her own very deliberate efforts to craft her relationship with her world and to navigate these very matters.

In France, where the contemporary feminist scene may be roughly divided between materialists and phenomenologists, one might say Beauvoir's "return" has been a partial one. Those who read radical feminist materialist Colette Guillaumin on race, or Gloria Anzaldúa, and the recent translation of bell hooks' works do not necessarily evoke Beauvoir. However, those involved in theorizing a phenomenology of oppression are indeed thinking *with* Beauvoir. This is the case, for instance, of Manon Garcia, who authored the preface of Coffin's *Beauvoir*. Garcia's first book, *We Are Not Born Submissive* (2021) borrowed from Beauvoir's famous statement that "one is not born a woman, one becomes a woman." Alongside feminist phenomenologists like Camille Froideveaux-Mettrie, feminist historians such as Sylvie Chaperon and Marine Rouch attempt to place Beauvoir in a new feminist history unmoored from its conventional "second wave" narrative. Of course, these boundaries are always porous, as we can see now with scholars like Mickaëlle Provost. She turns to Beauvoir precisely to examine how her work allows us to think intersectionally about the "lived experience of oppression" (Provost 2023).

In the same manner, French literary scholars have returned to Beauvoir's writing and highlighted the radical dimensions of her autobiography. Jean-Louis Jeannelle's (2008) many works, which are both historical and literary, have rekindled interest in Beauvoir and demonstrated how central she is to the

French literary and philosophical canon. The most striking example of that—something like Beauvoir's Pantheonization—is the 2018 republication of Beauvoir's *Mémoires* in the most prestigious French collection, *La Pléiade*. Jeannelle and Eliane Lecarme-Tabome, both experts in literature, history, philosophy, and autobiography in particular, write outstanding introductions to those *Pléiade* volumes and provide substantive annotations throughout. They historicize Beauvoir's project, showing how Beauvoir to be much more than the author of canonical *The Second Sex,* and, at the same time, using Beauvoir's memoirs to shed light back on the autobiographical origins and dimensions of her most famous philosophical text.

Coffin's study is in this historicizing vein. Beauvoir's memoirs, which elicited the lion's share of readers' letters, provide the framework for *Sex, Love, and Letters*. But as a cultural historian, Coffin is most intent on the history that Beauvoir and her readers lived—that they experienced, reflected on, anguished over, and argued about. If Garcia was asked to preface Coffin's book, however, it is because Beauvoir, as we see her through the eyes of her readers, was a phenomenologist of everyday life. Readers who wrote to Beauvoir recounted their difficult encounters with social, political, and other bodily constraints; they reflected on their worlds as well as the world. The book is thus an intimate existential history of the postwar years as well as a contribution to understanding Beauvoir's importance as a philosopher.

One of the questions Delavaud and Vaslin address in this roundtable is the controversial practice of "inclusive writing" (*écriture inclusive*). Indeed, against a long history of gendered French language and the grammatical rule that imposes the masculine as both a universal and a supposedly neutral, scholars, writers, activists have in the last few years stressed how language is political and, as a collective of French linguists recently explained, a locus of "power" (Linguistes Attérré.e.s 2023, 4). In 2022, the independent state-funded organization reporting on gender equality explained that "when language renders women invisible, it is the symptom of a society where they are deemed secondary. It is precisely because language is political that, for several centuries, French language has been deliberately bent towards the masculine by groups opposing gender equality" (Haut Conseil 2022, 61). In other words, as Monique Wittig stated decades earlier, "Language bore the mark of Gender" (1992, 76). There have been mounting demands for an *ungendering* that will wrench the French language from its colonial, patriarchal, and disciplinarian uses. Doing so, however, has proved incredibly controversial. Attacks have come from everywhere, accusing *écriture inclusive* proponents of a destructive "woke ideology." The most prestigious and highest French institution of canonical literature and language, L'Académie française, proclaimed in 2017 that, "in the face of this inclusive aberration, French language is now in mortal danger and our nation will have to answer to future generations" (Linguistes attérré.e.s 2023, 48). Coffin's editor and translator very deliberately chose inclusive writing for their translation. For them, it was all at once a pragmatic, political, philosophical, and literary choice and, in the conversation that follows this introduction, they discuss what it involved and how it was received.

The roundtable also addresses the ways cultural and political fantasies have been at play in Beauvoir's return to France. The book's methodological commitment to cultural history rather than biography has meant that French readers have, at times, been puzzled by it and by the author's own encounter with the archive. Because, as historian Arlette Farge notes, archives are "Unsettling and colossal, the archive grabs hold of the reader"—as the Beauvoir archive certainly did (1989, 5). Like other archives, the Beauvoir archive "was not [necessarily] compiled with an eye to history:" it "captures" and offers a glimpse into "the lives of ordinary people, people who were rarely visited by history" (7). Coffin and Delavaud's remarks below echo Farge's argument that "The archive is an excess of meaning where the reader experiences beauty, amazement, and a certain affective tremor" (31).

The revelation of a previously unknown archive has returned Beauvoir to France in a different form and has also demonstrated how difficult it is to dislodge Beauvoir from her iconic status. It has also

highlighted the challenges we face when we interrogate our relationship to the authority of (feminist) authorship. To think of Beauvoir as embedded in a larger world and to trace such a world is an intellectual endeavor that has troubled readers' phantasmatic investments in Beauvoir as a canonical figure. Scholar Bruno Perreau has explained it well: the transatlantic circulation of "feminist texts" is at once complicated and transformative since "transatlantic exchanges are the product of cultural fantasies whose effect, if not function, is to mask their original source" (2016, 7). For this reason, Beauvoir is a fascinating subject and object.

Finally, the very concrete ways our conversations on the Beauvoir translation unfolded was akin to a four-way form of writing. We pondered one expression or another, spent hours (and many emails at all hours of the day and night) discussing the specifics of a term or concept. We talked about what title might best render the book's aim in this different cultural and political "horizon" (Berman 2005, 58). We developed arguments to push against assumptions regarding the book. We had to negotiate the very pragmatic demands made by the economics of publishing and the context of a reactionary political moment in the last decade, a moment that has nonetheless witnessed a feminist resurgence in different forms.[2] In short, translating Beauvoir and bringing her back to the place where her work had first emerged proved an exhilarating and deeply political initiative. It enabled transnational feminist solidarities in small, yet concrete, and enduring ways. This roundtable, like the book and the letters it is based on, is an archive of these solidarities.

The conversation that follows features four scholars. Sandrine Sanos is a cultural and intellectual historian of twentieth century France, gender, sexuality, and violence and the co-founder of "Les Plumes Rouges," a development editing and translation service; she is also the author of *Simone de Beauvoir: Creating a Feminist Existence,* among other books.

Judith G. Coffin is a cultural historian of twentieth century France, gender, and sexuality at The University of Texas at Austin. Her most recent book, *Sex, Love and Letters: Writing Simone de Beauvoir*, studies an archive of letters from ordinary readers to Beauvoir at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF). It has won the David H. Pinkney award for the most distinguished book in French history from The *Society for French History* in 2021, the Eugen Weber Award for the best book in French History (since 1815) in the last two years from UCLA History, and an honorable mention for the Scaglione Prize for French and Francophone Studies from the Modern Language Association. She has also written *The Politics of Women's Work* (1996); four Norton editions of *Western Civilizations*; and articles on radio and psychoanalysis, mass culture, survey research, and gender/sexuality.

Lorraine Delavaud is a French independent feminist editor and translator. She has translated and published bell hooks as well as Mecca Jamilah Sullivan's *Big Girl* (Plon, 2023) among others.

Marine Vaslin is a professional literary translator. She trained with the École de Traduction Littéraire (ETL) and received her MA in Literary Translation from Angers University, translating a wide range of Anglophone texts and genres, from poetry to comic books, humanities, and psychology.

Roundtable Conversation

Origins

Sandrine Sanos: I wanted to return to the very beginning and how this project of translating Judith's book first emerged. How did the idea of publishing Judy's work in France, or this encounter and dialogue, come about?

Judith Coffin: This is a question for Lorraine, who "discovered the book."

Lorraine Delavaud: The book was in the hands of a literary agency. Cornell University Press had placed it with this agency that was in charge of selling the rights in France. It was Aude Sécheret from La Nouvelle Agence who told me about it. And I immediately fell in love with it, obviously. But I don't know if this is something you had initiated.

Coffin: Absolutely not! It all happened without me knowing anything. Cornell sent me a note saying "we're giving it to an agency." They asked if I agreed and of course I did!

Ironically, Beauvoir herself was so nonchalant about her work being translated, in fact all the archives regarding her first translation to English are here in the Knopf collection at the Harry Ransom Center at University of Texas at Austin. She didn't want to look at what was being done. She didn't even want to know anything about the person who was translating it. So, she was certainly not a model on that score.

I also didn't think a French translation would happen. Actually, I think it's quite rare for American scholarly books to get translated into French. As a result, I didn't pay very much attention and, the next thing I knew, I got an email from Lorraine.

Delavaud: Indeed, at the time, I had launched a collection of literary nonfiction essays and I was looking for new ways to look at canonical figures who belonged to what we call our patrimony—let's call it matrimony. I had overseen the publication in French of Bill Carter's *Proust in Love* (2014). Carter proposes a reading of novelist Marcel Proust's love life and how it pervades the writing of his iconic book, *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Here again, an American interpretation of a canonical French author sounded very exciting to me. And, of course, when Judy's book landed with me, I immediately jumped on it: here was this correspondence that the French had never heard of! It is quite extraordinary that you had found it and were now bringing it to France. In a way, it was totally improbable.

And, very often, when I talk about this book, people don't understand that it's been translated, and that it's actually from the United States. To the French, that is so unlikely.

Coffin: It is interesting that people consider it improbable that an American found this correspondence. That, in itself, might be worth thinking about. Americans were among Beauvoir's attentive correspondents, and they have followed French theory for a very long time. Historians and cultural theorists regularly cross the Atlantic to work in French archives. Think of Natalie Zemon Davis, Joan Scott, and Alice Kaplan among others. And to me, it was *immediately* obvious that this correspondence was a discovery, one that made us look at Beauvoir in a different and very revealing way. It may be that American and British genealogies and traditions of feminist and cultural history have long emphasized the importance of letter writing and correspondence. I should add, though, that my model for this work was French literary scholar Judith Lyon-Caen and her book on the letters to Balzac. So, as soon as I saw these letters, it was obvious to me that I could do something like Lyon-Caen's fantastic *La lecture et la vie* (2006). There's also a French historian, Marine Rouch, who began studying Beauvoir's women readers as I published my 2010 *American Historical Review* article, which already had "Sex, Love, and Letters" as its title.

Sanos: It seems to me that there's a connection between what you're saying, Lorraine, regarding this love at first sight and this unlikely object—Judy's book—which may have something to do with the ways in which Beauvoir is frozen as an object of fantasy. That question was on my mind as I thought about the entire enterprise, from translation to reception, and how it has maybe involved an amnesia. There are two things

at play here, I think: an amnesia in relation to Beauvoir's thought, which was itself fashioned in a transnational manner. But there is also, I would suggest, a kind of amnesia that has something to do with what, historically, we do with canonical figures. For instance, I remember when I went to the Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine. They are a prestigious literary archive, which houses some of the great authors of the twentieth century from Samuel Beckett to Violette Leduc, Frantz Fanon, Kateb Yacine, Marguerite Duras, Guy Hocquenghem, Tahar Ben Jelloun, and many, many, others. The archivists didn't understand that I wasn't there to work on the archive of ONE great literary or philosophical figure. They could not fathom that I wanted to explore a "panorama" of literary figures and how they were part of a cultural and political milieu.

These questions are at stake in the practice of cultural history and in relation to Beauvoir herself and feminist history. After all, cultural history means, as Farge explains, examining the "unexplained territory of cultural habits, of states of beings and of ways of doing" that make up ordinary people's lives, rather than focusing on a singular and canonical figure (43).

The Fate of Beauvoir and French Feminism

Sanos: Did you need to explain your choice, Lorraine, when you took on Judy's book?

Delavaud: Not really, as it was kind of love at first sight and, at the same time, it was so obvious to me that this book should have a place in France. But maybe there is something to think about in terms of Beauvoir's French reception today. In France, she is considered a bit out of fashion as a feminist. She's been criticized for many things, including not being intersectional. In other words, she is not seen as having much to do with feminism today. We might say there is a kind of disenchantment in France while, on the contrary, it looks like she remains very popular in the United States. In any case, I realized that there were a lot of scholars, or rather feminist scholars and philosophers outside of France working on Beauvoir. Whereas in France today, working on Beauvoir can seem a bit outdated.

In a recent France Culture radio podcast, for instance, many of the participants criticized her. Perhaps she is no longer considered an attractive and relevant feminist figure. The matter of her "pact" with Sartre—which you discuss in your book, Judy—is problematic, and her account of it is less than honest; it is seen by many as a betrayal. Her lack of sisterhood [*sororité*] is striking. Today feminist solidarity is everywhere invoked as a central tenet of feminist struggles. Maybe France and feminists are no longer enamored of Beauvoir.

The interesting thing is that your book, Judy, reorients the conversation: it is not a book *on* Simone de Beauvoir strictly speaking, and even less a hagiography. We understand how influential she was for people, something that these letters make real and tangible, irrespective of contemporary debates.

Coffin: I found these letters when I was asked to write a review of then-recent works on Beauvoir. Many of those books framed the history narrowly, and cast Beauvoir as, above all, a Great Feminist, or Mother of second wave feminism. What I found exciting in these letters is that there were precisely NOT that. I should add that Beauvoir was long out of fashion in the United States as well. By the time I was in college, we were all infatuated with new "French feminists" (Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva especially), which was a generational rupture with Beauvoir. What I found interesting in the letters was a completely different way to look at Beauvoir. The question wasn't whether Beauvoir is a feminist for us now but, rather, why was she so galvanizing? Why was she so riveting to so many people at the time, to so many *different* kinds of people? How did she "speak" to them? I actually had to explain this fascination and passion to myself

because, as young person in the 1960s and 1970s, I already considered her a little old-fashioned. What I wanted to do with this book was reflect on precisely that issue: why these readers were so in love with her, what her ideas did for them, and—not least—what, concretely, they did with her ideas—all in a historical moment that, I emphasize, was very unlike our own. The memoirs were a crucial part of the answer. Readers came to those first, and later came to *The Second Sex*.

I might have done more at the end of the book with the kind of generational break and critique of Beauvoir a in the 1970s. There was a sharp and decisive repudiation. Audre Lorde is an excellent example, with her speech and statement: "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (2007). Any numbers of thinkers—from Antoinette Fouque, Monique Wittig, Audre Lorde, and many others—repudiated her.

Sanos: That critique was already in the making in the famous 1979 Beauvoir colloquium in New York designed to mark the thirtieth anniversary of *The Second Sex*.

Coffin: Exactly. This is where Audre Lorde famously delivered her critique (Olson 2000).

Sanos: And Monique Wittig, who said then that "lesbians are not women" (32). Despite this falling out of love, however, we've also seen a return to Beauvoir and to Beauvoirian thought from feminist theorists over the last decade. This recovery is tied to an interest in affect theory and phenomenology. There have also been efforts to theorize what Beauvoir failed to do in terms of race, the collective, freedom, and so on. In fact, this is part of an overall resurgence of French feminist thought.

The Making of a Collective (I): The Practice of Inclusive Writing

Sanos: To return to the translation itself, once rights had been acquired, how did this "translation work" unfold? What were its stakes? And how did this translation "collective" come into being, since, Marine, you were translating alongside Lorraine, both in terms of its form and content. Were you aware of the stakes of such a translation from the outset? Or did that come about through the translation process itself? What was your relationship to the work?

Vaslin: I was contacted by my English teacher. Lorraine had contacted her to inquire about translators interested in collaborating with her. My professor explained that she was in contact with a wonderful, passionate publisher. She said, "It's a great project. I can't do it; but, if you're interested, get in touch with Madame Delavaud."

Our first emails were very formal. But my first phone conversation with Lorraine proved quite wonderful. One experiences few professional encounters like this in one's career: after barely an hour and a half, we found we were on the same wavelength, without discussing any details. I don't know how to explain it. Very quickly, we were already on first-name basis. To put it succinctly, we did not decide there was a big feminist issue at stake here. When Lorraine explained the project and her love at first sight, and I can say that the same question occurred for me: how has this book not been translated already? And, then, very concretely, there was the work. I remember writing to Lorraine after the first few pages saying: "I cannot translate "reader" in the universal masculine French (*lecteur*). So, what do we do next?" That is how it all began. I thought that, at this stage of my life, in this particular context, and although I wasn't especially involved in feminism, that I just could not use *lecteur*—the universal masculine. At the same time, I had just finished Kate Kirkpatrick's 2021 biography in a recent French translation. It used the word lecteur

throughout, which made me uneasy. And the more I read it, the more I thought I could not do the same. And I didn't want to do the same. At that point, we had not discussed the matter with Judy, so it was truly a translator's affective reaction.

After this, Lorraine and I gradually built a strategy. I was not aware of how the choice of inclusive writing was an activist and political one. Without Lorraine, I would have remained in one particular register. Then we each read one another's work, but I'll let Lorraine talk about the overall project management as well as the editing—all writing work.

Delavaud: Our logistical constraints actually shaped the work. We had to complete the translation in something like three months. The choice of whether or not to use inclusive writing is rather symptomatic of the French context: it is used by small activist publishing companies that operate outside of large conglomerates. While a prestigious publishing house like Seuil uses it here and there, that is not necessarily the case for Plon—as we were reminded when the AFP dispatch (taken up by subsequent reviews) explained that Plon was "one of the oldest and most venerable publishing houses." It is true that inclusive writing was not a given, especially at such a conservative moment. But it was for me, and that guiding principle drove our translation.

And this word lecteur was a conundrum for us. Even without being feminist or politically motivated, the question was this: should we translate it in the masculine (lecteur), in the feminine as expected (*lectrice*), or ungendered (*lecteur·rice*)? Of course, there are some ways to get around the issue, but *lectorat* (readership) and *on* (they) cannot do the trick for six hundred pages. I had already edited and co-translated a book by bell hooks, so I was experienced in the practice of inclusive writing. It really comes down to it becoming a habit. And, in the case of bell hooks, using inclusive writing or not was not even open to debate: it had to be. But why should we wonder whether to use inclusive writing when translating bell hooks and not ask the same about Beauvoir?

That said, we had to compromise because, while neologisms such as the pronouns "iel" and "celleux" [they] were not a problem when translating bell hooks, I was a bit more reticent with Judy's book.[3] I wish I could say that inclusive writing should be used regardless of the context but, in the current political moment, it is mainly the province of activist texts or publishing houses. I also had to think about the fact that Judy had not set out to write a feminist manifesto. It's an academic book and a history book. Of course, it is feminist in context, but it is not written in that genre. As a result, Marine and I decided to adopt a more consensual type of inclusive writing. This meant no neologism (such as "iel"). Practicality led to our use of the "middle period" [*point médian*], such as "lecteur.rices." We wanted to avoid having to have a dual formulation [*lecteur, lectrice*] a thousand times throughout the book. In the end, it's a very fluid form of inclusive writing, and I challenge anyone to tell us it's unreadable.

But I do know that there are many people in France, both men and women, who virulently oppose inclusive writing—to the point where they refuse to read a book written in that way. At some point, I did wonder whether using a "middle period" had been an unnecessary risk. And the initial book reception certainly seems to have proved my suspicions right. Some journalists have clearly shown how they resist this choice; their reviews focus exclusively on inclusive writing in their reviews, sometimes without saying a single word about the book's content. After a long conversation with me, though, one journalist ended up admitting that, indeed, it had not bothered him that much in the end! Marine and I have been called "*bécasses acéphales* (acephalous silly gooses) on social media. When that happens, we laugh about it for ten minutes, then just don't think about it anymore. Who cares? Debates are only interesting when they're open-minded and of substance. In any case, this reaction is certainly indicative of the current French context; our intuition was correct. We knew this would encounter opposition, even though inclusive writing remains, in many ways, a commonsense choice.

Coffin: I think this is absolutely right. We didn't have very much of choice when it came to the ungendering of the writing. I did not want *lectrice*, *lectrice*, *lectrice* (female reader) everywhere, because Beauvoir's readers were *not* all women. This idea that Beauvoir was a woman writer who was writing for women was something I wanted to push back against quite forcefully. One of my favorite feminist and historical texts has always been Denise Riley's *"Am I That Name?": Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (1989). It captures the ambivalence of so many of us, including Beauvoir, in the face of that proposed identity. Sandrine's recent essay on Riley (2021), reminds me why I loved *Am I That Name?* and why it is so worthwhile to re-read it. It also reminds us that this linguistic choice of "reader" in English, made plural, or ungendered in French speaks to what is at the heart of this book.

Beauvoir did not simply write for and about women. She wrote about politics broadly cast, about history, about emotions. She wrote about life, her politics, the Algerian war, sexuality, even old age—she wrote for men as well as women, young and old, lesbian, gay, and straight. That is why she elicited so many fascinating reflections from an unexpected range of people. Making these points was easy in English. I used "readers" and "letter writers" on virtually every page. I didn't have to worry about whether those words are gendered. And I did not think how hard this job would be for Lorraine and Marine.

Sex, Love, and Letters is a history, but I meant it as feminist intervention. My point is that Beauvoir is not interesting simply because of what she said about sex, or women, or the condition of women. Feminism is not only interested in or important to women. Feminism is an analytical tool, or a constellation of issues. Those constellations shifted depending on the historical moment; Riley made that clear decades ago. Feminism addresses many issues just as it evades others. And a history of feminism has to take that into account, has to call attention to its unfamiliar surfacings or constituencies. We can't assume we know what it means.

The title of *The Second Sex*, for instance, generated enormous interest, and we have to appreciate that in its context. "Sex" meant what we would call gender, sexuality, gender roles; it was implicated in seemingly everything—the body, the psyche, emotions, identity, motives, desires, social relations, and culture. My term for that moment is "mid-century sex," and I spend a whole chapter on why it was so compelling to so many. I'm still interested in that, in the cultural logic of the mid-century moment and what "feminism" means in that context.

Delavaud: Indeed, when the term "reader" is used, and the letter is quoted, we had to check the original letter to confirm whether it was a woman or a man who was speaking. I must admit that, while it wasn't something you had to think about, Judy, it became an extremely important detail for us, that is whether the letter-writer was a woman or a man.

Coffin: In fact, one of the ways to make letter-writers anonymous was to use this neutral term "reader." Since, as I explain in the book, French law require[d] that most of the readers "remain anonymous to protect their privacy" (Coffin 8). Every now and then, the reader's gender was perfectly obvious. And it was important that it be obvious in some cases but, at other times, it was just as important to fudge that.

The Making of a Collective (II): Transatlantic Conversations

Coffin: Can we come back, for a moment, to the creation of this collective? Because it was so spontaneous and so wonderful. I remember the first letter I got from Lorraine. When I answered, she wrote back straightaway. And I first thought, "who is this wonderful person, who answers her email in barely fifteen minutes?" I don't even know how many emails were sent back and forth. Then, there is the fact that

Sandrine was brought in so quickly. It made it feel like a small feminist collective publishing or newspaper—the kind of collectives we write histories about. It was exhilarating. That was largely because of the good humor and the sisterhood of everybody involved, as well as the incredible patience as we worked through different translation choices. I think some pages were read by all four of us, right? And multiple times . . . and . . . so, it really is a collective project.

Vaslin: I agree. Translating with someone else really sharpened the work itself, thanks to Lorraine's incredible talent and ability to be so precise with language. If we compare to the 1953 translation of *The Second Sex*, we were very privileged with this project; and, it was also a matter of professional ethics: both of us were already in complete agreement. But what was striking was that even when there was four of us, we were on the same wavelength.

We all wanted words to be the most precise and the most accurate, to be faithful to Judy's thinking, but also ensure the greatest clarity for French readers. When I re-read some of the work we did, I can't help but think that, between the four of us, we managed to surpass our expectations for the translation. You can't distinguish one person's work from another's. That is because we discussed how to say things, how to rework something, how to ensure the text's overall coherence, and how to adapt it to a French readership while also paying homage to those anonymous letter-writers.

As the book's translators and first French readers, there were times when we *wanted* to know who, exactly, had written the letter Judy cited, out of curiosity or interest. There were also times when we *needed* to know this in order to translate accurately. For instance, if there wasn't a "she" after a quote, we were stuck. That is why Lorraine spent hours at the BNF pouring over letters only to see if a man or a woman had signed them.

Coffin: The amount of energy and knowledge that everyone put into this translation is really extraordinary. Sandrine is not only French, and bilingual, but knows this history and Beauvoir inside out. She and I have a long history together and putting it together transatlantically was really interesting. She knew what I was trying to say and could say it—often better!

That is why our collective project is, in many ways, of the opposite of the first translation of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. The first English translation of *The Second Sex*, by H.M. Parshley for Knopf in 1953 is infamous, though it's very readable in English and it made the book very popular. But, of course, it stripped out everything that was philosophical about Beauvoir. To be fair to Parshley, the editors and Knopf pushed him to make very substantial cuts and to leave out literary references as well as discussions of existentialism or phenomenology. (Both Knopf's demands and Parshley's poignant enthusiasm for feminism and *The Second Sex* come through in the Knopf archives at the Harry Ransom Center). More than fifty years later, Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier (2011) took on the heroic task of doing a completely new—and unabridged—translation, which was published in 2010. Some have been very critical of that effort, too. Translation is not only an art, but often a thankless task.

Sanos: It seems to me that what emerges from what you're saying is that this collective was forged through practice. We did not discuss our commitments, our differences, our possible divergences. Everything was undertaken through the medium of the text, at the service of the text and of thought; and precisely in a dialogue that is also a feminist practice. In this sense, it is the opposite of the 1953 translation, where one person takes an "object" and makes something else of it. In our case, there is, for instance, the question of inclusive writing, which required us to think about the meaning of thought in an English-speaking or French-speaking environment and contexts, but also to examine an entire conceptual framework.

I am curious: did you have moments when you were truly wondering how a particular concept might be translated—for instance the use of feminist critical theorist Lauren Berlant's work? What did you think when a reader asked whether every use of "postcolonial" should not, in fact, be replaced by "decolonial?" I reread our exchanges over how to translate "mid-century sex," which is an expression that I love in English for its conceptual sharpness. I remember wondering how this could be translated in French while retaining its conceptual force. We discussed this at length, which gave me the opportunity to see and learn how you encountered a text as translators.

Coffin: Ah. There are two different things here: "mid-century sex" and Berlant. I was very proud of "mid-century sex" as an expression because it was a conceptual—I won't say theoretical—and historiographical intervention. It sounds great in English, and it was clear that it was not going to ring the same way in French. That's too bad. Second, Berlant's work was the theoretical and conceptual loadstone in this book. Berlant gave me a way of thinking about the "intimate public" and the *affective* dimensions of the often tangled and difficult relationship between readers and Beauvoir. I was stunned when I realized her work had not been translated in French. How could this be? How could Berlant—who is such a significant feminist figure in the United States—not be translated in French? And how would I be able to find French translations of excerpts that I was using? How could I inflict on Lorraine, Marine, and Sandrine the task of translating these long quotes from Berlant in French?

Vaslin: I cannot say it wasn't a lot of work. In fact, I hadn't realized how much editorial research would go into this translation, both to familiarize myself with the concepts, and then, really, just to reread *The Second Sex*. I had started reading it as a teenager and probably stopped before finishing it. So, to reread it at my age alongside the translation was a rather fantastic experience.

This was also a very down-to-earth experience: the work involved in discovering then finding sources only to realize that, indeed, they had not been translated and that we were now translating ourselves. [. . .] I do not recall the Berlant translation being especially difficult, though those were mostly in the sections Lorraine was translating. But I do recall that "mid-century sex" woke me up in the middle of the night. And I remember sending a text message saying: "yes, this is it, I found the right word for it: the middle (*mitan*) of life."

But, here, the issue was the same as with the term "followers," which was used eleven times in the book. We chose eight different translations even including the English word at some point. So one can play with chapter titles, then find different ways to name the concept in the body of the text itself in order to present it in different ways. But it's true that it's a shame to lose something that is so meaningful in English. Maybe it wasn't completely lost.

Coffin: I do know that the hardest thing for Lorraine was tracking down all those footnotes. In a collectivity, everyone brings something to the table. What Lorraine brought to the table was unbelievable.

Delavaud: I can see myself at the BNF on the microfilm machine, looking for the Kinsey report's official translation . . . Sandrine, you enabled us to tighten things with a form of scholarly conceptualization that we did not necessarily possess. For me, as editor, it was a relief to know that someone was able to "have our backs" so that one doesn't publish poorly translated concepts. And the fact that this was an all-women collective made a great difference, in terms of dialogue and generosity. It was never an overbearing experience despite our very different levels of expertise. This collective of women will remain such a precious experience.

Coffin: I think the experience pulled all of us out of our everyday.

The Making of a Collective (III): Affective Translations

Sanos: Speaking of that, Marine, do you have any particularly joyful or frustrating translation moments to share?

Vaslin: I think that one of the strengths of Judy's book lay in how the letters grab you as you're reading them. Every time we come back to the heart of your book, that is the letters themselves, it's such a powerful experience. And, afterwards, it led me to subjects I didn't know deeply, in particular the Algerian War of Independence. I had left the topic of decolonization aside for my high school diploma exams. And, now, I told myself I could not translate this chapter without the historical context. I could not just translate words and, every time—and that's what's great—we hope that the readers who will read the book, will do the same and look further. Every time a source is cited it proves interesting. So, I took note and then researched it and then, the search widens. It's an endless well of openness to the world.

There are passages and chapters that are powerful because of the pain they evoke. There are chapters like the Kinsey one where Judy shows how *The Second Sex*'s reception was framed by the release of the Kinsey report. I had never heard of the Kinsey report. Here is, as you were saying, Sandrine, an example of the power of crossing the borders of Beauvoir's thought and realizing that she was read across the Atlantic, that she has letters coming from South America, from Africa, and from all over the world. That is something that, as a French reader, I wasn't at all aware of. As Lorraine said, Beauvoir is a bit frozen in time. The letters were what enabled me to get through difficult translation moments or times of great exhaustion.

I don't know if the book is better in French or in English. But, in French, in any case, there is, on the one hand, the assurance of scholarly accuracy. And, on the other, it was a great comfort to work with an author who reads and speaks French so well. I do not know if everything that happened to us was a matter of luck. But it certainly is one of the book's strengths to have been able to do this.

Delavaud: It was a real gift to be able to have you, Judy, the author, available to answer any question about a possible misunderstanding. Translating is such a complicated endeavor. I remember, for instance, a passage in bell hooks. No matter how hard I wracked my brain, I could not figure out whether she meant this or that. They had opposite meanings and there was no one to turn to.

Coffin: I remember Marine had beautifully translated the first couple of paragraphs. But I wrote back correcting what she had written. One does not have a "big fat pencil" in that particular archive, it's always skinny little one. I hated being so picky. But I thought that if some scholars saw that, they would assume I had never been to the archive!

Sanos: What is highlighted here—hardly a new idea—is the fact that translation is really a creative undertaking and a form of rewriting that requires imagination. This might explain the intensity that characterized the entire project. Were there times when you worried whether this would not be conceptually or politically legible in French?

Vaslin: No, quite the opposite. It was a real gift to be able to collaborate with the author while translating. It is not the translator's place to say if something is good or bad. We admired every page, even the most

difficult ones; it is true there were some rather complicated pages to translate: we wanted to turn long sentences into ones that had French turns of phrase. That was especially important for a non-academic readership.

For instance, the expression "one of the few boisterous feminists of the period" became in French "l'une des rares écrivains féministes intrépides de l'époque." This is something we spent a lot of time on: did the adjective "few" (*rare*) refer to "feminist writers" or to "boisterous feminist writers." One word can change the meaning of a sentence. But, in retrospect, it seems obvious: wasn't a feminist writer necessarily bold and boisterous at the time? We also had discussions with Judy regarding "antiwar," which we translated as "anti-guerre" rather than "pacifiste." But none of this will be obvious when the book is read. That's what makes a translation successful. It is interesting in fact that, as time went by, Lorraine and I adopted Judy's style, and it became more unstudied. But that is the nature of translation work.

Delavaud: It is ironic because we tend to think of translation as a very lonely job: someone sitting at night by their bedside lamp at night, slowly translating. But it was the exact opposite for us. For my part, I had to decide on some things a translator would not have to do because of my role as editor. This meant endless readings and readings, examining thousands of layers one at a time: did we get the meaning right, are there any instances of mistranslations, did we render the argument correctly? But also: is the turn of phrase an elegant one? What about the style? Plus, are there typos lurking around. is there a grammar or other rule that we are unaware of? I remember that after six different people and thrice that number of proofreadings, including a professional proofreader, we still found in the published book/proofs, a grammar mistake such as "*Beauvoir envoit une lettre*" (the correct version is "envoie"). somewhere. It's hard, because when you work under such intense deadlines, often at night, always tired, you just *know* that there will be mistakes. When you begin editing one small sentence, repetitions might creep in because, because when translation takes place word after word, or one sentence after another, one's overarching reading will come later.

Then, inclusive writing, requires a completely different reading that will exclusively focused in order to work against our ingrained reflexes. It requires undoing them because it is very easy to let things slip by. And there is also the question of a "cultural horizon," that is asking ourselves how to translate with an eye to a different readership because some passages won't be read the same way in France. As a result, there are multiple layers of proofreadings. In fact, translation should be anything but a solitary job.

There was also the fact that, as an editor, I wanted to wrench the book out of academia, because in France, scholarly publishing isn't really glamorous—no offense. An academic book will barely sell fifteen copies. It is expensive and only a few specialists might be interested. There is here a kind of cleavage between publishing a literary essay with a publisher like Plon and academic publishers like Presses Universitaires. Though, these borders are beginning to be more porous and academic publishers are trying to be less dry, intimidating, or unattainable.

There was this trend that I was immediately interested in: there is a distinctly American genre of writing that is half-way between erudite or scholarly writing and nonfiction narrative. And that allows for books that are a real joy to read and where a scholarly author does not hesitate to speak in the first person. Whereas in France, it would be regarded as an error of taste, of style. It would be considered the worst kind of vulgarizing. So, when I bought your book, I really wanted for it to not be a book just for scholars but for everyone. That means we had to do this work on language, to avoid being stilted in one's expression or saying things like "first" then "second," in short to lighten some of the scholarly writing habits we might usually resort to when translating. The book often reads like a novel, especially when we encounter those letters' excerpts, but it's first and foremost an academic work. There's a very rich and dense context in the first few pages that might discourage a non-academic reader. At the same time—I know it's a bit contradictory with our determination to appeal to wider readership—we chose to use inclusive writing and

the "middle period." There was the title, though that was not our first choice. Plus our preface writer, feminist philosopher Manon Garcia. I suspect all of these narrowed our audience to a female and feminist one. In the end, we'll see how being in between these two genres will fare and what kind of audience the book will find. In any case, proofreading a book of this kind involves challenges that will remain invisible to readers.

Coffin: Indeed, I work very hard on style to make my work readable and I think that, in an American context, the book is extremely readable. Nonetheless, it is still an academic book and you had to do this work of transforming it for a much larger readership. Regarding the title, you and I had one idea on how to do that, while the publishing house absolutely insisted on their version of the title. You and I wanted "Love, War, and Feminism." They did not. Titles do a lot of work and adding that word would have captured why there's so much context, why I spend so much time talking about the Cold War, the Algerian War, the aftermath of World War II, and the Holocaust. The title would have gestured to that. But the publishing house refused.

Delavaud: They did not consider intellectual and scholarly readers or even how your book would reshape Beauvoir's historiography by associating her with war. It did not make sense to them and as salespeople. In fact, they were worried and explained that, in the wake of the Ukrainian context, books associated with war weren't faring that well. The publishers also did not want "feminism" to appear in the title on the grounds that there are so many feminist publications these days that the book would get lost, or that it would "only" be placed in bookstores' "feminist" sections. At some point, there was some talk about using "correspondence" instead—a rather hefty word. But "Sex, Love, and Correspondence" isn't incredibly subtle. It reminded us of other titles, names or slogans: like the TV sitcom "Amour, gloire et beauté" (Love, Glory, and Beauty) or the famous "Sex, drugs, and rock'n roll."[4] Even the title we wanted—"L'amour, la guerre, le féminisme" (*Love, war, feminism*)—echoed a very famous cheese ad slogan that everyone in France would be familiar with: "Wine, bread, and Boursin" (*du pain, du vin, du Boursin*).

We were caught between several arguments because there was also the issue, for instance, of the book cover design: the word "correspondence" is very long and won't quite fit on a beautiful, graphic cover like this one. Still, although it made its way back and is part of the book title, the fact that nobody was fond of using the word "feminism" is symptomatic of a particular context. I liked one title version, which Judy and I both wanted—"love, war, feminism." I liked it for the way it gestured to the war of sexes, without being explicit about it. I liked the juxtaposition of "love" and "war." It would also have allowed us to get rid of the word "sex," which I found far too sensationalist since it actually refers to sexuality first and foremost in French.

Coffin: I agree, I liked "L'amour, la guerre, le féminisme" too. And I hadn't thought about the different meaning of "sex" in French . . .

The Making of a Collective (IV): Misunderstandings and the Archive

Coffin: I have a question for you: none of the American reviewers expressed regret at not having access to Beauvoir's responses. Yet almost all the French reviewers did. I am not sure how Beauvoir's responses would be interesting. We've read millions and millions of her letters; they are published. Had I thought more about that, I would have emphasized why that absence is important, and how it makes the book more interesting.

Vaslin: It's not the purpose of your book and you explain it well.

Coffin: Indeed: Beauvoir is *there* in the book. Her thought is there. Her phenomenology is there. Can we go back to the Algeria chapters for a moment? Those were the hardest to write. I knew I had something important to say in there—besides simply situating Beauvoir in that unexpected context. This book is about the history of emotions; it is also, necessarily, about Beauvoir's phenomenology and her phenomenology of emotion. It is about how she articulated that phenomenology and how it lands with her readers. Beauvoir is everywhere and you learn a lot about her thought.

My readers—French or English language—have five or six volumes of her memoirs to turn to if they want to see her answers. I was rather frustrated by that, frankly.

Sanos: This speaks to Perreau's argument, that "transatlantic exchanges are the product of cultural fantasies whose effect, if not function, is to mask their original source" (7). This also speaks to the fact that Beauvoir remains a fantasy for many, while the purpose of your book is to open up an understanding of these emotions, feelings, and attachments. You want to use the figure of Beauvoir to get to something much broader. Its strength is precisely that you do not examine these letters as a form of "advice column" or "dear Abby" letters (*courrier du coeur*). Every chapter resists and undoes that fantasy. That question—"Why don't we have Beauvoir's answers?"—can be understood as a symptom of this attachment to Beauvoir, a figure everyone wants to know everything about, especially about what might be private or behind the veil. It reminds me of the time when, years ago, the French magazine *Nouvel Obs* published on its front cover a photo of Beauvoir, taken while she is naked, in the bathroom, and we see her from behind . . .[5]

Coffin: An Art Shay photograph . . .

Sanos: Yes, and for me, that is a kind of desire at work. This demand is symptomatic of what you describe in your book. And, if reading Beauvoir as people did involved a fantasy, then that fantasy also acts as a veil that obscures your arguments in the book. That might be what explains these misunderstandings; indeed such misunderstandings may not be a surprise. It's psychoanalytic: the transference that shapes people's relationship to Beauvoir. The same applies to what people had to say about the choice of title. That is why the juxtaposition of Beauvoir and the war is so incongruous to them. It disturbs that fantasy.

More pragmatically, there's also the fact that French publishers tend to use rather short titles these days. If I look at my bookshelf, I see Elsa Dorlin's *Feu*, Amandine Gay's *Ouvrir la voix*, Camille Froidevaux-Metterie's *Seins*, or Lauren Bastide's *Présentes*. Many history books also use shorter titles. But to go back to that transferential relationship, I would suggest that these reactions testify to what you've accomplished and how, in the end, this feminist translation work is an act of subversion.

Anecdotally, I also want to say the collective that came together so spontaneously wasn't just transatlantic; it is also transgenerational because the four of us belong to different generations, which was our strength though it can be source of conflict in feminism. It is also transdisciplinary: literary translation, academic and non-academic, history and literature. Judy and I are different kinds of historians and you, Lorraine, are *both* translator and editor. All these differences have permeated the work. That is why this translation is, in many ways a "practice of inscribing collectively-built world-making into practices of solidarity" (Krafft and de Souza 2023, 2) as the editors of this special issue explain.

Coffin: I think that it is absolutely true that Beauvoir is object of fantasy and I wanted to analyze that as a cultural phenomenon. To me, what was interesting was precisely how different generations of readers projected their feelings onto her. With men, the fantasies were pretty wild and intense, but women readers

were no less invested and intense. The importance of desire and thwarted desire in this relationship is so critical. And, Sandrine, you are right, I should not have been surprised that French readers who still have such investment in Beauvoir as a philosophical figure would respond this way. Of course, there are also those who have a seemingly insatiable appetite for more and more about her interesting and complicated life—in that way she's still a celebrity.

Vaslin: I think you explain this at the opening of the book—and I think that is precisely one of the book's strengths—your perspective as an American, as a historian, and your focus on the letters decenters that vision of what Beauvoir represents. I suspect that those who lament the lack of responses from Beauvoir in the book haven't read the book yet. Because your argument is very clear. And, in that process, there is a decentering of who we, the French, are. I'd be curious to see how it's received in Switzerland, Belgium, Canada, and Quebec, and to see if there's this kind of tension in Francophone worlds as opposed to France where we feel Beauvoir belongs to us.

As Sandrine was saying, this is not an advice column, a story of "Dear Abby letters." It is about making the impact Beauvoir has had on people's lives more visible. In a recent podcast about her work, I heard a French historian say that Beauvoir is one of the rare women writers to hold such importance in French literature and to have exercised such an influence in people's lives. That is what your book shows. Your gaze decenters our own. And this decentering allows us to rediscover her and to discover her anew elsewhere. For instance, I had no idea what a deep and tangled relationship she had to the Algerian war, and I consider myself to be part of the readership your book targets. There is so much we learn that is put into historical perspective. There is an entire world contained here: for instance, people did not know who to write to, so they wrote to Beauvoir to ask what a diaphragm was called. That is, indeed, amazing.

Delavaud: I can say I was lucky because thanks to this work I went to the BNF to see these letters. And they are extraordinary. Sandrine also worked on this archive, right?

Sanos: In my case, it was an accident. I was working on Beauvoir for another book project. Writers such as Albert Memmi and Anna Langfus were supposed to have written to her and I was looking for these letters. They brought me the wrong box of "correspondence." I had already read Judy's book and, when I opened the box, all of a sudden, I understood what Judy had described so well in her book and how amazing these letters are.

Delavaud: I had exactly the same experience as you: when I received the folder, and I opened it, I came across this little checkered paper with its lines.[6] And, suddenly, it grips you and you find yourself in vortex of time in the BNF's Richelieu Room. It's so very moving. Had you put Beauvoir's letters in my hands, I would not have had such a strong emotional reaction. But, here, it's really something else: to have this ordinary woman writing on her little piece of paper with her tight little handwriting on the corner of her kitchen table. It does something to you, it grabs you, it upsets you. An authentic torrent of feelings emerges when encountering these letters that come from all over the world, regardless of social class. I just couldn't stop rummaging through them, coming across one treasure after another. In fact, we ended up adding several more letters in the French edition. For that reason, I don't know either what to make of those who, having read your book, Judy, complain that say "there's no letter from Beauvoir." One critic even bemoaned an absence of index . . . for the letters! Especially, since, Judy, you did manage to convey Beauvoir's responses. You wove it all together so that we'd understand. And, in fact, there is one response from her in the book, that we managed to add in this French edition with Sylvie Le Bon-de Beauvoir's agreement, an astonishing letter that speaks volumes about the relationship she had forged with these readers.[7]

Coffin: On a more technical matter, as I was reading these letters, I was imagining them in English and so I was already translating in my head. So, when I had to excerpt these letters, I had to chop them up in order to preserve their anonymity, but also to keep the part of the phrase that worked best in English. And, of course, every time I went back to the archives, the folders were different since they were still being catalogued. They had to be kept in exactly the disorder they were already in.

Sanos: It was probably a good thing not to have had Beauvoir's responses. As you said, we are so used to Beauvoir in the first person and to her memoirs. Her responses would have cannibalized how readers encountered your book. In fact, hers is an absence that is not one.

Coffin: So well said, Sandrine. [smiles] I was glad not to have her answers. We know that version of the story.

Epilogue

Sanos: In conclusion, we talked about fantasy, misunderstanding, reception. But, for you, what was the life each one of you imagined for this book?

Delavaud: A fabulous translation! Or, that is what I wanted at the beginning of this adventure.

Coffin: The same. When it was published, I thought this version is better in French than it is in English and it will find a much wider readership. And I suppose I somewhat imagined myself becoming like Beauvoir who became so significant on the other side of the ocean.

Vaslin: I've been able to speak about the book in bookstores, and it's a great job: some of the audience knows Beauvoir's work very well, others do not necessarily agree with inclusive writing . . . and I think what made the book possible is what appeals to them here is an American historian who offers a different way of looking at Beauvoir through the point of view of ordinary people who had the courage to write to Beauvoir. I'd also like to tell people to leave their prejudices behind and open the book. Start with a chapter or another. Take your pick. There are many ways to encounter this book. That experience makes me want to keep going to bookstores and book readings, to keep talking about it. I want to share this beyond the four of us.

Delavaud: I find it always very painful when a book comes out, because we all want everyone to talk about it. I want it to be all over the radio, in the newspapers, everywhere. But, in reality, an editor has to fight for things not to be drowned out. Today, I'd say that I would like for the book to be read by readers who already know Beauvoir's work very well so that, alongside the general public, they are able to grab Judy's book's originality and its profound impact on our perception of Beauvoir's work and personality.

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Since this conversation, Marine has been invited for more talks on translating Coffin's Beauvoir and has an article forthcoming for the Société française de traduction journal on the practice and challenges of collaborative translation. Someone recently contacted Lorraine after having read the book in order to say that his mother had written to Beauvoir and received a letter from her in response. Sandrine is at work on two books, including a non-fiction essay, *Paris-Texas*. Judy is still working on "mid-century sex," this time

on a new book, *A Short Biography of Story of O*, the infamous erotic novel published in 1954 by Anne Desclos under the pseudonym of Pauline Réage.

Notes

1. For one of these founding Anglophone texts that, feminists have argued, "invented" "French feminism," see Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (Routledge, 1985).

2. See the work of Laurent Bastide, Virginie Despentes, Elsa Dorlin, Camille Froideveaux-Metterie, Amandine Gay, among many others, that also include podcasts such as "Les couilles sur la table" with Victoire Tuaillon and "Kiffe ta race" with Rokhaya Diallo & Grace Ly, or newly founded feminist magazine, *La Déferlante*.

3. The French neologism "iel" is an invention, or neo-pronoun designed to bypass the gendering of subject pronouns and corresponds to the English "they." It involves adapting a whole range of grammatical terms such as possessive adjectives (his/her) as well as the gendering of adjectives and verbs.

4. This was the French title to the American TV show*, The Bold and the Beautiful*, that was dubbed and broadcast in France.

5. On this, see https://intellectualsandthemedia.org/2018/12/05/simone-de-beauvoir-a-victim-of-her-own-success/

6. All French paper and notebooks include one thick horizontal line, with three thin horizontal lines. These have vertical lines going from top to bottom. That is why these are called "tiled" or "checkered" paper (*papier à carreaux*).

7. As the literary executor for Beauvoir's estate and, in keeping with French law, Sylvie Le Bon-de Beauvoir (who had been adopted by Beauvoir in 1980, which means she holds the "moral rights" to Beauvoir's works), must agree to the publication of any of Beauvoir's writings.

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