

EDUCACIÓN Y HUMANIDADES EN TRANSFORMACIÓN

Investigación e innovación interdisciplinar

Chiara Gemma
Vincenzo Cafagna
Juan Francisco Álvarez Herrero

(Eds.)



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Teléfono (+34) 91 544 28 46 - (+34) 91 544 28 69
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Capítulo 14. Untranslatable Subjects: Lesbian Epistemologies and Censorship in the Spanish Transition through Jane Rule's Nonfiction

Sara Llopis-Mestre

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8277-8005>

Universitat de València (Spain)

<https://doi.org/10.14679/4709>

Resumen: El capítulo estudia los mecanismos de regulación que limitaron la difusión de la no ficción lésbica angloamericana en España en los años finales del régimen franquista y en la primera etapa de la transición a la democracia. A partir de los expedientes de censura relativos al intento de traducir al castellano *Lesbian Images* (1975), de Jane Rule, el estudio analiza cómo los procedimientos administrativos, las expectativas morales heteropatriarcales y los patrones de control impuestos por el régimen influyeron en las decisiones de traducción. Se sostiene que la no ficción lésbica se volvió políticamente intraducible, no por dificultades lingüísticas, sino porque sus planteamientos sobre conocimiento e identidad entraban en conflicto con la ideología moral que regía la producción cultural. Desde los enfoques de los estudios de traducción feministas y cuir, el capítulo interpreta la no traducción como una forma de borrado epistémico que impidió la incorporación del conocimiento lésbico al discurso público español. Los documentos relativos a la consulta voluntaria de *Lesbian Images* muestran cómo las referencias al escándalo, la influencia social y la posible acción legal se utilizaron para desalentar su publicación e impedir formas de escritura que normalizaban el lesbianismo y cuestionaban la autoridad masculina sobre la moral sexual. El estudio sostiene que la recuperación, ya sea mediante la traducción, la investigación archivística o el análisis crítico, sigue siendo necesaria para recuperar voces lésbicas transnacionales en la memoria cultural española y contribuir a una historiografía de la traducción en España más inclusiva.

Palabras clave: no ficción lésbica, traducción y censura, traducción queer, franquismo, Jane Rule

Abstract: The chapter examines the regulatory mechanisms that limited the circulation of Anglo-American lesbian nonfiction in Spain during the final years of the Franco regime and the early transition to democracy. Drawing on archival material relating to the attempted translation of Jane Rule's *Lesbian Images* (1975), the study considers how administrative procedures, inherited heteropatriarchal moral expectations and enduring patterns of control influenced decisions about translation. It argues that lesbian nonfiction became politically untranslatable, not because of linguistic difficulty, but due to its claims about knowledge and identity conflicted with the moral ideology that governed cultural production. Using approaches from feminist and queer translation studies, the chapter interprets non-translation as a form of epistemic erasure that prevented lesbian knowledge from entering Spanish public discourse. The documents concerning the voluntary consultation of *Lesbian Images* show how references to scandal, influence and possible legal action were employed to discourage publication and to contain forms of writing that normalised lesbianism and questioned male authority over sexual morality. The study argues that recovery, whether through translation, archival research or critical study,

remains necessary to restore transnational lesbian voices to Spanish cultural memory and to contribute to a more inclusive historiography of translation in Spain.

Keywords: lesbian nonfiction, translation and censorship, queer translation, Francoist Spain, Jane Rule

1. INTRODUCTION

The final years of the Franco regime and the uncertain transition to democracy created a cultural environment in which questions of sexuality were still subject to intense regulation and moral scrutiny. Within this setting, lesbianism occupied a position of near invisibility in Spain, as the structures of censorship and legal control legitimised throughout during the dictatorship (1939–1975) rendered it unthinkable as a conceivable sexual orientation and, therefore, a category of knowledge that could generate legitimate discourse or scholarly inquiry within the cultural and academic context of the time. As examined in prior scholarship (Sanz Romero, 2021), the intersection of authoritarian governance, Catholic moral doctrine and the censorship apparatus produced a system in which lesbian subjects could not circulate without being reframed as scandal or pathology. This chapter investigates how these conditions influenced the circulation and translation of lesbian nonfiction through the case study of Jane Rule’s *Lesbian Images* (1975), text never published in translation in Spain and how the Francoist and transitional regimes sought to contain the potential formation of lesbian epistemologies within the country.

The conceptual framework for this analysis draws on theories of untranslatability that link linguistic practices to structures of power. Spivak (2021) conceives translation as “the most intimate act of reading”, arguing that it is never a neutral transfer of meaning but a political and ethical negotiation that demands attention to the rhetorical texture of language. Ignoring this dimension would risk reproducing the same violence that silences marginalised voices. To his respect, Castro Varela (2021) theorises epistemic violence as a structural condition of modernity, where dominant regimes of knowledge systematically exclude voices that challenge normative frameworks. Building on these insights, this study engages feminist translation strategies such as Massardier-Kenney’s notion of “recovery” (1997), which seeks to restore suppressed women’s voices, and Baer’s (2020) call to revisit translation historiography to include queer texts and interrogate how they have been read, mediated and rendered. These approaches allow us to examine the translation of lesbian nonfiction in Spain not merely as a linguistic process but as a political act, a potential deliberate act of epistemic erasure, foreclosing the circulation of counter-discursive knowledge and sustaining heteronormative cultural hegemony.

Methodologically, this study combines those queer and feminist translation strategies of recovery through archival research applied and translation studies. Following Zaragoza Ninet’s (2024) feminist methodological proposal for feminist translation analysis, the approach adopts recovery as a guiding principle to reconstruct alternative historiographies and to examine how translation practices intersect with gendered power structures. Although this research does not undertake the recovery of the work through translation, it advocates for it and aims to contribute to the process, in particular to the historiographic effort to account for the absence of translation and to interrogate the cultural and institutional conditions that produced that absence. This involves examining why the Spanish translation of *Lesbian Images* never entered the Spanish literary system and which were the agents involved in the process. Addressing these questions required

extensive archival research, since the reasons for non-translation are here embedded in bureaucratic procedures, censorial evaluations and institutional negotiations. The censorship files concerning Jane Rule's translations in Spain, including bureaucratic correspondence and censor reports, have been recovered from the Archivo General de la Administración (Alcalá de Henares) and systematically analysed using the *LESTRAC* Analysis Sheet (Llopis-Mestre, 2025). By reconstructing these decision-making processes, the study seeks to contribute to an inclusive historiography of translation that foregrounds silenced texts and the mechanisms of their exclusion.

2. JANE RULE: NONFICTION AND LESBIAN EPISTEMOLOGY

Canadian-American author Jane Rule (1931–2007) occupies a distinctive position in North-American twentieth-century literary and cultural history as one of the first writers to live and publish openly as a lesbian. Born in 1931 in New Jersey and later based in Canada, she combined fiction and nonfiction, challenging heteropatriarchal narratives about sexuality and identity. Her novels, including *Desert of the Heart* (1964) and *This Is Not for You* (1970), offered representations of lesbian relationships that resisted the tragic or sensationalist patterns dominant in earlier twentieth-century literature. These works earned her international recognition and, in the case of *Desert of the Heart*, which was adapted for the screen in 1985 as *Desert Hearts* directed by Donna Deitch, attracted a readership that extended beyond literary circles. The novel had a significant impact on sapphic communities, igniting correspondence from women who recognised their own lives in its characters (Martin, 2007). Alongside fiction, Rule developed a body of nonfiction that functioned as political intervention, addressing censorship, literary history and the ethics of representation. Her essays and public statements positioned her as an advocate for intellectual freedom and queer rights, as well as a critic of the mechanisms that sought to silence lesbian voices (see Rule, 1985, 1990).

Her nonfiction work *Lesbian Images* is one of the earliest sustained attempts to theorise lesbian experience through literary criticism and cultural analysis, building upon pioneering works such as Jeannette Foster's *Sex Variant Women in Literature: A Historical and Quantitative Survey* (1956). Rule herself frames the work as neither a comprehensive literary history nor a definitive thesis, but as a common reader, a statement of her own attitudes toward lesbian experience as measured against the images created by other women writers in their work and lives (1975, *preface*). Her goal is not to “make literary judgments”, but to “discover what images of lesbians women writers have projected in fiction, biography, and autobiography” (p. 3). She insists that literature, rather than social science, remains the most fertile ground for understanding the complexity of human experience, since psychological and sociological approaches often reduce individuality to statistical abstraction. For anyone seeking to know what it is to be lesbian, Rule proposes a multiplicity of answers, each voiced by a different writer.

The structure moves through individual authors, combining biographical detail with interpretive commentary, and situates each within a comprehensive conversation about art, morality and identity. By privileging literature over social science, Rule asserts that the complexity of experience cannot be reduced to statistical abstraction and that the truth of desire is more fully grasped through narrative and style than through case histories. Here, the aims of *Lesbian Images* are both descriptive and corrective. Rule seeks to reassess cultural myths that have cast lesbianism as deviant, tragic or exotic, and to recover voices that have been marginalised or misread. Her readings of figures such as Radclyffe Hall, Gertrude Stein, Vita Sackville-West, Colette, Willa Cather and May Sarton trace patterns of representation that oscillate between silence and confession, idealisation and condemnation. In doing so, she constructs a genealogy that challenges

the isolation of individual texts and reveals continuities in the negotiation of desire and identity. This genealogy is not static; it acknowledges ambivalence and contradiction, recognising that lesbian experience transcends theoretical schemes and resists uniform categorisation. The book therefore operates as a mode of knowledge production, proposing criteria for interpretation and offering a framework through which lesbian literature can be studied as a coherent, though internally diverse, tradition.

The significance of this work becomes clearer when placed within the transnational history of lesbian writing. From the damnation narratives of the interwar period, exemplified by Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), through the sensationalism of mid-century pulp fiction and the emergence of feminist perspectives in the 1970s, representations of lesbianism have shifted from stigma to affirmation, though never without contestation. *Lesbian Images* intervenes at a moment when feminist criticism and gay liberation were beginning to reshape literary discourse in an Anglo-American context, yet when authoritarian regimes such as Franco's Spain continued to enforce silence. By mapping a lineage that includes both canonical and neglected authors, Rule provides resources for readers and scholars to challenge erasure and to imagine lesbian identity as historically situated. This would prove to be incompatible with the moral ideology that governed Spanish cultural policy during the late dictatorship and its aftermath. It is precisely this incompatibility that explains the censorial anxiety surrounding its translation into Spanish, and that situates the text at the centre of debates about knowledge, power and representation.

3. IMPORTING LESBIAN TEXTS INTO SPAIN: LEGAL AND CULTURAL LIMITATIONS

The circulation of lesbian writing in Spain during the final decades of the dictatorship and the first years of the transition was conditioned by a legal and administrative structure designed to regulate both printed material and moral conduct. The regulatory framework that governed the importation of foreign books was shaped by legislation that combined criminal law, public order and moral doctrine. The Law on Vagrants and Thugs (*Ley de Vagos y Maleantes*), which was amended in 1954 to include homosexual men as subjects of suspicion, created an expandable category of deviance that enabled police intervention (Pérez-Sánchez, 2000, p. 375). Although women were rarely targeted directly through this legislation, the measure contributed to a framework in which any form of same-sex desire could be interpreted as a threat to public order. The later Law on Dangerousness and Social Rehabilitation (*Ley de Peligrosidad y Rehabilitación Social*), in force between 1970 and its gradual dismantling after 1978, reaffirmed this view by presenting homosexual behaviour as a matter requiring correction. The legal system did not define lesbianism explicitly, yet its silence did not imply tolerance. Rather, the absence of formal classification produced a form of invisibility that placed lesbian lives outside the field of recognised subjects (Mora Gaspar, 2016, p. 10), while still allowing the authorities to police conduct indirectly through moral regulations, public scandal provisions and censorship mechanisms.

Alongside these legal measures, the control of printed material continued to be exercised by a centralised censorial apparatus that combined administrative routine with ideological scrutiny. The 1938 Press Law established a system of prior authorisation, requiring that all books be submitted to the authorities before publication or importation (Abellán, 1980, p. 16). This structure remained in place until the 1966 Fraga Press Law, which replaced prior authorisation with the system known as "voluntary consultation". Although officially presented as a move towards flexibility, this procedure allowed publishers to seek ministerial advice regarding the admissibility of a text, and it continued to grant the

administration considerable power to intervene in the circulation of material deemed morally or politically undesirable (Abellán, 1978, p. 39). The mechanism remained operative until 1985, well after the formal end of the dictatorship, and its continued use during the transition demonstrates the persistence of moral guardianship within the structures of cultural regulation (Rabadán, 2000, p. 9).

Homosexual content was monitored through a combination of these procedures. Archival work on the censorship process reveals a concern with texts that might normalise same-sex desire or present it as ethically legitimate. Lesbians were often treated as a conceptual difficulty: neither named explicitly nor recognised explicitly within the legal codes, yet regarded as a danger when represented in print (see Zaragoza Ninet, 2018; Zaragoza Ninet & Llopis-Mestre, 2021; Llopis-Mestre, 2025). Nonfiction that presented lesbian experience as a legitimate form of knowledge was particularly vulnerable because it challenged the ideological premise that lesbian desire belonged to the realm of pathology or scandal. Fiction could sometimes be framed as narrative excess or as an isolated case, but nonfiction that offered analysis, genealogy or reflection that did not pathologise lesbianism could pose a more direct challenge. Previous research (Llopis-Mestre, 2025) has examined the treatment of several works of lesbian nonfiction by the Francoist censorship apparatus and has shown that works such as Ann Aldrich's *We Walk Alone* (1955) and *We, Too, Must Love* (1958) were read through a framework of moral condemnation. The reports associated with both novels describe them as harmful to public morals and liable to exert a negative influence on readers, reasoning was used to justify prohibiting their translation into Spanish in 1966 (pp. 225–228) and 1967 (pp. 234–239). The same interpretive framework is visible in the case of Charlotte Wolff's *Love Between Women*, examined in a later censorship file from 1972 (pp. 271–278). In this case, the psychobiographical study was authorised as it was considered a scientific study examining potential causes of lesbianism through biological, psychological and familial perspectives, intended for a specialised readership. The case showed that, towards the end of the dictatorship, lesbian content framed within a medicalised and clinical discourse could be admitted, provided it reinforced established pathological views rather than presenting lesbian experience as a legitimate form of identity or community.

Lesbian epistemologies contest this erasure by developing interpretive practices grounded in lived experience and collective memory. Nonfiction becomes a counter-discursive instrument through which lesbians articulate criteria of truth, reclaim literary traditions and dismantle myths of deviance or tragedy. Rule's work exemplifies this process by assembling a corpus of texts, identifying recurrent patterns of representation and proposing readings that affirm agency and ethical responsibility. Such intervention would directly challenge the Francoist project of moral regulation, which sought to confine sexuality to silence or stigma. They also expose the vulnerability of nonfiction to censorship, since its claims extend beyond private desire to public discourse, pedagogy and cultural authority.

4. CASE STUDY: THE CENSORSHIP OF *LESBIAN IMAGES* (1975)

The contrast between the treatment of *Love Between Women* and the earlier rejections of Aldrich's works prove how genre, tone and presumed intention or readership influenced censor responses to lesbian writing. *Lesbian Images* was submitted one year after its initial publication and the fall of the Francoist Regime. File number 6335-76 entered the registry on May 28th, 1976 when Bernabé Gerau Martí, acting on behalf of Editorial Sagitario in Barcelona, submitted the book to "voluntary consultation" as a work intended for translation. It was described as a 246-page volume to be included in the collection *Vita Nota*, with no information regarding print run or price. This absence would have

prompted the Readers Section of the censorship administration (*Sección de Lectorado*) to request further details from the publisher, since incomplete information regarding translation and production was common grounds for administrative enquiry.

This request produced a reply that entered the administrative record on June 7th, 1976. In the letter, Editorial Sagitario clarified that the provisional Spanish title would be *La sexualidad prohibida*, that the proposed print run consisted of 3,000 copies and that the book would be translated into Spanish. The choice of title suggested an attempt to market the work within a frame of sexual enquiry, and it indicated how publishers in post-Francoist Spain sometimes adapted lesbian themes for a Spanish readership by appealing to the established discourse of prohibition and sexual secrecy. Once these details had been provided, the file proceeded through the usual channels. On May 31st, the file, which contained no earlier records within the censorship apparatus, was assigned to censor number 9. The surviving documentation did not disclose the identity of the censor, and no signed evaluation from the agents involved remained in the material. What remained instead were two administrative texts dated in June 1976. The first, written on June 16th, offered a short assessment of the content by the main “reader” – that is, censor – assigned:

En la obra “IMÁGENES DEL LESBIANISMO”, la autora da una [definición] sobre lo que realmente es la [relación] sexual entre mujeres. Su [tesis] que se manifiesta a [través] de toda la obra es que la sociedad y la moral condenan el lesbianismo por costumbres y moldes antiguos establecidos por el hombre. La mujer —dice— ha vivido más bajo la presión y el peso de la ley que fuera de ella. Hace una defensa [enérgica] de la mujer lesbiana de la que dice está más llena de vida, de energía, tiene más temperamento y es más heroica y apta para la aventura que la mujer heterosexual y que el hombre homosexual.

En sus ejemplos de la Biblia y de la historia saca conclusiones que le sirven para demostrar el amor entre mujeres. Tanto por el tema que trata, como por el afán de ganar adeptos o extender el lesbianismo, se considera la obra como desaconsejable.

The second assessment that also lacked intelligible signature, dated June 18th, was added as “observations” and provided additional examination of the case:

El contenido de la presente consulta puede ser calificado como escandaloso desde el punto de vista de nuestro ordenamiento jurídico. En consulta voluntaria parece que lo correcto sería desaconsejarla. En el supuesto del adopto de hecho todavía que unizáramos con el dictamen, sobre todo en lo que se refiere al estudio del sentimentalismo, la posibilidad de una demanda judicial, que ya desde este momento se perfila como probable.

Together they presented the work as morally inappropriate and potentially problematic within the consultation procedure. The initial report described the book as an attempt to articulate a definition of sexual relations between women and noted that the author advanced the argument that both society and established moral codes condemn lesbianism through conventions and normative structures created by men. It singles out the author’s defence of the lesbian woman as especially energetic and summarises her claims about vitality, courage and aptitude for adventure in comparison with heterosexual women and homosexual men. It notes the use of examples from the Bible and from history to argue

for love between women. The conclusion announces the intention to discourage the work for two reasons, the selected theme and the desire to gain “followers” or to “extend” lesbianism. The wording is brief and categorical. It reduces a multi author study of literary representations to the suspicion of lesbian “recruitment”, considering analysis and scholarship as advocacy and a threat to public order.

The observations page adds a second layer by introducing a legal register. It states that the content may be considered scandalous in light of the legal order at the time and that within “voluntary consultation” the correct course would be to discourage publication. It then suggests that even if the authority were to align with a discouraging opinion there may still be a risk of judicial action. Despite the orthographic slips, the message is clear in both reports. The administration presents publication and translation as a potential danger to a Spanish readership during the Transition to democracy. The prospect of a lawsuit is brought to the foreground as a way to dissuade the publisher from publishing a translation of the text. This moves the file from moral judgement to procedural warning, a threat, and serves as further evidence of the real nature of the “voluntary consultation” procedure as a barrier for circulation.

Several themes emerge from these records. First, lesbophobia frames the reading of the book. The report converts a critical reassessment of cultural myths and literary histories into an allegation of proselytism by invoking the author’s supposed desire to gain “supporters”. Any attempt to describe lesbian life as meaningful, shareable and capable of generating its own interpretive frameworks appears, in this reasoning, as an effort to recruit into an agenda. Second, moral panic informs the label of scandal. The mere discussion of love between women, even within a critical and literary study, is construed as a disturbance of legal order. Third, the file reveals the regime’s fear of influence. Although the pages do not single out a specific audience, the stress on lesbianism spreading as a possibility, a reality and an actual sexual orientation would pose the work as dangerous, since it could normalise it and present it as legitimate. Fourth, the emphasis on proselytism and scandal sat alongside a clear discomfort with the book’s challenge to male authority. The report highlighted Rule’s critique of moral codes “established by men”, and this acknowledgement of heteropatriarchal structures appears to have intensified the censor’s disapproval. In this reading, a text that questioned male control over definitions of morality and sexuality became doubly troubling: it was seen not only as normalising lesbian experience but also as calling into question the ideological foundations on which the regime claimed authority over the regulation of women. Finally, the language of recommendation, consultation and potential legal action placed responsibility onto the publisher, who was invited to reach the safe conclusion that translation would expose the firm to seizures, sanctions and financial penalties.

Together these elements disallow the book as knowledge. The assessments deprive lesbian nonfiction of epistemic authority and confines it to the realm of suspicion and scandal. The reports also discredit lesbian epistemologies by imputing a lack of seriousness to the project of criticism. The summary reduces a carefully argued genealogy of women writers to an assertion that lesbians are more alive or more heroic. It ignores the book’s historiographical aims and treats its interpretive claims as propaganda. This manoeuvre renders lesbian knowledge unteachable, unpublishable and untranslatable in post-Francoist Spain. It denies the possibility that lesbian nonfiction might contribute to literary history, ethics or pedagogy, and it preserves a hierarchy in which only certain subjects within Spanish culture can claim to know and to speak.

The text was never translated into Spanish, non-translation acting here as a political strategy. The publisher did not seek permission to print an existing Spanish version but

asked whether a translation could be pursued. The response does not ban, it advises against. Yet the effect is the same for circulation. By presenting publication as scandalous and legally unsafe, the administration turns voluntary consultation into an instrument of non-translation. This process produces an untranslatable subject. The absence of a Spanish version is not an accident of market conditions, but the result of a system that warns against translation and threatens with legal exposure. Lesbianism is made to appear as something that cannot be named beyond pathologisation or presented as a field of study. The lesbian subject remains outside the circuits of cultural legitimacy because the path into those circuits, translation and publication, is blocked by moral and legal warnings. Untranslatability here is not a linguistic difficulty, it is an enforced political choice. It leaves no target text in Spanish to read, teach or cite. It prevents lesbian knowledge from entering catalogues, university courses and public libraries. It keeps lesbian discourse at the level of scandalous rumour or scattered references, fostering Francoist patterns also after the end of the regime.

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis presented in this study demonstrated that the political mechanisms governing translation and circulation during the early transition into democracy in Spain produced a form of political untranslatability that affected lesbian nonfiction. This form of untranslatability did not arise from linguistic difficulty but from the deliberate construction of lesbian subjectivity as a source of moral and legal concern. The treatment of Jane Rule's *Lesbian Images* revealed how the censorship apparatus, still active during the Transition through the mechanism of "voluntary consultation", continued to operate in a way that discouraged the introduction of texts that challenged Francoist heteropatriarchal norms of gender and sexuality. The warnings concerning scandal, influence and potential legal action served to create an environment in which translation became a liability for publishers, rendering the circulation of lesbian knowledge legally impossible.

The comparison with earlier cases confirmed that this pattern was neither isolated nor accidental. Works that presented lesbian experience as pathological or framed it within clinical or scientific discourse could be permitted, whereas texts that articulated lesbian identity beyond medical or moral condemnation or as a mode of knowledge, in an attempt to normalise it and counteract its cultural invisibility, were subjected to far greater disapproval. This distinction exposed the extent to which the censorship apparatus remained invested in preserving Francoist patterns that positioned lesbianism as deviance rather than as a legitimate cultural or intellectual category. The suppression of *Lesbian Images* through non-translation therefore contributed to a longer history of epistemic erasure, in which lesbian voices were denied entry into the Spanish cultural sphere and prevented from contributing to the formation of public discourse.

The persistence of this pattern after the dictator's death indicated that legal transition did not immediately dismantle the habits and assumptions embedded in the censorship system. The continued, fostered use of the "voluntary consultation" procedure, threats of post-publication legal action and the prevailing regime's moral criteria revealed that the fall of the regime in legal terms did not produce an immediate opening of the cultural sphere. Instead, forms of bureaucratic caution and institutional reluctance continued to affect the circulation of minority voices and persecuted topics. The absence of a Spanish translation of *Lesbian Images* to this day and the limited presence of Anglo-American lesbian nonfiction in the decades that followed illustrate the long-term effects of these practices. Lesbian readers and scholars in Spain were deprived of twentieth-century key

texts that might have contributed to community formation, collective identity and intellectual development.

Translation therefore emerges not simply as a linguistic process but as a form of political and cultural intervention with the capacity to sustain or repair epistemic harm. The recovery of lesbian narratives and knowledge, whether through translation, archival study or critical analysis, functions as a strategy through which silenced voices can be reinserted into literary and cultural histories. Further research remains necessary to examine additional archival files, to study the reception of lesbian texts that circulated despite these limitations and explore the intersections between queer translation and the reconstruction of collective memory in Spain. Such work holds the potential to contribute to a more inclusive historiography of translation in the country and to deepen the understanding of how censorship continued to influence reading practices and cultural norms during the dictatorship and well into the democratic period.

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