Self-translation is generally viewed as a minor, borderline, eccentric practice within translation studies. Suggesting that self-translation is in fact both more pertinent and more widespread, this article argues for a reconceptualization of translation models, using the example of Nancy Huston’s self-translating practice as a deconstructive lens. Taking self-translation as a prototype for the ways in which translation may be viewed not as a degenerative process, but rather as creative expansion, this article sheds light on a theoretical aporia in the field of translation studies, while also forging a wider, more generous conception of the goals, art, and ethics of translation.

Nancy Huston’s self-translation practice is an exemplary case for considering translation in the context of French and Francophone literature. In the field of translation studies, self-translation is generally viewed as an exceptional, minority practice and consequently is not widely discussed. However, I suggest that self-translation reveals something about the nature of all translation and that it is theoretically productive precisely because of its problematic status in relation to the binary categories by which translation is often defined: original/translation; author/translator; source text/target text. With reference to Huston’s work and the controversies it has inspired, I propose we re-negotiate many of these terms. Thus, instead of confining self-translation to a distinct and separate space, I emphasize the continuities between self-translation and translation, showing how self-translation
provides us with a strategy for deconstructing monolithic models of translation.

Self-translation, also called auto-translation, was included by G. C. Kálmán in his survey of “Some Borderline Cases of Translation,” as one instance, along with other anomalies such as pseudo-translation and zero translation, warranting further analysis. While Kálmán saw these extrinsic examples as simply overlooked and requiring inclusion within the field of translation, my purpose is somewhat different. I hope that by using self-translation to strategically disrupt standard definitions of translation, this article will contribute to Maria Tymoczko’s call for a new disciplinary understanding: “translation as a cross-cultural concept must be reconceptualized and enlarged beyond dominant Western notions that continue to circumscribe its definition” (310). While my discussion of Huston’s work remains within North-American and European models, it nevertheless serves to unsettle many of the assumptions Tymoczko invites us to question by considering non-Western instances of translation.

Without seeking to define self-translation within a closed taxonomy à la Genette, Roman Jakobson’s distinction between the three types of intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic translation may be of use in manipulating the otherwise potentially unwieldy concept of self-translation for the purposes of this article. While I discuss both intralingual and interlingual forms of self-translation, I do not consider the many metaphorical uses of the term “self-translation” to describe, for instance, the experiences of women “translating” themselves into patriarchal culture, writers in postcolonial cultures destined to “translate” themselves as a part of the colonial heritage, or transnational migrants living as “translated beings” between multiple cultures, languages, and national identities. These metaphorical uses of self-translation are distinguished from the practice of self-translation I am

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1 Sherry Simon discusses some of the ways translation is evoked as a metaphor in Gender in Translation (134-35). Joanne Akai focuses on the relevance of self-translation to postcolonial contexts, proposing the argument that “West Indian literature in English can be considered self-translation […] an intricately woven textile of Creole and English: a hybrid writing made possible through the translation of Creole experience into English; oral Creole culture into written English; the Creole language into the English language” (195). Mary Besemer edited a collection of essays that explore the issue of self-translation specifically with respect to auto-biography, Translating One’s Self: Language and Selfhood in Cross-Cultural Autobiography.