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## Commentary Article on JMD-0634. R1

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‘On the “Not Translated”’: Rethinking Translation and Food in Cross-Cultural Contexts:

A response to ‘Translation and Food: the case of mestizo writers’ by Ma Carmen Africa Vidal Claramonte and Pamela Faber

### Borders and boundaries

“Food passes any boundary you care to mention” notes the narrator in Salman Rushdie’s 1988 novel, *The Satanic Verses*. In the passage in question, Hind, the fierce and voluble figure at the helm the famed Shaandarr Café in London, is remembered as a once ‘most blushing of brides’ in Dhaka, Bangladesh, ministering to her new husband, the ‘erudite schoolmaster’ Muhammed Sufyan, a dazzling variety of food and drink. Hind admires her ‘secularist husband’s... pluralistic openness of mind’ (245) and matches his interest in the ‘multiple cultures of the [Indian] subcontinent’ by first ‘struggling’ to read key Indian and European writings, and then by ‘struggling in her kitchen’ (246) to explore the Indian subcontinent by cooking its different regional foods: ‘the dosas and uttapams of South India as well as the soft meatballs of Kashmir...the highly spiced dishes of Hyderabad and the high-faluting yoghurt sauces of Lucknow’ (246). Such culinary and gastronomical eclecticism becomes a ‘grand passion’ (246) for Hind but also, in time, a commercially viable business in London. Her famous cooking skills enable her to support her family, and to buy the four-storey building above the Café to rent out to other migrants (notably the mysterious Saladin Chamcha). Like the *atravesados* of the lead article, ‘Translation and Food’, in her London Café, Hind occupies an ‘intercultural space’ in which she is uniquely placed to enact culinary deterritorializations and reterritorializations of regional Indian food, re-presenting these ‘local’ cuisines within a new glocal context. This is ‘a cosmopolitan space in which there is a blending of indigenous and Western discourses’ (Vidal Claramonte and Faber: 18): the multicultural, migrant city of London.

I have chosen to start with this passage as I think it throws some useful light on the main concerns raised by the lead article. Its link to food is perhaps more self-evident than that to translation and thus the latter requires some teasing out. I argue (after Jaaware 2011: 178 and others), that it is “counter-productive to restrict the meaning of translation to linguistic, or even cultural equivalence, because such as restriction of meaning disallows a fuller consideration of social change.” The post 1990s ‘cultural turn’ in Translation Studies is now well established but there is still scope to recognize that “translation’ can be enlarged...by considering the kinds of translations that are not normally considered within Translation Studies” (Jaaware 2011: 179). This is exactly what the lead article authors propose, as they move beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries to consider Translation Studies and Food Studies, their productive intersections and the space ‘in-between’. In contrast to more traditional theories of linguistic translation, they situate their research within a series of pertinent theoretical contexts: poststructuralism and deconstruction (Derrida on ‘relevant’ translation), theories of cultural translation (Talal Asad, Sara Maitland), ideas of minor literatures (Deleuze and Guattari) and the postcolonial translation theories of Homi

Bhabha. They argue that concepts and methodologies from Translation Studies can contribute to Food Studies but also demonstrate how understanding food as a semiotic system and its direct relation to translation reinforces the benefits of interdisciplinarity. Their lead article also contributes to Cultural Discourse Studies (as both research practice and research strategy) by suggesting cross-cultural culinary discourses as an interesting new area for Cultural Discourse Analysis and by demonstrating how thinking theoretically about categories of the interstitial or 'inbetween', across different disciplinary boundaries (here Food Studies, Translation Studies and Postcolonial Studies) can lead to new conceptualizations of cultural identity and translation.

Thinking about translation in this way, one can argue that Rushdie's character, Hind is a translator. She may not literally translate from written text to written text but she is certainly a mediator between cultures and a 'translator' of cultural identities through food, as are the mestizo writers examined in the lead article. Like them, Hind moves between at least two cultures - if not more, if we consider the heterogeneous linguistic, cultural and culinary traditions of the Indian subcontinent *and* those of Britain as a multicultural society. Indeed, this can be seen as a novel about translation: the two main characters are 'two complementary, translated men, Saladin Chamcha and Gibreel Farishta, who respectively represent a migrant who tries to reinvent himself through his adopted conception of Englishness and an Indian who 'stays home', but performs constant restagings of self, in his profession as a Bombay Talkie film star" (Thieme 2003 262). Hind's role as a 'translator' is arguably as important as her role as a cook (an important but often undervalued form of cultural work); indeed, we might argue that both are part of a process of 'translation', as is Rushdie's fiction itself as a bicultural, British-Asian writer. The authors cite the observation that: 'migrants take two things with them, their language and their food' (Chiaro and Rossato 2015: 240) and, in their chosen passages for discussion, they foreground moments when food comes into zones of cultural and linguistic contact or conflict. What is interesting about Hind is that she draws on both food and minority language, not for the purposes of culinary nostalgia, a common enough trope in migrant writing (and one which the authors note in Adichie Chimamanda's *Americanah*), but in order to mobilize it for commercial use. Her food still signifies otherness, difference and ethnic identity, as the narrator's retention of minority language food terms ('dosa' 'uttampam'), perhaps shows. However, it is left to a group of drunken white men visiting the Café later in the novel, when Gibreel and Chamcha are eating there, to reveal the darker racist undertones to the idea that the "way that any group eats helps it to assert its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently." (Fischler 1988: 275), as the leader of the drunk group calls out: "enjoying your food?...It's f\*\*\*\*\*g shit. Is that what you eat at home, is it? C\*\*t's" (441)

### Food, consumption, 'home'

The opening premise of 'Translation and Food' is the now familiar idea of eating practices 'having meaning...encoding processes through which people communicate within cultural contexts (Sceats 2000:1) and postcolonial novels (such as Rushdie's) often feature images of food preparation, cooking and eating in highly symbolic contexts. However, the authors never really engage with the politics of consumption, an area now well established in Postcolonial Studies. Food, literary texts and their translations are all consumed by audiences in ways which reflect the increasing asymmetries of cultural production and consumption in our unevenly globalized world. (e.g. the dominance of Western publishing houses and their neo-liberal agendas in the global North or the biases of global literary prizes [see Apter 2006, Brouillette 2007, Huggan 2001]). It would have been useful to see more consideration of the audiences and readership of the mestizo writers included in the article, especially given the discrepancies between the huge international profile of Chimamanda Adichie

compared to say, the more minoritarian status of Najat El Hachmi or Esmeralda Santiago. If we return to the passage from *The Satanic Verses*, we see Hind's role as a different kind of consumer. As the narrator wryly notes: "all that food had to find a home somewhere" (246). Hind's culinary and gastronomic pluralism has been translated (literally and metaphorically) into the spectacle of her increasingly ample flesh; meanwhile, her more ascetically minded husband puts on 'not a *tola*, not an *ounce*' (246). Rushdie's use of the word 'home' is also significant: Hind's body and her role as a symbolic 'translator' or transcultural transmitter, constitutes a kind of 'home' coming, as her body comes to signify the acculturation of borrowed food practices in 'hereness', the local and the familiar. She becomes the food she eats (a *biological* subject) but also, through the culinary and eating practices she adopts, a *cultural* being, a character who demonstrates how food serves more than a basic survival instinct, it constitutes a whole semiotic system and a complex set of symbolic meanings. That the two are not always easily separated is abundantly clear from the extracts chosen by the lead authors. In *The Satanic Verses*, as in other of Rushdie's novels (notably the narrator, Saleem Sinai, in *Midnight's Children* whose increasingly fragmented body mirrors that of his newly partitioned country of India/Pakistan), Hind's body starts to resemble the 'wide rolling land mass itself' a 'subcontinent without frontiers.' (245-6). Such symbolic linkage of the female body to the land, often metonymically representing the nation state itself, is a common enough trope in postcolonial writing (See Nasta 1991), but its explicit linkage to food in this context is interesting. In these respects, the excerpt usefully draws together some of the issues raised by 'Translation and Food', not least the idea of cultural translation, the linkage between food, consumption and the body, cultural identity and difference, transnationalism, cosmopolitanism and the local.

## Translation

Rushdie is a good example of a contemporary postcolonial writer who writes in a pluralistic South Asian, diasporic British Asian, *and* self-consciously global context. In the title essay to his collection *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) he famously reflects:

The word 'translation; comes, etymologically, from the Latin for 'bearing across,' having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained. (17)

The idea of translation as a reciprocal process, not just a 'carrying across' into the dominant language (in Rushdie's case, English as a colonially imposed language as well as a global 'language of power') is one of the key points of the lead article, as the authors explore the possibilities and problematics of theorising (and practising) a more ethically informed translation process. In the words of Derrida, whom they cite, it necessitates 'translating ourselves into [the minority language] and not mak[ing] it come into our language' (1982/1985: 100). Arguably, this is an urgent recognition for *any* translator and translation, not just those in a cross-cultural, bicultural or postcolonial context. Derrida's metaphor is rather more benign in this respect than the more incendiary language of Deleuze and Guattari (also cited), who remind us that the 'minor' or 'minoritarian' always carries the 'seed' or "crystal of becoming whose value is to trigger uncontrollable movement and deterritorializations of the mean or majority", in this case effectively a "deterritorialization of the language of power." (Deleuze and Guattari 1975/1986: 106) Yet, as the authors reflect, the ethical responsibilities of translation in cross-cultural contexts where minority languages are involved are surprisingly undertheorized in Translation Studies. Michael Cronin is one notable exception. In *Translation and Globalization* (2003), he echoes what he terms this 'double

invisib[ity] at a theoretical level' (140) of minority languages in translation as he suggests that not only are minority languages more vulnerable to erosion and language death in the face of the asymmetrical power relations involved in the translation process but that they also remain "disturbingly invisible' (139) within academic discourse and theories of translation, even within the relatively newer field of Postcolonial Translation Studies. (Rushdie 1991, Bhabha 1994, Krupat 1996, Bassnett & Trivedi 1999, Rahmen 2002, Apter 2006, Jaaware 2011, Ramone 2013) Part of the original contribution of the lead article is to show how Derrida's poststructuralist strategy of going 'toward the unthought thinking of the other language' (1985: 115) can be a productive decolonising or anti-imperialist translation strategy: rather than absorb the minority language into the hegemony of the majority language, the minority language is seen as a vital resource for pockets of resistance, enacted through a refusal to allow certain lexical items to be translated. The result, argue the authors, is a "relocation of languages and cultures in relation to institutions and power" (18) and a Derridean 'relevant translation': "a translation that reflects on the multiplicity of languages and the impurity of human life...that challenges monolingualism and understands language as a political instrument" (Derrida 2001: 176)

The authors propose that leaving food-related words untranslated in the literary texts of mestizo or migrant writers accords such writings a 'minority' status (after Deleuze and Guattari) which enables the writers to address their experiences of asymmetric global power relations in 'authentic' ways. This 'border thinking' is not, in itself, a new or original idea. Indeed, Gloria Anzaldúa's classic feminist text, *Borderland/La Frontera: the new Mestiza* (1987) (which the authors cite) deliberately uses both untranslated English and Spanish to disrupt the linguistic, cultural and gender hegemonies Anzaldúa she experienced as a mestiza woman growing up on the US-Mexican border, as well as to formulate a theory which aims to decolonize and 'transform' what Walter Dignolo has called "the rigidity of epistemic and territorial frontiers established and controlled by the coloniality of power." (Dignolo 2000: 12). Likewise, in his *Translation and Globalization* (2003) Michael Cronin refuses to translate from the Irish or other minority (indeed other majority) languages into English in the main body of his text, preferring instead to relegate these to the endnotes. This is significant since it disrupts the assumption that minority languages should accommodate themselves to 'majority' or more powerfully hegemonic global languages of power' such as English rather than the other way around and reminds us of the mixed or impure nature of all language. (see also Krupat 1996 on this) On the issue of language and translation, many postcolonial writers have long been attuned to the pleasures of leaving untranslated words from their first languages in texts aimed primarily at globalized audiences of English-speaking readers; they have also been insightful on the problematic politics of both audience and translation in a postcolonial context. Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe's famous choice to retain certain untranslated Igbo words in his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), as well as Kenyan novelist and critic Ngugi Wa Thiong'o decision to publish only in Kikuyu, his native 'minority language', after earlier translations of his writing into English, are both cases in point. Within the field of Postcolonial Studies there is a growing body of scholarship on translation and it is salutary that the authors of this article draw on some of these approaches. For postcolonial scholars, translation matters, not least because as Elleke Boehmer and Rosina Chaudhuri note, in an Indian context:

The history of translation in Europe...has been typically Eurocentric in foregrounding the translation of the Bible into modern European languages, neglecting entirely the socio-historical context of translating of the Bible into several non-European languages in a colonial context, where local demands change the shape, in one example, of the notion of the Trinity. (2011: 104)

The lead authors note the growing scholarly interest in “food as cultural mediation and as a semiotic system that translates minority and marginalized life styles” (4) as part of a wider interest in the ethical responsibilities of the translator as ‘cultural mediator’ and ‘communicator’ and argue that this is especially the case when the translator must deal with food related terms which are closely linked to ethnic identity and difference. Rey Chow has reflected on the figure of the translator as a particularly important one in understanding the postcolonial context as she argues that:

[b]y bringing to the fore issues of exchange, cultural inequity, and the reversal of temporally inscribed values normally conferred on original target languages/ literacies in the process of translation, the figure of the translator this helps sharpen the focus on problems of unevenness [asymmetry] that are inherent to postcolonial intercultural encounters. (Chow 2007: 570)

The lead article productively furthers these debates by foregrounding the ethical responsibility of the translator and by arguing for an expanded horizon for Translation Studies which is not only cognisant of these asymmetries of power but of the need to ‘broaden [...] out and open up’ translation theory to ‘other traditions’ (Hermans 2009: 103) including valuable insights derived from the situation and strategies of the mestizo writer.

### Interdisciplinarity

The idea of ‘Border thinking’ may not be new but the lead article’s interdisciplinary focus on Translation Studies in interaction with Food Studies in the context of an emergent theoretical ‘borderlands’ between food studies and translation studies *is* new and original; as such, it contributes to a growing scholarly interest in this area, which the authors note (4-5). ‘Translation and Food’ takes research beyond the traditional “inherited frameworks” (Fumey, Jackson & Raffard 2016: np) of looking at food from within the disciplinary areas of anthropology, sociology, psychology, history, geography and gender studies, for example, and opens up potentially very exciting possibilities for new and original research in both food studies and translation. The authors’ definition of ‘mestizo writers’ as ‘those who live in a global society within two cultures and who use an equally hybrid language politically in order to combat the asymmetry between the culture and the stronger culture” (Abstract) is relatively broad and this might be critiqued; by this definition alone, Rushdie might, arguably, be considered a ‘mestizo writer’ and perhaps he is. Of the writers selected for discussion in the article: Moroccan/ Catalan novelist, Najat El Haachmi and perhaps most clearly, American-Puerto Rican writer Esmeralda Santiago fit most unproblematically into a popular understanding of mestizo writing; the choice of the Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie who writes about Nigerian-American experience and that of the ‘returning migrant’ in *Americanah* (2014) is more interesting. The term ‘mestizo’, although of course not fixed or monolithic, is most commonly used for mixed race or bicultural subjects in a Latin American context, or of southern or central-American minorities in North America (such as in Gloria Anzaldua’s hugely influential coinage of the ‘new mestiza’ to refer women writers of mixed Chicano or Latino backgrounds in the US who, she suggests, deliberately locate themselves within what Anzaldua calls ‘borderlands’ of different kinds in order to disrupt binary ways of thinking about identity politics); it is also used of mixed or hyphenated identities more generally and in some very particular ways in relation to Cuban cuisine as a signifier of an adaptive national culture. (see Garth 2013: 95-106). The term ‘mestizo’ is not generally used by writers of or in Europe and this is perhaps evidence of yet another thinly veiled instance of Euro-normativity. It is, therefore, interesting to see the use of ‘mestizo writer’ in this

article, as a theoretical concept that can be utilized in a reading of the works of a wider range of global writers who engage with bicultural or 'border states' in their writing.

### Cultural Translation and Hybridity

As Kate Sturge argues, the use of the term 'translation' within Postcolonial Studies is commonly figurative as well as literal. In short, translation is viewed as "less a procedure to which cultures can be subjected than itself the very fabric of culture." The term 'translation' is used not just for:

interlingual transfer but [also] metaphorically, as the alteration of colonizing discourses by the discourses of the colonized and vice versa. For Bhabha, the resulting hybridity in language and cultural identity means culture is both 'transnational' and 'translational' (1994: 5), constituted via 'translation' as exchange and adaptation, especially through the phenomenon of migration. In this view, translation is not an interchange between discreet wholes but a process of mixing and mutual contamination, and not a movement from 'source' to 'target' but located in a 'third space' beyond both, where conflicts arising from cultural difference and the different social discourse involved in these conflicts are negotiated. (Sturge 2009: 69)

'Translation and Food' addresses translation in both these senses. It explores how food, as represented in a range of mestizo women writers, often signifies 'home' or more precisely, 'here-ness' and 'us-ness' in a context of 'elsewhere' and 'otherness' (such as migrant or 'border' experience) and demonstrates how lexical items associated with food can signify absolute difference, even untranslatability and can, moreover, be freighted with positive or negative values. Where the lead authors go one step further is in arguing that it is not so much untranslatability (a well-theorized term in Translation Studies) but a conscious *refusal* to translate lexical items for culturally specific food related terms which marks the hybrid writing of these mestizo writers as "double, plural, heteroglossic, and heterotopic" (7); it is in this function that their writing is powerfully resistant, even transformative. The authors argue that such 'untranslated words' have a wider role in disrupting monolithic notions of language and culture (whether sympathetic or orientalist) and traditional notions of translation as a simple 'carrying across' from source to target language, in favour of a strategically hybrid style, a mixed or 'metisse' language. That such languages (like the cultures they belong to) are already inherently hybridized is an important recognition in such writers. In this respect, it is worth returning to the passage from Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*: Like the intercultural writing of the *atravesados*, both Sufyan's reading and Hind's cooking are characterized by the 'already hybrid', the mixed or metisse and by the disruption of simple or fixed binaries (such as a nativist distinction between pre-or post-colonial cultures, or India and its others), as food and language, European and non-European heritages come together in complex and shifting ways:

Whilst secularist Sufyan swallowed the multiple cultures of the subcontinent – '*and let us not pretend that Western culture is not present' after these centuries, how could it not also be part of our heritage?* [my emphasis], his wife cooked, and ate in increasing quantities, its food." (246)

Given the hybridity of the writers they discuss, it's fitting that the lead authors choose a thoroughly hybridized methodology too. They argue that translation is wider than the 'interlingual' context': food and language are, after all, parallel semiotic systems and translation is arguably, the status of culture not just a discrete process within it. What is most exciting here is the author's sense that

they, and others working in these disparate fields, might forge potentially even more promiscuous and productive cross-fertilisation of theoretical approaches, methodologies and ideas, as they start to formulate a new kind of translation which sheds old disciplinary boundaries and disrupts old binaries. In Vidal Claramonte and Faber's article, the subject which comes into a new prominence is the mestizo, the in-between, the 'translated (wo)man', the subject of Bhabha's 'third space of enunciation'. They show how thinking about mestizo writing as a minority literature (in the Deleuzian sense) and the translator's retention of 'small languages' to refer to 'food related words' might help us to construct new theories of resistance to 'majority' languages and literatures in situations in which writers occupy the 'in-between' space between cultures, languages and world views. It is hard not to see such an argument as joyfully emancipatory yet perhaps fundamentally flawed by its utopianism, and yet, the firmly pragmatic insistence on the ethical responsibilities of translators dealing with mestizo or migrant writers 'in which the subversion of the colonial language is a way of expressing ethnicity' (5) is both eminently achievable and transferable to other instances of translation. Indeed, the authors' wholly commendable decision to think outside of – as well as across - disciplinary boundaries and their (suitably hybrid) methodology sheds important light on the increasing relevance of mestizo, hybrid or 'third space' 'translated' and 'translating' subjectivities in a globalized world where the need for 'translation' in its widest sense is arguably more urgent than ever before.

The original contribution which 'Translation and Food' makes is clearly not confined to Postcolonial Studies, Food Studies or Translation Studies, though it is, I think, in the latter field that it makes most impact. As I have argued in this response article, the ethical responsibilities and strategies which the authors propose are part of a wider imperative within Translation Studies. As Theo Hermans reflects:

The current global scene, with its economic inequality, increased inner-connectedness and urbanization, and with the pre-eminence of English, only makes the issues [of reinventing Western academia 'a province of a larger intellectual world [rather than] its centre) more pressing. (in Mundy ed. 2009: 104)

It is worth citing Hermans in full as his point is closely aligned to the future trajectories for research suggested by 'Translation and Food':

In an attempt to sidestep the crude binaries of national versus global and provincial versus cosmopolitan, Michael Cronin (2003, 2006) advocates micro-cosmopolitanism, which seeks to develop an eye for the myriad fractal complexities of the local while remaining aware of the larger context. Attention to detail, he argues, will confront us with the limits of our understanding. If much proves untranslatable, so much more remains to be translated. To the apocalyptic combination of forever standardizing translation and equally relentlessly standardizing globalization, Cronin [proposes an opposing] view of translation as actually fostering diversity. Translation, as he sees it negotiates meanings and thus creates an intermediary zone of mediation which is socially necessary for densely populated multicultural centres...Instead of the monolingual thesis which regards ethnic diversity as a threat to cultural and political coherence and insists on seeing wholesale integration and the adoption of a common language, Cronin projects a vision in which translation helps to increase the totality of humanity's knowledge base without undermining cultural specificity. (104-5)

Hermans concludes: "There is, it must be said, grandeur in this view of translation" and it is one which 'Translation and Food' shares.



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