AGAIN; BABEL

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ABSTRACT

The emerging field of Cultural Studies strives to transcend diverse social spheres, in conflict in this period of post-colonial transit, and sketch the interstitial, in-between space where we can negotiate a new atlas of the world. It claims no methodology of its own; instead it draws from whatever fields are necessary to generate knowledge appropriate for every contingency. Translation is now moving towards the core of current thinking about culture, providing the ideal site on which to explore the indeterminacy of diasporic identity. Derrida's translation of Walter Benjamin's seminal article "The Task of the Translator" in *Illuminations* provides the theoretical framework to approach the representation of cultural difference in the narrative of Toni Morrison and Salman Rushdie who, from the liminality of the migrant Other, fictionalise the Confusion produced by the deconstruction of Babel: "translate me, but whatever you do, don't translate me".

RESUMEN

El nuevo campo de Estudios Culturales se esfuerza por trascender diversas esferas sociales, las cuales están en conflicto durante este período de tránsito colonial, para dibujar el espacio intersticial intermedio donde podemos negociar un nuevo atlas mundial. No reclama ninguna metodología propia; en su lugar recurre a los campos de investigación que sean necesarios para generar conocimientos apropriados para cualquier eventuali-

dad. La traducción se está acercando al centro del pensamiento contemporáneo de cultura, ofreciendo el lugar ideal para la exploración de lo indeterminado de la identidad diaspórica. La traducción de Derrida del artículo germinal de Walter Benjamin "The Task of the Translator" en *Illuminations* proporciona el marco teórico para acercarnos a la representación de la diferencia cultural en la narrativa de Toni Morrison y Salman Rushdie, quienes, desde la marginalidad del Otro emigrante, llevan a la ficción la Confusión producida por la deconstrucción de Babel: "tradúzcanme, pero en ningún caso tradúzcanme".

> The effect of mass migrations has been the creation of radically new types of human being: people who root themselves in ideas rather than places, in memories as much as in material things; people who have been obliged to define themselves - because they are so defined by others - by their otherness; people in whose deepest selves strange fusions occur, unprecedented unions between what they were and where they find themselves ...To see things plainly, you have to cross a frontier.[1]

The modern cities of the First World are becoming borderland areas populated by postcolonial diasporic ethnicities gathering on the edge of "foreign" cultures, articulating and being articulated in another's language they are forced to serve that is not their own - a tongue they may no longer, or not yet, even know. As a result, new hybrid and transitional identities are emerging, and bizarre interracial relations are being forged. "*Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world.*"[2]

One of the consequences of recent research in the field of cultural studies is the destabilisation of traditional categories of identity - embracing race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and nationality. Diverse social and political spheres are transcended in order to sketch the interstitial, in-between space where a new atlas of the world can be negotiated. This field of investigation is by nature not merely interdisciplinary, but at times vehemently anti-disciplinary, with translation now moving towards the core of current thinking about culture, providing the ideal site on which to explore difference and the indeterminacy of diasporic identity.

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"Translation," writes Blanchot, "is the sheer play of difference: it constantly makes allusion to difference, dissimulates difference, but by occasionally revealing and often accentuating it, translation becomes the very life of this difference." [3] The title of our paper -"Again; Babel" - owes something to the poetic wisdom of Jacques Derrida, something to the theorist of migrant experience and cultural translation, Homi K. Bhabha, but something more to the hybrid translated writers Toni Morrison and Salman Rushdie who, from their different disseminated positions, have fictionalised for us the complex experience of cultural translation, the right of the migrant to signify, the construction of the self at the moment of alienation, strategies for survival. Babel. Confusion.

"The Task of the Translator", written in 1923 as an introductory essay to his German translation of Baudelaires's *Tableaux Parisiens* [4], constitutes Benjamin's formulation of a modernist theory of translation. This essay has often been interpreted as supporting that thorny translation problem of mimesis, namely that the original is more privileged than the copy, thus undermining the figure of the translator. This text became a source of inspiration and acquired further-reaching implications with the emergence of post-structuralism, and the rigorous, systematic questioning, and deconstruction of theoretical discourses such as Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Feminism, and, more recently, translation theory as the locus of difference.

In our period of post-colonial transit, where the identity question is not so much " Where are you from?" but "Where are you between?" [5], we are witnessing the rise of a growing body of minor literatures, which Deleuze and Guatari describe as "literatures written by a minority within a major language" [6]. In their search for identity in the territories of others, the postcolonial writers have appropriated, appropriation itself a process inherent in the act of translation, the privileged language which they need to remake and augment for the expression of their own decentred, deracinated reality. In Deleuze's terms, language becomes "deterritorialised", thus making translation a perpetual process and a global concern.

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Derrida's model of language as différance, which deconstructs the binary opposition and the static nature of the Saussurean sign, forms the basis of post-structural thinking. As Barbara Johnson has demonstrated[7], polar or binary oppositions are crucial to the logic of our culture's rhetoric about race, identity, gender and sex. The plurality of the signifier, the endless chain of signifiers, implies that the meaning of a word, a text, a culture, an individual emerges from its relationship to all the other elements within language, textuality, cultures and society now viewed as a system of relations and differences. Language for Derrida articulates, structures and perpetually recreates the world and human experience. Derrida's reading of Benjamin's theory of translation can thus provide a framework to approach the question of hybrid identity and cultural difference.

The Derridean model of language and splitting of the sign allows a new reading of Benjamin's ambivalent concept of untranslatability, that element that does not lend itself to translation, the tension between the original and the copy. Différance can be conceived as a spatial-temporal continuum in permanent flux, the interstitial space where the foreignness of language is performed, cultural difference is staged, Homi Bhabha's "untranslatable" boundary between cultures and racial heritage that is not fixed or given, but has to be redrawn and negotiated in each inscription of identity. Our postcolonial Babelian paradox, "translate me, but whatever you do, don't translate me," is an enriching, nourishing linguistic and cultural transformation rather than the self-effacing erasure and loss of cultural roots inherent to the mimetic translation required by the bankrupt notion of assimilation and sameness: "One hears a thousand things through other tongues".

Benjamin suggests that "A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light but allows the pure language, [...] to shine upon the original [...]" [8]. Thus the task of the translator, he claims, is to liberate in his own language that pure language, cultural signification, from the spell of another in her/his recreation of the original.

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The translation will truly be a moment in the growth of the original, which will complete itself in enlarging itself. ... And if the original calls for a complement, it is because at the origin it was not there, without fault, full, *complete, total, identical to itself.*[9]

The concept of pure language comes to signify a greater all-encompassing language which strives to communicate the plurality and ethnicity of human experience. The process of translation, in nurturing the growth and renewal of the original in its quest to live on in its life after life, sheds light on the true kinship of languages and cultures. Thus, cultural translation can be now described as the re-construction, re-creation of Benjamin's much-translated fragmented amphora, the "metamphora", the barely distinguishable cracks echoing the différance, the incommensurability of cultural difference, now the original and translated subject in ambivalent harmony:

Fragments of a vessel in order to be articulated together must follow one another in the smallest details although they need not be **like** one another. In the same way a translation, instead of making itself similar to the meaning of the original, it must lovingly and in detail, form itself according to the manner of meaning of the original, to make them **both** recognisable as the broken fragments of the greater language, just as fragments are the broken parts of a vessel.[10]

The aporia which lurks in Walter Benjamin's text could be tentatively formulated as what happens to both the original and the target language in the process of translation. This is, we feel, what attracted Derrida to Benjamin's reflections on language and translation and what has fascinated cultural studies theorists. What happens to the disjunct diasporic individual in the process of translation into another language, another code of social behaviour, another culture?

Salman Rushdie's triptych, as he likes to call his three novels *Midnight's Children*, *Shame*, and *The Satanic Verses*, is "a migrant's-eye view of the world ... written from the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis ... from which can be derived a metaphor for all humanity" [11]. In this century of displaced people, migration across national frontiers is not the only form of the phenomenon. When we look

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at the world through metaphors, says Rushdie, it becomes a richer place. Rushdie's novels are addressed to all the "borne-across humans" who inhabit our post-colonial world: "Migrants - borne-across humans- are metaphorical beings in their very essence; and migration, seen as a metaphor is everywhere around us. We all cross frontiers; in that sense, we are all migrant peoples." [12]

These three novels could be said to mark a turning point in Salman Rushdie's own translation into hybridity. The driving force behind *Midnight's Children* is his desire to reclaim history, his city, Bombay, and his imaginary fragmented India, the homeland of his childhood. *Shame* constitutes his attempt at reconciliation with the palimpsest-country, Pakistan, "a miracle that went wrong", where his family moved against his will when he was seventeen and already at school in England, where he was made aware of his Otherness. *The Satanic Verses* is written from the migrant sensibility of a writer who, through his fabulations, has recuperated his past and is now part of that "very strange and many-headed beast, the Indian diaspora" [13]. The book is Rushdie's attempt to open up that unstable, mobile space from which differential identity can be negotiated. In the middle of the novel, he places the migrant chapter entitled "A City Visible but Unseen", this ironic duality drawing attention to the plight of the migrant striving for visibility. Saladin Chamcha, the Man of a Thousand Voices and a Voice remains invisible: "They pay you to imitate them, as long as they don't have to look at you ... [your] face is the wrong colour for their colour TVs" [14]

All Rushdie's characters are divided, split selves reflecting his transgressive assault of all binary oppositions, the polar logic which is at the base of our dominant culture. The paired protagonists of *The Satanic Verses* are Gibreel Farishta and Saladin Chamcha, "Gibreelsaladin Farishtachamcha" as the narrator names them at the beginning of the book, who "are condemned to this endless but also ending angelicdevilish fall" (p.5), suggesting that the apparent polar oppositions of good/evil, true/false, self/other are interchangeable and mutually independent: "For are they not conjoined opposites, these two, each man the other's shadow?

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One seeking to be transformed into the foreignness he admires, the other preferring, contemptuously, to transform." (p.426). The angelic Gibreel, in spite of his "born-again slogans, new beginnings, metamorphoses", wishes to remain "true" to his past, his origins, as a continuous, untranslated man, destined to perish following the logic of Benjamin/Derrida's view of translation as growth, renewal and survival. To refuse translation is to refuse life. In opposition to this, Saladin Chamcha prefers to revolt against history and, in our terms, he is "false": "And might we then not go on to say that it is this falsity of the self that makes possible in Chamcha a worse and deeper falsity -- call this "evil" -- and that this is the truth, the door, that was opened in him by his fall?" (p.467). Rushdie's deconstruction of this binary opposition would do Derrida proud.

The death of the old allows the new to be born, giving Chamcha the possibility of a new beginning after the Fall at the opening of the novel: "To be born again ... I tell you, you must die, I tell you, I tell you" (p.3). In the character of Chamcha we see first his transformation into the anglophile, assimilating the social codes and values of the dominant, privileged culture, obscuring his own ethnic history. But his obscured origins force its way back through what had been impossed. After his rebirth he initiates a painful process of metamorphosis. He turns into a Satanic goatman and crawls back to an Indian-Pakistani ghetto, the Shaandaar cafe in London's Brickhall Street, to his despised migrant compatriots who capitalise this demonic figure and turn him into the symbol of their fight against racism: "You're a hero. I mean, people can really identify with you. It's an image white society has rejected for so long that we can really take it, you know, occupy it, reclaim it and make it our own" (p.287).

"Illegal migrant, outlaw king, foul criminal or race hero, Saladin Chamcha was getting to be true" (p.288). In the "time" of translation, the original is put in motion in order to become desacralized. Chamcha is now the discriminatory sign of a performative, projective British culture of race and racism. The revenge of the migrant comes in the Club Hot Wax

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sequence where through a ritual of translation Saladim Chamcha, the satanic goatman, is historicised again. It is by releasing the original that Chamcha is **humanised** achieving the desired transparent translation which sheds light on the previously obscured original.

The Satanic Verses, says Rushdie:

> [...]celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it. *The Satanic Verses* is a love-song to our mongrel selves. This is how newness enters the world.[15]

The theme of migration and cultural translations is dealt with in her poignant narrative by another translated novelist, the Afro-American writer Toni Morrison, who, on being openly questioned about her creative intentions, declares:

> I think long and hard about what my words should do. They should clarify the roles that have become obscured; they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not and they ought to give nourishment.[16]

In her novels, she brings forth into the present strategic moments in black American history during which social and cultural forms suffered disruption or transformation and the historical-mythical past of the African Americans now distanced not only from their African past, but more recently from their core culture re-created in the rural communitites of the deep American south. She feel her mission as a writer to be that of re-connecting her people to the essence of cultural meaning behind their traumatic history, the barbaric enslaving of 30 million Africans between 1442 and 1880, in a soul-restoring strategy for survival. She claims to be fascinated by "What it means to make people remember what I don't even know." [17]

Historical transition is a key element in her writing, which portrays the migration of black Americans from the south to the more prosperous north to seek wage labour, with the resulting effect of displacement on her characters. There is, in consequence, a dilemma in the relationship

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between the past of these migrants, as it has helped to form them, and their present, as they are **forced** to experience it. This dilemma is poetically articulated in her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), set in her own home town of Lorain, Ohio: "In that young and growing Ohio town ... this *melting* pot on the lip of America, facing the cold but receptive Canada - What could go wrong?" [18]

Something definitely does go wrong. Such a cultural translation is doomed to failure as an Afro-American cultural heritage/the traditional black village communities of the past struggle for survival in a larger dominant white, middle-class ideology, characterised by urban, materialistic codes of social behaviour. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison explores the problem of self-affirmation in a world that promotes Anglo-Saxon standards of beauty and a middle class lifestyle as the social "original" to be copied mimetically.

The novel deals with the tragedy of a small, ugly, poor black girl, Pecola Breedlove, the "other" of the "other" in the terms of Michele Wallace[19] who, like the other black characters in the novel, is constantly bombarded by self-negating cultural images in the shape of Shirley Temple mugs, Mary Jane chocolate wrappers, Hollywood movies and blonde-haired, blue-eyed plastic dolls, set forth paradoxically, and for her at times inexplicably, as coveted items:

> The master had said, "You [the Breedlove family] are ugly people." They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. (p.28)

Polly, her mother who is marginally translated into the dominant community thanks to her domestic duties in a well-to-do household, is however alienated as a result of her striving to achieve the desirable white bourgeois model that surrounds her, not only in her adoration of the Hollywood stars she dreams of emulating, but especially in her adoration for the blonde child in her charge which she cares for more than her own, whom she treats with violence and disdain:

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> She became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role practically fulfilled all of her needs [...] More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man - they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early-morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely. (p.99)

However, cultural erasure, not only about the individual incest victim, Pecola, but a collective internalisation of self-hatred, is most powerfully highlighted by Morrison's inclusion, first at the beginning and then at various points in the narrative, of the well-known "Dick and Jane" primer text, familiar to generations of American school children learning to read, as the ultimate social model *par excellence* of a lily-white, sexually stratified, middle-class family.

> "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy..." (p.1)

Its utter meaninglessness for such migrant, socially disadvantaged, creatures such as Pecola is emphasised by Morrison in the text's repetition first without punctuation, that unchallengeable law of dominant discourse, and then with no spacing between the words, challenging the alphabet's and language's power to signify.

It is this failure to relate to this original, the linguistic and social construction of the dominant discourse, contrasted with the otherness of Pecola's dysfunctional family, that leads to Pecola's eventual madness at the end of the novel, when she and her mother have been relegated to the border of their town and Pecola, the incest victim, to the isolation of her inability to communicate, except with an imaginary friend who constantly reassures her of the dazzling beauty of the blue eyes she now believes she is the proud owner of. Social death, alienation and marginalisation are the rewards of Pecola's wish for blue eyes of her own: "A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment." (p.162)

Her failure in the process of socio-cultural translation is hinted at earlier in the novel, as, in a mirror image of the garbage surrounding her at

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the work's conclusion, she finds comfort in the familiar cracks of the bumpy sidewalk and the dandelions at the base of the telephone pole :

> These ... inanimate things ... were real to her. They were the codes and touchstones of the world, capable of **translation** and possession ... And owning them made her part of the world, and the world a part of her. (p.35)

This failed translation is due, in great part, to what Morrison describes as the loss, or negation of, "funk" , the original, "the dreadful funkiness of passion" which the "thin brown girls from Mobile" manage to negate in their assimilation of the white cultural norm in their own attempt at survival: "Wherever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers or clings, they find it and fight it until it dies" (p.64). Thus, the erosion of the individual's sensitivity and cultural heritage is achieved on the one hand by white cultural domination and on the other by the ordering mechanisms within the black neighbourhood itself, Morrison advocating her own black, female creativity as a pragmatic solution to the problem of survival of the transparency of the original. Alienation is here the result of the individual's struggle to re-define and re-claim his/her self, with the strength and continuity of the black cultural heritage as a whole being at stake, resisting liberation, and constantly being tested in the space created by cultural difference under the obliterating influence of social change and historical transition. Morrison's novels are, in their culling of the shared, ancestral, cultural memory of experiences not specifically her own, but an affirmation of that cultural essence.

In this brief survey, we have attempted to demonstrate how we might apply Derrida's reading of Benjamin's theory of the task of the translator to the migrant, hybrid "minor" literature of both Toni Morrison and Salman Rushdie. The final message for our post-colonial Babel of scattered peoples striving to signify and become visible is one of hope:

> I, too, am a translated man. I have been **borne across**. It is generally believed that something is always lost in translation; I cling to the notion [...] that something can also be gained.

Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (p.29)

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NOTES

1 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Granta Books,1991), pp.124-5

2 Ibid., p.394.

3 Quoted by Lawrence Venuti in his introduction to *Rethinking Translation* (ed. Lawrence Venuti, London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p.13.

4 Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator", *Illuminations* (trans. Hannah Arendt [Harcourt Jovanovich, Inc., 1968], New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1969), p.69.

5 After a quotation from "The Airbus" by Luis Rafael Sánchez (1984), included in James Clifford "Travelling Cultures" in *Cultural Studies*, (ed. Lawrence Grossberg et al., new York and London: Routledge, 1992), p.109.

6 Giles Deleuze and Felix Guatari, *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneaplois: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p.16.

7 For more detail, see Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, Md and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1987.

8 Walter Benjamin, op. cit., p.79.

9 Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel", *Difference in Translation* (ed. Joseph F. Graham, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.188.

10 This fragment from Walter Benjamin, op. cit., was translated by Andrew Benjamin for Homi Bhabha, who includes it in his essay "DissemiNation: time, narrative and margins of the modern nation" in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p.320.

11 Salman Rushdie, op. cit., p.394.

12 ibid., p.278.

13 From an interview with Salman Rushdie by Roger Burford Mason in *Cultural Studies* 15 (4 [66], 1989, p.15.

14 Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988), pp.60-61. All subsequent page references included here refer to this edition.

15 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, op. cit., p.394.

16 Carolyn C. Denard, "Toni Morrison" in *Modern American Women Writers* (ed. Elaine Showalter et al., New York: Collier Books, 1993), p.209.

17 Ibid., p.209.

18 Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Picador, 1990), p.91. All subsequent references refer to this edition.

Michele Wallace, "Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity" in Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed., *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* (New York: Meridian, 1990).

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