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Translating Worlds: Migration, Memory, and Culture, Susannah Radstone, Rita Wilson, London & New York, Routledge 2021, 174 pages

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# Translating Worlds: Migration, Memory, and Culture, Susannah Radstone, Rita Wilson, London & New York, Routledge 2021, 174 pages

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## TEXTE

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- 1 This compact but rich volume is part of Routledge's international, interdisciplinary *Creative, Social and Transnational Perspectives on Translation* series and, as such, aims to "place translation centre and front as the active, agentic and ineluctable integer in a mobile and malleable space of society." (ii) The book is resolutely interdisciplinary, including history, museum studies, memory studies, translation studies, and literary, cultural, and media studies, notably, and seeing in translation a paradigm for other modes of communication across a range of areas. Moira Inghilleri's 2017 *Translation and Migration* had already provided an analytical framework for discussing acts of cultural and linguistic translation in situations of migratory movement; here, the objective is to widen and enrich the debate by initiating and promoting dialogue between two "boom disciplines", translation and memory studies, on the same topic.
- 2 Reflecting the editors' academic affiliation, the research discussed is predominantly grounded in the Australian experience, which naturally offers an enormous range of migratory situations, while being refreshingly non Eurocentric. The ten thought-provoking essays making up the whole are divided into two parts, one foregrounding memory, the other translation, although the distinction is one of emphasis and authorship, rather than a systematically perceptible difference in kind. The editors' introduction succinctly reminds us of the genealogy and evolution of each discipline: memory studies born out of WWII trauma, with Halbwachs (Halbwachs, 1950) emphasizing the role of social frameworks in forging collective memory, although always concerned with the articulation between individual identity and mediating processes, but leaving unexamined how this "transmission" actually occurs. Translation studies progressively widening

its remit since its 1970s beginnings to become a “hub interdisciplinary” spanning key human processes and ethical questions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Each can only gain from a deeper conversation with the other.

- 3 One striking feature of this work is the place given to subjectivity as a valid scientific approach to experience; four essays in the first part and one in the second deal with “territories of the personal” (6), with authors either using their own biography as the object of study, or referring to it at length in relation to their research. This deliberate turn to the personal, backed up by erudition and sensitive contextualisation, yields valuable, sometimes moving insights into how migration, memory and translation articulate in ways that are only beginning to be understood. Another fairly recurrent theme relates not to what is said about the past but to the silences and omissions that haunt migrant families, where memories or either too painful to relate or are have simply been lost. The paradoxical consequence is that it is actually those who have not migrated, second and third generations, who suffer the most acutely from the double burden of their parents’ often unspoken heritage and their enforced role of go-between in the new culture.
- 4 Susannah Radstone’s opening chapter takes one of her personal belongings, a clock lost then found, hoping to illuminate how such ‘migrant objects’ operate by simultaneous deep introspection into her own memories and historical contextualisation of the clock-owner, her father’s situation. In examining and nuancing an evolving theoretical framework, she reminds us that memories should not be seen as “fixed, retrievable representations stored in personal or collective archives.” Instead, remembering is envisaged as “dynamic and performative” (14), a way of actively engaging with and reclaiming the past. She nevertheless concludes that in clinging to lost objects, there always remains something enigmatic “which we strive endlessly to translate” (23).
- 5 Alison Ribeiro de Menezes’ essay, starting from Seamus Heaney’s famous “need for translation” (Heaney, 2012) to ensure an afterlife for texts, examines the role visual art plays as a bearer of memory for “the illegally detained, forcibly migrated, and improperly buried...” (27), here the sixteen “disappeared” of the Northern Irish Troubles, three of whom have still not been found. The author draws parallels

with such political violence elsewhere, pointing to the psychic alienation and “ethical loneliness”(30) resulting from this confiscation of the right to mourn with dignity – the foundation of humanity. Two Irish artists, David Farrell and Willie Doherty, have used photography and film to produce “tactile transpositions of sorrow and mourning onto the landscapes” (34) and Ribeiro de Menezes sensitively analyses how their art translates notions of pain and healing.

- 6 Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen makes clear that her work on life narratives and trauma in the Vietnamese diaspora is closely linked to her personal, family, and community history. The essay is a reflection on 14 years’ work within the Vietnamese community in Australia, including her reasons for choosing it: “I believe it was the silences in our lives as refugees, rather than stories told, that shaped my desire to gather and interpret refugee narratives...” Nguyen is candid about the emotional and psychological toll the work has taken on her, but underlines that the issue of trust has been central for respondents, who gain immense psychic benefit from adding their stories to the repository of refugee, migration, and trauma experiences in Australia.
- 7 Grace Pundyk, in another setting, also describes the unsettling experiences of silence and absence. First the migrant objects that do not reveal their secrets – here five photos and four letters left by her father and written in Polish – then the psychic-linguistic impossibility of mourning the absence of her grandmother, who wrote the letters and died in a Siberian work camp. In answer to the question of “how to bear witness ethically and responsibly to a memory that is temporally, culturally, geographically, and linguistically unfamiliar, in order to properly mourn this silenced ‘Other’”(58) Pundyk concludes that the only possible response is an artistic one, involving walking barefoot through snow and standing scantily clad on a mountain top then “transforming these acts, via photography and video, into ‘shareable’, ghostly encounters” (64), in an aesthetic attempt to mobilise affect in mourning a loss that cannot be understood experientially.
- 8 In a stimulating account of her work on a tellingly-named project with Melbourne museum, “The Unending Absence”, Maria Tumarkin takes a radical stance on political correctness: “If there was no steam coming off my words, if they sat politely on the page, I got rid of

them. I used allegory, direct address, transposition, metaphor, irony, rudeness. I used parables and allusions" (p. 74). All this with a view to expressing "from the inside" the emotional and psychological realities of immigrant experience, most especially giving voice to the grief, which, for Tumarkin, remains all too often unnamed and, ultimately, because it has nowhere to go "it ends up going back into families and shaping them across generations." (77)

- 9 A subtle analysis of Bengali Jhumpa Lahiri's (Lahiri 2016) literary work by fellow Bengali Mridula Nath Chakraborty opens the second part. The discussion is articulated around Lahiri's decision to live in Italy and write in Italian, in order to be free of the "burden of cultural, linguistic ethnic cargo" (88), speaking imperfect Bengali and excellent but "non-native" English. Lahiri's novels all deal to an extent with the disjuncture of being a "hyphenated self" and Chakraborty skilfully weaves personal testimony into her analysis, including a delightful account of their shared discomfit at the far-from-anecdotal problem of mispronounced names. She concludes: "Italian allows Lahiri to take faltering steps and forge a tongue of her own, errors and all, without the concomitant history attending languages that she would then have to lug around for the rest of her sentient life." (86) She suggests, however, that this may be "a mirage".
- 10 In "Foiba. Genealogy of an untranslatable word", Diego Lazzarich provides an exhaustive and most instructive account of the intricacies of successive territorial and political claims which have dictated the fortunes of this term's connotations and acceptability over the twentieth century. Originally a Friulian dialect term for a geological feature of Istrian terrain: a sinkhole, the word became a synonym for the mass graves concealing the bodies of victims of military retaliations and political assassinations, particularly those carried out by the Yugoslav partisans in Istria, Dalmatia and Venezia-Giulia towards the end of World War II and after. Lazzarich shows how the term was alternately instrumentalised in the name of fascism or made a taboo word concealing unacceptable truths. Only recently has it become less ideologically charged as Italy comes to terms with the traumatic migratory memories it contains.
- 11 Kyle Harvey and Kate Darian take a diachronic look at English language teaching on Australian television over the twentieth century,

focusing on one well-known flagship programme *You Say the Word*. They assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of the system, showing how Broadcast media was used as a tool in teaching English language skills and “translating” Australia, by explaining local cultural values to migrants arriving in Australia during the post-World War II decades, with cultural assimilation, social participation and productive citizenship as watchwords. But by the 70s, the Anglo-Celtic social, ethnic, and linguistic homogeneity no longer existed, with successive waves of migrants from the Baltic, all parts of Europe, the Middle East and South-East Asia. The consequent gap between assimilationist language teaching and its reception by migrants grew, leading perforce to increased multiculturalism, celebrated today.

- 12 Katarzyna Kwapisz Williams and Jacqueline Lo make critical use of the concept of cultural translation to focus on the relationship of Polish, Jewish and Polish-Jewish migrants and their descendants with their former homelands, considered by the authors to be a troubled one. This is particularly the case for second and third-generation migrants who have not actually crossed national boundaries, but who experience a sense of migrancy and “diasporic subjectivity” (133). The fact of being exiled from a world they have never personally lived in gives rise to what is here likened to “unhoming”, drawing, like Pundykn, on Freud’s concept of *unheimlich*, an uncanny haunting and loss. The 2016 exhibition entitled *Can We Talk About Poland?* at the Jewish Museum of Australia in Melbourne serves as a demonstration of this idea, featuring as it does photographic works by second and third generation migrants Arnold Zable and Lindsay Goldberg.
- 13 The final essay in the collection by the other co-editor, Rita Wilson, departs from the Australian focus in foregrounding two young Italian writers of migrant descent: Indo-Italian Gabriella Kuruvilla and Somali Igiaba Scego. Each has written a multi-modal experimental work that explores their respective cities of residence, Milan and Rome. Wilson takes a geocritical approach, which assumes a literary referentiality between world and text, demonstrating how, in very different ways, both writers employ, what, quoting Cronin, she calls a “politics of microspecion” (Cronin 2012) to investigate how transnational migrations have affected and transformed contemporary Italy and conceptualizations of Italian identity as a whole.

- 14 In conclusion, this volume is a valuable addition to the field of translation studies and a timely contribution to the global debate on migration in the current ideological climate. It not only offers some stimulating theoretical insights and reflections on the linguistic and psychological challenges migrant populations face in managing memories of lost homes and negotiating new cultural worlds for home-making, but the stories behind many of the discussions are a sobering reminder of the trauma and pain that so many migratory situations imply, however upbeat their telling, often with little hope of closure.

## AUTEUR

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