**‘In-between’ a Rock and a ‘Third Space’? On the Trouble with Ambivalent Metaphors of Translation**

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Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994) made waves in translation studies. His theories of hybridity, third space and the in-between have been consistently present in the literature ever since. For scholars concerned with the ethics of translation vis-à-vis the cultural other, Bhabha’s metaphors give expression to the notion of “writing back” to neo-colonial hegemonies. Despite their allure, what has not been addressed is the extent to which their success is threatened by the agency of the translator as a writer. Where the power to write is exercised not by the other but by the translator on their behalf, resistance to hegemony is an ideal that can only be ventriloquized. Through the framework of translation practice, this article examines Bhabha’s metaphor of hybridity and signals the methodological risks of imbricating his ideas uncritically within resistant translation discourse.

**Keywords**: Bhabha; translation; hybridity; hermeneutics; resistance; representation

One of the enduring qualities of translation is its refusal to be contained. We are captivated by its resistance to easy classification, for when it comes to theorization, translation’s cryptic status is not a stumbling block but an invitation: to name the unnameable practice of translators and build a case for translation thinking beyond the interlingual. From one perspective, the causal relationship a translation shares with a text originally directed towards another audience in another time and in another place is a connection that never totally disappears. As the Benjaminian logic goes, without the “source” a translation cannot exist, for its very *raison d’être* as a text in one language depends upon the absence of a text written in another. Yet this presence in absentia also requires a translation to depart from the source in new and interesting ways, enabling it to carve a path as a text in its own right. From the translator’s point of view, “over there”, where the source was originally received, and “over here”, where a translation finds its new audience, are not binary opposites but different threads of textual possibility intertwined and inextricably linked through the subjective work of translation. Small wonder that the practice of the translator is so difficult to place, for the ontology of a translation is ambivalent to say the least.

Since the publication of Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (1994), hybridity – and its related notions of third space and the in-between – has gained considerable currency as a counter-language to the constructedness of national identity associated with colonial settings.[[1]](#endnote-2) With these terms, Bhabha promotes a politics of cultural encounter where new forms of identity are advanced to contradict hegemonic representations constructed by colonial authorities. In translation studies, the discursive attractiveness of a theoretical gesture that speaks both to the ontological ambivalence a translation enjoys and the possibility of writing back to the neo-colonial hegemonies of appropriation and representation translation implies has won Bhabha many advocates. His emphasis on resistance taps into an ethical anxiety that has pervaded translation thinking since the publication of Venuti’s *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation* in 1995. His study of naturalizing strategies that subordinate elements of the foreign to dominant literary and social determinants in the Anglo-American literary market adduced an ethical responsibility to protect translation’s other from ethnocentrism. This anxiety has its basis in translation’s failure to translate the source text without creating change. For translation theorists Bhabha’s ideas on the emancipation of cultural identity from the distortion of colonial writing thus provide an appealing solution to translation’s own representational shortcomings.[[2]](#endnote-3)

In the postcolonial and cultural studies fields, however, a rich seam of critique has limited the practical utility of Bhabha’s ideas. Parry writes that reading Bhabha is like going for a walk in the dark: the opacity of his writing means one risks misunderstanding, misapprehending or even misplacing oneself in the process (2004, 56). This is due in part to Bhabha’s fondness for enshrining poststructuralist indeterminacy even at the level of his prose, which is often impenetrably complex and redolent with allusion. As Pettersson observes, “his cryptic and abstract formulations hardly help the reader to grasp, let alone effectively employ, his theoretical concepts” (1999, 3). Pym has questioned Bhabha’s use of the postcolonial novel as a site of resistance. Colonial subjects may gain increased power to “enunciate”, but the textual bias elides the material effects of colonial oppression and dispossesses its subjects of the power to effect real resistance. As Pym notes: “You cannot tell traditional societies, organizations of ethnicity-based immigrants, believers in minority religions, and the rest, that their identity structures have now been deconstructed and they can rejoice in their hybridity” (2010, 8).

This essay responds to the contested space that Bhabha’s ideas occupy within their own disciplinary context and to the imbrication of his ambivalent metaphors within the theorization of translation resistance. The affinity between his concepts and the world of interlingual translation is undeniable. Proceeding from an act of reading, translation exposes the source text to an array of appraisals and renders its meaning inherently mobile. As a text that owes its presence to another’s existence while simultaneously enjoying a presence of its own, a translation displays a double ontology. It is this immanent ambivalence that serves, when acknowledged, to resist essentialized appraisals that would deny translation’s transformative nature and reduce it to an act of intercultural photocopying. But in the context of post- and neo-colonial domination, what does the translator’s positionality as a reader of the source text bring to bear upon its capacity for resistance in translation? The interpretive hermeneutic through which the translator frames not just the text-for-translation but also the needs and expectations of its commissioner and eventual audience means that translation locates itself in the domain of subjective judgement, irrevocably transforming the resistant qualities of a source text according to its treatment by a translator. In a theoretical sense, a translation’s identity may indeed be ambiguous; but when it comes to the concrete process of weighing up the interpretive possibilities presented by a text against the needs and expectations of those who will receive it, the act of translation requires a decisive politics that from the point of view of the translator is anything but ambiguous.[[3]](#endnote-4) Translators adopt positions, as much about the audience who will receive a translation as the source text upon which it is based. If we are to apply Bhabha’s ideas within a framework of resistant translation it seems the subject position of its translator cannot be avoided.

In this paper I focus on the application of Bhabha’s theory of hybridity in two recent engagements in the translation literature and identify broad barriers that vitiate the cogency of Bhabha’s ideas when reproduced in the context of interlingual translation. The first concerns the abstruse nature of Bhabha’s theories, their critique in other disciplines and their presence in translation studies. I use Vidal Claramonte 2012 to show how Bhabha’s metaphors have functioned as theoretical commodities in a project of identitarian politics that has proceeded without reference to their function and reception in postcolonial studies. By problematizing their replication in translation studies I urge a greater engagement with disciplinary differences. In Bandia 2010, we trace a second barrier, namely the methodological implications of adopting hybridity as an active technology of resistance within the practice of postcolonial translation. Driven by a commitment to hybridity’s subversion of discourses of domination, Bandia develops an approach that requires the translator to assume “an active role as a mediator who reinforces the author’s expressions of resistance” (2010, 187). By concretizing this approach within a specific instance of translation, I argue that a methodological barrier at the level of the translator’s subject position disables the capacity of Bhabha’s hybridity to effect true resistance with regard to interlingual translation. What follows is both a critical examination of the application of Bhabha’s ideas within translation studies and a call for such applications to proceed with a recognition that when it comes to interlingual translation the theorization of hybridity is complicated by its practice.

**The disciplinary barrier**

Vidal Claramonte’s article invokes hybridity as part of a discussion of translation and its relationship to issues of power, displacement and deterritorialization: “Without any doubt, these concepts are of interest to translators at a complex time when conflict and hybridization come together, challenging the idea that cultures correspond to the maps others have traced for them” (2012, 271).Translation is faced with spaces, she adds, “which nowadays are spaces for the hybridization of identities, for confrontation and otherness” (ibid., 272). Postcolonial discourse makes use of hybridization through the trope of territorialization in which:

in the face of the imposition of Western culture, the African culture tries to resist by means of the choice of language and its hybridization, [...] a wish for territorialisation which ends up, as authors like Bandia and Bhabha point out, in a third space, expressed also in language by means of its hybridization. (ibid., 273)

In addition to hybridity, we also find references to Bhabha’s notions of third space (ibid., 273), the liminal (ibid., 275) and the in-between (ibid., 279), which contribute to what she terms the “ideal” (ibid., 280) approach to translation in the contemporary era of multiculturalism. Quoting from Bhabha, Vidal Claramonte writes: “It is really a question of achieving a translation ‘of elements that are *neither the One* [...] *nor the Other* [...] *but something else besides*, which contests the terms and territories of both’” (ibid., 279, original emphasis). Bhabha’s ideas are central to her overall argument, but are not accompanied by a critical study of their disciplinary emergence, spread or decline, a tendency which D’Hulst describes as the attribution of “paradigmatic” status to Bhabha and a handful of others (2010, 354). In the specific case of hybridity, this approach in the translation studies literature is not unique. The concept is often presented as self-evident, without explanation and discussion limited either to a reference to Bhabha’s name (Merkle 2007; Dizdar 2009; Benmessaoud 2013) or to one or two quotations from his work (Simon 1997; Pireddu 2006; Steiner 2006; Woods 2011). In some instances hybridity is explained, but with recourse to other metaphors which themselves are not explained. Stahuljak offers this description:

Hybridity has been defined as the site as resistance and negotiation, fusion and bricolage, “the construction of a political object that is new, *neither the one nor the other*” (Bhabha 1994:37, original emphasis). Based on the idea of biological *métissage* (mixing of races), translation is seen as a textual *métissage*, a liminal, in-between space, that performs the borderline work of cultural production, and that negotiates and politically transforms the strict delineations of homogeneous national cultures and colonial representations. (2010, 256, original emphasis)

What is missing is not only an account of what is meant by the “in-between” but also evidence for the assertion that translation “negotiates and politically transforms” national cultures and colonial representations. The reader does not know whether Bhabha was successful in convincing his audience of this power; only that we must trust in the authority his name carries.

In their position paper for the *Translation Studies* forum on cultural translation, Buden and Nowotny describe how, in contrast to a politics of cultural diversity rooted in identitarian politics,

Bhabha proposes the concept of the “third space”, as the space for hybridity, the space for subversion, transgression, blasphemy, heresy, and so on. But hybridity is also the space where all binary divisions and antagonisms, typical of modernist political concepts including the old opposition between theory and politics, cease to hold. Instead of the old dialectical concept of negation, Bhabha offers the idea of cultural translation, which he believes to be in itself politically subversive, as the only possible way to transform the world and bring about something politically new. (2009, 201)

They conclude that translation can thus be used both to establish powerful regimes and to transform them (ibid., 206). Although this conclusion is informed directly by Bhabha’s ideas, this is the most they say about its basis in Bhabha’s thought. In her response to the position paper, Pratt writes that in the growing literature on cultural translation the lack of examples “is a symptom that often nags. The thing is referred to as if we already know what we are talking about; our scholarly ruminations retain a vagueness that the ungenerous could take for intellectual impoverishment, or languor” (2010, 94). In each of these examples, hybridity is referred to as if we already know what it is and how Bhabha’s approach differentiates from that of other theorists. Through the weight his ideas carry in humanities writing in general, the concept is made to appear substantial for a translation studies audience in particular. But it is important to note that Bhabha did not address these ideas to a translation studies audience. Unless we devote the time and space to sustained engagement with Bhabha’s work in postcolonial and cultural studies, how can readers coming to him from the perspective of the theory and practice of interlingual translation be assured of their validity?

**Bhabha and his detractors**

Even in their own disciplinary context Bhabha’s theories have proved problematic. An abiding criticism is that by advocating for the resistant possibilities of ambivalence through hybrid enunciation he assumes a level playing field of intercultural encounter that does not exist. By locating emancipation purely in the literary field, moreover, he crafts a theoretical model that elides the structural asymmetries out of which the term hybridity grew and which is relevant only to those who have the opportunity to write and sell works of fiction that contest hegemonic representations of cultural identity (Tomlinson 1999, 145). In other words, the “postcolonial exotic” of the international literary elite (Huggan 2001) is unreflective of the class exploitation and racial oppression experienced by the former subjects of colonialism *today*.

Related to this is the complaint that Bhabha’s ideas are underpinned by an overreliance on theories disconnected from the subjects of his research and with which he himself does not sufficiently engage. Consider this passage:

If hybridity is heresy, then to blaspheme is to dream. To dream not of the past or present, nor the continuous present; it is not the nostalgic dream of tradition, nor the Utopian dream of modern progress; it is the dream of translation as “survival” as Derrida translates the “time” of Benjamin’s concept of the afterlife of translation, as *sur-vivre*, the act of living on the borderlines. Rushdie translates this into the migrant’s dream of survival: an *initiatory* interstices; an empowering condition of hybridity; an emergence that turns ‘return’ into reinscription or redescription; an iteration that is not belated, but ironic and insurgent. For the migrant’s survival depends, as Rushdie put it, on discovering “how newness enters the world.” (Bhabha 1994, 324-325, original emphasis)

For Pym, this suggestive extract raises urgent issues for a globalized, multicultural world at a time when the impact of economic and forced migration must be acknowledged. But, he cautions,

note the way the thought is presented, not from any claims about the world, not from a sociology of multi-ethnic societies, not from a history of migrations, not from comparisons of any good or bad societies, but from the apparently authoritative pronouncements of prior theorists. (Pym 2010, 4)

By focusing on resistance through representation, situated within a theoretical framework developed by others working outside the colonial context and pieced together jigsaw-style, Bhabha risks conflating literary theory with social processes of domination and rebellion, relegating conflict to a matter of migration theory. As Spivak suggests, the subaltern – subject to violent divisions of class, gender and power – and the diasporic – the migrants upon whom Bhabha’s theories are predicated – are not interchangeable. When articulated from a place of First World entitlement, resistance refers only to the continued dominance of the very forms of representation Bhabha opposes.

 Nevertheless, Bhabha’s appeal is clear. In today’s popular imaginary, the term “hybridity” has become quite fashionable; we recognize it as the half-electric, half-combustion-powered vehicle of choice for eco-friendly Hollywood celebrities, or the half-human, half-machine of the *Star Trek* and *Terminator* universes. It is French flamenco and Irish bluegrass, the McDonalds in Cuzco’s *Plaza de Armas,* nestled between Incan temples and symbols of Spanish colonization*,* or the vast hall in Belfast’s Titanic Quarter, where once the ships of Harland and Wolff were painted, and where now HBO’s *Game of Thrones* is filmed.[[4]](#endnote-5) These contemporary configurations contrast with its genesis in the Latin *hybrida*, which referred to the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar. Its meaning later expanded to encompass the mixing of plant and animal species and by the height of the age of imperialism it had become a cipher for the fear of miscegenation and the dilution of the European race (Young 1995, 9). Yet as Pieterse and Parekh argue, contemporary hybridity discourse need not assume fixed centres of gravity; just because nineteenth-century racial theories of miscegenation emerged from Anglophone Europe, *all* forms of hybridity need not be sullied by Eurocentric complaints of interracial mixing (1995, 1-19). This sentiment is shared by Papastergiadis, who asks: “[S]hould we use only words with a pure and inoffensive history, or should we challenge essentialist models of identity by taking on and then subverting their own vocabulary?” (2000, 169). By recuperating a term once synonymous with colonial domination, marking positively a boundary between identities based previously on essentialized notions of “us” and “them”, Bhabha’s version of hybridity has much to recommend it (ibid., 10).[[5]](#endnote-6) But this does not mean that his ideas can and should be imported into translation theory and practice without questioning how they are transformed in the move from one disciplinary context to another. Interdisciplinarity is very healthy, writes Pym, but if we are going to bring together disciplines that deal with different kinds of data, we must remain aware of their differences: “Make them speak to each other, by all means, but you cannot say they all say the same thing” (2013, 6).

**The methodological barrier**

It is in this vein that I turn to Bandia’s chapter, which makes use of hybridity to construct a translation strategy in which resistance is secured “by being attuned to the subversive and defamiliarizing language of the source text” (2010, 186). By considering Bandia’s strategy in the context of a case study, I argue that Bhabha’s hybridizing methodology loses its resistant appeal in the concrete terrain of translation practice. For Bandia, Bhabha’s methodology provides “a critical framework for understanding the current tendency to avoid colonialist dualisms in favour of emphasizing the complex nature of today’s postcolonial reality” (ibid., 171). Here hybridity is positive and inevitable:

In today’s postcolonial societies hybridity has become the norm and is no longer viewed by postcolonial subjects as an incomplete, partial, or inappropriate reflection on the metropole. Hybridity here is not just a state of refuge from colonial aggression but rather a fact of life with its own internal machinations for survival. Unlike *métissage,* hybridity is not made up of equally constituted parts; it is a state in which blending seems to occur mainly within the instituted colonial matrix, “so that the other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority” (Bhabha 2004/1994: 162). Colonial language is thus subverted and in its various manifestations becomes a powerful weapon in the hands of the dominated, as well as an important component of the linguistic fabric of postcolonial society. (Bandia 2010, 172-173, original emphasis)

But what effect does this everyday experience of hybridity have on its ability, in Bandia’s words, to “estrange” authority as a “weapon in the hands of the dominated”? How can something that is “normal” also be subversive? Many societies have emerged out of a process of syncretism whereby distinct elements of difference come together to produce something new; but for the term to have any explanatory usefulness it must be the exception rather than the rule (Delanty 2009, 65). For resistant strategies of translation based on Bhabha’s model, if hybridity is everywhere and intercultural mobility is the norm, where is hybridity’s transgressive power to disrupt the status quo?

**Resistance? Or reinscribing homogeneity?**

Bandia’s template deals with “modes of resistance characteristic of contemporary postcolonial societies where various strategies of resistance can be understood in terms of opposition to internal rather than external forms of oppression” (2010, 185). In his study of contemporary Francophone African fiction he finds

hybridity is used deliberately to disrupt the flow of the novel, which is generally written in standard metropolitan language but includes heteroglossic elements contesting the authority of that colonial norm. […] The linguistic hybridity and literary heteroglossia characteristic of today’s postcolonial societies result from both incomplete mimicry of colonial discourses and deliberate attempts to negotiate or circumvent state authority and neo-colonial realities (ibid, 185).

We recognize Bhabha’s influence here, but as with Vidal Claramonte, the engagement is brief – under a page and a half. Bandia reminds us that Bhabha’s theories are focused on the subversion of colonial authority through the ambivalence that results from the encounter of cultural identities brought together by colonial representation. But in order for ambivalence to emerge from the coming together of cultural identities misrepresented by the colonial authority, they must first exist as “perfect” undistorted entities. Bhabha must construct cultural identity as an *a priori* essence that hybridity can correct. His detractors emphasize that by assuming the binary opposition of essentialized cultural identities against which hybridity rails, Bhabha’s theories imply the existence of bounded structures that are more nuanced in reality. Thus, withoutthe prior approval of the irreparability of cultural boundaries, hybridity would disappear. In order to prove itself as an ambivalent alternative to boundedness and essentialism, moreover, hybridity must define ambivalence as neatly as possible by indulging in the very frameworks of categorization it seeks to undo (Pieterse 2006, 676). In a twist of hybridity logic, a theory of translation that looks to hybridity in a bid to avoid what Bandia terms the “homogenization of language in the translated text” reinscribes at a strategic level the very homogeneity it attempts to resist (2010, 186).

**The interpretive task of the translator**

Bandia closes by stating that a resistant translation should be implemented by procuring knowledge of the author’s own resistance in the source text. The translator must “grasp the modes of resistance within the specific situations of postcolonies and then represent this resistance through translation strategies that mirror and account for the various forms of expression in the source texts” (ibid., 186). He underscores that it differs from Venuti’s call for the disruption of target language norms and instead “deliberately attempt[s] to capture the already subversive and defamiliarized heterogeneous language of the source text [...] by being attuned to the subversive and defamiliarizing language of the source text” (ibid.). Referencing Spivak’s notion of strategic essentialism, Bandia’s practical process of resistant translation requires the translator to be familiar with the history of the language, the author and “the history of the language-in-translation” and to “pay particular attention to the forms, the language and the specific context of the postcolonial reality” (ibid., 187). This enables the translator to take up “an active role as a mediator who reinforces the author’s expressions of resistance in the target language culture”, mobilizing resources to “reproduce similar source language resistant effects” (ibid.).

However, Bandia does not address what this role means in practice. To discuss only a translator’s familiarity with the forms, language and historicity of the things she is translating presupposes that these are the only challenges. Yet behind Bandia’s language lies an interpretive task that remains unacknowledged. As tables 1-3 show, every resistant translational action also requires the replication of an essential element in the source text:

[Table 1 here]

[Table 2 here]

[Table 3 here]

The translator’s task is clear: to “carry over” (table 1), to “disrupt” (table 2) and “reproduce” (table 3), etc. The objects of resistant translation, meanwhile, include “the author’s own resistance and the author’s representations of resistance” (table 1), “the underlying ideological program” (table 2) and “the already resistant and subversive discourses of the postcolony expressed in the source text”, etc. But can we say that these are monadic units of resistance simply awaiting translation? Bandia points out that his project is not about a “systematic quest for dynamic equivalence or formal equivalence, for it does not concern itself with issues of transparency or fluency” (ibid., 187). Even if we reject equivalence, to what are we being not-equivalent? Before we can reject some things and “disrupt” others, we must first have a clear idea of what it is we are rejecting. Bandia’s template does not take into account the hermeneutic challenge that faces the translator, for the task of “employing strategies that disrupt the target language and reproduce the intended effect of resistance to state power and other forms of oppression” (ibid., 185) is, above all, one of interpretation.

 For translators attempting to put Bandia’s strategy into practice, two problems arise. First is the implication that translation operates between fixities, when, as has been more or less universally acknowledged, the interpretive hermeneutics at the heart of translation makes securing target text resistance as subjective an exercise as any. Translation does not ferry explanations from one immutable shore to another but is instead founded on shifting sands of understanding that vary according to the hermeneutic applied. These sands are “shifting” in the sense that different interpretations of resistance in the source text will yield different treatments in translation and “shifty” in the sense that this interpretive morass creates the conditions both for variance and, of course, misunderstanding. When theorization eschews the interpretive leaps translation requires, we risk promoting the idea that translation is the communication of unitary forms of culture rather than their transformation (Scott 2001, 1-8). Even when resistance is the aim, a translator’s ethical intentions are always channelled through the internal signifying practice her subjectivity demands, inscribing essentialism whether resistance is presumed to be present or not.

**The agent of resistance**

The second problem returns us to the underlying theory of hybridity. Bandia notes: “Bhabha’s concept of mimetic subversion that in effect gives credit to the colonized subject’s semiotic agency can be applied to the postcolonial subject’s mimicry and subversion of the discourses of dominance and power used by the local elite of the postcolony” (2010, 172). But what happens to this agency when the subject of subversion is neither the colonized, nor the postcolonial, but the translator? To answer this we must better understand how subversion is produced in Bhabha’s conceptualization.

In the asymmetrical relation in which hybridity takes place, indigenous cultural identities are subsumed by the totalizing universalism of the colonizer. Bhabha’s resistance is located within the very structures of the colonial authority and aims to disrupt the ease with which the colonizer appropriates the identity of the other:

What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, *contingently*, “opening out”, remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference – be it class, gender or race. Such assignations of social differences – where difference is neither One nor the Other but *something else besides*, *in-between* – find their agency in a form of the ‘future’ where the past is not originary, where the present is not simply transitory. (1994, 313, original emphasis).

Arguing that culture is developed not teleologically but relationally, gaps in “translation” emerge to create the “newness” that Bhabha sees as the subversion of the received continuum of past and present. He looks to translation because hybridity is found within the “stubborn chunks” of difference that make their presence felt (ibid., 313). In-between the “past” of the colonizer’s gaze and the “present” of the colonized, these ambivalent identifications reveal themselves as “something other than what its rules of recognition assert” (ibid., 160). This response to essentialism delights in fracturedness, resisting dominant colonial discourse by disrupting the binary thinking upon which colonialist thinking relies.

The “disruptive” translator in Bandia’s model, however, proceeds from an interpretation of what is, in the first instance, an act of reading. As Ricoeur’s philosophical hermeneutics shows, the “meaning” of what is written is separated from the intentions of its author, requiring the reader to undertake a subjective process of understanding before it can be explained. What he terms the “semantic autonomy” of the text means that to its reader, a text unfolds a history distinct from that of its author (Ricoeur 2013, 12-13). It is for this reason that Ricoeur defines the central problem of hermeneutics as one of interpretation, because every text is effectively independent with respect to its author’s intention and context of production and reception (ibid., 45). This task of interpretation

is to conquer a remoteness, a distance between the past cultural epoch to which the text belongs and the interpreter himself. By overcoming this distance, by making himself contemporary with the text, the exegete can appropriate its meaning to himself: foreign, he makes it familiar, that is, he makes it his own. (Ricoeur 2004, 16)

In the metalanguage of hermeneutics, this is the “guess” – that the text contains some symbolic significance out of which we can make meaning. The net effect is that texts can be construed in more than one way. But this does not mean care-free conjecture on the reader’s part. As Ricoeur cautions, there are no rules for making guesses but there are certainly ways to validate the guesses that we do make. This involves making something similar to a legal case for a particular interpretation: resting one’s construction on the “clues” a text contains; taking into account the greatest number of facts supplied; noting its potential connotations and attempting, ultimately, to ensure that all of its possible connotations come together and enable it to “mean” all that it possibly *can* mean.

**Interpretation in action**

A case of translation practice elucidates these insights. Nuevo Teatro Español/New Spanish Theatre is a festival of contemporary Spanish theatre in English translation, hosted jointly between Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance, Caos Editorial, Euro Theatro Association, SpainNow!, Theatre Futures and the Ministerio de Cultura de España. In 2011, I was invited to translate *Dentro de la tierra*, Paco Bezerra’s multi-award-winning play, for performance as a dramatized reading at Rose Bruford College and the New Diorama Theatre London. Set in a family-run tomato farm in rural Andalusia, the play is a macabre tale of a father’s ambition and his violent verbal and physical abuse of the North African workers he employs. Throughout, he refers to them as *moros* [Moors]:

Padre Los moros, Indalecio, no pueden salir de los invernaderos. La tierra y el plástico, ahí es donde tienen que estar. Ése es su sitio y éste es el nuestro.

[Father The Moors, Indalecio, cannot leave the greenhouses. The land and the plastic, that’s where they have to be. That’s their place and this is ours.[[6]](#endnote-7)]

His son also joins him in this language:

Padre No es la primera vez que hemos pillado a alguno metiendo la zarpa.

Hijo Y no hablamos de los moros, ni de los negros, ni siquiera de los rumanos, la misma gente de por aquí.

[Father It’s not the first time we’ve caught people getting their claws in.

Son And we’re not talking about the Moors, or the blacks, or even the Romanians, but people from around here.]

As the translator I asked what role this language played with regard to plot and character development. By analyzing which characters used marked terms such as *moros* [Moors] and *negros* [blacks], which used the more neutral *trabajadores* [workers] and how their interlocutors responded when they did so, I interpreted the play as a clash of multicultural values. My challenge was to find a translation that would communicate the family’s racism while resisting the potential for harm when performed for English-speaking audiences. In a play in which regimes of representation suffuse every aspect of the language – an author’s representation of a farm-owner’s representation of migrant workers – my primary concern was for the ways in which my own representation would itself be interpreted by my eventual spectator. The author himself suggested ‘Moors’ and ‘niggers’ as a translation. Certainly, this would make the family’s vehement bigotry clear, but as an English-speaking translator commissioned to read the text and produce a translation for performance specifically in England, I found these options problematic. The ambiguity of *negros* in Spanish, moreover, invites numerous readings, as a case the same year showed. When footballer Luis Suárez was accused of racially abusing Patrice Evra in a match between Liverpool and Manchester United in October 2011, Suárez argued unsuccessfully that his use of *negro* was both consistent with his upbringing in Uruguay and intended “in a conciliatory and friendly way” (2011, 5). In the light of conflicting accounts, an independent commission was convened to investigate and opinions sought from experts in Spanish language and race and ethnicity in Latin America. Suárez was found guilty on the finding that he used the word *negro* seven times and that on each occasion the words were insulting (ibid., 100). But the official report also noted that “the word ‘negro’ is ambiguous in all countries and regions of Latin America” (ibid., 45). According to the experts’ observations, the word can have “pejorative connotations, as it may be associated with low class status, ugliness, vulgar behaviour [...] etc.” and can thus be employed “with the intent to offend and to offend in racial terms” (ibid., 46). Yet, the experts observed, it “is by no means, however, always used offensively” and may be a friendly form of address “to someone seen as somewhat brown-skinned or even just black-haired” or “as a nickname in everyday speech” (ibid.).

As a “reader” of the term my task was to assess the context of its usage both from the perspective of the author and the characters in the play. But given my commission, to translate for a UK performance, my readerly concern had to take into account the Spanish text *and* its English-speaking audience. Could the author’s suggestion take the audience beyond the territory of a racist insult towards a place of real discomfort? Could “blacks” convey the Father’s racism without alienating spectators? What about the references to *moros*? “Moors”, “North Africans” or “Maghrebis”? I tested out these diverse dramaturgical possibilities on a stage director considering the play for full performance. She told me she initially balked at the family’s use of language; and, in a sense, this is precisely the effect Bezerra’s language creates. But my concern was to enable such a challenge while ensuring it did not take the audience beyond my belief in the dramatic clash of multicultural values the play was offering, towards a place of offence, confusion, or hostility. I opted for “Arabs”: playing on a pejorative usage familiar to UK audiences while avoiding the historical associations of the term “Moors”. In the final analysis, what role these terms play in the source, how they will resonate with audiences in English and how best to translate them are practical questions the translator asks and answers for herself. Through my research into the history and context of the terminology and my consultations with the author and UK stage director, I put my reading of this complex translational ecology to the test and acted upon my interpretation. Future directors, spectators and readers of the translation will bring readings of their own, further testing its range of meaning and opening up its dramatic richness – in Ricoeur’s terms, enabling it to mean all it can possibly mean.

 What does this mean for Bandia’s theory of resistant translation? Recall that in Bhabha’s model it is the difference of colonialism’s “others” that leads ultimately to the disruption of the colonizer’s ability to dominate. In Bandia’s template the emphasis is on translational disruption directed towards a series of fixed elements of resistance contained within the source text. Unlike Bhabha’s model, it is not strictly the difference of colonialism’s others that does the resisting but the translator’s *reading* of that difference. Given the hermeneutic enterprise underlying translation, if the translator’s construction of the source text elements of resistance she is charged with “carrying over” is subject to the same semantic autonomy Ricoeur identifies, who is the true agent of resistance? Because translation is at base a representational project that follows an interpretative process, the resisting “other” ceases to exist as an organic, speaking reality and becomes another representation *to ourselves.* The implications of this misplaced agency for resistant translation theory based on Bhabha’s hybridity are serious. As the example of theatre translation illustrates, “enunciation” is not achieved by the people a translation represents but is constructed by the translator on their behalf and is driven by a reading both of the text and its imagined reception in translation. To misplace the agent of resistance is to suppress the very real issues of power and control that continue to result from the interpretive process that translation entails.

As we have seen, Bandia takes inspiration from Spivak’s “strategic essentialism”. But it is also Spivak who observes that when it comes to the representation of an outside source, we must take into account two conflicting uses, in which “speaking of” (such as the re-presentation of ideas found in art and philosophy) can be confused with “speaking for” (representation in the political sense). Her contention is that all forms of representation are influenced by a political position. It is by this logic that she answers her own most famous of questions: the subaltern cannot speak since to “speak” is to imply a position of political representation and equality by having the ability and agency to represent*.* To speak to the hegemonic other is precisely no longer to besubaltern because subalternity is the very condition of not-speaking. To speak “up” and write “back” against the condition of subalternity – as is the project of hybridity – is already to move away from the condition that is being represented and to effectively nullify resistance in the process (Spivak 1988, 276). In the context of resistant translation, where enunciation in the ambivalent space of colonialism is undertaken neither by the text nor its author, it is not the subaltern who speaks, but the translator in their stead.

**Conclusion**

With hybridity, Bhabha calls for binary forms of cultural identity inscribed within colonial representation to be rewritten, transforming essentialized descriptors of cultural identity into resistant forms of ambivalence. His approach rescues the concept from its racist underpinnings and speaks to the productive possibilities of cultural encounter. For those seeking to theorize translation’s potential for social, cultural and political renovation, its attractiveness is clear. Yet as Bhabha’s critics have shown, in order to present ambivalence as a panacea for the boundedness of cultural identity that comes with colonial representation, hybridity must also construct bounded articulations of the very ambivalence it seeks to foster. When deployed within translation, where it is the translator who enjoys the agency to represent, the resistance of an oppressed “other” can only be ventriloquized on their behalf. The strategic consequence of an uncritical imbrication of Bhabha’s ambivalent metaphors is that we ignore how even the most well-meaning translational encounters reify the source text within the subjective framework that accompanies the translator’s reading – both of the text and its target audience in translation. Viewed from this perspective, the choice appears stark: either to insist on the validity of hybridity discourse, asserting that resistance on the part of the translated other is indeed achievable; or acknowledge that no resistance can be present in translation except that which is asserted by the translator herself. Cronin writes that at some level translators must be “homebirds” – for although they are involved in perpetual comings and goings between the world of the text and the world of its translation, we must not forget that “translation is a return ticket and that homecomings are as important as leavetakings” (2002, 87). By the time it reaches the domain of translation theory and practice, we might say, the dialogical quality of Bhabha’s ambivalence becomes distinctly monological. To promote hybridizing translation either as the recuperation of agency on the part of the other or the reproduction of pre-existing qualities of resistance contained within the source is to risk forgetting that the interpretive hermeneutic by which the translator construes both the text and its target audience means that the location of agency is firmly within the translating camp. To deploy Bhabha’s ideas within a framework that does not acknowledge the subject position of the translator is to subordinate what we know of the practice of translation to its theorization.

However, this does not mean that the translator’s interpretations should be free from scrutiny or that translation cannot be resistant. One of the successes of recent hermeneutic thinking within translation theory is the acknowledgement that translation practice is the actualization of a transformative process. A greater awareness of the translator’s role within this process – of imbuing texts with new potential in new times and places – ensures our critical gaze is fixed not on resistance as an *a priori* essence in the source but on the ways in which translators might create resistant meanings of their own. We can and should direct our studies of translation towards the choices a translator makes, whether in Ricoeur’s words to “validate” a reading of a text or to scrutinize its power to effect resistance within the only community in which it is empowered to do so: its audience. Where the focus of future efforts at securing resistance can most usefully be orientated, therefore, is in theorizing oppositionality not as a quality that emerges from the thoughtful encounter between translators and source texts but between translators and their target audiences. By self-consciously embracing the subjectivity of translation practice, we go some way towards subverting the self-confident implacability that all representation entails. When it comes to adopting Bhabha’s metaphors within translation theory, the course of resistance is best served when we acknowledge the interpretive regime we inscribe at the level of translation practice.

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**NOTES**

1. See Papastergiadis (2005) and Pieterse (2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Extended studies of third space are provided by Batchelor (2008) and Wolf (2000, 2008) and on the in-between by Tymoczko (2003) and Bennett (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. In line with the Code of Ethics of the Society of Authors (2014), the translator I envisage is commissioned to produce a translation for reception by an identified audience speaking the translator’s mother tongue and do not address collaborative or self-translation processes in which authors are actively involved. My emphasis is on translation across a distance: linguistically, from the source language; spatially, from the place of its author; and temporally, from the moment of production and reception. Although they may spend significant portions of their life in cultural contexts other than their own, translators here must, in Johnston’s words, “engineer” something from somewhere or sometime else, making it tangible for audiences in the here and now (2012, 46). This paper concerns the interpretative leaps this task requires. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. The so-called “world music” model of “organic” hybridity where cultural practices change naturally over time (Bakhtin 1981, 360; Pieterse 2009, 87). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. It should be noted that different terms are used in other languages and not all are negative. For Vicente Riva Palacio (1832–96), the *mestizo* descendants of European settlers and indigenous inhabitants were the race of the future, an idea now associated with Jose Vasconcelos’s “cosmic race”. Likewise, Gilberto Freyre (1900–1987) believed that the descendants of European settlers and African slaves would lead to a superior Brazilian race. For further discussion, see Burke (2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. These glosses are for demonstration purposes and do not represent the published translation. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)