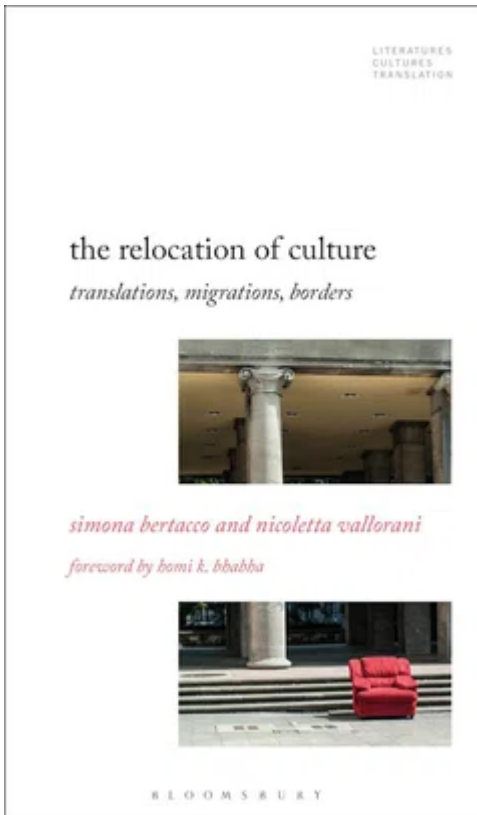


The Relocation of Culture

Reviewed by Isabella D'Angelo

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Simona Bertacco and Nicoletta Vallorani
The Relocation of Culture: Translations, Migrations, Borders
Bloomsbury
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The Relocation of Culture, jointly written by Simona Bertacco and Nicoletta Vallorani as the outcome of a long-lasting collaboration, critically addresses the question of translation in our present, and proposes a new way to look at it. Based on an etymological reading of “translating” as “moving”, the book offers a twofold understanding of migration as translation and translation as migration: translation, both a conceptual tool and a concrete practice, is offered as method to understand migration. This involves shining a light on migration and translation as moments of encounter between people and cultures, and raises fundamental ethical issues concerning encounter. The book critically dialogues with a rich literature on translation and migration studies, and the title explicitly refers to Bhabha’s seminal *The Location of Culture* as a point of departure to rethink postcolonial cultural processes thirty years later, something that Bhabha himself praises in his foreword to the book.

Bertacco and Vallorani clearly identify a paradox: translation is fundamental to our globalized everyday life and, at the same time, devalued as lacking practicality. They effectively demonstrate the

practical value of translation and the importance of theorizing about it. However, they depart from common understandings of translation as an abstract practice, to concentrate instead on the embeddedness of “translation from below”, seen from the experience of migrants. Embodying translation through migration allows the authors to account for the human experience of people being translated, and to concentrate on the agency at play in translation processes. Moreover, the perspective of “translation from below” sheds light on the ethical dimensions of translation, putting into view the responsibility of all the actors involved in its processes.

The authors reject the mainstream schema of translation as a linear practice moving from one discrete language to another, from one place to another, that conveys images of the translator as a neutral medium, and the receiver of translation as having a purely passive role. Instead, they propose a new schema, one that acknowledges how we are always already in a translational and translated culture. Translation schemas are strictly related to distinct worldviews: whereas the linear understanding of translation is related to a worldview of discrete nation-states that simply need mediation to communicate one with another, the authors propose a non-national idea of culture in translation, each culture being embedded in polylingualism. Acknowledging the experience of being translated requires new geographies of translation and migration that take the border as a point of view for semanticizing anew the topographic and cultural lexicon of translation, starting with the word “relocation”. From this angle, Bertacco and Vallorani insist on translation as a practice that creates new spaces, not so much in the modality of in-betweenness, but rather as an overcrowding of sense. The book presents an understanding of fluid identities that resist capture and are, instead, projected towards many possible translations of the self.

The authors track and reject a Eurocentric approach to translation, that they name a “recognition paradigm”. Through this paradigm, the people and messages to be translated meet a process where they are made intelligible and recognizable according to the cultural codes of the receiver. Underlying this process is a hegemonic will to reconstitute “the other” into manageable terms, particularly evident in the management of migration: the migrant is accepted and recognized only insofar as it is possible to reconstitute their stories into something familiar, and therefore to sympathize with them. During this process, those differences that simply cannot be reconstituted to European codes are erased. For this reason, the “recognition paradigm” leads to an “aporia of translation”: on the one hand, it brings translated people into visibility and recognition, on the other, it erases their cultural differences. For this reason, the authors propose another approach to translation, insisting on the necessity of preserving those elements of foreignness that resist adaptation, the “semantic gaps” (p. 82) of linguistic exchange: this necessarily produces a translation that is incomplete, but also responsible.

The authors discuss examples of this type of translation, concentrating on art as a vehicle for it. They examine a wide array of pieces of art that in recent years have been creatively engaging with questions of translation and migration, ranging from Palestinian artist Jacir to photographer Badagliacca to storyteller Mazzantini, to name only a few. The examples the authors discuss all concentrate on two main areas: North America and the Mediterranean Sea. While this focus allows for a detailed, in-depth analysis, it may also be seen to reproduce a Western-centered view on the privileged sites of translation.

The artists praised in the book are the ones who seek to preserve “the core of otherness” that demands to be kept as such: they avoid the risk to appropriate and stereotype the other in the process of making sense of them and, at the same time, take full charge of their responsibility over the translational interplay. Some of the artists successfully involve migrants as active agents of their own self-translation, thus challenging the view of the cultural mediator as the only actor of translation. The authors also suggest that their readers become actors of translation, by way of engaging in an “accented reading”: a way of reading that considers one’s own relation to the language and one’s own

personal accent, so that the translation process goes on when the translated text is received: language is seen not as a neutral, standardized medium, but one that is constantly changed by all those who use it.

Discussing artistic examples, the authors suggest translation as a principle of aesthetic renewal and state the need for a “translation literacy”, meant as “an ability to acknowledge and assess the translational aspects of the world around us” (p. 9) and to assume responsibility as a precondition for translation. However, one can wonder if art is the only possible key to the epistemological relocation that, according to the authors, is needed before any cultural and political change is possible: the book lacks a consideration of other forms of imagination rather than art. Nevertheless, its overall consideration of concrete translation practices is innovative and most needed: case studies do not only serve to corroborate theories but are made a singular starting point for theoretical elaboration, so as to “break the commonly held divide between art and politics” (p. 120).

About the authors

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