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Crossing language barriers: using translation to bridge socioeconomic, cultural, and gender-based gaps

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Crossing Language Barriers:

Using Translation to Bridge Socioeconomic, Cultural, and Gender-Based Gaps

An Honors Program Project Presented to

the Faculty of the Undergraduate

College of Arts and Letters

James Madison University

by Audrey Layne Cannon

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Accepted by the faculty of the Department of Writing, Rhetoric & Technical Communication, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors Program.

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at the James Madison University Honors Symposium on April 24, 2015.

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis with gratitude to my grandmother Eleanor Cannon who has supported me not only throughout the course of this project, but in all my endeavors.

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Introduction: Developing an Interest in Translation

“[T]he literary translator is necessarily engaged with far more than words, far more than techniques, far more than stories or characters or scenes. He is . . . engaged with worldviews and with the passionately held inner convictions of men and women long dead and vanished from the earth . . . his task is the mining out and reconstruction of those worldviews, those passionately held and beautifully embodied inner convictions.”

– Burton Raffel, “Translating Medieval European Poetry”

My sophomore year of college, I started dreaming in Spanish. I was taking nine credit hours of upper-level Spanish classes and preparing to study abroad in Spain that summer. A year later, when I was desperately trying to think of a senior thesis that would tie together my interests, a course I had taken in Spain became my inspiration: Translation Studies. A project in translation, centered on translating a complete work of Spanish literature, would allow me to incorporate not only my Spanish language skills, but also writing, editing, and women’s literature.

When I was in eighth grade, I had to choose a language to study. Spanish was the most popular, so I chose it, somewhat arbitrarily, not realizing the effect it would have on my life. For the next five years, I gained a strong foundation in the language. Although I enjoyed my studies, I never dreamed I would pursue a higher degree in Spanish. When I entered college, I learned I needed to take one Spanish class to fulfill my Bachelor of Arts requirement, so I enrolled in a 200-level course, not thinking much of it. That soon became my favorite class. When registration rolled around again, I signed up for a 300-level class, thinking maybe I’d pick up a minor. That minor soon led to a double-major in Spanish and a summer abroad in Spain, which led me to that fateful course in translation.

Translation Studies caught my attention from the start. I remember calling home and telling my parents I had never been so enthralled with a class nor so naturally-inclined towards a course of study. It came more easily to me than anything else I had taken. This made sense because my first major is Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication and one of the first lessons I learned is that to be a good translator, you must be able to write well in your native tongue.

While Spanish came naturally to me, writing was my first love. Upon entering college and learning there was a major devoted to writing and rhetoric, I didn't hesitate to choose it. I had loved to write since I was a young child. I remember running to my parents excitedly grasping some story I had written, handing it to them proudly, and waiting for feedback. As I matured, not much changed. I didn't understand why the other students in my class dreaded writing essays; they were one of my favorite assignments. A pivotal experience in high school was an essay contest my English teacher required her students to enter. As an exercise, she asked that we remove as many "verbs of being" from our essays as we could – that is, replace weak verbs with strong ones. After drafting my essay, I painstakingly rewrote each sentence replacing the verbs of being with "action verbs" and was shocked by the product. Through a simple exercise, I learned one of my greatest lessons about writing. A couple months later, I was stunned to receive a check in the mail. I had placed in the contest and won a small prize for my essay. As a young student, that was monumental. I liked being paid for my writing, and I decided I wouldn't mind making a living that way.

After returning from Spain with my love of writing and Spanish solidified, and a new interest in translation blossoming, I enrolled in a Spanish course focused on women's literature from Latin America. It wasn't until that class that I learned that works by women in Latin America

are often overlooked in the United States. I was fascinated to hear about the Hispanic women writers who defied odds and became published, successful authors in the United States.

I wanted to choose a thesis that somehow linked all these interests – a true culmination of my studies. After struggling for months and brainstorming with various professors, I finally came up with the perfect idea: translate a previously untranslated work of literature by a Latin American woman.

Slowly, I developed a plan. Step one: to research current theory on literary translation, synthesize the information, and write about what I learn. Step two: to choose the perfect work to translate – something inspired, something the English-speaking world simply needs to read. Step three: to research extensively the work, the author, and the country of origin. Step four: to read carefully and annotate the work before beginning to translate. Step five: to translate – the longest and most tedious part of the thesis but also the most rewarding. Step six: to edit and polish the English translation with the ultimate goal of getting it published in the United States.

Somewhere in the course of this process, it occurred to me that I might be able to contact the author, if she were still living. And maybe, if the stars aligned just right, I would be able to meet her in person for an interview. Maybe I could plan a trip to make every bit of my effort worthwhile, a trip that would validate the hours upon hours of work spent slaving over someone else's work. Ever since I studied abroad in Spain, I had been dying to travel to another Spanish-speaking country. And so a crazy plan hatched in my mind. With all these ideas and lofty goals swimming around in my head, I began to work. What you are about to read is what I came up with – the product of over a year of hard work and planning. I hope you enjoy it, because I sure enjoyed creating it.

A Study of Literary Translation

The Craft of Translation, edited by John Biguenet and Rainer Schulte, is a compilation of essays by various scholars in the field of translation. In their introduction, Biguenet and Schulte write, “Translators, by necessity, read each word and sentence at least as carefully as the critic or scholar. Even the smallest detail in a text . . . cannot be neglected” (ix). They continue by quoting Gregory Rebassa, one of the scholars who contributed an essay to the compilation: “I have always maintained that translation is essentially the closest reading one can possibly give a text. The translator cannot ignore the ‘lesser’ words, but must consider every jot and tittle” (Biguenet and Schulte x). These scholars agree that in order to produce a successful translation, the translator must first have a thorough understanding of the original work. The editors write, “The words of the original are only the starting point; a translator must do more than convey information (a literary translator, that is)” (Biguenet and Schulte x). In other words, the translation of a literary work has many possible outcomes. The translator does not merely convert each word into a new language, but rather conveys a wealth of meaning that may require background knowledge of the culture of origin, the predispositions of the author, and the idiosyncrasies of the original language. Making this point clear, the editors state, “It is a generally accepted fact that literal translations cannot be successful with literary works” (Biguenet and Schulte xi). The multifaceted nature of literature and the nuances of words make this impossible. The editors continue,

“Reading becomes the making of meaning and not the description of already fixed meanings. The imaginative literary text places the reader between several realities that need to be deciphered and adjusted to the specific perspectives of seeing that the reader brings to the text” (Biguenet and Schulte x).

Therefore, “an exact equivalence from one language to another will never be possible” (Biguenet and Schulte xiii). Even if a word has a literal translation according to the dictionary, the meaning behind the word – when cultural influences are taken into consideration – is not always conveyed in the translation. Moreover, since the translator of a work does not have the same beliefs, thought processes, and background as the author, the translation of a work will inevitably differ in some way from the original and will differ from other translated interpretations of the work. The editors confirm, “We know that two different translators will never come up with exactly the same translation, since their initial way of seeing a work varies according to the presuppositions they bring to a text” (Biguenet and Schulte xv). The essays that the editors have compiled further explore these ideas regarding literary translation by referencing their own work in the field and their personal experiences.

Response: “No Two Snowflakes are Alike: Translation as a Metaphor” by Gregory Rabassa

Gregory Rabassa’s scholarly essay on translation purports that the act of translating is not some mathematical system where one word equals another, but rather a translation can never reach an exact equivalence of the original work. He provides several thought-provoking examples to illustrate this main point. First he explains why it may seem to us that we should be able to replicate the meaning of a work in another language, but why it is, in practice, impossible:

“Schooled as we are from the time of our first letters and figures in such things as $2 = 2$, we rarely wake up to the fact that this is impossible, except as a purely theoretical and fanciful concept, for the second 2 is obviously a hair younger than the first and therefore

not its equal. With this in mind, we should certainly not expect that a word in one language will find its equal in another” (Rabassa 1).

Rabassa continues to support his point by explaining why two different words in different languages that mean the same thing, for example the English word “dog” which translates to “*perro*” in Spanish, may not carry the same connotations: “other subliminal images may accompany the two versions and thereby give the two words further differences beyond sound” (Rabassa 1). Another relevant example Rabassa provides is that “cocks do not crow alike in the ears of different peoples: an American rooster sings ‘cock-a-doodle-doo,’ but carry him to Mexico and he will say *qui-qui-ri-qui*” (Rabassa 2). Rabassa continues with yet another complex example of the difficulties of translation, specifically from Spanish to English. He explores the Spanish word *rama*, which may translate to *branch*, *limb*, or *bough*. If the translator fails to take into consideration the other meanings or connotations of these words, especially within the context of the work, confusion on the part of the reader may ensue. *Branch* may refer to a part of a tree but may also denote a subset of, for example, a bank. *Limb* may again refer to a tree but could also be mistaken for a human appendage. In order to produce a successful translation, one must consider different meanings, nuances, and context surrounding each and every word. Failing to do so may result in a translation that is not only far from ideal, but even impossible to understand.

Rabassa moves on to describe how a translator can never have complete confidence in his or her work as there always exists the possibility that another word may have fit the context better: “Since we are not writing our own material, we are still unsure whether or not the word we have used is the best one, either for meaning or for sound or for ever so many reasons” (Rabassa 7). He concludes his essay with a continuation of this point:

“The translator can never be sure of himself, he must never be. He must always be dissatisfied with what he does because ideally, platonically, there is a perfect solution, but he will never find it. He can never enter into the author’s being and even if he could the difference in languages would preclude any exact reproduction” (Rabassa 12).

Rabassa addresses the idea that sometimes searching for the closest equivalence of a word in another language is not the key to a strong translation. Rabassa cites Jorge Luis Borges, a prominent author from Argentina, who “told his translator not to write what he said but what he wanted to say” (Rabassa 2). This piece of wisdom from Borges once more illustrates that producing a literary translation is not a pragmatic mathematical equation; it requires research, comprehension, and creativity.

Response: “Building a Translation, the Reconstruction Business: Poem 145 of Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz” by Margaret Sayers Peden

In her essay on Spanish to English translation, Margaret Sayers Peden uses Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz’ famous Poem 145 to demonstrate the difficulties of translation and the impossibility of creating a translation of a poem that is perfect in structure and meaning. Peden captures the essence of translation by citing, and translating, a quote from a work by Argentine writer Eduardo Pavlovsky: “*Hay que violentar para embellecer; hay que destruir para crear.*” One must do violence before one can make beauty; one must destroy before one can create” (Peden 13). Peden demonstrates this concept of destruction preceding creation by providing three relevant metaphors. First, she cites the idea of Walter Benjamin: a translation must be assembled in the target language “with loving particularity . . . just as the broken pieces of a

vase, to be joined again, must fit at every point, though none may be exactly like the other” (Peden 13). She goes on to explain how she thinks of translation as the act of melting an ice cube. The ice cube represents the original piece in the foreign language. As the translator works, melting the ice cube, “molecules escape, new molecules are poured in to fill the spaces, but the lines of molding and mending are virtually invisible. The work exists in the second language as a new ice cube – different, but to all appearances the same” (Peden 13). Peden creates a more optimistic metaphor than that of Pavlovsky and his vase; she gives the translator hope that it is possible to translate a work and make it look new not by patching together the pieces of the broken original, but by melting down the original and molding its parts into something different, and yet the same. Finally, Peden compares translating, specifically Poem 145, to restoring an old building:

“Sor Juana’s sonnets are baroque edifices in miniature. To translate them, the artisan must . . . remove the convoluted detail of the ornate façade . . . until she reaches the structural frame. All the debris – the components of the original edifice – must be transported to a new language, to be restored to its original baroque splendor with the least possible signs of damage” (Peden 14).

Next, Peden provides nine different translations of Poem 145, including her own. By placing them all one after another, she highlights the different ways scholars translated the same sonnet. Poem 145 ends with the famous line, “*es cadáver, es polvo, es sombra, es nada.*” The translators are tasked with converting this hendecasyllabic line into the iambic pentameter used in English sonnets. Peden translates the line as “is but cadaver, ashes, shadow, void.” She explores the many different ways to represent the final word *nada*: “It is one of the beautiful words in the Spanish language, and one of the most difficult to translate. The poet offers

‘nothing,’ ‘nothingness,’ ‘naught,’ ‘nonentity,’ and ‘very little’ – none of which is strikingly mellifluous” (Peden 26). Peden’s structural analysis of Poem 145 and its various translations once again emphasizes the idea that a single work may be translated in many ways but may never be considered complete. Peden ends her essay with the emphatic claim that “all translations should be followed by a blank page. That blank page awaits the ideal translation of poem 145, the reconstituted vase, the re-formed ice cube, the perfectly re-constructed baroque edifice” (Peden 27).

On Translating *Paseo de la Reforma*

Mexican author Elena Poniatowska's novel *Paseo de la Reforma* fits all the specifications I was searching for in the work I hoped to translate. I wanted to include a section of my thesis addressing what it was like to translate Elena Poniatowska's novel: difficulties I encountered, decisions I made, and resources I used. Following this section in which I provide specific examples of my research, I am including my translation of two full chapters of *Paseo de la Reforma*.

A website called WordReference.com was my lifeline throughout the process of reading and translating. I have been using Word Reference for years, but it was especially helpful for me with my thesis because not only does it have a comprehensive Spanish-English dictionary, but it also has a user forum section where tricky words or phrases are discussed by native speakers, scholars, or students. When I search a Spanish word, Word Reference provides the definition of the word in Spanish followed by several different ways the word may be translated into English, with explanations and example sentences. It also notes when a word or phrase may be informal, formal, offensive, or slang. It then shows how the word may be used in compound forms, that is, in phrases that are often colloquialisms. If the translation of a word or phrase is specifically used in Mexico or another country, that is denoted with the country's abbreviation. This was a great help to me when translating many of the "Mexicanisms" in *Paseo de la Reforma* with which I was previously unfamiliar.

After reading and annotating the novel more closely than I have read anything – my copy is so full of highlights and markings that it looks like it has been passed around for years – I roughly translated each chapter as best I could, highlighting the phrases or concepts that would

require further research. After I realized that my thesis would be an ongoing project – in the time I had, I could have translated all the chapters but I couldn't have translated them *well* – I chose my two favorite chapters to perfect and include as part of my final project. Even after reading, annotating, and creating a rough translation of these chapters, polishing them up still required a great deal of research. Here is a bit of insight on some of the research I did and the decisions I made.

Chapter 4

In the beginning of chapter four, Poniatowska describes how the gathering of scholars knew it was morning because a rooster sang in a house of the “colonia Roma,” which is a district of Mexico City near the city's center. Because “Roma” has no translation in this context, I decided just to say that a rooster sang in a nearby house. This will make more sense to the English-speaking reader. I made several similar decisions when translating concepts that seemed particularly specific to Mexico or to the time period of the book, concepts that I thought might be lost on the average reader. For example, main character Amaya's eyes are described as “obsidian,” and I learned that obsidian is a black rock that is very common in Mexico. Since I had to do research to find out about obsidian, I changed the metaphor to a simile by writing “as black as obsidian” so the meaning would be clear. In both chapters four and six, Poniatowska uses the phrase “lotus position” to describe how Amaya sits on the floor. After much thought, I exchanged “lotus position” for “Indian style” because it will make more sense to English-speakers. When Poniatowska writes that Amaya's husband is referenced in the financial section of *Excelsior* and *El Universal*, I decided to say simply that he is referenced in the financial

section of “several Mexican newspapers.” As a final example, I changed Aubusson to “ornate, French rug” because I thought it would make the meaning more accessible to the average reader.

In addition to making these decisions, in many cases, to translate for meaning instead of a literal translation, I had to conduct a great deal of research on the array of political, intellectual, and artistic figures referenced. The novel is full of these references – I would consider it historical fiction – and they are especially abundant in chapter four. I read about people such as Alfonso Reyes, José Vasconcelos, Octavio Paz and his wife Elena Garro, Emiliano Zapata, Ortiz Rubio, and many others. I researched them, not necessarily because I needed to write about them in the translation, but because understanding these allusions was key to understanding the work as a whole. With a deeper understanding of exactly what Elena Poniatowska was trying to say, I could work to produce a much more meaningful translation. One of the most interesting references I researched was Italian painter Sandro Boticelli who worked during the Early Renaissance. In chapter four, Amaya says to Ashby’s wife, “You are a Boticelli.” Studying the type of women Boticelli painted helped me determine what Ashby’s wife Nora was like physically and otherwise. Poniatowska goes on to describe Nora’s “black hair pulled back and a few ringlets falling from her bun, with her slender white neck and her modest eyes.” This description does, indeed, align with the Italian women from Boticelli’s paintings.

Chapter 6

In chapter six, I made several of the same kind of changes I made in chapter four – that is, changing something that may be clear to a Mexican reader to something that would make sense to an English-speaking reader. For example, I changed *Esto* to “newspaper” and *Siempre!* to

“political magazine.” I changed 80,000 hectares to 2.5 acres. Instead of saying Hermes wallet, I used “expensive, leather wallet,” and instead of saying Tin Larin, I said “Larin chocolate bar” for clarity.

When Amaya and the others show up in Morelos, they go to the Government Palace to address the governor and try to get the seven laborers released from jail. I studied photos of this Government Palace so I could better visualize the situation and provide an accurate description of the setting. When Amaya is talking to – or rather, yelling at – the governor, she references the PRI several times, so I read up on the PRI. In English, it is referred to as the Institutional Revolutionary Party, and it held power in Mexico for 71 years beginning in 1929.

One particular phrase in chapter six that caused me trouble was when Amaya says to the governor “estamos hasta la coronilla.” A literal translation of the phrase got me nowhere; I came up with something like “we are before the crown.” After extensive reading on Word Reference forums, I finally learned that it is a colloquial expression meaning “we’ve had it” or “we’re fed up.” This made far more sense in the context of the chapter and I gladly incorporated it into my translation.

The examples included here represent just a small fraction of the thought and research required to translate these two chapters, let alone the entire novel. A common misconception about translation is that if you speak the two languages, it’s easy: you just go word by word and convert it to the new language. As I learned the hard way, the art of translation is far more complex. It requires the ability to think about the work as a whole and about the target audience when translating each part. It requires comprehension, creativity, and patient research.

Paseo de la Reforma: Chapter 4

Every Saturday dinner became more and more crowded and Ashby was pleased that he and Nora gained popularity among the most significant and intelligent group of men and women in the country. Moreover, Nora's good will, her willingness to stay up until five in the morning continuing to walk around offering whiskeys with the same affability, led Ashby to reconcile with her. A rooster would sing at some house nearby, and they would laugh. "I have here the civilization of the capital." Sol Arguedas would then stand himself up and say: "Rubín de la Borbolla, let's go; didn't you hear the cock-a-doodle-do?" Nora would offer: "Stay for breakfast" and everyone would celebrate. The fact that his friends loved her was flattering to Ashby. Many times, they would meet on Sunday to talk about what had happened the night before. Ashby and Nora's Saturdays were more than a weekly party; they raised the pinnacle of Mexican culture.

Ashby changed from one elite to another. All elites ended up being cruel and Ashby listened, amazed, to the way they practiced hostility like one of the fine arts. By the warmth of the fifth glass, the venom was released from their tongues and there was no remorse possible. Ashby could compete with the best of them. Words that they couldn't find in Spanish they said in English, French, German; their quotes were exact and their power of seduction had no weakness. He discovered that seduction was his natural weapon and that, while he didn't apply it to the Mexican "upper class" women because they fell at his feet after just seeing him, here, in this group, he needed to be more than he was before, more than his privileged appearance and innate elegance. He had to know how to ride these centaurs because, if not, they would crush him in a ruthless disarray of hooves like "Classic Touch" in the equestrian competition of April 1945.

Nora was left behind, even though motherhood had molded her and turned her into a truly beautiful woman. She accepted the changes in Ashby with docility, but they only doubled her obligations. She didn't have time to have tea with her mother nor to attend the frequent vigils. Oh, how people died in Mexico! And the number of widows and widowers left behind! The chauffeur took the kids to their gymnastics classes, swimming, French, and fencing; Ashby had personally ordered horseback riding. Nora had to supervise their schedules and never failed to put her two little ones to bed. When her head finally hit the pillow of their grand, Tudor-style bed, Nora only managed to read three or four pages of *The Turn of the Screw* before she fell asleep, exhausted. Proust languished on the bookcase. On the other hand, her husband's library, every day more packed with piles of books on the floor and in chairs, was consuming the house because in addition to what he bought, editors would send him entire collections and authors gifted their works with flattering dedications.

One Saturday, Mr. Alfonso Reyes gave Ashby the ultimate dedication of presenting himself at his house with his wife Manuelita. On another occasion, José Vasconcelos attended, but they didn't get along. Now, they talked a lot about the poet Octavio Paz' return to Paris with his wife, Elena Garro, and the young people, above all Carlos Fuentes, they awaited eagerly. Mexico, the country of open arms, after giving lodging to the exiled Spaniards received prominent Chileans, Argentineans, and Uruguayans. They carried the weight of exile on their shoulders, and they found comfort in the Egbert's hospitable home.

One night, past midnight, Amaya Chacel made her entrance with five others. She immediately attracted the host who received her at the door. Two hours was all it took for the individual groups to move closer to listen to her in a corner of the room where she was talking in a thread of a voice. She was not pretty like Nora; this woman was something different.

Something about her was dazzling. When her conversation partner fell silent and watched her with penetrating eyes, everyone looked at her, expectantly. What would Amaya say? They listened, immobile, prodigiously attentive. She had the concentration of a cat, quiet before pouncing, every bit of her stalking, every bit of her cruel. Surrounding her, the hypnotized mice, insects, or lizards waited for the fatal blow. Amaya spoke with dexterity, with elegance, in a very low voice that made everyone fall silent and listen intently so as not to miss a single one of her words. “What are you all conspiring about?” Ashby asked as he approached, but Amaya didn’t invite him to join them.

Ashby surprised himself by waiting with longing the following Saturday. Just when he had lost all hope, the doorbell rang at 1:10 a.m. This time, she was accompanied by four Chileans, two writers and two painters. Amaya was dressed in white, her blonde hair falling loose over her shoulders, her eyes as black as obsidian.

“We are the same as Emiliano Zapata’s followers,” said Ashby.

“Oh, yeah? How great; I love that!” Amaya smiled at him for the first time.

Ashby saw that she had gorgeous teeth. He had not realized.

That night, the large group dissolved into smaller ones and little by little they circled around Amaya. Every one of them tried to be as close to her as possible. The women didn’t have a better solution than to follow their husbands like magnets. Amaya created a threatening spiritual atmosphere. One never knew when she would attack one of her followers.

“Literature is composed of words, not concepts. This is what’s interesting to me. It’s much more ruthless to say of a president ‘Grotesque, Ortiz Rubio, grotesque’ than a long paragraph of opinions.”

She ranted about the elevated sentiments that claimed to make Mexico a nation of the new world: “Have they not realized that Mexicans don’t eat? Have they not realized that there are millions of Mexicans that can’t read?” “Oil? Please, oil is the only card the corrupt government plays!” Her face became ruthless. Jorge Portilla brought to her attention that many presidents of Bolivia, Panama, and Mexico had studied at large North American universities and at Ivy League schools and that infuriated her. “That doesn’t mean they know about civil rights. The greatest disgrace of Mexico is its human rights.” At two, Nora proposed that they go ahead and eat dinner. Nobody paid her any attention. Finally, at three in the morning, it was Ashby that asked: “Well, don’t you all think we should eat something?” The black look that Amaya shot him let him know that he never should have suggested it, but the order had been given and various people had gotten up. Amaya didn’t. Seated on the floor, she continued talking to those she kept bewitched. She dismissed Ashby coldly. However, she said to Nora in a low, fast voice:

“You are a Boticelli.”

Ashby had never thought that his wife was like the women depicted in Boticelli’s paintings. But with her black hair pulled back and a few ringlets falling from her bun, with her slender white neck and her modest eyes, Nora, flushed by the bustle of the party, did have the grace of the Renaissance Italians.

Ashby began to live Saturday to Saturday. He never knew if Amaya would present herself and that kept him in a state of nervousness that was difficult to control. In her absence, the Saturdays became grey; they lost all their attractiveness, at least for Ashby who wandered from one guest to another, from one lifeless thought to another, until it ended. On the other hand, with her, everything sped up even though Amaya barely deigned to give him her hand. Accompanied by an admiring entourage, she made sensational entrances. Her husband's absence was conspicuous even though his name appeared frequently in the financial section of several Mexican newspapers. Amaya would mention him: "Alfonso and I. . ." "Alfonso said. . ." but she would keep talking without a pause. One time when Ashby interrupted her to ask why Alfonso never came, Amaya not only left the question hanging in the air, but she also avoided speaking to him for the rest of the night.

Sometimes, Amaya's low, even voice grew in the heat of an argument.

"That it not literature; it is sentimentality."

"*The Diary of Anne Frank*, sentimentality?"

Amaya pulverized Marta Seite with the look she gave her:

"And also *The Little Prince* by Saint-Exupéry. *The Diary of Anne Frank* was published by the father of the girl after her death. Her attitude is the same as that of the family of the cripple in *Divinas Palabras* by Valle Inclán, whose members fight amongst themselves to push him down the street on a piece of wood with wheels to display him and make money off his misfortune. . . This is not literature. I don't understand how you all lower yourselves to talk about such works."

Relentless, Amaya would shatter the writer placed before her. When someone claimed support for Rodríguez Aura – “He has worked a lot and Goethe says that those who work hard will be saved” – she responded definitively:

“Yes, but if he is an idiot, he won’t be saved.”

Her responses produced the same collective ecstasy as bullfighting. Amaya charged and the plaza, divided into sun and shade, encouraged her to criticize and show her true colors. She was brave and the fans screamed, “Cite it, cite it!” like at the bullfighters. If she was afraid, she never showed it. Seated on the floor Indian style, the ashtray on the ornate, French rug between her legs, she converted Ashby’s library into a bull ring. “We are going to buy cushions and throw them on the floor,” Nora told him. “Ever since Amaya arrived, your friends reject our armchairs.” “Yes, you are right,” agreed Ashby. Then Nora concluded:

“Now that she comes, Saturdays are different.”

“How so?”

“I don’t know, but they are different. I feel like she offers Mass and you all are her parishioners.”

“Are you?”

“I am not,” she responded and left the room.

Paseo de la Reforma: Chapter 6

When Amaya talked to Nora to ask if she and Ashby could accompany her to Morelos, Nora seemed completely comfortable with Ashby going alone:

“Tomorrow I have to attend Parents’ Day at the kids’ school. I hate to turn you down, but they would be very disappointed if I didn’t go. Wait a second, Amaya, I’ll just insist that Ashby go. I’m sure he would love to accompany you.”

She didn’t have to insist. Ashby, at the first suggestion, accepted. He would pick Amaya up and they would return at dusk.

Taking the highway to Cuernavaca with Amaya by his side produced in Ashby an invigorating exaltation. *I feel like a teenager again*, he thought. The countryside seemed beautiful, majestic. He loved looking at her white skirt, her naked legs, her childlike feet in her wedges. Her beautiful legs, her feet – those of baby Jesus in the manger couldn’t compare. He held back the impulse to park the Mercedes on the curb and bend to kiss them.

“Your feet are as beautiful as Maria Asunsolo’s,” he allowed himself to tell her.

“Dolores del Rio’s cousin?” asked Amaya.

“Yes.”

“Ah, she’s one of us!”

Amaya launched into what she had against the movie *Maria Candelaria* by “Indio” Fernández and Gabriel Figueroa: “their postcard skies and their dialogue, more fake than Antonio Caso’s wide forehead. He didn’t have more than two fingers worth of forehead and, to

have the head of a philosopher, he shaved it! This is a country of puppets, a country without a face, a country ashamed of itself, a country of liars. Think about it, even recipes are lies and treason. They asked Mrs. Catita Escandón about a dessert that she calls “Almond Fondant.” She refused to give the recipe and when she died, one of her daughters-in-law opened a notebook that she kept locked and read the famous dessert recipe written in her own handwriting. It began with: “Peel the Mexican yams. . .”

“What a liar, calling Mexican yams almonds, blondie. . .”

Ashby was enjoying her witticisms, but suddenly Amaya fell quiet.

“What are you thinking about?”

“The countryside. Before mountains like these, one has to remain silent. It’s a shame that in this country the politicians live better than the farmers, the natives, those who work.”

The sun streamed through the window and warmed Amaya’s hair and naked shoulders, and Ashby felt so great that he exclaimed, his grey eyes spilling over with affection:

“I have never been so happy.”

“Oh yeah?” responded Amaya, and she lit a cigarette with a big smile.

“Can you tell me why we’re going to Morelos?”

“You’ll see.”

“And to what part are we going exactly?”

“You’ll find out.”

Ashby put his hand on top of Amaya's, laughing. Amaya didn't withdraw hers.

"Ah, such a mysterious woman!"

He drove with Amaya's hand under his until she moved hers:

"I want to light another cigarette," she explained, freeing herself.

"You shouldn't smoke so much. Why do you smoke so much?"

"I like it; it calms me down."

"But how much you smoke is over-the-top, blondie."

"Why do you care?"

"Because I respect you, blondie; no one inspires so much respect in me. You are a phenomenal woman."

"Oh, please Ashby, don't flatter me; just focus on the road."

"I will, blondie."

They returned to silence. By his side, with the freedom of a woman who knows she is beautiful, Amaya sat up on her knees "to see better" and Ashby realized very quickly that she was bothered by compliments. Seated like that, she shined more young and free than he had ever seen her.

"You're so attractive."

Amaya blew out her smoke:

“Stop, Ashby, or God will punish you.”

“What an absurd comment!”

When they arrived in Cuernavaca, Amaya pointed to a dirt road. They closed the windows because of the dust and the Mercedes started to shake from the potholes and windings of the road. For a moment Ashby thought that his automobile hadn't been made for those working-class holes, but he scolded himself for his meanness. The woman by his side could very well turn his Mercedes into a mountain of steel and him into a mountain of guts. Amaya returned to sitting “properly” and she lit another cigarette indicating to her driver:

“This street is pretty long, just to give you a head's up. It's going to take about an hour and a half if we make good time.”

Finally, after passing various villages only graced by the sun and sugar cane, Amaya asked Ashby to stop the car in front of a shack:

“Here it is.”

She got out without waiting for Ashby and from the path that cut through the sugar cane she screamed:

“Tiburcia, Tiburcia!”

Various dogs barked and upon hearing them, Tiburcia left the door of the shanty and discovered Amaya:

“Ms. Mayito, you're a sight for sore eyes.”

Amaya hugged her and Tiburcia began to cry.

“What happened, Tibu, what happened?”

“They took them, Ms. Mayito, they took them! They got hold of seven by going to claim the land like you said. Now they have them in jail, in Cuernavaca.”

“Despicable, vile, wicked! Don’t worry, Tibu, we’re going to get them right now,” said Amaya with so much conviction that Tiburcia took off her apron, grabbed her purse, and screamed:

“Platón, Platoncito, come here Platón!” and when the little boy came she said, “Let me just wipe your nose.”

She took her grandson by the hand and, just like that, followed Amaya over to Ashby who still had the car running. Ashby didn’t even dare to ask for a glass of water in light of the fury in Amaya’s eyes.

“Scoundrels. But they are going to pay.”

During the hour and a half journey returning from Temixco, they bore the dirt road. Amaya spoke with Tiburcia in a low voice, the pot-bellied child looked out the window, and the only times Amaya spoke to him was to ask if he could go more quickly. The shock absorbers knocked against the rocks in the road and since the windows were closed because of the dust, the heat became unbearable. The child and the woman smelled bad. Amaya didn’t seem to notice it. She was boiling in her own rage. Every once in a while she exclaimed: despicable, miserable, wicked. Tiburcia continued talking in a never-ending litany, a monotonous delivery of which Ashby could only distinguish: “I got ahold of them and I said . . . and then the judge got ahold of

them and he said. . .” When they finally arrived in Cuernavaca, Amaya, with fury in her voice, ordered Ashby:

“See that you get to the Government Palace immediately.”

“Why are we going to the Palace?”

“Park the car there,” said Amaya in a tone that allowed no objection.

“Ashby parked in front of a soldier with a rifle in his two hands and he informed him that he couldn’t leave the car there. Then Amaya screamed:

“We are going to see the governor. You, little soldier, had better look after the car. Come Ashby, come Platoncito.”

Amaya gave her arm to Tiburcia to climb the stairs. When they reached the top, she released her. Tall and thin, she continued quickly down the corridor. In the entrance hall, Amaya hardly paused before the secretary who was reading the newspaper:

“I’m here to see the governor.”

“The governor is in a meeting.”

“Oh yeah? Well, never mind.”

Driven by her beautiful rage, Amaya opened the door and entered. Behind his desk, the governor looked at her with alarm:

“Mr. Governor, let those men go immediately or you will see what I am going to have printed in the Mexican newspapers. Everyone knows that your son has pocketed 2.5 acres in Temixco.”

The governor stood up and came out from behind his desk with a terrified face:

“Ma’am, what is this about? I don’t have the slightest idea what you’re telling me.”

“You’ve had seven laborers from Temixco as prisoners for fifteen days.”

“Ma’am, which ones?”

Amaya’s fury laid waste to everything; her black eyes expelled fire. It was a sight to see her erect in front of the governor as he stammered uncontrollably. Tiburcia, Ashby, and the boy also watched Amaya, paralyzed by her anger.

“Look – you, Tibu, give the names of the men to the governor.”

Tiburcia recited in a worn out, flickering voice:

“Aristeo Guillén, Emiliano Vértiz, Pancho ‘el Olote’ Uribe, Anastasio ‘Tacho’ Gómez, Ramón ‘el Cacas’ Flores Medina, Enedino Pérez Álvarez, Candelario Acevedo – I think that’s all Ms. Mayito.”

“When were they put in jail?” Amaya returned to her angry questioning.

“Fifteen days ago the day before yesterday.”

“What are the charges?” inquired the president.

“What will it be, governor? Of what do you accuse all poor Mexicans?” Amaya intervened as prideful and clearheaded as Ashby had heard her the night Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo dared to invite them to dinner. “You accuse them of invading the land that before was theirs, that which your son took to build a residential development. Unlike you all – the government, those of the PRI, the politicians that are either bullies or cowards – they don’t have the opportunity to take someone else’s land every six years. Their integrity would stop them. They deserve respect. They are the legitimate owners; they have legally owned the land since the Colonial Era. You sons of bitches, usurpers that rob and mug them, deserve a public lynching, but they are the ones thrown in jail. And of course, it is them that you dare to denounce.”

“Ma’am, calm down, let’s talk.”

“Talk, my ass! Now it is my turn to talk, and we’re done listening to you all. Pure lies, pure demagoguery. You all are concealers, let me tell you, the authors of the structural corruption of this poor country. You all bribe, falsify, humiliate, bend the rules, silence, conceal, murder. The PRI and the government are the noose with which you asphyxiate the Mexican people.”

Amaya took a breath and Ashby thought she would stop, but no, her voice became even more intense:

“While you all build your weekend homes on communal land and drink cocktails in your hot tubs, they work from sunrise to sunset, and you still take their deeds.”

“Ma’am, please, don’t get upset, I’m going to call my secretary. I have to consult with the Chief of Police. I’m going to see what the situation is and what the appropriate procedure is for this case.”

“I’m not moving from here, governor, until I leave with those men.”

“I don’t have them here, ma’am. This can’t be resolved in sooner than 72 hours.”

“I’ll give you 72 minutes.”

Amaya gave the orders and the governor, nervous, obeyed. He got on the phone and slowly read the names of the prisoners into the mouthpiece. When he got up, he informed Amaya, in an almost deferential manner:

“You will have your laborers by 5 p.m.”

Amaya told him:

“Very well, we will wait here. Or better yet, we will go get them from the jail.”

“No, ma’am,” the governor was frightened thinking about the scandal she would assemble. “No, no, no, they will be brought here.”

Ashby had become invisible to Amaya. She didn’t ask him if he was hungry or thirsty, nothing.

“Sit wherever you like, ma’am, I have to excuse myself for a moment, but my secretary will be here if you need anything.”

He completely ignored Ashby, Tiburcia, and Platón.

In response, Amaya made herself comfortable on a leather sofa and lit a cigarette. The governor left. Amaya gestured for Tiburcia and the child to sit next to her. Ashby took a seat and leafed through the political magazine that was always in government offices. Platón slept

with his mouth open and he started to snore like a puppy. From time to time, he coughed in his dream, a dry cough from deep in his chest. Amaya didn't say a word until she saw that she didn't have any more cigarettes; she crushed the box in her right hand and asked Ashby:

“Could you go buy me a new pack?”

“Yes, of course. Do you also want something to eat?”

“I'm not hungry,” she responded sharply.

“And you, Tiburcia?”

“What Ms. Mayito says.”

In the street, Ashby felt faint. It was the first time in his life he had skipped a meal. Never, if his memory served him, had something similar occurred, except for in the hospital. At a fruit stand, he drank a combination of two juices; then he stopped in front of a hot dog stand and asked for one that tasted richer than the ones he had in Woodsworth, Illinois, where he competed without a single loss. At the corner store, in addition to the cigarettes, he bought five Larín chocolate bars and when he entered the government office, he put them on Amaya's lap. “I recalled that you like these, blondie.” Amaya barely muttered a “thank you.” Then Ashby kissed her on the cheek: “You were terrific.” He had never kissed her before and it thrilled him to feel her skin, to smell her perfume. “Thank you,” she said again in the same neutral voice and she gave four of the Laríns to Platón, who had just woken up, and she saved the other in her purse.

After fifteen minutes, seven laborers with dirty pants and unwashed shirts entered the governor's office, feet dragging, straw hats in hand. Tiburcia and the boy rushed into the arms of

the tallest one. Amaya hugged each one of them, shook the secretary's hand, and asked if he had their release forms.

"Each one has his, ma'am."

"And their deeds?"

"Those too, everything is in order. Isn't that right, men?"

"Yes, Ms. Mayito."

The laborers addressed her. It appeared that they knew her well.

In the street she declared:

"Now we are all going to eat."

When they finished and got up from the chairs of the tavern that had served them from a fixed-price menu, Amaya asked Ashby:

"Aren't you going to pay?"

"Of course," Ashby hurried, feeling sad.

"Now we are going to take a taxi. Ashby, Tiburcia, her husband, the boy Platoncito, you Tacho, and I will go in the car and the rest of you in a cab."

They returned to Temixco, the taxi following in the Mercedes' cloud of dust. Amaya, by Ashby's side, only spoke to Tacho and Aristeo, Tiburcia's husband, who held his grandson in his arms. They slowly narrated all they had suffered. Amaya only exclaimed from time to time in a truly sorrowful voice: "How is it possible, how is it possible."

It was getting dark when they said goodbye. Amaya asked Ashby:

“Can’t you give them something?”

“Of course, blondie.”

Ashby opened his expensive, leather wallet and left in it only what he needed for the cab driver.

“There, share it.”

Aristeo didn’t thank him; Tiburcia lifted her voice over the land.

“God will pay him, Ms. Mayito.”

On the way back, Amaya finished her pack of cigarettes. Above the convertible top of the car, the stars flew in the opposite direction. As they drove down a slope, the city seemed like another immense star at the base of the dark valley. It moved Ashby. It was as beautiful as Amaya demanding the rights of the laborers in front of the governor. When Ashby could talk, he said:

“I have had one of the most incredible days of my life with you, blondie.”

Amaya lowered her legs and settled herself without responding.

They had both completely forgotten about Nora. Ashby, who loved the theater, was replaying the tragic Greek scene in which Amaya had given orders to the governor and thought that not even the best director could have controlled his actors that way. This woman, now by his side, was genius, and not only genius, but noble. What a privilege it was to watch her, to listen to her, and to drive with her in the passenger seat!

When they returned to her house, at eleven at night, Amaya asked:

“Do you want to come in?”

She turned on the light in the foyer, took the last chocolate bar out of her purse, and said:

“Do you want to come upstairs and put it in the basket? You already know the way.”

“Of course.”

Amaya followed him up the carpeted staircase. He didn't hear a sound in the house. It was the same immense silence as on the highway of Cuernavaca. Ashby reached the basket and Amaya threw her shoes on the ground and threw herself face up on the bed. From there, she reached out her arms and he took her like he had never known another woman.

At three in the morning, Ashby was sleeping deeply when Amaya, beside him in the bed, shook him:

“You have to go.”

“Why? Don't you love me, blondie?”

She was seated, the sheet pulled over her golden breasts. She looked at him with distant eyes.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because you have never done anything beautiful.”

“But I have never done anything ugly.”

“I don’t know,” she responded, pensive.

Ashby tried to embrace her:

“Have you already forgotten that you have a wife? Look at yourself!”

Suddenly, wrapped in the sheet, she knelt beside the bed.

“What are you doing?”

“I am praying for you.”

“What are you asking?”

“I said: ‘God, forgive Ashby for what he has done to his wife.’”

“Oh yeah? And didn’t you ask forgiveness for yourself?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t believe in marriage.”

Ashby got dressed. At the door of the bedroom, the last image he took away was that of Amaya seated Indian style on the bed, her blonde hair in disorder, trying to hold the sheet over her naked body while lighting a fresh cigarette.

On the deserted street of Puebla, after he started his car, he saw that another car arrived at the garage and a man got out to open it.

It’s her husband, he thought, with suspicion.

He changed gears, hit the accelerator, and for the first time since he began the trip with Amaya, he thought about what in the world he was going to tell his wife.

Research in Mexico City

In December, I received an email with an application to apply for money to support scholarly activities, specifically, grants for travel and research. That email sparked an idea: the distant possibility that I could travel to Mexico City to meet the author of the book I had been working so hard to translate. I knew it was a long shot, especially since I had no idea how to contact her, but nevertheless I began to formulate a plan. Since I was unable to find any contact information for Elena Poniatowska online, I emailed her biographer Michael Schuessler. I ordered his book *Elena Poniatowska: An Intimate Biography* (which, ironically enough, is a work in translation), and I awaited a response to the email I had sent asking him to help me contact Ms. Poniatowska. I was thrilled when he wrote back almost immediately praising my project idea and giving me her email address with the advice to contact her and copy him on the email. I did just that, and was thrilled again when she wrote back right away saying I was welcome to meet up with her for an interview in Mexico City. Her offer helped make me a competitive candidate for the travel grants I applied for, and when I found out the trip would be covered, I quickly began planning my first trip to Mexico.

A few days before I left, Elena Poniatowska informed me that she completely forgot she would be out of town for a book fair that week. Although I was disappointed not to meet her, the trip was still relevant for my thesis and validated all the work I had done. I still value the fact that I am in communication with her and plan to send her drafts of my translated chapters.

Elena Poniatowska lives in an artsy district of Mexico City called Coyoacán. I visited her neighborhood when visiting both the Diego Rivera Studio and the Frida Kahlo Museum. I wanted to experience the Frida Kahlo Museum because, in addition to being one of the most

visited museums in Mexico City, the characters in *Paseo de la Reforma* discuss Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. In chapter 5, the collection of intellectual and artistic figureheads gathered in the home of protagonist Ashby Egbert discuss an invitation they received to a party at the *Casa Azul* – which in that time was Frida Kahlo’s residence but is now the renowned Frida Kahlo Museum. I enjoyed visiting a location specifically discussed in the book, one that I researched and wrote about before visiting Mexico City. While in Coyoacán, I spent some time in a plaza called *Jardín Centenario*. Sitting in front of a fountain, watching the Mexican people as they went about their business, I could picture where Elena Poniatowska got the inspiration for the characters in *Paseo de la Reforma*.

Paseo de la Reforma, in addition to being the title of the book I am translating, is the name of a grand avenue that cuts through the center of Mexico City. The main character in the book, Ashby Egbert, grows up in a mansion on Paseo de la Reforma as a *niño bien* – a spoiled, rich kid. When Ashby was a child, he and his father would walk up and down Paseo de la Reforma together looking at the monuments; his father would point out which monuments Ashby should respect and which he shouldn’t. In the novel, Ashby’s father says to his son, “Just walking down Paseo de la Reforma, you learn about the history of Mexico.” I got to experience this first hand. I stayed in a hotel just one block away from the Paseo de la Reforma close to *El Ángel de la Independencia*, or the Angel of Independence, which is a famous monument celebrating Mexico’s independence from Spain. On Sunday mornings, Paseo de la Reforma is closed to cars and invites families to cycle or run on the wide, beautiful street. On the Sunday I spent in Mexico City, I joined the thousands of others on Paseo de la Reforma by going for a run, enjoying the sunny day, and looking at the famous monuments and buildings that line the street.

On that bright, temperate morning, I felt like I was in a race as I blended into the mass of others running, walking, and cycling along the wide street lined with skyscrapers and street vendors.

Traveling to Mexico City was not only a great opportunity to gather research for my thesis, but it also allowed me to practice my Spanish language skills and gain an invaluable international travel experience. I was shocked by the lack of other tourists there but glad that I got to interact with so many Mexicans, speak in Spanish, and soak up as much of the culture as I could. Maybe someday I will get the opportunity to see more of the country, but for now, I am very pleased with the productive week I spent in Mexico City.

Conclusion: Reflecting on Changes and Challenges

When I began this thesis, I had a specific goal in mind. I wanted to translate a work that had three primary characteristics: that it be written by a woman, that she be from somewhere in Latin or South America, and that it be previously untranslated into English. Choosing the work of literature to translate was the hardest part. I was stubborn and wanted something that fit my original concept, and that wasn't easy to find. After several weeks of searching, I finally settled on *Paseo de la Reforma* by the renowned Elena Poniatowska. Although it was longer than I had hoped, and I had concerns about being able to finish it in the time I had left, it fit all my requirements, so I began to read and then translate it. My professors warned me that it was an ambitious undertaking – that a 176 page novel might be a bit much to translate in a year – but again, I was stubborn. I jumped in and made it through almost the entire novel before realizing they were completely right. The translation I had created would require months of research to be anywhere near worthy of publication, so I finally agreed that this thesis is an ongoing project, one that I could continue to work on for years before finally being satisfied with my translation.

The most rewarding part of this process was contacting the author of the novel and having the opportunity to travel to Mexico City. Traveling, and the incredible experiences that came with it, not only validated all the work I had done, but also allowed me to improve my thesis in a way no other form of research could have. Elena Poniatowska's having to cancel our meeting at the last minute was only one of the major changes to my project I coped with along the way. I learned that in order to succeed with a project lasting three semesters, I had to be flexible.

As I was putting the final touches on my translation of the two chapters included here, I made an overwhelming discovery. Someone else, a graduate student from the University of Alberta, had the same idea for her thesis. Although unpublished, a translation exists of the first nine chapters of *Paseo de la Reforma* created by Melanie Joy Johannesen in the year 2000. Ms. Johannesen's work made me reconsider one of my principle requirements – that the work I chose be untranslated into English. At first I was disappointed, but upon reflecting, I realized that I had dealt with changes to my thesis throughout the entire process, and I could deal with this. Instead of viewing her work as a hindrance, I resolved to see it as an excellent way to compare what we have both accomplished.

After reviewing Melanie Joy Johannesen's thesis, I found that her format differs from mine. She includes sections on the author Elena Poniatowska, the work *Paseo de la Reforma*, and the problems she encountered in translation, all of which are written in Spanish. It was fascinating to read about some of the issues she had when translating because I understood exactly what she had gone through. Following these sections is the translation of the first nine chapters of the novel. When comparing her work to mine, I focused specifically on chapters four and six. I felt like I was reading the work of an old friend; it was incredible to think that she had pored over every word of the novel and had painstakingly thought of the best way to convey the meaning, just as I had. In my research on translation I read extensively about how no two translations are alike, but reading Ms. Johannesen's work made that point explicitly clear to me. Every now and then, I would stumble across a phrase, smile, and think "I wrote that!" For the most part, however, even though the meaning behind our translations was close to identical, the syntax and diction differed in almost every possible way. I can't help but think I would like to

collaborate with her, that together, we could produce an excellent translation of Elena Poniatowska's novel.

While reading Ms. Johannesen's work, it was amazing to think about how someone else, at a different time, place, and position in life, had the same idea for a thesis. Someone else decided to follow through on that idea and spent an immense amount of time working to make her translation as perfect as possible. Someone else thought *Paseo de la Reforma* is a work worthy of translation, something that should be available to the English-speaking world. The product I am turning in to the JMU Honors Program is a snapshot of the work I have done, and it showcases what I have learned about translation. Although I am only including two full chapters of *Paseo de la Reforma* with this thesis, I have a clear concept of how to finish translating the book. I fully plan on completing it over time, and my ultimate goal is still to get it published in the United States. I know that with hard work and perseverance, I can make that dream a reality.

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