

TRANSPLANTED SUBJECTS: SELF-TRANSLATION PROCESSES IN TRANSLINGUAL NARRATIVES

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Displaced, linguistically, geographically, and culturally, I moved in and out of languages with different systems and different literary and critical traditions and cultures. I performed the role of the self and the other, the writer and the translator. (Attar 141)

Introduction

Increased migration and the consequent increase in horizontal language acquisition have given rise to a new polyphonic linguistic and literary reality in the Twentieth Century, and a significant body of narrative texts now exists that is variously referred to as multi-, hetero-, poly- or translingual¹. Translingual texts offer a comparative perspective, through which a dialogic process is established between the culture of origin and the host culture. They do so by addressing various frames of reference (religion, food, landscape, traditions, etc.) and by highlighting common and differing aspects in the two cultures. In this way, readers are not only made familiar with cultures often remote to them, but they are also offered a view from the outside of their own culture and society, so that they can look at it from a different – and critical – angle. At the same time, while on the one hand a comparison is established, on the other hand a syncretic process is enacted, both in the gradual adjustment of the migrant protagonists to their new home and in the impact they make on the host culture, so that it becomes difficult to determine to which particular culture a particular aspect or behaviour is to be ascribed; facile cultural stereotypes are dismantled, and a transcultural perspective emerges as a major subtext of translingual writing.

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¹ See, for example, Kellman (2003), Meylaerts (2006), Hokenson and Munson (2007).

The concepts of translated identities and cultures have been addressed by numerous well-known theorists in postcolonial literary and cultural studies. Françoise Lionnet, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Niranjana Tejaswini², for example, have all emphasized the importance of translation and the necessity for readers and writers to demonstrate linguistic flexibility in order to confront the multivoicedness of texts that construct hybrid identities. While the work of these theorists constitutes an important basis for my study of the challenges that ‘language migrants’³, encounter when trying to translate themselves into a new linguistic code, their research often conflates cultural and linguistic translations and manipulates ‘translation’ as the wider concept of ‘transfer’ from one sphere (linguistic, cultural, social, and/or political) to another. In this paper, I would like to focus specifically on translation as the linguistic shift from the source language to a target language. As is well known, the vast majority of professional translators translate from a foreign language into their mother tongue. Their task is to make the unfamiliar (the other) accessible to their home audience by presenting it in familiar linguistic forms. The task of the language migrant is the opposite. If we consider the narrative that articulates the pre-migration self as a source text written in the migrant’s mother tongue and the narrated self that emerges from the translating act for his/her adoptive-language audience as the target text, the language migrant is translating from the mother tongue to the foreign language. S/he is translating the self into the other.

Thus, a pivotal concept for translingual writers, who fashion narratives that try to encompass both the ‘original’ and the re-located cultural-linguistic self, is that of ‘self-translation’⁴. Such writers, working in their adopted language, must narratively ‘translate’ the self that took shape in the native language in or-

² Lionnet (*Postcolonial Representations*) has shown that postcolonial identities are necessarily *métissées* in order to braid the multiple aspects that constitute them. *Métissage*, as a multi-voiced practice, enables writers to privilege the differences that living in multiple languages afford them and to shape hybrid identities. Tejaswini has labelled postcolonial people as «people living in translation» (36). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has established the impossibility for the translator to «translate from a position of monolingual superiority» (410). This impossibility demonstrates the necessity for linguistic diversity and flexibility in order to engage in «the most intimate act of reading» that translation constitutes (409).

³ «Language migrants» is the expression that Mary Besemeres uses to describe writers who articulate their autobiographical narratives in languages that are not their mother tongues.

⁴ Gideon Toury identifies self-translation as autotranslation and defines it as «translating what one has just said in one language into another; (i) to oneself (intrapersonal autotranslation) and (or: and then) (ii) to others (interpersonal autotranslation)» (244). Here, I use the term to refer both to the process of translating oneself or one’s own culture in writing, as well as to a self-reflexive and inter-lingual creative process. For more on this see Wilson (2009).

der to render it intelligible to an adoptive-language readership. This seems to me to be a particularly important and yet under-studied issue that requires a temporary separation from the wider issue of cultural translation and its social and political consequences. When I speak of focusing on the linguistic aspect of translation, my intention is not to compare the lexical or semantic choices available to ‘language migrants’ to translate themselves into the new language. Rather, I wish to examine their own reflections on how the shift in languages has affected their way of perceiving and understanding themselves and their new reality and how their negotiation between two, or more, languages is rendered in narratives that are not easily classifiable: they stand somewhere in between personal memory, autobiography, family biography, novel, even historical documentation of oral sources. Understanding how the process of linguistic self-translation works through the textually reconstructed experiences of others allows us to define how these experiences can be translated into accessible knowledge for other «nomadic citizens» (Meylaerts 1) to use.

A woman’s touch

What is striking in the current literary production by language migrants in Italy is the massive presence of female writers. The reasons for this are manifold⁵, and though their voices vary greatly since they come from different geographic, economic and political origins, they all have a propensity to represent an ‘otherness’ within the ambiguity and ambivalence of a bilingual and bicultural reality. Some consider their bicultural situation as a contradiction, while others take advantage of it in order to ‘bilanguage’⁶ reality and so destabilize a monolingual vision of Italy and highlight the incommensurability of the different cultures as a political commentary.

While the creativity and self-determination involved in writing in Italian have, within the last few decades, inspired many authors, the act of self-translation is usually accompanied by a deeply-felt sense of loss of the mother tongue. As Cristiana De Caldas Britos eloquently argues:

La madre lingua [...] sta per la struttura mentale. Abbandonare la lingua dell’infanzia per sostituirla con una lingua imparata da adulti significa operare un cambio

⁵ For a recent detailed discussion of the presence of migrant women writers in the Italian literary landscape, see Contarini (2010).

⁶ Walter Mignolo theorizes that bilanguaging «as a condition of border thinking from the colonial difference, opens up to a postnational thinking» (254).

nella qualità della comunicazione. La mia esperienza mi ha fatto capire che le parole non entrano in modo meccanico nella mente. Ci vuole un po' di tempo perché una lingua nuova possa penetrare nel nostro tessuto interiore. Bisogna sentirsi legati affettivamente anche alle parole. Solo allora possiamo essere creativi in una nuova lingua. (n.p.)

An obvious advantage of writing in one's mother tongue is that it holds «the seamless connection» (De Courtivron 1) between language and the things and feelings associated with the language. Nevertheless, writers are compelled to write in a second or additional language, for a variety of reasons. Some may be victims of political upheavals, and writing in the additional language seems to offer them a form of protection; mastering the additional language may be the only access to the symbolic resources in the society in which they have to live. Others find comfort and freedom by expressing themselves in the new language; to them writing in an additional language is like flipping out another «badge of identity» (Buruma 19). In short, writing across languages permits new kinds of conversations and new speaking positions, which draw on linguistic processes such as abrogation, hybridization, and creolization and combine (auto)biography, historiography, ethnography, and fiction in order to articulate complex (self-)translations that challenge the notions of 'authority' and 'authenticity'.

In what follows, I examine processes of self-translation articulated the first narrative works of four women writers located in these new speaking positions: Ribka Sibhatu, Geneviève Makaping, Ubax Cristina Ali Farah, Maria Abbebù Viarengo. Their pioneering works arise from the double need to give voice to the experience of immigrants and to make Italians familiar with the cultures of origin of their new neighbours, fulfilling, therefore, a function of cultural mediation. Translation, in a broad sense, is presented as a necessary condition of writing and, subsequently, reading. In their narratives, self-translation, mis-translation, back translation and/or zero translation are used in order to liberate and express a translingual imagination.

Double inscription of her self: Ribka Sibhatu

There are many acts of translation in the life of Eritrean-born Ribka Sibhatu; beginning when she disguises herself as a country woman (braiding her hair to pass as someone from a lower class) and smuggling herself across the border into Ethiopia. Hers is a journey in translation: from her native Tigrinya into the language of her primary education – Amharic – in Addis Abeba; to French

when she fled to France after her marriage and then finally to Italian when she moved to Rome, where she earned a degree in Modern Languages and Literatures from “La Sapienza” University. The material experience of travelling is directly related to Sibhatu’s acquisition of cultural, and linguistic, dynamism.

Translation of identity through disguise, migration and language is at the core of her innovative first book, *Aulò: Canto-poesia dall’Eritrea* (1993) a narrative written in Italian with parallel text in Tigrinya.⁷ The Italian text is presented on the left side of the book – thus investing it with the authority of normative reading – while the ethio-semitic characters used in the Tigrinya writing system on the right acquire an ancillary, decorative, ‘othering’ function for the European reader. This bilingual text is both exemplary of the notion of self-translation as a double writing process, in which each text produced is a variant of the other, and of the view that the act of self-translation represents a «literary encounter which opens autobiographical spaces» (Nikolau 27). Sibhatu’s is a game of appropriation and accountability in which she shifts between her ‘original’ self and her translated self, and in which she practises a politics of resistance whereby the act of linguistic translation is not fully accomplished but undermined by the *testo a fronte* in Tigrinya. While the traces of difference are visibly present, the *testo a fronte* also reveals a dialogism, a continuity between original and translation that conveys Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia in a concrete way: both the typography and the illustrations that accompany the text accentuate the multiplicity of languages and heritages embedded in the narrative discourse. There is an implicit understanding that the faithfulness of the translator is a given so that the reader may have a sense of parallel motions of meaning and images on both sides of the book.

Sibhatu’s bilingual text is a clear case of self-translation but it is also one that presents a form of deviance from the commonly understood practice of self-translation in that it requires several processes of mediation. She is not, in fact, the idiomatic bilingual described by Hokenson and Munson as equally able to write in both languages alternately and to reproduce standard and normative discourse of a high enough standard as to retain the author’s original meaning in both texts without the interference of an editor (13-14). First, she requires the mediation of a fellow Eritrean, to render her «tigrino ‘romano’ in tigrino ‘toscano’» (6). Second, the act of translating the self from the ‘mother tongue’ into the familiar but not perfectly commanded Italian language requires a further process of mediation by the editor. Sibhatu does not, therefore, produce

⁷ Tigrinya is spoken in the Eritrean highlands, in Asmara and in the Ethiopian region of Tigray. It should not be confused with Tigrè, which is only spoken in Eritrea.

the ‘authentic’ translation aspired to by Spivak. She does, however, use both languages to simultaneously mark and erase her difference, revealing the continuity and discontinuity within both traditions. Italian is used to make host society aware of increasing multiculturalism:

[I testi] Li ho concepiti e scritti mentre già vivevo qui, mi sentivo di casa e mi sembrava naturale scrivere qualcosa che il pubblico italiano potesse comprendere. C’era quindi anche una volontà comunicativa.⁸

The use of Tigrinya is testimony of the continuity of her engagement with her original language and culture, as the choice of genre also makes evident:

L’*aulò* o il *massè* è una specie di canto-poesia e il *melques* un canto-pianto. [...] Sia l’*aulò* che il *melques* [...] si tramandano tramite il racconto. Due *aulò* sono stati dedicati a mia nonna Hiriti: [...] *Voglio dire aulò a Hiriti! / Le sue promesse uguali ai fatti e le sue parole sono dolci! / Consigliata e si fa consigliare dai ras, dai degiasmàc / dal generale e dal re!* (60-61)

Sibhatu attempts to live across boundaries, searching for freedom by wearing several «language skins» (Steiner 473 and *passim*), shifting her focus from private to public, from oral to written, from local to global. On the one hand, the veil of secrecy provided by the two «language skins» helps to maintain her individual freedom and her own territory. On the other hand, the two facing languages and cultures enter into mutual interpenetration by creating what Pratt calls transculturation⁹. The confrontation between languages creates mutual cultural contamination and establishes a process of transformation – for both the Italian and the Tigrinya reader.

The view from across the other side: Geneviève Makaping

While Ribka Sibhatu opts to make the process of self-translation visible through the dual-language presentation of her text, Geneviève Makaping

⁸ Interview with Daniele Comberiati, quoted at <http://www.360gradisud.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=215:scrittura-migrate&catid=18:parlano-di-noi&Itemid=4>.

⁹ The term was first used by ethnographers to describe how marginal groups select and invent from material transmitted to them by the dominant cultures. Mary Louise Pratt defines transculturation as a «phenomenon of the contact zone: social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination» (4).

chooses to foreground processes of self-translation as acts of symbolic self-assertion and empowerment in her book *Traiettorie di sguardi. E se gli altri foste voi?* (2001). A naturalized Italian from Cameroon and an anthropologist by training, she uses the methodology of participant observation in which the gaze is reversed so that the narration of her personal experience as an object of violence and intolerance becomes a study of 'native' Italians: «*Guardo me che guarda loro che da sempre mi guardano*» (40, italics in original).

Makaping operates a deconstruction of the «ideologia dell'esclusione» (55) which she identifies as the dominant marker of European identity, by defining a strategy of 'eccentricity' (both the sense of 'ex-centric' and 'unconventional'):

l'eccentricità diventa la mia strategia, il luogo da dove fare partire la mia voce. Io sono eccentrica. Appartengo ad un centro che non è di *loro*. E loro mi trovano bizzarra. Mi sento anche privilegiata, rispetto a quelli *come me*, dal momento che io posso parlare, *non accettare, dire di no, non annuire*; io sono il centro di quelli *come me*, e tutti insieme poi siamo il margine. Sono una sineddoche, la parte per il tutto, il singolare per il plurale. (137)

The emphasis on «quelli *come me*» evokes that concept of mimicry which Homi Bhabha uses to describe the projection of the self as performed by minors. He notes that in the textuality of (post)colonialism, mimicry addresses difference – *almost the same but not quite*. Mimicry becomes a discourse «uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and within them» (Bhabha. "Of Mimicry and Man": 89). Mimicry appropriates and distorts the model proposed as the dominant – and therefore normative – by giving back a gaze of otherness, shattering from the margins the unity of the hegemonic group. This is analogous to Makaping's strategy of creating a new linguistic code by deconstructing and reconstructing given meanings and concepts in the dominant (Italian) discourse, beginning with asserting the right to name herself: «Voglio essere io a dire come mi chiamo» (31); «chiamatemi negra» (36).

The border is often the place where the first act of self-translation takes place as one of the very first things to be translated is the language migrant's name. The translation can be literal: an Italian equivalent of the language migrant's original name is chosen to represent her in the new country¹⁰; or phonetic: the language migrant's original name is 'translated' by 'Italianizing' its

¹⁰ As in, for example, «Mustafa diventa Mino, e Hussein diventa Enzo» (Wakkas 143). The preservation and/or modification of names is a recurring issue in Italian migrant writing, and dates back to the 1990s with Mohamed Bouchane's *Chiamatemi Ali*.

pronunciation¹¹. The practice of Italianization of names is not innocuous. It is an attempt to normalize whatever seems deviant or different and has the effect of appropriating identity. Makaping resists this misappropriation of identity and experience. Her self-translation is an attempt to create a space in which the previously marginalized can affirm their own subjectivity and can articulate their own perception of the world: «Se sai scrivere il tuo nome e pronunciarlo, potresti rivolgerti al tuo denominatore nella sua stessa lingua. Se sai il tuo nome, per forza saprai anche il suo» (55).

In Spivak's terms, Makaping is a 'competent native informant', that is, someone who can speak for her/his native group to outsiders. She is acutely aware that language is not only related to power in a bigger picture in society; it is also related to power in a smaller picture for individuals in their effort of constructing an identity that allows access to resources in the society of which they wish to become a member. Language in this sense is a kind of 'password'. If you understand the language responsively and are able to manipulate it, you pass; if you have access to the more highly valued form of that language, you gain a more prestigious identity. In other words, to construct an identity that allows access, you need to master the language first. Makaping underlines the fact that Italian is not the only language present in these texts, and it is not taken for granted that it should be:

La mia espressione linguistica invece è ancora solo 'traduzione' in italiano di concetti pensati in chissà quante altre lingue contemporaneamente: il francese, il pidgin, l'inglese e la mia lingua madre che è il bahuanese del Camerun. (79)

It is not only a problem of code as Makaping underlines. The interiorization of any new language is the starting point both for recognising the plurality of the identities acquired by the author, and to question the completeness and integrity of her subjectivity: «a prescindere dalla mia conoscenza delle lingue, devo comunque riconoscere di avere un'identità caleidoscopica o a mosaico» (80).

Makaping's provocative text illustrates the power of a «migratory vision» derived from heterolingual techniques (Bhabha. *Location of Culture*: 185). Her approach is akin to that process of doubling that Bhabha describes as extracting the canonic meaning from «narratives of originary and initial subjectivities» in order to resignify them. Innovative combinations of discourse are produced through an 'unpicking' and relinking that 'retranslate' normative discourses (185). This tendency to retranslate and relink in its use of 'non-European' ele-

¹¹ «Gli europei mi chiamano Ribka, Rebka, Rebecca. In realtà mi chiamo (Rebqā) (Sibhatu 10).

ments is shared by Ubax Cristina Ali Farah, in whose heteroglossic work the friction present between different linguistic and cultural strata is made transparent.

Living and Writing in Translation: Ubax Cristina Ali Farah

Born in Italy, Ubax Cristina Ali Farah spent her childhood in Mogadishu where she often acted as a translator for her mother, who never learnt Somali. Her first novel, *Madre piccola* (2007) presents a main character, Domenica Axad, who like the author, has a Somali father and an Italian mother, and, again like the author, programmatically signifies her dual identity in the use of both her Somali and Italian first names. After her parent's separation, Domenica Axad is caught between two different worlds and cultures. She develops self-injurious behaviours and only stops this habit once she is able to 'knot the threads together again', using the metaphor that recurs throughout the whole novel; the threads are those of her own double identity as well as that of her people dispersed in the diaspora caused by the Somali civil war at the start of the 1990s.

The theme of a 'braided' identity is presented in the incipit of the novel:

Soomaali baan **ahay***¹², come la mia metà che è intera. Sono il filo sottile, così sottile che si infila e si tende, prolungandosi. Così sottile che non si spezza. E il groviglio di fili si allarga e mostra, chiari e ben stretti, i nodi, pur distanti l'uno dall'altro, che non si sciolgono. Sono una traccia in quel groviglio e il mio principio appartiene a quello multiplo. (1)

The opening words unequivocally affirm the narrating voice's Somali *appartenenza*. At the same time, the Italian translation of the Somali phrase ('Somalo io sono') which is provided in a footnote alerts the reader to the interplay of (linguistic and cultural) subjectivities within the novel, which is conceived as a tale told by many voices, differing from chapter to chapter. The process of self-translation is directly evidenced in the table of contents, in which the titles of the chapters indicate the move back and forth between the Italian narrating voice (Domenica) and the Somali narrating voice (Axad)¹³. Throughout the

¹² It is the refrain of a poem composed by Cabdulqaadir Xirsi Siyaad, "Yamyam" (1977). He was one of the most important poets of socialist Somalia and his writings, which were among the first to appear since Somali became a written language in 1972, were disseminated by readings on radio.

¹³ The complete table of contents reads: Preludio – Domenica; 2. Barni; 3. Taageere; 4. Axad; 5. Intermezzo – Taageere; 6. Barni; 7. Taageere; 8. Domenica; 9. Epilogo – Barni.

novel, Ali Farah uses language self-consciously: the act of speaking is also the act of being spoken; Domenica Axad sees herself both shaping language and being shaped by it:

parlo difficile, uso costruzioni contorte. Lo faccio soprattutto in principio di discorso, perché voglio dimostrare fino a che punto riesco ad arrivare con la lingua, voglio che tutti sappiano senz'ombra di dubbio che questa lingua mi appartiene. È il mio balbettio, è il soggetto plurale che mi ha cresciuto, è il nome della mia essenza, è mia madre. (253-254)

The choice to speak (and to write) in Italian is not conscious when it is forced by the necessity of migration, but become conscious when it is perceived as part of one's identity, «come la mia metà che è intera», as Ali Farah writes in the first line of *Madre piccola*. The whole novel can be seen as a 'translation' from orality to the written text, as the the plot is completed when Domenica Axad finally writes down the oral tales she has collected, mirroring Ali Farah's own writing practice (Comberiati 46). In the process of self-translating from oral Somali to written Italian, Ali Farah practises 'code-mixing' in the sense used by eminent linguist Braj B. Kachru; that is, «the use of lexical items or phrases from one code in the stream of discourse of another» (273). At the heart of such code-mixing is the strategy he defines as *neutralization*:

used to "unload" a linguistic item from its traditional, cultural and emotional connotations by avoiding its use and choosing an item from another code. The borrowed item has referential meaning, but no cultural connotations in the context of the specific culture. (273)

Translingual writers have recourse to their own mother tongues, inserting them into their adopted language (in this case Italian), thus rendering the latter the base on which other languages are grafted, creating new and original solutions. Code-mixing modulates intercultural encounters in which the language is contaminated and distorted. As Ali Farah says in an interview, she wants to invert the relationship between the languages by inscribing one within the other and thus making an effort to initiate a process of renewal ('svecchiamento') of the Italian language:

il mio intento è quello di stravolgere il rapporto di potere tra le lingue, di capovolgerlo, ma ho paura del pericolo della caricatura [...] [Intendo] riprendere questi drammi in versi e poesia, contestualizzandoli e rendendoli universali. Usare ciò che è popolare e che a volte sembra *cliché* per ricollocarlo e renderlo collettivo e oggetto d'arte, qualcosa che messo nella giusta cornice lo valorizza. (Quoted in Nur Goni 45-47)

In *Madre piccola*, heteroglossia has a narratological function. The Somali words and expressions are an integral part of the discourse, sometimes accompanied by an Italian equivalent, sometimes left untranslated. As the narrative progresses, these words become familiar to the reader and do not constitute a language or knowledge barrier – rather they convey a concept that would not be conveyed with equal impact in Italian. Through self-translation Ali Farah also introduces the principle of plurality into the unity of the writing subject thus de-centring the position of the author. Writing through translation is a strategy that aims at accumulating as many points of view as possible. Each time a text gets translated into another language a new standpoint is reached from which the original thought can be viewed under a completely different angle. The author, through the voice of the protagonist, develops a series of metalinguistic reflections that are germane to the other texts under consideration here. The message that is conveyed, that is, not taking a language for granted, is a fundamentally important one, especially for monolingual (mother tongue) readers who do not, generally, reflect on a tool that they've had since birth. Those who have never been immersed in a foreign language can easily take their own language for granted – a language that is seen from quite a different perspective by someone who lives in two distinct language worlds. There are numerous references to such a double register in *Madre piccola*, specifically to draw attention to the fact that being bilingual is both a privilege and a responsibility, especially when that bilingual is also an author-translator-mediator:

Vivevo la traduzione come un divertimento, a tratti, ma più spesso con un forte senso di responsabilità, soprattutto quando si trattava di limare le asprezze, di non lasciar trapelare sentimenti negativi. Ero alle prese con voci schiette che scaturivano dall'animo prive di filtri. Voci consegnate a me traghettatrice senza che l'emittente si sforzasse di adattarle al destinatario.

Divenni una grande conoscitrice dell'animo umano, in virtù di questo esercizio quotidiano con il quale mi allenavo a capire gli adulti nei loro recessi più profondi. (232-233)

Domenica Axad epitomises the translator who mediates not only between languages and cultures but is also the locus (or meeting place) of internalised dispositions and societal norms. Ali Farah, like Sibhatu and Makaping, is intensely aware of her role as mediator - a role that is charged with immense responsibility – and as someone who occupies the liminal space in between cultures, and who operates from a position of plurality, she uses her authorial position to move the emphasis from sociocultural relevance to representationality. It is precisely the need to represent herself – to establish her own authority and identity –, rather than a desire for verisimilitude, that determines the use of 'other' languages in Maria Abbebù Viarengo's writing.

Writing the self into public existence: Maria Abbebù Viarengo

One of the most experimental writers within this group of language migrants, Maria Abbebù Viarengo creates a discourse on *métissage* and multiple identities that brings together the personal and the theoretical, autobiographical narrative and public discussions of otherness. The daughter of an Ethiopian mother, from the Oromo language group, and of a Piedmontese father, she is another example of a biologically interracial daughter who ‘braids’ her languages and cultures in a transcultural move that appropriates and modifies the standardised platform of Italian literature and creates cultural spaces in which other perspectives are represented.

Her as yet unpublished autobiography *Koborò e Violini io non scelgo* has been described as an ‘ego-document’ (Ponzanesi 143) which is explicitly intended as a form of dialogue with the author’s mother:

Mamma era morta, aveva trentasei anni, lasciandomi la rabbia di un dialogo mai nato nel momento in cui potevamo parlarci come due donne, e l’impotenza di una lingua dimenticata Oromo Imbecu (Viarengo. “Andiamo a spasso?”: 75)

In 1990, *Linea d’Ombra* published an extract from her autobiography under the title “Andiamo a spasso?”. The publisher’s unilateral decision to translate the original Oromo title (“Scirscir ‘n demna”) into Italian – thus effectively erasing the mother’s heritage – resulted in Viarengo’s refusal to publish the text if it would be subjected to such linguistic intervention and the full autobiography remains unpublished to date¹⁴.

The overlapping of languages is an important aspect of the dichotomy that Viarengo has inscribed on her body and in her work in what is effectively both a biological and a literary *métissage*¹⁵. Writing her life in Italian becomes the

¹⁴ Chapter 8 has been published in an English translation by Aamer Hussein in *Wasafiri* in 2000.

¹⁵ *Métissage* is a site for writing and surviving in the «interval between different cultures and languages» (Lionnet. *Autobiographical voices*: 1); a way of merging and blurring genres, texts and identities; an active literary stance, a political strategy and a pedagogical praxis. As *Métis* has been re-appropriated from its original and negative meaning «half-breed», following Lionnet we appropriate *métissage* from its original meaning of «mixed-blood», to become an alternative metaphor for fluidity, and a creative strategy for the braiding of gender, race, language and place into autobiographical narratives. Literary *métissage* not only describes experience; it is a strategy for interpreting and critiquing the experiences reported. At the same time these autobiographical texts open apertures for understanding and questioning the multiple conditions and contexts which give rise to those experiences; and the particular languages, memories, stories and places in which these experiences are locat-

thread that weaves together the fragments constituting her *métisse* identity. By narratively weaving her different selves, she attempts to create a space in which chronological order is destroyed and past and present can be rewritten in synchronic order. Self-translation is a way for Viarengo to reconcile her two languages and cultures, through a process of recreation and rewriting, not only of her work but of herself and her world, favouring a double, in-between identity. Nevertheless, like De Caldas Brito, she experiences a prevalent sense of loss – there are wide gaps in her history that cannot be filled, and she writes of the difficulty of self-identifying with any one culture while others struggle to ‘identify’ her, calling her: «anfez, klls, meticcia, mulatta, caffelatte, half-cast, ciuculatin, colored, armusch [...] indiana, araba, [...] siciliana» (“Andiamo a spasso?”: 74). Viarengo resists all attempts to fit her into a neat pigeon hole, recalling how she has always moved among three languages: Oromo, Italian and the local Turin dialect. The translation from one vernacular to another is a thread uniting the old and the new life. Language, which is usually talked about in terms of the dividing line between us and them, the global and the local, in her case operates as a flexible mediation:

I have inside me fragments of many languages: Oromo, Amharic, Tigrina (*sic*), English, Arabic, of gestures, tastes, religions, perfumes, costumes, feasts, sounds, music, looks, faces, places, spaces, silences. (“Scirscir ‘n demna”: 21)

Many cultures and sublanguages interfere with the dominant one. Viarengo’s father’s Piedmontese constituted a specification within Italian as much as her mother’s Oromo was for the Amharic-speaking community. When she moves from Ghidami to Turin, it is the Piedmontese dialect that gives her a sense of belonging in Italy, not the Italian language: she begins to translate the meanings of words and phrases that had accompanied her throughout her life and whose meaning had remained opaque, like the slogan «ca custa lon ca custa viva l’Aosta» which she can now translate, albeit «a denti stretti» (74) because she now understands its imperialist implications.

Viarengo uses in her text entire sentences in Piedmontese (without glossary or translation) which locates her in the community, both bonding her with anyone capable of understanding Piedmontese, but also excluding any reader who

ed and created. Literary *métissage* offers the possibility for writing and telling stories which are rooted in history and memory, but are also stories of becoming. These texts generate knowledge about repressed cultural and individual memories, traditions and mother tongues. Literary *métissage* is seen as a hopeful act initiating a «genuine dialogue with the dominant discourse(s)» in order to transform these discourses, thus favouring exchange rather than provoking conflict» (Lionnet 3).

is not located within that very specific culture. She does the same with Oromo words which are naturally blended with the Italian language as if some inexplicable way capable of recreating a duality in the sameness: «[mamma] ci portava a *scircir* e ci preparava il *faffatò*» (76). Through the insertion of the vernacular, Viarengo plays up the complexity of her translation process: the representation of non-standard speech varieties within a language invites readers to confront and interpret the diversity within that language, within that speech community – diversity of class, region, education, age. In Viarengo's case, this is accompanied by the representation of heterophone languages, thus forcing readers to confront and interpret the multiplicity of speech communities in the world, the impossibility of understanding the speech of communities other than their own, their own position in a polylingual context.

Viarengo constructs a translingual space – an 'extra territory' akin to Makaping's 'ex-centric' space – in which to position herself both as a Piedmontese and as an Oromo. Functioning as a strategy of exclusion, the vernacular undermines the binary relation of the centre to the periphery; offering a continual play of resistance and creating «tensions and contradictions within the dominant discourse, setting in motion the dynamics of dissent, intervention and change that can ultimately allow a 'minority' position to resist integration and assimilation» (Lionnet. *Postcolonial Representations*: 334). Viarengo's text resists appropriation because the inclusion of Oromo and Piedmontese dialect in the Italian text creates an opacity in the text for both the non-Oromo and the non-Piedmontese-speaker. This opacity has a double subversive function: it marks the text as 'other', increasing the distance between author and reader, between insider and outsider, thus preventing the ideological adoption of a static form of humanism.

I believe that it is the lack of translation that makes Viarengo's text highly empathetic. Lack of translation does not mean that the author does not want to communicate. Her autobiographical narrative does not want to be solipsistic writing. Rather, her work is the concrete expression of the plurality of identities, a creative and experimental writing that gives an idea of the cohabitation of more than one identity within an individual. I think that the potentiality of untranslated expression goes beyond the juxtaposition of languages and identities. In the case of purposeful untranslatability, such as Viarengo's, the same untranslatability is meaningful. The unsaid, the not-immediately-understandable, the untranslated, amplify the text's meanings: these are effective ways to represent the often contradictory dimension of those who live in between two cultures. Through this literary expedient, Viarengo sets a new perspective for the writing of social relationships.

Concluding remarks

It is the comparison of divergent models of discourse that challenges the literary canon and provides a context for the development of new identity profiles; aesthetic, social or cultural. The translingual writer who composes in more than one language is an artist who wants to experience both her own maternal linguistic reality and transcend it by simultaneously taking on that of the Other. The act of multilingual creation reflects a desire to enter, know and become the Other, and then share two spheres of cultural and linguistic formation through the process of transculturation. These writers are proud of their linguistic heritage and almost invariably want to maintain their ability to write in their mother tongue: thus there is no desire for 'vertical' translation here, of giving enhanced prestige to the 'new' language, but rather of establishing a linguistic relationship of horizontality, reaching out to explore the possibilities of expression in another language of equal importance and perhaps also to understand what it is like to achieve linguistic identification with another reality. Arguably, the multidimensionality of these translingual narratives is the consequence of an epistemological reflection about the power and the limits of the (monolingual) word. Their literary experimentation should be placed into the context of the multi-/poly-/hetero-/ translingual reality their authors inhabit. They are the 'new' nomadic citizens that Meylaerts characterizes as «polyglots travelling in between languages, in a permanent stage of (self-) translation» (1).

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