SELF-TRANSLATION AS TRANSLINGUAL
AND TRANSCULTURAL TRANSCREATION

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In recent years self-translation has attracted growing scholarly attention within both translation and cultural studies, both because its peculiarities oblige us to rethink the traditional dichotomies of translation proper and because, in cultural terms, it is a condition shared by an ever-growing number of migrant, translingual individuals. By combining elements from both theoretical frameworks, this essay analyzes the works of three Italian-Canadian female writers/self-translators for whom self-translation is both a tool for expressing a translingual imagination and renegotiating a transcultural identity, as well as a subversive transcreative practice through which to convey their gender politics.

L'autotraduzione come transcreazione transculturale e translingue
In ambito sia traduttologico sia culturale una messe di studi ha analizzato il fenomeno dell'autotraduzione, evidenziando come le sue peculiarità ci portino a riconsiderare le tradizionali categorie della traduzione e come dal punto di vista culturale sia una pratica condivisa da un numero sempre crescente di individui migranti e translingui. Prendendo spunti teorici da entrambi questi ambiti, il presente lavoro esamina le opere di tre scrittrici/autotraduttrici italo-canadesi per le quali l'autotraduzione è al contempo un mezzo per esprimere un'immaginazione translingue e rinegoziare un'identità transculturale, ma anche una pratica transcreativa sovversiva attraversa cui articolare la loro politica di genere.

Introduction

Defined by Popovič as «the translation of an original work into another language by the author himself» (19), self-translation has received growing scholarly attention in recent years in the fields of literary, translation and cultural studies[1]. While translation theorists have analyzed it mainly in terms of process

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[1] For an updated bibliography of studies on self-translation see Gentes. To date, scholars have reconstructed the history of self-translation and analyzed the works of canonical self-translating writers belonging to multiple literary canons, as well as those of emerging migrant, ethnic and postcolonial writers (Antunes; Hokenson and Munson). They have

and product[2] – namely as «the process of transferring one's own writings into another language and the product thereof, i.e. the self-translated text» (Grutman and van Bolderen 323) – cultural theorists like Bhabha and sociolinguists like Pavlenko and Lantolf have emphasized the more personal and psychological implications of translating oneself as a consequence of physical displacement and the reconstruction of a hybrid transcultural identity. In fact, as Grutman and van Bolderen acknowledge, in relation to migrant subjects, the term is used «to describe the manifold ways in which writers' identities, their 'selves', are remolded by the move to a new country and the integration into a new language-culture, a physical 'translation' that can be accompanied or not by actual translations» (323).

Viewed from this latter perspective, it becomes clear that self-translation is not merely the mechanical act of rewording sentences, utterances and thoughts into another language, as occurs in translation proper, but it involves a more personal effort to reshape the self through and across languages, to express a different sensibility and experience, thus a different identity every time. Indeed, for «translingual» individuals, who live and «write in more than one language» (Kellman ix), self-translation is a necessary, ongoing and integral part of who they are; it is a strategy of self-definition and resistance against homogenizing politics, which allows them to assert, re-inscribe and legitimize their mercurial selves across cultural-linguistic boundaries and to experience the freedoms and pleasures of authorial transcreation. Describing her practice of self-translation, Friulian-Canadian poet Dôre Michelut, for instance, writes: «By translating myself into myself, by spinning a fine line in-between states of reality, I transcended the paralysis of being either inside or outside form. It was like transmuting lead to gold and back, solely for the pleasure of knitting their interrelation» ("Coming": 166).

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addressed issues such as the exceptionality of the self-translator's role and their privileged position as author-translator (Castillo García; Tanqueiro. "Un traductor privilegiado"), as well as the self-translator as a bilingual and bicultural subject with dual affiliations and as a cross-cultural broker (Cordingley).

[2] From this perspective self-translations have been variously categorized as «naturalisante», «décentrée» and «(re)créatrice» (Oustinoff 29-34), «consecutive or simultaneous» (Grutman. "Self-translation": 259), «vertical or horizontal» (Grutman. "Beckett e oltre"), «transparent or opaque» (Dasliva), «intratextual» (Santoyo) and «explicit or mental» (Tanqueiro. "Sobre la autotraducción"). Epistemic cognitive approaches have also been applied to describe the process of self-translation as an example of *contradictio in adjecto* (Salmon), while many have pointed out the complementariness of translation and creative writing in the self-translating process and theorized self-translation as a double writing process, as manipulation and rewriting (Bassnett; Eco).

If self-translation has mainly been theorized in relation to, and in contrast with, translation in general, the sole theoretical frameworks of translation studies grounded in linguistics and semiotics feel somewhat limiting to fully investigate the broader sociocultural aspects of self-translation as a means of pluricultural re-appropriation and personal and public empowerment. Instead, any analysis of self-translation in the works and experiences of multilingual and migrant subjects needs to be theorized within a transcultural and translingual paradigm of transcreation, manipulation and rewriting[3], which debunks the traditional categories of translation proper and incorporates multiple discourses ranging from cultural, gender and migrant studies to neuro-, psycho- and sociolinguistics.

In light of these considerations, I will here briefly examine the works and authorial statements of three Italian-Canadian translingual writers and self-translators, Dôre Michelut, Gianna Patriarca and Licia Canton, who were born in Italy and emigrated to Canada as young children[4], and who have decided to retrieve their mother tongues – the oral Friulian, Ciociaro and Cavarzerese dialects[5] – to complete their process of self-renegotiation. My aim is to show that for these writers self-translation is not simply a means of coming to terms with their hybridity and asserting the legitimacy of plurilingualism against normative monolingual and monocultural dictates, but it is also a powerful subversive tool for enacting their gender politics.

Translingualism and Self-Translation

As translingual subjects, writers and self-translators Michelut, Patriarca and Canton are in the special position of inhabiting, mastering and juggling be-

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[3] Cf., for example, Bassnett or Eco, who argue that self-translation and rewriting are dialectical parts of the same process, where there is a going back and forth between original, translation and original. Bassnett thus sees the two texts as «two versions in two languages, each with its own set of meanings» (33, trans. mine), while Eco denies the possibility of self-translation stating that it is merely «a reinvention in different languages» (27, trans. mine), a rewriting in which the author self-plagiarizes himself.

[4] The late Dôre Michelut (aka Dorina Michelutti 1952-2009) was born in Sella di Rivignano, Udine and emigrated to Ontario in 1958. Gianna Patriarca was born in Ceprano, Frosinone in 1951 and emigrated to Toronto in 1960, while Licia Canton was born in Cavarzere, Venice in 1963 and emigrated to Montreal in 1967 where she currently resides.

[5] I have chosen to use the term 'dialect' to designate Friulian even if today it is an officially recognized language, since like Cavarzerse and Ciociaro, it was mainly learned as an oral form of peasant speech by the poet. By choosing to commit their mother tongues to the written form in their poetic works, all three writers, however, re-evaluate the status of these non-standard idioms. Patriarca, for example, states that even Ciociaro should be considered as a language ("La langue": 93).

tween several languages, namely English, Italian, French and the dialect of their original homeland. Codemixing is a normal, integral and intrinsic part of both their daily lives and their creative works and it occurs at both the written and oral levels. As Canton explains in her essay "Se traduire au quotidien", she changes her languages during her daily routine just as often as she changes social roles: she greets her children in Italian, speaks English with her husband, French with her fellow Montrealers, all three languages at work, and the Cavarzerese dialect with her relatives and immigrants from Veneto (88). A seemingly unproblematic relation with language is also expressed in Gianna Patriarca's lapidary verse «i am the words i speak» from the poem "Woman in Narrative" (*My Etruscan Face*: 13), which aptly sanctions the outcome of her quest for reconciliation with her plural identities and legitimizes her right to define and express her selves through a variety of linguistic codes without feeling apologetic for or neglectful of the persona she is in each of them. Thus, like Canton, every day she switches between English, Italian and the Ciociaro dialect to relate with others, the three languages being the different parts of a whole, «la trilogie d'une langue» ("La langue": 94).

However, such a natural transition among languages is only apparently an effortless endeavour, because living in a translingual space of enunciation is often a place of limbo, as suggested by the title of Nancy Huston's bilingual text *Limbes/Limbo*, a place where all certainties, linguistic and otherwise, are constantly put to the test, shattered and painfully reconstructed. It is a place where – as Michelut explains – the subject is faced with the fear of continuous loss, but also rewarded with the delightful pleasure of recovery, rediscovery and reinvention:

> At first I lived the impossibility of translation as silence. In fact, I became aware of the exclusion of myself from one world and the other to such an extent that I started feeling irrelevant to both […] Then I started to write in any language and despite all grammars. It would have been unintelligible to most but, as far as I was concerned, I was producing meaning, and on my own terms ("Coming": 165).

Since the self-translator occupies a presumed privileged position as both author and translator (Tanqueiro. "Un traductor privilegiado"), we could be inclined to assume that the act of writing in various languages is an uncomplicated task. Yet, this is far from true. Indeed, it is not unusual for translingual writers to struggle with issues of untranslatability because certain things just cannot be expressed in another idiom. Canton, for instance, expresses her frustration at the impossibility of translating her trilingual poem "Chi Non Viene" into English, despite her strenuous attempts, but also acknowledges that she uses her languages for different purposes: English is the language in

which she writes her stories and critical essays, while her poems are written in Italian or dialect. Equally, translating between Italian and French is easier than translating from English into French or Italian ("Se traduire": 90-92). In the essay "La langue à l'intérieur des mes langues", Patriarca, likewise, admits her dissatisfaction with the Italian versions of poems written in English or Ciociaro, since she is unable to master the complexity of Italian's sonority, rhythm and sophistication. It is impossible, she states, to reproduce a specific sonority on another melody, and thus, while her English verses are concise, brief and authoritative, her Italian translations become more verbose and take on a nobler, more regal quality (94-95). Translating the creative experience in various forms is, thus, – as Michelut writes – like having «two different sets of cards shuffled together, each deck playing its own game with its own rules» ("Coming": 163). It is burdened with the «fear of betrayal» ("Coming": 163) and constantly involves a process of dialectical mediation to create a fluid heteroglossic continuum wherein to assert transculturality.

Often the tension of continually negotiating among languages and cultures is foregrounded on the written page by retaining the use of codeswitching in the parallel versions of the self-translated text. In Patriarca's poem "sono ciociara / i am ciociara", for instance, English and Ciociaro surface in both versions so as to signal the poet's pluricultural identity and affiliations: the English epigraph from Philip Roth is maintained in the text written in dialect, while the Ciociaro term *paisans* erupts in the English version where it is implemented with the addition of «with all your friends / in that little town» (*My Etruscan Face*: 26), so as to signal both a renewed sense of belonging with the original homeland community and a self-conscious distancing from «that town» with the consequent acceptance of the new Canadian homeland.

A similar polyphonic dialogue among languages is established in Michelut's poem "La terza voce diventa madre / The Third Voice Gives Birth" where the trilingual verses: «O Susanna tal biel cjastiel di Udin / with tanti pesciolini e i fiori di lillà / don't cry for the deer and dead buffalo» (*Loyalty*: 34-35) are grafted onto both the Italian and English versions so as to blur the hierarchical boundaries among the poet's three languages and establish a process of transcultural contamination and renewal[6]. As for Patriarca, the use of codeswitching signals here the climax of the poet's efforts at translating the self and at legitimizing her transcultural identity in the interface among languages.

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[6] For a more thorough analysis of self-translation in Michelut and Patriarca's poetry see Saidero: "Plurilinguismo e autotraduzione nelle opere di Dôre Michelut" and "Self-translation as Transcultural Re-Inscription of Identity in Dôre Michelut and Gianna Patriarca".

Self-Translation Recréatice

Being a means to re-inscribe an in-between identity and reconcile multiple languages and cultures, for all three writers self-translation occurs as a process of recreation and rewriting. Discussing her short story "In the Stacks", Canton admits, in fact, that «lorsque je traduis la nouvelle en francais, je fais de l'auto-traduction mais aussi de la réécriture» ("Se traduire": 90), as she grants herself the freedom to recreate the original creative process and to take detours in order to find a suitable term to express words that no longer work in the language of translation. Producing the self-translated text thus involves duplicating the writing process, which, in Canton's case, is «consecutive», in that it occurs «only after completion or even publication of the original» (Grutman 259). However, even when the two texts are produced simultaneously, at a certain point of the creative process they «snap apart», as Michelut states, «and become independent entities», evermore untranslatable as they progress in their own direction, but also evermore aware of themselves as «coherent, whole and complete» and capable of recognizing the other ("Coming": 166) and embracing dialogism.

At times, this hybrid process *recréatrice*, as Oustinoff calls it (33), entails sacrificing faithfulness to the original and generating different variants which, nevertheless, complete and enrich each other. The two versions, one in Italian and the other in English of Canton's short story "From the Sixth Floor", aptly exemplify the liberties the author takes in the rewriting process, as well as the interplay she creates in the mid-ground between the two texts. With its different layout and numerous omissions (ranging from single sentences to entire paragraphs), the Italian translation "Dal sesto piano", published in 2006, reads as an abridged version of the English story published five years earlier, with the consequent result that it presents a completely muted perspective for both the writer and the reader. Indeed, while the English text is fashioned as a diary entry in which the abused woman addresses her self (the self she used to be) as she tries to escape the destiny of committing suicide that her husband is pushing her towards, the Italian text elides any hint at self-dialoguing and appears more like a first-person narrative that addresses the readers as a cry for help. The interrogative form «Is there anyone who can help me? A priest? […] My family? […] A friend?» (46) of the English version becomes a pleading imperative «Aiutatemi, vi prego…» in the Italian version, where it is then reinforced a few paragraphs later by «Nessuno può aiutarmi?» (158). Moreover, while the lengthy English text emphasizes the woman's entrapment in an Italian household and within Catholic socio-religious expectations, in the Italian text we simply get an in-between-the-lines glimpse at the inner drama of a woman

whom we cannot locate in any specific place since the reference to Roma Termini station has been elided. It is, however, in the dialogic space between the two texts that Canton's denunciation of Italy's patriarchal culture emerges most prominently, alongside the negotiation between the old world's stronghold on women's lives and the possibilities of freedom and emancipation they can enjoy in a new world.

A self-conscious manipulation of the text is also underway in the trilingual versions of the poem "Risposta agli antenati / The Most Extraordinary Man in the World", where Canton creates a polylogue between Cavarzerese, Italian and English to debunk patriarchal stereotypes about men across cultures. Here the syntactical looseness of the English version whose free verses have a prose-like quality speak back to the poetic style of the texts in Italian and dialect which are, instead, imbued with a greater rhythmic musicality and sonority, as if to mimic the rebellion of the younger generations against the older ones. While the metric pattern of the parallel versions in dialect and Italian echoes abusive male behaviour against women, the stylistic freedom of the English text sanctions the shift away from socially-inscribed gender roles from the old world: the poet's husband is no longer «arogante autoritario» like his father; he has deleted insults like «inseminia» and «simpia» still present in dialect from his dictionary, and he «weaves words with this woman / here, on this page / a new narrative for our children to call home».

Self-Translation and Gender

While attempting to overcome the trauma inherent in reconciling with one's plural linguistic, cultural and ethno-racial subjectivities, for translingual women writers writing in-between languages also comprises an effort to address gender-specific issues pertaining to their place in society, their conventional roles and their quest for authorial mastery. As we have seen above, Canton manipulates the formal structure of her texts to subvert patriarchal conventions that still influence women's lives in Italy and in Italian-Canadian immigrant households. Patriarca similarly creates a transcultural dialogic space to convey her critique of stereotypical representations of Italian women and to empower them with mastery. In the interstices between the three versions of her poem "Rita"[7], which was inspired by the film *La siciliana ribelle*, the poet, for instance, debases patriarchal stereotypes about women writers as madwom-

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[7] The three versions of the poem are published in Patriarca's essay "La langue": 95-96.

en who threaten the existing social order. The three poems, albeit structurally equivalent in terms of content organization and wording, address different audiences and convey different aspects of the poet's translingual imagination and sensitivity. Rather than stylistic manipulation, Patriarca's strategy is one of linguistic and cultural subversion. Writing in all her three languages enables the poet to legitimize her authority as a woman and a writer beyond linguistic barriers and to empower other minoritized subjects in the process. The version in Ciociaro, affectionately entitled "Rituzza", performs, for instance, the double function of establishing a link with the original Sicilian dialect which inspired the poem and of erasing the boundaries between women and cultures of lower status, thereby endowing them with dignity and legitimacy. At the same time, the cultural reference to Rita Atri, the young Sicilian woman who courageously denounced the mafia bosses responsible for Paolo Borsellino's death, provides us with a new mythical model of female strength and resistance which urges women across cultures and nations to fight against the crimes, ignorance and superstitions they are still victims of.

As part of their transnational commitment to gender politics, Michelut, Patriarca and Canton also use the self-translational practice to expose the cultural dynamics between the standard language and the oral dialect[8], which for all three signifies a return to and retrieval of the mother tongue. Undertaking this performative act serves several functions, both public and personal. On one hand, inscribing the oral cadences of dialect in written form elevates it to the status of language, thereby contributing to preserve it from its current threat of extinction and allowing it to enter in conversation with the more prestigious Italian or English idioms. On the other, it enables a return to the semiotic, maternal aspects of language which belong to the non-verbal, rhythmic and sensory dimension and are not saturated with the ideological values of the written word. Dialect, thus, offers them new expressive possibilities, which enable them to inscribe their presence as women writers within the traditionally authorial male world of Italian-Canadian writing and culture. As Patriarca writes, with its

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[8] In the works of male writers the focus seems to be, instead, on the power dynamics among Canada's majority and minority cultures. In his trilingual poem "Nous les Rapailles", Quebec-based writer Filippo Salvatore, for instance, attempts to bridge the cultural divide between Anglophone and Francophone Canada and re-inscribe the presence of other immigrant communities, so as to subvert the supremacy of English and its politics of domination. His translational strategy comprises on one hand the parodic coupling of formal archaic terms like «harlot» and colloquial ones like «teeny-hopper» (138) in the English text and, on the other, the use of English loanwords like «penthouses» and «downtown» (139) in the flow of the Italian text to draw attention to the threat posed by the spread of English in Quebec and around the world.

short words, missing vowels and cut-off final consonants, the sound, rhythm and cadence of dialect express a childhood innocence which cannot be reproduced in English or Italian ("La langue": 95). It is, indeed, «ste dialect / mezz stuort e sturdit» (*My Etruscan Face*: 25) that allows her to express the child within her and connect with her mother and first-generation immigrants.

Canton and Michelut equally give in to the «unspoken presence» (Michelut. "Coming": 169) of their mother tongues to foreground a matrilineal heritage because, as Michelut states, «languages, like mothers, are identities we grow within» (*Ouroboros*: 76). Self-translating into dialect allows them to circle back to a space beyond symbolic signifiers and write in the rhythms of their bodies – a language that fully gives voice to their multiple selves. Often the recovery of this pre-oedipal sensory dimension occurs in the interface between the standard and non-standard language also through a web of metaphorical imagery connected to female sexuality and corporeality, such as the acts of love-making and giving birth or the reference to the female womb in Michelut's poem "Tra l'incudine e il martello": «L'arancione di Firenze mi penetra. Faccio all'amore e la notte si spiega dall'utero di mia nonna, mi lega, aggroviglia nomi e tempo, è la mia voce, urla il dolore di donne dilaniate che si vestono l'anima di carne» (*Loyalty*: 32). Other times, the symbolic re-inscription of women's presence across cultures is obtained through a self-conscious alteration of conventional spelling and grammatical norms, such as Patriarca's use of the lower-case for the first person pronoun 'I' in the English poem "i am ciociara", which echoes the spelling of the pronoun *i* in the parallel version in Ciociaro, where capitalization is not used on the model of the Italian *io*. Through this consciously feminist device and the creation of written norms for an oral dialect, the poet provokingly signals her rejection of patriarchal conventions and asserts her marginalized female presence as she trans-writes her self across cultures.

Conclusion

Owing to its specific features, theorists have often questioned whether self-translation is translation proper at all and concluded that it is more a process of «alloglot authorial rewriting» (Ceccherelli 14, trans. mine) than an interlinguistic carrying across of meaning. Because of this inherent tension it has remained a marginalized and invisible field of investigation within both translation studies and literary histories shaped by the monolingual paradigm of the nation-state[9].

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[9] Cf. Hokenson and Munson 1-2.

When investigated through a broader sociocultural lens, however, it becomes clear that, instead of being a devalued form of cultural production, self-translation is a highly charged political activity aimed at drawing attention to important issues connected with identity, gender, authorizing, authority and cultural dynamics.

For migrant subjects as those discussed above self-translation is, indeed, a translingual act of transcreation which performs multiple political agendas, both personal and collective. Firstly, in terms of identity politics, self-translation, as both a written and more widespread oral and mental practice, enables a renegotiation of one's multiple fractured selves as it allows the writer to come to terms with her various personas without feeling ashamed of or dwarfed by her plurilingual and pluricultural affiliations. Self-translation is, thus, a strategy of resistance against assimilation by the dominant culture and of self-affirmation of difference. Secondly, as a hybrid rewriting process it does not jeopardize, as some claim, the traditional role of translation as an instrument of knowledge and transformation of the receiving culture[10], but rather provides a space for dialogue among cultures and languages. Indeed, the translingual heteroglossic space of enunciation created between the parallel texts becomes a privileged site for stimulating transcultural awareness and for subverting hierarchical cultural and linguistic power dynamics such as those between mainstream and minority cultures or between standard and non-standard languages. The retrieval of dialect and its use on the written page, for instance, gives voice to the various silenced Italian immigrant communities present in Canada, while simultaneously giving dignity to the multifarious oral languages and cultures of Italy whose richness is often shadowed by standard Italian.

Finally, for women writers the self-translational space is also a place wherein to articulate gender-conscious issues aimed at re-inscribing the female body and legitimizing women's desires, sexuality and eroticism, as well as their writing and quest for authority. Indeed, the self-translated texts enable a fluid (re)production of meaning which amplifies the subversion of patriarchal culture across languages and reinforces the writers' efforts to make the marginalized female/migrant/minority writer visible. The womanhandling strategies employed in the translational space echo across cultures to transcreate a transcultural feminine aesthetics.

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[10] Cf., for example, Cocco 111.

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