

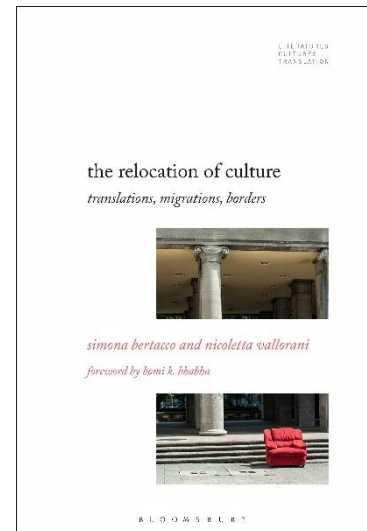
Simona Bertacco and Nicoletta Vallorani

The Relocation of Culture

Translations, Migrations, Borders

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Review by Annarita Taronna



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From its very title, Simona Bertacco and Nicoletta Vallorani's *The Relocation of Culture: Translations, Migrations, Borders* holds much promise not only for the immediate and tangible nexus it establishes between the processes of translation and migration, but also because it swiftly engages the reader with an homage to two influential texts that have guided recent generations of scholars and social activists: Adrienne Rich's "Notes towards a Politics of Location" (1984) and Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994; 2004). Both works serve as a strong source of inspiration for Bertacco and Vallorani's study, as they provide a useful vocabulary for talking about culture, identity, and agency through concrete engagement with the politics of body, gender, decolonization, and translation. However, the authors' ambition is not to revert to the definitions of a politics of location and a location of culture as a retrospective maneuver, but to take them as a starting point for issuing a call for a new vocabulary of displacement that will support the analysis of contemporary transethnic artistic and literary works.

Such a challenging research goal is also valorized by Homi Bhabha's foreword, in which he acknowledges Bertacco and Vallorani's attempt to turn translation into "a mode of ethical witnessing," a shift that can only be imagined and realized through an understanding of the "schema of translation [as one] which strives to make the multilingual complexity of the world visible and audible" (xvi). In line with such a mode, Bhabha also envisions a translational 'turn' that is significantly marked by Bertacco and Vallorani's book, as the editors tie together translation and migration through the political and cultural practice of hospitality, which may help to revise "one's way of being, living, and thinking, side by side in a spirit of complementation" (x). Accordingly, the book manifests itself from the very beginning as an

extraordinary journey into the interwovenness of the physical and intellectual experiences that both translation and migration entail, namely, “the redistribution of migrants and the cultural and linguistic adjustment that people who move from one form of belonging to another know firsthand” (1). In this light, both Part One (“Translation as Migration”) and Part Two (“Migration as Translation”) retrace in depth the symmetrical nexus between translation and migration by drawing on a line of thinking and a consolidated vocabulary that connects scholars as diverse as Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Venuti, Vincente Rafael, Gayatri Spivak, Emily Apter, Sherry Simon, Sandro Mezzadra, and Naoki Sakai. More specifically, in the first part of the book, written by the US-based literary critic Simona Bertacco, translation occupies the central focus and is explored from the point of view of the experiential and epistemological condition of human life. In an attempt at deconstructing old schematic definitions that have conventionally described translation in terms of loss and gain, Bertacco proposes alternative descriptors of language practice and literary production related to diasporic and migrant narratives, advocating a “translation literacy” (9). Bertacco understands it as the ability to acknowledge and assess the translational aspects of the world around us. She exemplifies this through a close reading of translational works by Palestinian artist Emily Jacir and Mexican-American writer Valeria Luiselli, as well as of works by Derek Walcott, Velma Pollard, and Dionne Brand, well-known representatives of postcolonial literature.

By following the story of the installation “Translate Allah,” which began in 2003, Bertacco scrutinizes Jacir’s original attempt to read the world through translation, as the artist creates a bilingual (Italian-Arabic) network of transport through the city of Venice. The translational value of Jacir’s art is also associated with her 2016 project of a Mediterranean Via Crucis, which she recreated in a small church in the very center of Milan to contemplate the current refugee and migrant crisis. Bertacco integrates her critical view on Jacir’s embodiment of translation literacy with a selection of such significant pictures as *Stazione* (a translation of each of the twenty-four stops of the *vaporetto* along the crowded Linea 1 that crosses Venice) and *Via Crucis* (a permanent installation in Milan inside the Chiesa di San Raffaele) that may remind the reader of the multiple meanings of visual signs which symbolically evoke the current refugee and migrant crisis.

Bertacco’s attempt to problematize the connection between translation and migration is further developed across her reading of Valeria Luiselli’s book *Tell Me How It Ends* (1.4 “Translating Right(s) at Entry Point”) as a pragmatic and revelatory testimony of the author’s reflections on the screening sessions of child asylum seekers after they have crossed the US-Mexico border and on her role as a volunteer translator-interpreter for the New York court system. By

recognizing the relevance of the ethical dimension of any translational encounter, Bertacco rereads Luiselli's work as a way of making tangible the complexity – and at times the impossibility – of interpreting the worlds of the children who often cannot understand the questions they are being asked during the interviews with the interpreter in the immigration court system.

This close reading of Jacir's and Luiselli's work, which is central to conceiving translation as a key epistemological concept as well as a hermeneutic and ethical practice, also paves the way for a discussion of the expression “translated people” (Rushdie 1991). Bertacco and Vallorani examine this term both as a metaphor currently used, and perhaps abused, to describe millions of African migrants across the Mediterranean Sea who are constantly ‘translated’ on the front pages of newspapers, and as a method of accounting for the human experience of being ‘translated’ from one place to another. With their focus on translation and migration, the authors are interested in reacting against a reductive vision of translation as a mere linguistic transfer, providing instead more complex insights into its mode of the articulation of the self and the other, as well as into the sufferings of today's migrants, narrated from the point of view of the people “who have left the keys to their homes behind” (39). To this end, instead of reiterating traditional representations of “translated people” as passive migrants, the whole book unfolds alternative models for rethinking their linguistic and cultural identities by looking at such emblematic literary texts and creative artworks as those discussed in the chapter “The Postcolonial Lesson” (2). Crucially, this part sets out to explore some specific issues as the impact of colonization, local vernaculars, and accents on literary production by taking postcolonial literature as the language practice *par excellence* to emerge out of the nexus between migration and translation. Drawing on such powerful spatial metaphors of transcultural writing as “contact zone” (Pratt 1992), “third space” (Bhabha 1994), and “translation zone” (Apter 2006), Bertacco accurately selects and examines some significant “accented texts” (49) as those by Caribbean writers Derek Walcott, Velma Pollard, and Dionne Brand, all of whom exemplify distinct attitudes toward the use of Creole in literary writing.¹ Such a selection of texts reflects Bertacco and Vallorani's ambitious research aim to legitimize, among others, the linguistic status of the Creole language, which in the Western literary canon has traditionally been framed as inferior through the use of pejorative labels like ‘dialect.’ This

¹ Chapter 2 focuses on Bertacco's detailed analysis of Derek Walcott's poem “Sainte Lucie” (1976) written in St. Lucian French Creole within an English base, Pollard's “Karl” (1992) a novelette written in Anglophone Creole, and Dionne Brand's *No Language Is Neutral* (1990) and *Land to Light On* (1997), in which Standard English and Trinidadian English Creole are syncretistically fused.

is a successful move from both the theoretical and methodological point of view in the way that their critical and multimodal reading adds a new perspective to the connection between migration and translation.

Additionally, this attempt to interpret such a connection from a postcolonial and decolonial viewpoint and to rethink their related lexicon is further expanded upon throughout Part Two (“Migration as Translation”) by the Italian cultural theorist and novelist Nicoletta Vallorani. Vallorani emblematically identifies the border as a key location where migration and translation overlap and can be explored through an experiential and ethical lens. Crucially, the border is discussed by the author through a multimodal analysis of the textual and visual representation of boats, detention and identification sites, refugee camps, and temporary shelters for migrant women and unaccompanied minors. The study features photographs, films, videos and drawings documenting the experience of people when crossing borders and encountering a culture that is different from the one in which they originated. Significantly, in Chapter 3 (“Navigating the Mediterranean Sea”) Vallorani effectively shows how different Western artists have suggested diverse ways to make sense of the condition of mass migration in the specific context of the Mediterranean Sea and how these can be examined, with particular attention to representations of sea crossing. To this end, she proposes a critical reading of three intermedial texts: *Sea Sorrow* (2016), a documentary directed by the artist and activist Vanessa Redgrave that narrates the actress’s journey through several refugee camps in Italy, France, and Lebanon; *Lampedusa* (2015), a play written by the British playwright and activist Anders Lustgarten that develops around the issue of statelessness; and *Appunti per un naufragio* (*Notes for a Shipwreck*, 2017) a book by David Enia that became a highly successful theatrical monologue entitled *L’abisso* (*The Abyss*, 2018). What emerges from Vallorani’s original reading of these three works is the transformative power of their visual representation that, sometimes using the autobiographical paradigm, devises an efficient ‘code’ for translating the border experiences reflected in the eyes and bodies of the people who reach Mediterranean coasts after a terrible journey by sea.

Additionally, the author also reflects on the key question for which the artists under discussion seek an answer through their works: what is translated in the real world, when a person crosses a border? Here, the role of language is central to counteract the use of such labels as ‘refugees’, ‘migrants’, ‘asylum seekers’, or ‘unaccompanied minors’, which presume to translate the migration experience, but need to be understood for what they are in practice: “filtering words that are filtering human beings” (75). In line with such a counteraction against traditional models for the representation of migrants, Vallorani’s approach enables an unprecedented

critical analysis based on a new and decolonized vision. This is accurately illustrated in Chapter 4 (“The Gaze of Medusa”), where she embarks on the narration of visual artist’s experiences as a kind of “outsideness” that is partly indebted to what African American artist Kara Walker defines as the “sidelong glance” (91). From this standpoint, Vallorani offers a discussion about *Solo andata* (*One-way Only*, 2014), a short film by Erri De Luca and Alessandro Gassman that combines images, music, and poetry and revolves around the analogies between the Italian migrants at the end of the nineteenth century and the African people shipwrecked on the Italian coasts today. *Solo andata* serves as a case study that aims to show how far and how persistently translation is a cultural agenda of any community that leads to the normalization of the migrants and tries to make understanding possible for Italian people.

Nevertheless, this issue is complex and ambivalent, as Vallorani clearly argues: on the one hand, translating the image of the stranger into one’s own (Western) terms may neutralize the evidential and political power of the image itself; on the other, there is no understanding without sympathy. Such ambivalence is problematized in terms of what Vallorani appropriately calls “the colonial gaze” (96), in the way that its implications are made evident when we want strangers to become familiar so as to be able to cope with them. However, she alerts us to the fact that making them familiar may fatally betray their true identities.

Within this framework, Vallorani also refers to what she names “translation by analogy” (96), an intersemiotic process through which images may suggest both an act of coding the message and an effort at decoding it by counting on a series of references in the mind of the public that are consciously or unconsciously taken for granted. She identifies it while analyzing “The Game,” the latest ongoing multimedia project by Mario Badagliacca, a young Sicilian photographer who produces photos of migrants openly inspired by Renaissance paintings. Dealing with the Balkan route, officially closed by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) and the EU authorities, Badagliacca’s work is a visual ethnographic project that can be read as a translation of the suspended condition of the migrant not only over the Balkan borders, but also from a more universal perspective.

A further significant case study, full of visual dramatic potential, provided through the critical lens of Vallorani’s visual analysis, is #RefugeeCameras, the young photographer Kevin McElvaney’s project originating from the intention of providing the refugee seekers with a tool for self-representation so as to allow them to portray themselves on their own terms. The project, which consisted of putting fifteen disposable cameras into the hands of a group of migrants at Izmir, Levos, Athens, and Idomeni, is discussed for its explicitly political value, as it creates the

conditions for migrants to make themselves visible by providing their own gaze and representation of their own journey.

In conclusion, as it stands the book undoubtedly sheds light on the complexity of the nexus between translation and migration, which always requires the crossing of a border, a process that is as physical and spatial as it is symbolic and epistemological. In this light, Bertacco and Vallorani have advanced a reading of translation as ‘a relocating act’ which shifts/moves meanings, texts, and pictures, but also people and cultures, and have introduced a new pedagogical vision that helps us realize how we can counteract the practice of ‘unseeing’ the migrant. Their critical discussion of migration through translation has also provided us with a useful vocabulary to study, describe, and come to terms with the complexities of the discourse of migrant identities both in Europe and in the United States, as well as with the direct and indirect ways in which migration, like translation, touches us, both individually and collectively. Hence, the book successfully articulates translation as a vital principle of our cultural life and as an act of locating ourselves in the world by acknowledging at the same time the plurality of our languages and the complexities of our migratory processes.

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