
Paola Splendore, ed. and trans., *Passaggi a ovest: Poesia femminile anglofona della migrazione* (Bari: Palomar, 2008), 170 pp.

Reviewed by **Katherine E. Russo**

“If we pause for a moment on the meaning of ‘states’ as the ‘conditions in which we find ourselves’, then it seems we reference the moment of writing itself or perhaps even a certain condition of being upset, out of sorts: what state are we in when we start to think about the state?”: these are the words with which Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak recently redressed the relationship between language, national belonging and the state (*Who Sings The Nation State? Language, Politics, Belonging*, 2007, 2-3). The stateless, yet steeped in power, condition of Anglophone migrant women writers, their heightened experience of the discursive power of language and of linguistic belonging as rift, is the focus of the collection and translation of poems, *Passaggi a ovest: Poesia femminile anglofona della migrazione*.

The task of editing a collection of poems is not easy; all collected works inevitably exclude or level out. From the outset, the editor warns the reader against the homogenizing tendency of studies on migration and acknowledges the need for more differentiation in the way migration is represented and theorised. Yet, *Passaggi a ovest* successfully overcomes this impasse as it asks its readers to face the ‘current’ multiplication of life risking journeys across deserts and seas but at the same time to consider the colonial ‘cosmopolitan’ histories lying beneath the ordinary multiculturalism of Britain, the U.S.A., Canada and South Africa. Within the anthology, the middle passage is pluralized and embodied in the ‘passaggi/passages’ of M. NourbeSe Philip, Moniza Alvi, Gabeba Baderoon, Sujata Bhatt, Merle Collins, Choman Hardi, Grace Nichols, and Karen Press.

Passaggi a ovest bears witness to the contemporary effects of forced migration and the new routes it sets off. It opens with a difficult and engaged translation of M. NourbeSe Philip’s poem, *Discourse on the Logic of Language*, which actively deconstructs the scientific and historical discourses of racism and slavery through the sharing of what lies within the silences and erasures of official documents and edicts: the pain and anguish created by the imposition of the English father-tongue. Yet, the poet also writes about how the mother-tongue tries to repair the father-tongue by blowing, licking, forcing ‘her’ words into ‘her’ mouth. In between the father- and mother-tongue, the poet shares her attempts to ‘tongue’ English, as she babbles, stutters and stretches her tongue to appropriate it,

English,	L'inglese
is my mother tongue.	è la mia lingua madre.
A mother tongue is not	La lingua madre non è
not a foreign lan lan lang	no, una lin lin ling
language	lingua straniera
l/anguish	lingua
anguish	l/angoscia
- a foreign anguish.	- un' angoscia straniera. (18-19)

By re-installing the inescapably suffering character of her experience of hybridity, Philip enables the emergence of an interstitial agency that refuses the binary representation of social inclusion/exclusion, but does not renounce its unique ground and time. Her use of co-existing but different languages and texts is a perfect opening to the collection as it introduces the reader to the migrant condition of in-betweenness, but also to the possibility of refusing assimilation and staking out areas of difference that cannot be mediated or redrawn.

Questions of language and gender, and the troubling relationship migrant women have with language, lie at the centre of the collection. Yet the relationship with the English language is represented very differently in the poems collected by Splendore. At times, language is the repository of a nostalgic search for origins and for an imaginary homeland, as in Moniza Alvi's longing for Urdu and Hindi, the languages which could have been hers if she had grown up in Pakistan (92-93). At others, writing in English is a means to communicate the existence of a country, Kurdistan, surrounded by silence and whose sole existence lies in books about genocide; elsewhere, it is represented as the liquid space of linguistic rebirth, as in Grace Nichols's "Epilogue";

I have crossed an ocean	Ho attraversato un oceano
I have lost my tongue	la mia lingua s'è perduta
from the root of the old one	dalla vecchia radice
a new one has sprung.	una nuova è spuntata. (28-29)

Nichols explicitly voices the desire not to recover or repeat the conceits of empire, but to shift into a different state of being, appropriating the streets of London, changing its habits, customs, language, as in "The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping" and "Two Old Black Men on a Leicester Square Park Bench" (30-31, 40-41). Nevertheless, appropriating English is often a process analogous to inhabiting a language 'like a rented apartment' (Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1984). Inevitably, the mother-tongue of migrant women writers haunts the house of English as in Nichols's "We New World Blacks", "whatever tongue/ we speak/ the old ghost/ asserts itself/ in dusky echoes" (38). Habitation does not necessarily entail belonging, as Paola Splendore aptly clarifies in the introduction. Hence, although it may be chosen, migration is often a condition of permanent foreignness.

While nations reinforce their frontiers and multiply their border controls, the migrant's condition is more intricate than a mere opposition of exclusion/inclusion in the nation's imagined space. The nation-state, sovereign, limited and fraternal on an 'imagined basis' exerts and extends its sovereignty through diffused practices such as a renewed insistence on assimilation; new forms of biopolitical intervention; punitive responses to asylum seekers; the redefinition of citizenship in ethnocultural terms. Thus, English is the language of the state department, of the applications for naturalization, of access to the job market, of the discursive construction of the 'permanent migrant', of the vacuous enterprises of multiculturalism, and of othering as one is always "defined by someone else – one who cleans the toilets, burns the dead" (Moniza Alvi, "And If", 90-91). Certain bodies, certain gestures, certain desires are naturalized as authentically 'ethnic' through the reiteration of definitions and representations; thus Merle Collins emphasizes how colonial history often shapes the character of contemporary multicultural programmes:

Then is how come I become a ethnic minority?	Allora com'è che sono diventata minoranza etnica?
It sound like a germ. It sound like a worm. It sound like something that doesn't quite make the grade	Sembra un germe. Sembra un verme. Sembra qualcosa che non ce l'ha fatta
the minority in me mouth it have a vinegar taste the ethnic you know it sounding like nigger to me?	La parola minoranza sa d'aceto in bocca a me Eenica sapete è come dirmi negra. (62-63)

The racist connotations behind certain multicultural policies, the "grade" as mark and as colour chart, the woman behind the term "nigger" (significantly translated by Splendore with the feminine grammatical gender in Italian), reveal a country that struggles to come to terms with the official diagnosis of institutional racism (Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, 2005). As in Collins's poem, the language of the poems collected in *Passaggi a ovest* is always double. It is the echo of a movement into alterity or, as Splendore notes, it is "a voyage that has taken them far from home to inhabit the body of the foreigner" (my translation, 9). Hence it may happen that a mother is considered a foreigner in her own house, as in the lines by Choman Hardi, a poet from Iraqi Kurdistan:

I can hear them talking, my children fluent English and broken Kurdish And whenever I disagree with them they will comfort each other by saying: Don't worry about mum, she's Kurdish. Will I be the foreigner in my own home?	Li sento parlare, i miei figli inglese sciolto e curdo stentato. E ogni volta che ci troviamo in disaccordo loro si consolano a vicenda dicendo <i>Non fare caso alla mamma, lei è curda.</i> Diventerò straniera in casa mia? (162-163)
---	---

Language may be one of the few repositories of identity and belonging for those whose greatest fear is that of “entering the ranks of invisible and stateless citizens” (my translation, 14). The different, at times conflicting, layers of signification in these poems are a clue to the writers’ agency, thus their performativity and rhetoric is crucial, since by erasing difference translation may reinstate the founding violence at work within hegemonic languages. As Spivak notes, translation may be defined as the experience of contained alterity in an unknown language. Translations should sketch the itinerary of the trace that the subaltern author has left. In every translation, she urges readers to hear the faint whisper of what could not be said in order to mark the sites where the subaltern was effaced (*Outside in the Teaching Machine*, 1993). Conversely, feminist translation studies have revealed how translators actively rewrite texts by following Barbara Godard’s and Sherry Simon’s proposition that feminist writing and translation meet in their common desire to foreground female subjectivities in the production of meaning. Splendore is an acclaimed translator and is not afraid of using Italian turns of the tongue, recognizing her involvement and investment in translation (see Sujata Bhatt, *Il colore della solitudine*, 2005; Ingrid de Kok, *Mappe del corpo*, 2008). Yet, an ethical aspiration safeguards the translations in this collection as the translator ‘surrenders to the text’ by relinquishing the desire of visibility which dominates current debates in Translation studies. While feminist methodologies often entail a reconceptualization of the translator as writer, Splendore’s translations are dominated by a desire to listen and collaborate; thus they question the relative cultural homogeneity of womanhood suggested by feminist translation studies. In her translator’s note, Splendore states that the poems with translation on the opposite page are a testimony of “the original in its integrity” but also of the ‘necessary’ “surrenderings and losses of translation” (my translation, 15). Translation thus becomes the space of a voluntary relinquishing of self to others, the page a transnational conversation.