TRAVELLING MUSES
Women, Ancient Grammars, and Contemporary ARTivism in Refugees' Tales

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Abstract – This essay reflects on the issue of cultural translation as a 'third space', a site where, as Bhabha suggests, translation, decolonisation, and location or relocation are tied together (Bhabha, Rutherford 1990). A specific political stance is taken, and flexible critical tools – drawing on translation studies and cultural studies, migration studies, performance studies, visual studies, and film studies – are adopted to show some of the ways in which many contemporary artists have been trying to account for the risks, losses, difficulties, and hopes implied in forced migration. Within the context of the constant relocation that migrant people experience, the effort at developing a dialogic relationship between languages and cultures has been gradually shaping a 'grammar' of representation that is new but built on familiar signs and images. Particularly in the Mediterranean Sea, forced migration has been going on since ancient times, though the changes in its nature have multiplied the number of stranger-in-need, whatever their country of origin. The representation of the migrants of today through the alphabet provided by classical Greek literature is one of the strategies currently used in activist creative and political practices. It helps to translate the experience of migration adapting and reshaping stories that belong to the Western reservoir of myths and traditions and combining the creative drive with the need to be active in the political field. In what is currently defined 'ARTivism', the text/work of art becomes a political gesture and draws its meaning from a commitment to social justice (Pulitano 2022, pp. 1-21). The analysis that follows is primarily focused on two documentary films resulting from two theatrical experiences, both inspired by classical tragedies (Sophocles's *Antigone* and Euripides's *The Trojan Women*). It aims at showing how the blueprint offered by the classics builds up as a shared semiotic system connecting ancient Greece, contemporary Middle East, and the European audience of today.

Keywords: cultural translation; migrant theatre; documentary filmmaking; Syrian women; ARTivism.

1. Spartacus in disguise

"We need another Spartacus": these words sound surprising, framed within the context in which they are uttered and in connection with the person who speaks them. They are drawn from a recent documentary film by Benedetta Argentieri, *I Am the Revolution* (2018), developing around the life of three

women (an Afghan politician, a commander of the Syrian Democratic Army, and an Iraqi feminist). The person speaking is the Iraqi activist Yanar Mohamed, her voice interweaving with that of Selay Ghaffar, from Afghanistan, and Rojda Felat, from Syrian Kurdistan. Symbolically, in putting forward her testimonial, each of these women has 'become' a new Spartacus. Each of them has succeeded in transforming her vulnerability – as a social subject – into one more tool for addressing continuing injustices, as Spartacus did. The Greek hero, then, becomes a *sign* in a language that can translate east to west making a 'foreign' culture more understandable to the European audience. In practice, when putting forward the Spartacus metaphor, Yanar Mohamed chooses an alphabet – the classical one – that makes the 'text' of her fight more understandable to the West, though simplifying it. This translational act is encased in an artefact (a film) that is linguistically articulated at three levels: it is made by a Westerner (Benedetta Argentieri), spoken in English (neither the mother tongue of the three women nor of the director), and set in the Middle East. The film as a discourse on postcolonialism and power is therefore polysemic and polyvocal, openly political, and, in short, an act of artistic activism. What puts the message across, from the addresser to the addressee, is the communal knowledge we have – as Mediterranean people – of the stories, histories, and storytelling flourishing around this closed basin since ancient times. As Chambers points out, this is the site "where the Occident and the Orient, the North and the South, are evidently entangled in a cultural and historical net cast over centuries, even millennia" (Chambers 2008, p. 3). I want to reflect on Chambers assumption of "the shifting currents and cultures of the Mediterranean" (Chambers 2008, p. 23) that "repeatedly draw our attention to the labor of translation: to confronting what arrives from abroad while simultaneously announcing the historical trauma of time that refuses to solidify in the existing state of knowledge" (Chambers 2008, p. 5).

Within this context, my analysis is aimed at showing how current ARTivism[1] finds a productive ground in the commonalities of stories that is being increasingly exploited to create a communal *grammar*. More often than not, the act of recovering a diachronic perspective capable of building a bridge with the remote past of the Mediterranean Sea has a double purpose: on the one hand, it reinforces the universal reasons and consequences of migration (loss of belonging, risk of death, fear, uprooting, and so on and so forth); on the other, it aims at composing a text in which ancient stories are bricks and mortar for building new visions and most of all a renewed form of solidarity. The process of recasting Greek myths or ancient tragedies can be

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[1] In her *Mediterranean ARTivism*, Pulitano explains the origin of the term, locating it in a manifesto published as early as 1976, written by Carlos Almaraz within the frame of Chicano/a cultures. The text was included in an issue of *ChismeArte* (Pulitano 2022, p. 164).

seen as a kind of cultural translation (Baer 2020, p. 139): it includes language, but it also goes beyond it and produces a strong impact on the whole life and attitude of the people involved in the experience. As I hope to show, whenever the classics are recast in the context of current migrations, the resulting text is potently polyvocal and intensely rooted in the idea of a culture that is, literally, a 'network' of shared meanings (Williams 1961). While "transcreating the myth" – a definition used by Alessandra Rizzo in her analysis of *Queens of Syria* (Rizzo 2018, pp. 150-179) –, the participants in the recasting process are led to devise new codes, vitally connected to ancient times (hence the universal flavour), but also brand-new in the cultural and linguistic hybridisation they require (hence the specificity of each artistic work). However diversified the exploitation of the classics in the current narrative of migration may be, the recasting process is grounded in one purpose: connecting the West and the rest of the world and therefore starting the process towards a new understanding of the very notion of otherness.

A step in this direction and a meaningful example of what may happen to an average elderly, middle class, educated Western man when he is put in touch with the world of refugee seekers is provided by Jenny Erpenbeck's *Gehen, ging, gegangen* (2015). The protagonist of the novel, Richard, is a retired professor of Classics. In need of something useful to do with his free time, he starts working as a volunteer in a refugee centre for migrants in Berlin. At a loss when facing a universe totally unfamiliar to him, he finds in the classical Greek stories of gods and heroes a bridge and an imaginary repertoire making it possible for him to communicate with the African refugees. What he used to teach to his students is gradually transformed into a shared alphabet, where the myth of the Gorgon can be adapted to the paradigms of Berber mythology (Erpenbeck 2015, p. 180) and the writings of Seneca, Plato, Ovid, Empedocles become useful in approaching the issues of reception, hospitality, and integration (Erpenbeck 2015, p. 299). In so doing, Richard literally *creates* a new grammar and a new language that allow him to communicate with people coming from the other side of the Mediterranean Sea (Bertacco, Vallorani 2021, pp. 72-74). The notion of translation as world culture is obviously implied here, but even more relevant appears the opportunity that narratives of this kind offer to view the current situation in a different, less West-centred light.

This possibility seems to be very much the focus of narratives set on the coastline of the Mediterranean Sea and portraying the journey northward from the former colonial African world. The play *Lampedusa* (2015), by Anders Lustgarten, develops around the clash between the ancient solidarity among people living on the coasts of this closed basin and the resistance to a tragedy that is unacceptable from the ethic point of view and unbearable from the economic and social one. The play is composed of two alternating

monologues, developing in totally different settings: Denise, a debt collector, lives on the outskirts of Leeds and experiences the fear, hate, and unease of poor Western people towards the migrants (who steal their jobs and women, as the saying goes), while Stefano is a fisherman from Lampedusa. This latter character is particularly relevant for my purposes here. A seaman of a family of seamen, Stefano is now doomed to recover dead bodies in the Mediterranean Sea. In terms of his own descent, Stefano inherits the legacy of the sea as a blood tie that is not to be broken. As he proudly declares, "My father was a fisherman. And his father before him. And before and before. I always thought, always knew, I'd make my living at sea" (Lustgarten 2015, p. 7). To account for his devotion, he goes back to the ancient times when the Mediterranean Sea was "Caesar's highway" and could be literally taken as "the origin of the world. Hannibal's road to glory" (Lustgarten 2015, p. 3). Over time, however, what Gilroy defines the "colonial hydrarchy" (2014, p. 51) of the past has proved an increasingly catastrophic process, transforming the source of life and beauty into a gigantic grave. Now that "the Med is dead" (Lustgarten 2015, p. 7), Stefano works at recovering corpses from the sea, drowned migrants who were trying to reach safety and did not make it. He does not stop belonging to the sea and finding there the source of his identity, but at the same time – as sadly happens in the real world – he constantly tries to recast the ancient meaning of the Mediterranean Sea as life and beauty into a totally different present. And again, the only possible rescue strategy resides in relationships, the network of shared human universal values. For Stefano, the encounter with the other – the Malian refugee Modibo – is mediated by a common belonging to the same history and a shared ability to resist the tragedy in the name of the commonality determined by their being both Mediterranean people. Fragile as this assumption may be (as the saying goes, "una faccia, una razza" [same face, same race]), it states a new principle of hope (Bertacco, Vallorani 2021, pp. 77-79).

Newness always keeps a relation to the past. In this respect, it does exist a strong connection of the current narratives with the ancient Greek myths. These latter, however, have to be recollected and relocated in the grammar of the current world. Memories are the focus of John Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* (2010). This poetic cine-essay on the Black Diaspora in the British Midlands chooses as a guideline the epic of Homer and more specifically the figures of the muses: each section of the film is devoted to one of them. The muses belong to Greek mythology and represent the power of memory. Recontextualised in the rainy, cold landscapes of England and articulated through a great quantity of intermedial references, they provide a tool to understanding the process of Black Diaspora within the universal dimension of the experience of exile. The historical process that is portrayed here – the one related to the so-called 'Windrush Generation' – is by no

means understandable if not embedded in the line of time. The ushering of wave after wave of migrants from former British colonies to a nation in deep economic crisis, after World War II, does not differ from the journey of economic migrants to the Greek poleis. That ancient story actually anticipates the issues currently experienced in Europe, and in Italy in particular, where migration is fiercely resisted though at the same time intensely needed to support the economy.

The fact that the core of the process appears to have stayed unchanged over a great length of time must not hide or remove the awareness that the current migrations are different, and they emphatically call for new codes. In all the works and artistic projects mentioned so far, however different they may be, there is a common tension towards the creation of a renewed grammar that is shaped by recasting the classics into a brand-new context, where the exile takes on a different flavour, though still rooted in the same basic conceptual paradigms. We are all Mediterranean people, whatever it means. We are not exactly the same, but the artists I am considering in my work, and the case studies that follow, try to draw on similarities rather than differences. In *The Return of Odysseus*, Irad Malkin reflects on "the ambivalence implied in exploration and protocolonization" (Malkin 1998, p. 4) and points out that the imagined community of the Mediterranean Sea holds up to a point. To work properly in the artistic and activist practice, this commonality is to be reshaped: it keeps the same starting point – for example, a classical tragedy – but needs the revitalising contribution of new languages, born from the old ones.

The Greek princesses and queens now come from postcolonial or neocolonial countries.

2. The two Antigones

Sophocles' *Antigone* was written and performed in 441 BCE. The original tragedy, belonging to the Theban trilogy, tells the story of Antigone, who disobeys the new ruler of Thebes, Creon, by deciding to bury her brother Polynices. The act is a crime because it goes against the prohibition of the king, who wants to refuse burial since Polynices had fought against the city. When caught and brought to face the ruler, Antigone denies none of her acts and is sentenced to death. Haemon, the son of King Creon and Antigone's beloved, tries to save her but fails and consequently kills himself.

Patently enough, the tragedy is not only a story of brotherly love and lovers' mutual devotion but also a reflection on the conflict between the law of the state and the law of the heart. Probably for this reason, the play has often been recast and adapted to approach the same topic in different contexts. A version of Sophocles's tragedy is the central focus of a play by

South African Athol Fugard, *The Island* (1973), where two cellmates on Robben Island, while preparing a performance of *Antigone*, exploit the ancient text as a symbolic canvas to tell the story of the injustice they are suffering. Another equally effective version of Antigone's myth is told in a novel by Mexican writer Sara Uribe, *Antigòna Gonzales* (2012), which develops around a strong female character frantically searching for her brother Tadeo, connected with drug trafficking and suddenly disappeared.

In 2017, when Ubah Cristina Ali Farah chooses the same tragedy as the hub of her theatrical project, she is fully aware of the previous artistic experiences. A Somali-born refugee currently based in Belgium but living in Italy at the time, she decides to collaborate with the director Giuseppe Massa and the Cultural Association Sutta Scupa, to organise a theatrical workshop involving both professionals and real-life migrants. Understandably, the purpose is double: the play is helping the migrants to face and possibly overcome the trauma of exile and at the same time is contributing to help first the professionals and then the audience to understand the fate of migrants framing it in the familiar classical tragedy of a woman willing to bury her rebellious brother against the rules of the king. The text of the play collates fragments of the original tale and testimonies of the refugees.[2] This creative strategy seems to be effective: Ali Farah, Giuseppe Massa, and the actresses and actors succeed in showing the absurdity of a law when it is applied with no respect for the compassion, piety, sorrow, trauma that accompany the death of a beloved relative. Antigone faces her fate unveiling the hypocrisy of king Creon's position:

> ANTIGONE: Non parlate del destino voi, ma piuttosto di chi mi condanna, innocente. Voi che avete seguito Creonte nella sua guerra di invasione, voi che fingendo di esportare la democrazia non siete interessati che a difendere le vostre ricchezze e a rapinare gas e petrolio, vedrete le stive delle vostre navi tornare non piene, ma vuote.[3] (*Quadro* 8)

The connection to the current process that has brought exiles and refugee seekers to the coasts of Italy is made here, by Antigone herself, who later on adds: "Nessuno accoglie più gli esuli o i naufraghi che la tempesta getta sulla spiaggia come relitti o tesori" [Nobody welcomes the exiles or the castaways the storm throws on the beach like wrecks or treasures anymore] (*Quadro* 9). Her ability to feel a form of commonality with the forgotten works as a fitting

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[2] The script does not exist in print. It was sent to me by the author herself. The tragedy is divided into nine *quadri* [frames]. In the following quotations from the script, I am keeping this reference to make it possible to identify specific sections of the play.

[3] [ANTIGONE: Do not speak of fate but rather of those who condemn me, innocent. You who followed Creon in his invasion, you who pretend to export democracy but are only keen on defending your riches and plundering gas and oil, you will see the holds of your ships return not full, but empty].

reply to the chorus, which translates the shared reaction of the community and the politically enforced common sense evoking the traditional fear of invasion:

> CORO: I clandestini penetreranno i nostri confini e invaderanno le nostre case, prenderanno le nostre mogli e sgozzeranno i nostri figli, il cielo striato, il sole dietro una grata.[4] (*Quadro* 6)

Antigone Power was performed in 2018, with the support of the Municipality of Palermo. The audience perceived the familiarity of the classical grammar and at the same time they were brought to see the universal aspects of the tragedy occurring today in the Mediterranean Sea. Ali Farah is an exile herself. She can fully understand the many ways in which the fact of having been obliged to leave one's motherland implies a dual impulse: the desire to be 'integrated' in the country of arrival and an intense commitment to the culture and tradition of one's motherland. Negotiating between these two drives is not easy. Cultural translation can provide some effective tools, though, as Sakai and Solomon remind us, universalism and particularity tend to interweave in unpredictable ways (Sakai, Solomon 2006, pp. 150-153). What is to be fought is the ever-present tendency – basically human and therefore understandable – to reduce the stranger to a generalising stereotype (Sakai, Solomon 2006, pp. 155-160). Individualisation exercises a strong resistance against the tendency to simply 'transport' the other into a Western context (Vallorani 2017, p. 43-59). The resilience of 'the foreign' – meaning both foreign human beings and foreign forms of culture – is not only to be taken into account but also understood and accepted.

"We are not princesses" – states one of the six refugee women protagonists of a recent artistic work resembling Ali Farah's *Antigone Power* – "No one knows us nor would say anything if we died. Even in death there is inequality" (Azzam, Auger 2018, 01:09:30-01:09:37). The quotation is drawn from one of the last sequences of Itab Azzam and Bridgette Auger's *We Are Not Princesses*, a documentary film released in 2018 and combining realistic scenes and animation. The film develops around the story of six brave women, all of them Syrian, living as refugees in Beirut. All of them are involved in a theatrical project aimed at recasting Sophocles's tragedy in a play with a new title, openly positing similarities and differences: *Antigone of Syria*. The film results from the experience of working on the play at the same time giving voice to the tales of loss, love, desperation, but also hope that the women carry with them.[5]

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[4] [Clandestine migrants will enter our borders and invade our homes, take our wives and slaughter our children, the sky streaked, the sun behind a grate].

[5] All the three performances of the play took place in Beirut at Al Madina Theatre in 2014.

The documentary opens on a sequence of rehearsal: Israa, one of the characters, is trying to memorise a part of the play while standing at a window. In the background, we see the dilapidated landscape of Beirut and we hear the sound of men at work:

> ISRAA: Antigone is to be taken to a deserted place and imprisoned in a cave. They will leave her very little food and she will die there, slowly. Honouring the dead is a noble thing, but those in power do not tolerate being disobeyed. Your strong will has led you astray […] Chill out man! I'm rehearsing here. Get out of there. (Azzam, Auger 2018, 00:10-00:47)

The everyday life of a refugee and the effort to frame it into a more universal and timeless tragedy – that of forced migration – combine through the interweaving of personal recollections and segments of the original, classical play. The film is divided into sections, each devoted to one of the women.

Fedwa and Heba are mother and daughter. Fedwa lost a son as a martyr, and she was not given the possibility to attend his funeral. Heba takes care of a cat which ironically "has a passport, his health certificate and he is vaccinated" (Azzam, Auger 2018, 05:48). Israa is a rapper and cherishes the high-heeled shoes she wears when she runs away from Lebanon or when she visits relatives: she hopes they will take her to freedom. Mona is mother to two children. She is introduced at the beginning of the film, with her kids and husband, who playfully objects to her wearing eyeshadow and smoking in front of the camera. Zayna, married at 14 and now 19, loses her face veil in her first few days in Beirut and is forbidden to go out: "No face veil, no going out" (Azzam, Auger 2018, 21:00). When she eventually succeeds in getting permission to take her sick child to a doctor, she dreams of being "a bird in a cage that had been freed. I wish that I had wings so I could fly back to Syria" (Azzam, Auger 2018, 23:21-23:35). Wafa, now 29 and married at 15, is mother to five children and feels she resembles Haemon because she has been deprived of the possibility of romantic love. All of the women inflect Antigone's tale so as to be able to tell *their own* experiences, but they are fully aware that "Antigone's story is written, completed and finished. But we're still writing our stories" (Azzam, Auger 2018, 55:07-55:24). They feel they have literally become the characters in the play, and they recast the tragedy in their own experience of refugees:

> "I've become Antigone".
> "Do you think Antigone smoked?"
> […]
> "She definitely smoked".
> "I only started when my brother died. I didn't smoke much before".
> (Azzam, Auger 2018, 24:45-26:44).

In terms of language, too, the film is hybrid. It is spoken in Arabic and

subtitled in English. The names of the women are also given in both languages. So, in the in-between space created by the theatrical workshop, a new language is gradually being shaped, and it is fruitfully connected to the shared past, though recast in the world of today. The hybrid memory bank that is built through this kind of artistic projects is a composite archive, where memory becomes an active method of resistance. The play had an enormous impact, both in terms of the work leading up to it and in the actual performance. It changed the lives of the people involved in the experience and it also helped the audience to create relations between the ancient tale and the current situation.

3. Proud queens

A similar process of cultural, linguistic, and symbolic translation is the key to a more complex project. Started in 2013 by Charlotte Eagan and William Stirling through a partnership between Refuge Production and Oxfam, *The Trojan Women Project* is currently one of the most active initiatives involving refugees of different origins in theatrical projects related to Euripides's *The Trojan Women* and resulting in theatrical performances touring around Britain in the following years. One of the first steps of the project took place in a Jordanian refugee camp, in the fall of 2013. Just over 50 refugee women from Syria were involved in a theatrical workshop primarily meant to help them cope with the sense of loss, anomy, and desperation springing from their having been obliged to leave a country in war. The group was led to approach and then stage *The Trojan Women* in a play that in fact premiered in 2016 and was directed by Zoe Lafferty. The operation was built up on the analogies between the past and present condition of the Syrian refugee women involved in the project and the fate of Hecuba, Cassandra, and the others.

What appeared clear right from the beginning was precisely the wide spectrum of analogies between the fate of Euripides's Trojan queens and princesses, doomed to become slaves at the end of the war, and the condition of Syrian women crossing the border and hoping to reach safety. The original play dates back to 315 BCE. Focused on the Peloponnesian war and conceived as a protest against the Athenian crimes, the tragedy is easily intended as an antiwar play. Even the dynamics of the war, if you look at it, are quite similar to what is happening in many ongoing conflicts, both in Europe and in other continents: an independent island refuses to accept subjugation, and as a consequence its resistance is brutally crushed. The men are killed, and the women and children enslaved. What makes the difference in Euripides's tragedy as well as in the *Trojan Women Project* is the point of view that is chosen. These are the disasters of war seen through a female

gaze. In the same way as Antigone may easily reflect and provide a blueprint for an updated representation of the conflict between law and empathy, the Trojan women end up by portraying the war as death and destruction, and this kind of representation can effectively highlight the plight of Syrian refugee women. In more ways than one, Euripides's classical tragedy *The Trojan Women* literally becomes, in this project, a *grammar* to translate the journey and condition of Syrian women, leaving behind them – like Hecuba, Cassandra, and the others – their cities turned to dust and their men killed or imprisoned. Translation – and a revised notion of both the word and the process – comes into play here. More than anything else, what comes front stage in the process is the role of Syrian women, literally *becoming* active agents of translation and therefore pushing towards the revision of translation theory and practice that Loredana Polezzi suggests in her *Translation and Migration* (Polezzi 2012, p. 353).

Though the theatrical performance is the final purpose of the workshop, I want to work primarily on a by-product of it: the documentary film resulting from sequences shot as backstage of the work on Euripides's tragedy. Yasmin Fedda's *Queens of Syria* (2014) documents the making of the play in the Jordanian camp closely and beautifully, providing an insight into the process leading to the final performance. In approaching the text, I want to go back to the notion of translation as declined by a robust line of thinking that approaches the study of 'the contemporary' from the vantage point of the aftermath of European colonialism and within the frame of Mignolo's decoloniality as a "project that encompasses both, as Fanon puts it, the colonized and the colonizer and therefore, emancipation and liberation" (Mignolo, 2007, p. 457). We know that ARTivism, as the neologism implies, consists in producing artistic works resulting from a political commitment to determine a change in unfair social conditions, and, as Carlos Almaraz suggests in his manifesto, "art could be the catalyst to produce that change" (Almaraz 1976, p. 50). Within this frame and focusing on the issue of current migrations, a preliminary awareness of the role, weight, and long-term consequences of colonial power is needed. The epistemic privileges focused on by Mignolo (2009, p. 3) also requires the transdisciplinary approach adopted by Pierpaolo Frassinelli in his *Borders, Media Crossings and Translations* (2020). The issue of language as a dialogic tool comes forefront and calls for new perspectives. As Rafael claims, "[a] metalanguage is thus a medium for meditating upon mediation and mediumship, allowing you to reflect on reflection" (Rafael 2016, p. 7).

Strictly speaking, *Queens of Syria* uses three languages: the original play, in Greek, is translated into Arabic, and the film is spoken in Arabic and subtitled in English. To this, the languages of cinema are to be added, which means visuals, point of view, casting, montage and editing, soundtrack. The resulting text is understandably polyvocal and interweaves different codes,

positing translation as a complex, multivocal process. Within this theoretical horizon,

> the reflection on translation as the location, or articulation, of a non-national idea of culture has become central in translation studies, literary studies, and postcolonial studies. In its earlier definition, cultural translation emerged as the modus operandi of postcolonial and diasporic cultures, cultures that can be pictured as translations with no retrievable originals and whose system of values is caught in a wandering status between the precolonial, the colonial, and postcolonial or diasporic orders of knowledge and existence. (Bertacco, Vallorani 2021, p. 26)

I want to see if the operation taking place along the process – which I consider in all respects a translation – satisfies the requirements of what Homi Bhabha re-defines as the '*Aufgabe*' of the translator in his very recent re-reading of Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator" (2021). What I want to understand is this: in the actual performative practice, how does *Queens of Syria* exploit the 'grammar' of a Greek tragedy as a system of signs familiar to the European audience? And, if in this case the '*Aufgabe*' of the translator consists in providing an effective representation of forced migration today as to make it approachable and understandable, does this translation "liv[e] up to its aspiration and duties" (Bhabha 2021, p. xi)?

   I think it does. The Syrian women, situated in Jordan in precarious living conditions, act in the play, and in so doing they translate – both linguistically and culturally – their experience for the Western public into the words and acts of Euripides's *Trojan Women*. The process is bidirectional: the Trojan women are re-coded as current refugees, and the Syrian women are put into the shoes of the Trojan deportees. The '*Aufgabe*' of translation is, for the Syrian women, a form of self-articulation and agency. It does not normalise their experience, but it proposes "new ways of 'seeing' and 'hearing' each other" (Inghilleri 2017, p. 27).

   In a sequence of the film (Fedda 2014, 28:22-31:00), an extremely moving and meaningful moment of the theatrical workshop is portrayed. The Syrian women are encouraged to draw maps of their journey, somehow adding further specificity to the etymological meaning of the Latin *transducere*, which also conveys, according to Polezzi, the sense of a forced relocation and implies at least the threat of violence (Polezzi 2012, p. 349). The telling of each individual journey through words and images is a story of translation and losses, differently articulated for each woman and collectively felt as a tragedy. There is no hierarchy of grief: only differences. In some cases, the refugee women have to be helped to write because they cannot do it by themselves: they need a 'translator' able to put their words into written form. A multiple process of encoding/decoding – quoting Stuart Hall's description of the journey of discourse (1993, pp. 90-103) – is openly at play

here. The interweaving of oral/written language, drawings, discussion, collaborative production of texts, and cooperative construction of a new play (Middle Eastern) from an old one (Western) account for a notion of language that is mobile, flexible, constantly reshaped, and explicitly 'accented'. I am borrowing this last term (*accented*) from Anita Starosta, who labels as "accented criticism" a "new orientation for humanistic inquiry" (Starosta 2013, p. 174) where translation is intended not as normalisation but quite the opposite: litmus paper to make irreducible differences more visible. In this version of *The Trojan Women*, we recognise, as Westerners, a familiar paradigm (women and children as war victims), but we also fully understand that what we are watching is a Greek tragedy 'accented' in Arabic. The Syrian women literally become active agents of translation (Polezzi 2012, p. 353), working on "a sense of commonality that has been developing since ancient times among the civilizations flourishing around (and mostly because of) the sea and that has gradually shaped the feeling that we do belong to the same race" (Bertacco, Vallorani 2021, pp. 69-70). At the same time, the fact that some refugee women appropriate an ancient Western text and reshape it represents an effective reaction to the Western tendency to superimpose some pre-digested and culturally authorised stereotypes onto the identities of the other. The Bakhtinian 'outsidedness' often quoted by Polezzi (2012, p. 354) is kept unchanged and raises serious questions about the very notion of 'foreignness' and its supposed normalisation. In short, in the process of combining a Greek masterpiece and a current tragedy, *Queens of Syria* functions as a multilayered translated text, resulting in a political gesture, able to interrogate, through art, the policy regulating refugees care and resettlement in Europe. It also encourages us to keep the 'fact of translation' front and centre in any discussion of migration proposing a multilingual and multicultural testimonial to the experience of Syrian women, both ordinary and high-rank, exploiting a far more ancient artistic document focused on a different but similar tragedy and involving different but similar women. It is new but *not* new. And it may lead to the "understanding of translation as a complex generative site of negotiation and world-making, the very place at which 'newness enters the world'" (Baer 2020, p. 158).[6]

Translation as a metaphor and a process that is at the same time transitional and translational vitally relates to migration. The act of "carrying over" amounts to displacement as "transportation, slavery, colonization" (Hall 1994, p. 228).

Over time, what Farrier defines as "a form of double-voiced discourse" (Farrier 2011, p. 6) multiplies in a rhizomatic collection of voices, texts, languages, and translations, all of them witnessing the collective effort to

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[6] Here Baer is quoting – and partly criticising – Bhabha (1994).

give a political voice to current migrancy. The specificity of the context I am referring to adds further complexities to this line of reasoning. Slowly developed into a collection of global smuggling hubs, the Mediterranean Sea is the site where, diachronically, a broad reservoir of images and myths related to migrations have developed over time, interweaving and unravelling around internal and international forms of displacement.

Queens of Syria gets a grip on a whole set of myths and stories, in the version provided by an ancient Greek dramatist, and exploits it as a metaphor and a Rosetta stone to translate a current experience. Does this mean using translation as a metaphor? Bhabha, Hall, and Rushdie would probably say yes. However, I would suggest that the implications are more complex: abusing the use of translation as a metaphor would probably result in oversimplification and ultimately risk of neutralizing the political impact of the operation. *Queens of Syria* is not relevant because Euripides's tragedy is exploited as a metaphor to translate the suffering of Syrian women, but because, starting from the realisation of a general, maybe universal analogy, the text proceeds to see what happens if you switch from Greek to Arabic (and to drawings, gestures, performative actions) while framing the process of staging the play in the context of the director's task, which consists not only and not simply in translating an ancient text but also in performing a series of complex operations, namely convincing the women, examining their experiences, reassuring them, listening to them, restoring their freedom of expression. In short, *respecting* them and their being 'foreigners'.

Foreign is the female body whose face is covered or faded in the process of editing the film: it is not foreign in itself, in terms of ethnicity, gender, class, age, but because it maintains the 'signs' of a different culture, signs that stand out when invading the European scene and re-speaking European words. In this process, the theatrical scene epitomises the border as the place where, according to Bhabha, "something begins its 'presencing'" (Bhabha 1994, p. 7).

The *Trojan Women Project* is still ongoing. A new documentary, *The World to Hear* (Ginsborg, Sloan 2017), focuses on the production of the *Trojan Women*, on tour in the UK and directed by Zoe Lafferty. Co-produced by the Young Vic Theatre, the play involves 13 women from the original play, who in the meanwhile have succeeded in obtaining visas to come to the UK. The film, directed by Charlotte Ginsborg and Anatole Sloan and commissioned by Trojan Women Scotland, reports on the tour of the play around Britain, thus focusing on the relations between the Syrian women and the British audience and again providing reflections on the cultural process of translating the experience of forced migration for a Western public.

Polezzi emphatically claims that a "connection between migration, translation and political action" is now a must-do: "we need to investigate

how these three items throw some light on the biopolitics of language" (Polezzi 2012, p. 347). In this respect, both *We Are Not Princesses* and *Queens of Syria* offer a number of examples of the possible ways of engaging oneself in staging actions to change policies, or locate humanitarian, political, and even financial responsibilities for the enormous tragedy taking place around and in the Mediterranean Sea (Pulitano 2022, pp. 23-40). The interweaving of oral/written language, drawings, discussion, collaborative production of texts and cooperative construction of a new play (Middle Eastern) from an old one (Western) account for a notion of language that is mobile, flexible, constantly reshaped, and explicitly 'accented', i.e. able to provide "new orientation for humanistic inquiry" (Starosta 2013, p. 174), where translation is intended not as normalisation but quite the opposite: litmus paper to make irreducible differences more visible, therefore a new grammar for ARTivism.

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