

A Planetary Via Crucis Migration and Translation in the Work of Emily Jacir and Valeria Luiselli

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Abstract This essay explores the nexus between translation and migration via two works of art that deal explicitly with the “migration crisis” in Europe and North America. *Via Crucis* is an art installation by Emily Jacir (2016) in the Chiesa di San Raffaele in Milan, while *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* by Valeria Luiselli (2017) records the author’s reflections on the screening sessions of child asylum seekers after they have crossed the US-Mexico border. In both texts, translation is central to how the stories of migration are told and, this essay argues, it should be central also to the way in which they are read and received.

Keywords Migration. Translation. Reading. Emily Jacir. Valeria Luiselli.

Summary 1 A Mediterranean Via Crucis. – 2 A Pan-American Via Dolorosa. – 3 Translation Literacy and Global Citizenship.



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It is not compassion that is called for but citizenship - the spectator's responsibility toward what is visible.

Sarah Sentilles, *Draw Your Weapons*, 189

1 Introduction

In her powerful book *Draw Your Weapons*, Sarah Sentilles reflects on art and violence, on the ways in which images - particularly documentary photographs - affect us and alter the way we understand the world. "Photographs", she writes, "allow viewers to be somewhere they could not otherwise be, to see what would otherwise remain invisible. The theorist Ariella Azoulay calls photographs 'transit visas,' and [...] she insists the camera grants a kind of citizenship that transcends borders" (Sentilles 2017, 187-9). At the core of Sentilles's scholarship, writing and activism is a commitment to investigating the roles that language, images, and cultural practices play in supporting oppression, violence or social transformation, and she advocates for what she calls "a visual literacy", that is, a pedagogical project that questions received ways of seeing and puts the emphasis on the viewer's agency. Sentilles' project, especially her analysis of our ability to respond as well as our responsibility as viewers, aligns with the preoccupation with a 'translation literacy' that I would like to articulate in the pages that follow.

Through a close reading of works by Emily Jacir and Valeria Luiselli, in this essay I will articulate the possibility of a translation literacy as a responsible way of reading stories of migration in the present. Even more than photographs, in fact, translation grants us transit visas to different cultures, places, and epochs, while training our hearts and our minds as citizens of the world. A transit visa is a powerful image for a view of translation grounded in stories of migration; it subverts the dynamic between sameness and otherness which is often implicit in conventional views of translation and emphasizes, instead, the foreignness in the receiver (i.e. the potential traveler). Jacir's and Luiselli's works grant us such temporary transit visas: they show us a picture of the world as heavily translational and a picture of ourselves as agents of translation but also, simultaneously, as 'translated people'.

The descriptor "translated people", made famous by Salman Rushdie in the early 1990s (Rushdie 1991, 17), has prophetically stretched to symbolise the condition of an ever-increasing number of subjects

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of different kinds, from common travellers to work migrants, from cosmopolitan globe-trotters to immigrants, from asylum seekers to deportees. By connecting the act of translation to the physical movement of people, Rushdie was pointing to a simple yet important fact. It is not only texts, ideas and languages that are translated, but human beings, too. And this is at the centre of so many news stories that we read, watch, and consume every day. How do we understand these stories? Through which schemas of the world? Using translation as the method with which to approach today's stories of migration, this paper questions what literary and cultural criticism might look like if representation is understood as experimental and experiential, and what it does to critics' long-held categories regarding cultures, people, and languages.

2 A Mediterranean Via Crucis

Born in Palestine, raised and educated between Rome, Ramallah and New York, Emily Jacir has built a compelling oeuvre that explores translation, mobility, resistance, and cultural erasure in the Mediterranean region. Her work investigates personal and collective movement and its implications on the physical and social experience of trans-Mediterranean space and time, in particular between Italy and Palestine as the two countries Jacir considers her homelands. Her work has received many accolades and awards, but it has also met with protests and censorship.¹ Starting with her 2003 installation *Translate Allah*, in the aftermath of September 11, covering the Queen's Museum of Art building in New York City, we can follow Jacir's attempt to read the world around us through translation or a lack thereof. *Translate Allah* has been widely analysed by several scholars, and Emily Apter perceptively notices how the refusal to translate "Allah" as "God" - which is the "correct, standard English translation of the word" - by many American media after the September 11 attack in effect limns the process of othering and the "politics of offense" implicit in the "translational interdiction" (Apter 2013, 99). The two pieces by Jacir that I want to discuss, instead, capture translation as a way of living and knowing, have a Mediterranean context of reference, and were created in response to the global discourse around the 'migration crisis' and its impact on European culture.

¹ Emily Jacir is the recipient of many prestigious awards, including a Golden Lion at the 52nd Venice Biennale (2007); a Prince Claus Award (2007); the Hugo Boss Prize (2008); the Herb Alpert Award (2011); and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Rome Prize Fellowship at the American Academy in Rome (2015) (<https://darjacir.com/Team>).

Stazione was created for Palestine c/o Venice, a side event of the Venice Biennale in 2009. Jacir translated into Arabic the name of each of the twenty-four stops of the *vaporetto* along the Linea 1, going from Piazzale Roma and Santa Lucia train station along the Grand Canal to Rialto and San Marco.

Venice is a translational city. It is the city where the first Jewish ghetto was instituted in 1516 and where the word *ghetto* originates, where street names are painted on *nizioleti* (tiny sheets) in Venetian dialect on the walls of the buildings, and it is the only European city that has an Arabic name: *Al-bunduqīyya*. According to the Somali-Italian writer Igiaba Scego, there is a metropolitan legend surrounding its origin:

Bunduqīyya in Arabic means ‘gun’, ‘rifle’, or even ‘bullets’. The common belief is that Venice was given this name because of its important role as a centre of production and distribution of firearms. However, the word *bunduqīyya* has been used to refer to firearms only after the fourteenth century, whereas Venice was called *Bunduqīyya* in much earlier days. The metropolitan legend, therefore, seems to have little credibility, if any. But Lord, how fascinating! (Scego 2013, 2)

Jacir’s intention was to create a bilingual network of transport through the city, and the words in Arabic were meant to unearth and visualise the shared hidden history of Venice and Palestine – Palestine c/o Venice – and reclaim Venice’s Arab cultural heritage. Discussing her work on the Herb Alpert Award in the Arts website, Jacir writes: “Addressing this rendered invisibility, my project aims to remind visitors and citizens of Venice, not only of its deep and varied cultural origins, exchanges and influences but also of possible futures of exchange” (Jacir 2011).

The project also entailed the printing of a trilingual map (in Italian, Arabic and English), inscribed within the comprehensive map of the public transportation system. Before the opening of the Biennale, the Venice Transport Consortium (ACTV, or Azienda Consorzio Trasporti Veneziano) revoked the authorisation without explanation. The artist was not allowed to issue a statement for the cancellation of the event, she was only allowed to add the writing “THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN CANCELLED” to the trilingual maps of the city which had been printed for distribution. The artist comments on the events:

My work was completely secular, addressing cultural exchange between Venice and the Arab world. I really don’t think the fact that I am a Palestinian was the issue in Venice... I think it is more likely that the work was being presented in the public realm, in

the streets of Venice, and not being confined to a designated ‘art’ space... I do believe that the Arabic script was a problem... When Arabic crawls out of... borders... and becomes part of the cityscape... perhaps this was the very thing that was so threatening to them. (Jacir 2011)

Jacir’s idea to use the material translation of the stops of the *vaporetto* to invite her audience on a journey along the Grand Canal, zigzagging from one bank to the other, and re-activating lost associations, forgotten exchanges, disclaimed heritages is particularly ingenious and adds an unearthing element to the translation as migration nexus explored in this essay. During the boat ride, in fact, borders are crossed multiple times and translations occur; however, translation is also the movement from one bank to the other of the Canal and, symbolically, the Mediterranean.

‘Untranslatability’ has emerged in recent years as a key concept in discussions of cultural translation. Articulated mostly by the comparatist Emily Apter in her works *The Translation Zone* (2006) and *Against World Literature* (2013), advocates of untranslatability are trying to halt the absorption of many literatures and postcolonial literatures into an assimilationist super-sized English-language curriculum and insist, instead, on the persistence of areas of incommensurability across different cultures. For Apter, untranslatability offered

a cosmology that recognized the universe of comparison as more dark space than connective constellation; a cartography that added voids and subtracted from solids. This would entail pedagogical practices that did not just substitute “difference” for cross-cultural equivalencies, but *a way of thinking language* opacity as philosophically, spatially and temporally everywhere. (Apter 2016, 10; emphasis added)

In Jacir’s work, however, ‘untranslatability’ is shown to be less about an incommensurable distance between cultures and more about the political refusal, what Apter calls the “translational interdiction” (2013, 99), to engage in translation and enter the translational exchange. The artist’s antidote to political untranslatability is to take the understanding into our own hands, as translated and translating people, by getting on board the *vaporetto* and seeing Venice/Al-bunduqiyya, first from one bank of the Grand Canal and then from the opposite one.

In 2016, Jacir re-created a Mediterranean *Via Crucis* in a small church in the very centre of Milan to contemplate the current refugee and migrant crisis which is urgently calling for a redefinition of European culture. Like *Stazione*, this project tells its story through travel and translation, and it establishes an important link between the shared legacies of Italy – as the country that hosts the Catholic Church’s State – and Palestine, as the place of origin of many of the

relics found in Italian churches. The *translatio* of relics from the Holy Land provides the first translational palimpsest through which we approach this installation which, in line with Jacir's previous work, can be described as translation art. The second translational palimpsest is religious – the *Via Crucis* which is chosen as the narrative device for the composition. The story is told through large rounds of steel placed above square- or rectangle-shaped glass cases containing the objects from Palestine. The story begins at the top of the left nave, below the altar steps, with the first seven stations of the cross identified in Arabic to resume, symmetrically, on the right side of the altar, with stations VII through XIV signalled in Italian.²

This is the full schema of the composition:

- I. **يسوع محكوم عليه بالموت [Yasue mahkum ealayh bialmawt] / Jesus is condemned to death.**
Keys from Palestinian homes.
Nakba.
- II. **يسوع حامل الصليبية على منكبية [Yasue hamil salibiat ealaa mankibia] / Jesus carries his cross**
Valise
Dispossession. Exile.
- III. **يسوع ساقط تحت الصليب للذمرة الاولى [Yasue saqitanaan taht aslib lilmarih al'uwlaa] / Jesus falls for the first time**
Barbed wire from West Bank
Occupation. Separation
- IV. **يسوع ملتقيا بأمه الحزينة [Yasue multaqaan bi'amih alhazina] / Jesus meets his mother**
Glass cast in Venice
The sea.
- V. **وقد اعانه هنا سمعان القيرواني على حمل الصليب [Waqd 'aeannah huna samean al-qiriwani ealaa hamal alsalib] / Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus carry the cross**
Piece from fisherman's boat from Gaza
Vittorio Arrigoni.
- VI. **مسحة هنا وجه اليسوع القديسة فيرونیکا [Msihat huna wajhah alqadisat vyrwny-ka] / Veronica wipes the face of Jesus**
Photograph from Bethlehem (circa 1915)
Lampedusa. Lost photographs.

² I am grateful to Federico Pozzoli, doctoral student in Humanities at the University of Milan, and Soukaina Tarraf, MA student in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Louisville, for their help transcribing and interpreting the Arabic portion of Jacir's work.

- VII. **اليسوع وقع هنا تحت الصليب للمرة الثانية [waqae huna taht alsalib lilmarat althania] / Jesus fall the second time**
Iron rusting
Political prisoners. Child prisoners. Prisoners
“Iron always rusts”.
- VIII. **Gesù incontra le donne di Gerusalemme / Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem**
Piece of traditional Jerusalem woman’s dress (embroidered in Bethlehem 120 years ago).
Tears. Resistance.
- IX. **Gesù cade per la terza volta / Jesus falls for the third time**
Cement.
The Apartheid Wall.
- X. **Gesù è spogliato delle vesti / Jesus is stripped of his garments**
Olive wood from Bayt Jalla
800.000 trees. And more. Uprooted. Destroyed.
- XI. **Gesù è inchiodato sulla croce / Jesus is nailed to the cross.**
M16 shells from the West Bank
Violence.
- XII. **Gesù muore sulla croce / Jesus dies on the cross.**
Fishing nets from Gazan fishermen
3 km perimeter. Forbidden.
- XIII. **Gesù è deposto dalla croce / Jesus is taken down from the cross.**
Keffiye from Hebron
Shroud.
- XIV. **Il corpo di Gesù è deposto nel sepolcro / Jesus is laid in the tomb.**
Slayeb stone from Bayt Jalla
Right to be buried in our homeland
Palestine.

The iconic correlation of station to object makes this installation compelling and moving: the first station (*Jesus is condemned to death*) showcases a tangle of rusty keys to recall the image of Palestinian homes abandoned during the Nakba in 1972 [fig. 1]. A symbol both of an exile/death sentence and of the hope of a return to the homeland, the abandoned key is turned into an equally powerful symbol of longing for belonging for displaced people throughout history.

The second station (*Jesus carries his cross*) shows the first tool of all journeys: in a small glass square case a leather suitcase is so crumpled as to be unrecognisable [fig. 2]. The icon for the third station (*Jesus falls for the first time*) is a crown made of barbed wire from the West Bank. In Station IV (*Jesus meets his mother*), a glossy



Figure 1 Emily Jacir, *Via Crucis*. 2016. Station I: Jesus carries his cross



Figure 2 Emily Jacir, *Via Crucis*. 2016. Station II: Jesus is condemned to death



Figure 3 Emily Jacir, *Via Crucis*. 2016. Station VII: Jesus falls the second time

tile of azure glass blown in Venice recalls the colour of Mary’s veil in western iconography. The semi-circle begins with the rusty “keys from Palestinian homes” and ends with a tile of rusty iron in Station VII: *Jesus falls for the second time*. A slab of rusty iron. Political prisoners, children prisoners. Prisoners [fig. 3]. The caption in the catalogue reads: “iron always rusts” (Jacir 2016, 53).

This is “a story told in things”, John Lansdowne writes in *Translatio*, the collaborative book that accompanies the installation, inspired by the medieval tradition of collecting and displaying the relics of saints brought from Palestine in Italian churches (2016, 11). There are so many layers of symbolism to be unpacked and to respond to, starting from the matching of the language script with the direction of the physical movement of the Via Crucis (the stations in Arabic script proceed anti-clock-wise in the left nave and the stations in Italian clock-wise in the right nave of the church); to the evocation of places and communities through elaborate artifacts or, instead, through materials such as iron, cement, marble, wood, glass. Jacir’s relics are, in many cases, the things left behind - the literal meaning of relic - as in Station VI where a water-damaged photograph is showcased and connected to the stories of migration that the Mediterranean Sea has witnessed from Bethlehem to Lampedusa, or in Station XI in which M16 shells collected in the West Bank are displayed to form an artistic symmetry.

As Lansdowne points out, the “thinginess” (Lansdowne 2016, 9) of Jacir’s objects is perhaps stronger in the artifacts created for the installation, because the materials she chooses – the piece of olive wood, marble as part of the land, cement, iron – do not by themselves convey sacredness until they are understood in the cultural terms that make them unique for an individual or a community. The last station, the one that commemorates Jesus being laid in the sepulchre for instance, is a slab of red *slayeb* marble from Bayt Jalla, from the quarries now inaccessible to the local Christian community since they have been incorporated into the Israeli settlement of Gilo (MacEvitt 2016, 107-8). The red and bloody colour of the marble associated with the caption in the book – *Right to be buried in our homeland. Palestine* – is particularly touching for a modern viewer [fig. 4].



Figure 4 Emily Jacir, *Via Crucis*. 2016. Station XIV: Il corpo di Gesù è deposto nel sepolcro / Jesus is laid on the tomb

Jacir’s relics are iconoclastic, an oxymoron in terms of figuration, as they speak of people without showing them and intensely evoke places through the materials, the crafts, the techniques with which they were created. As the viewer has to make an effort to decipher some of the objects given the position of the stations and the paucity of light in the church or to connect them with the religious narrative of the Via Crucis, the viewer turns into a pilgrim moving from station to station. In its origins, the Via Crucis was meant to be “a pilgrimage by proxy” (Lansdowne 2016, 12) for all the Christians who could not go to Jerusalem and worship at the actual places through which Jesus had carried the cross. In other words, the Via Crucis translat-

ed Jerusalem to Italy so that would-be pilgrims could worship. Even today, the Stations of the Cross create a physical space for prayer and meditation in commemoration of Christ's passion and crucifixion, but also a space to think about and initiate action, and Jacir's stations add an extra layer to the meditation that becomes simultaneously intimate and spiritual, social and historical.

For the Catholics who pray in this church, these *are* the Stations of the Cross, their pilgrimage by proxy, as there are no indications that this is an art installation;³ however, with half the station titles written in Arabic and half in Italian, it functions, properly, as a translation while simultaneously posing the question: which is the original? It should also be noted that the title of the installation, *Via Crucis*, is in Latin, since that is the name used within the Catholic liturgy in Italy, which, on the one hand, acts as a reminder of the persistence of Latin as the official language of the Catholic Church and, on the other, unearths the historical reasons why this is so.⁴

The fact that *Via Crucis* speaks its message of adoration and devotion through translation is what moves us – on an intellectual plane – to a halt. The Passion of Christ is represented through the contemporary passion of Palestinians as well as of all the people displaced from their homes.⁵ Migrants, Jacir seems to be saying, are today's Christs, but who are they saving? What is palpably absent is the idea of Jesus's salvific suffering that turns the passion into the powerful metaphor of redemption that it is for Christians. Yet the question is looming and permeates the viewer's experience. What is certain is that suffering of this scale and proportion, which the installation in its overpowering materiality emphasises, cannot leave the viewer untouched.

Translatio – another Latin term left untranslated in Jacir's installation catalogue – is the term used to describe the transfer of a saint's body or a relic from one place to another. When relics were acquired and 'translated' to Italy, thanks to the will of important patrons such

³ The church of San Raffaele is associated to a cultural centre by the same name and regularly houses artists' collections and installations.

⁴ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for directing my attention to this further layer of translation which, as an Italian accustomed to the use of Latin in the Italian Catholic liturgy, I had missed. I am extremely grateful.

⁵ According to the UN 2017 *International Migration Report*, 2016 was the record year for the number of people displaced from their homes since World War II when the UN started keeping the records. By population, the report said Syria still accounts for the biggest number of displaced people at 12 million, followed by Colombia with 7.7 million, Afghanistan with 4.7 million, Iraq with 4.2 million and South Sudan at 3.3 million. Those rankings do not include the long-standing Palestinian population of roughly 5.3 million, but that figure is included in the total. Cf. https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/publications/migrationreport/docs/MigrationReport2017_Highlights.pdf.

as Saint Helena (Emperor Constantine's mother), or Theodelinda (Queen of the Lombards), the churches in which they were placed were renamed as the relics' presence gave them a new meaning and function. Good examples of this, both in Rome, are the Basilica Herulaem, which is today Santa Croce di Gerusalemme, or Santa Maria Maggiore, which is today Santa Maria ad Praesepe (Lansdowne 2016, MacEvitt 2016). Similarly, Jacir is the translator, she is the agent of the *translatio* of secular relics, and she brings or re-creates them, for people to see, worship, and meditate on. How do these relics change the meaning and function of the church in which they are placed?

San Raffaele is considered as one of Milan's minor churches, built in the late sixteenth century in proximity to the church of Santa Maria Maggiore, today known as the Duomo, and is so tightly squeezed in between the glittering *Rinascente* shopping mall and the majestic cathedral, which is two steps away, that it can very easily be overlooked. Indeed, the marginal status of the church in which the installation is located seems to mirror and call attention to the invisible status of migrants and their suffering, which is the subject of the installation itself.⁶ The contrast, as often happens with Jacir's art, is powerful and arresting.

Like in *Stazione*, Jacir insists on the deep historical and cultural ties connecting Italy and Palestine; but at the centre of this work is not the history of the city, of Milan, rather it is the Palestinians' forced exile, placed side by side with the sufferings of today's migrants, presented as different facets of the same martyrdom. Translation as a mode of understanding the world allows Jacir to turn the tables on the standard narrative of migration given in political discourse and circulated by the media: the story of migration is told from the point of view of the people who have left the keys to their homes behind, who have had to abandon their beautiful, traditional clothes, their mothers, their children, or who have lost the photographs of their loved ones at sea. This is the story of migration that Jacir bears witness to, and translation – or rather *translatio* – provides the language for the story to be told.

3 A Pan-American Via Dolorosa

Moving from the fourteen stations of Jacir's Mediterranean *Via Crucis*, to the forty questions of the intake questionnaire for child asylum seekers in *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* by Valeria Luiselli, which describes a pan-American *Via Dolorosa*, the transition is disturbingly seamless. However, while Jacir's ingenious use

⁶ I am very grateful to Pamela Beattie for bringing this parallelism to my attention.

of the trope of the *translatio* of relics puts the emphasis on the ‘migrational’ aspect of translation, Luiselli’s book looks at a key location where translation and migration meet, the immigration court system.

Tell Me How It Ends collects the Mexican American writer and essayist Valeria Luiselli’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. This extremely readable, 120-page long essay is formatted after the questionnaire the court uses to interview the children. It was met with great success when it was published in 2017 at the height of the immigration crisis on US soil: a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in Criticism in 2017, it was also adopted as common reading in some General Education programmes in colleges across the US.⁷ *Tell Me How It Ends* has achieved a visibility and won accolades that are inversely proportional to what is perceived as the dominant political rhetoric of migration in the US, and this fact alone is worthy of notice. Some reviewers state that it has “opened doors” to the discussion of the migrant crisis in American society in “new terms” (de León 2019). In fact, Luiselli’s intent was to reframe the way we think and talk about migration by taking a hemispheric - this is one of the new terms she proposes - approach and digging into the historical, political, and cultural context of the current crisis.

Situations of interpreting within the immigration court system represent translation - understood as linguistic/cultural transfer - in action. Indeed, when we start taking into account people rather than texts, the ethical implications of translation are suddenly foregrounded. In her study of the conditions of interpreting within the asylum-seeking legal process, Moira Inghilleri emphasises the active role played by interpreters and translators, a role almost as important as that played by the immigration officers, even though the public and media perceptions seem to ignore or belittle their essential contribution. By law, asylum seekers are to be provided with an interpreter before a formal interview with an immigration officer can take place, and Luiselli’s essay details the risky process through which the information is collected and organised prior to a formal hearing within the US immigration system.

The year of the events described in Luiselli’s essay is 2015 when the dominant rhetoric surrounding migration in the US invoked the

⁷ I am indebted for this information to Hilary Levinson’s reflections on her own experience at Virginia Commonwealth University’s Common Book Program, a programme that distributes the selected book among its first-year students. It also invites the wider Richmond community to read it since the author is invited to campus for a public lecture. The other notable book in recent years that has had a similar success and general education trajectory is *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine published in 2014.

same trope of a fortress invaded and under siege that was circulating in Europe. By organising her essay around the forty questions of the intake questionnaire, Luiselli leaves this polarising rhetoric behind and directs the reader's attention to the actual vocabulary of immigration, its underlying assumptions, and its current usage: "screening", for instance, is the term used for the interviews; "aliens" is the legal term for non-citizens; "removal" the word for deportation; "sending countries" are opposed to "receiving countries", and so forth. Behind these words a precise image of the world materialises: it is the world as an inter-national agglomerate of distinct nations established as a model by European modernity. In her signature incisive manner, Luiselli draws attention to the world view behind the words:

The intake questionnaire for undocumented children [...] reveals a colder, more cynical and brutal reality. It reads as if it had been written in high definition, and as you make your way down its forty questions it's impossible not to feel that the world has become a much more fucked-up place than anyone could have ever imagined. (2017, 10)

The language of the current immigration systems is not the language of "universal hospitality" invoked by Kant in *Perpetual Peace* (Kant 1957, 20).⁸ Since the terrorist attacks in 2001 and the global war on terror, it has been transformed into the language of homeland security, protection, and control of the nation's entry-points. We need only look at the news and see the images of the *detention/hospitality* centres designed to contain migrants and refugees and separate them from the rest of the population to bring this point home. However, for lack of better words, interpreters negotiate this vocabulary in their job every day. They are aware that the interviews they translate at the early point in the process are highly significant and can determine the final outcome of the migrants' cases; they participate in the excluding practices of screening through which nation-states exert their control over those who demand entrance while, on the other hand, they bear witness to the stories of the migrants and provide a form of real hospitality - linguistic and cultural - that is vital in the process (Inghilleri 2012, 76-8).

Luiselli's book sheds some much needed light onto interpreting as a crucial aspect of the legal migration process while also underscoring the necessity of reviewing the schemas behind translation and,

⁸ Several scholars have highlighted, by referring to Hannah Arendt's work, how the case of asylum seekers explodes the logic of possibility of the nation-state and its association of rights with citizenship. See Agamben 1998, 126-35; Polezzi 2012, 353-3; Homi Bhabha (NEMLA Keynote, Washington, DC, 22 March 2019).

by extension, interpreting through which we operate. The opposition often drawn between interpreting and advocacy when migrants come face to face with legal institutions is a case in point, as Loredana Polezzi points out (Polezzi 2012, 349). This opposition is artificial at best and misleading at its core since it does not consider how mediation works, simplifying a process that is, in reality, very complex and fraught with potentially consequential errors. Within the prevalent skills-based approach, interpreters are imagined as passive “conduits” of information (Inghilleri 2012, 85), and migrants are “translated” between places and cultures, with no attention given to the active role of participants in the interpreting event, i.e. the intricate social, ideological and emotional components that inform the communicative exchange at entry-points. Luiselli showcases the interpreter’s dilemma:

But nothing is ever that simple. I hear words, spoken in the mouths of children, threaded in complex narratives. They are delivered with hesitance, sometimes distrust, always with fear. I have to transform them into written words, succinct sentences, and barren terms. The children’s stories are always shuffled, stuttered, always shattered beyond the repair of a narrative order. The problem with trying to tell their story is that it has no beginning, no middle, and no end. (2017, 7)

Tell Me How It Ends explodes the conduit schema of interpreting by describing the difficulty and, at times, impossibility of translating the words of the children she interviews who often cannot understand the questions they are being asked: “interpreters have to reconfigure the questions, shift them from the language of adults to the language of children, breaking the intake questions up in smaller phrases until she finds a way to connect with the children” (63). In making the interpreter’s role fully visible and acknowledging its importance but also its challenges, Luiselli is showing what a migration-based approach to translation (and interpreting) has to offer: the recognition of the political and ethical dimension of any translational encounter.

As an immigrant to the United States, Luiselli reflects on the incommensurable distance between her own process of immigration and her status as a ‘Legal Permanent Resident’ and that of the children she is screening. She is both translated and translator, mirroring the common experience of immigrant children who become the official interpreters for their families. In other words, Luiselli shows the multilayered notion of agency that is a crucial part of the translational phenomena surrounding migration, and she does it through meta-linguistic musings about her exchanges with the young migrants. The traditional schema of translation with its idealised view of homolingual speakers and enunciation, and of interpreters as passive

conduits of transfer, proves sorely inadequate to represent translation as it lives and is lived in contexts of migration.

As in the case of *Via Crucis* and *Stazione* by Emily Jacir, translation constitutes the subject matter of this book, but also, and beautifully, it constitutes its form. *Tell Me How It Ends* fully participates in the genre of testimonial texts,⁹ texts that can be read as translations, or versions, of original stories, stories that would be lost without translation. Writing about AIDS narratives, Ross Chambers describes these texts as *relays*, texts that:

imply or make use of a metaphor of relay in their account of what the writing of testimonial entails, or they employ other metaphors suggestive of portability such as reporting or fostering. Such tropes describe the witnessing writer as a mediating agent, connecting or attempting to (re)connect those who cannot speak (the dead) and those (the living) who seem oblivious to their fate, as if it were not relevant to them. (2004, 37)

Even though the children are alive and not dead, like in most testimonial writing, the book is explicit about its witnessing function:

Telling stories doesn't solve anything, doesn't reassemble broken lives. But perhaps it is a way of understanding the unthinkable. If a story haunts us, we keep telling it to ourselves, in silence, replaying it in the silence while we shower, while we walk alone down streets, or in our moments of insomnia. (Luiselli 2017, 69-70)

Following the rhetoric of testimonial writing, which entails a de-authorisation of the author, Luiselli's book lists the questions one by one, commenting on the typology of answers they elicit and on the words that are repeated in the exchanges and that we learn to understand as we read (coyotes, pandrilleros, La Bestia, the hielera, La Migra), as in the example below where two little sisters from Guatemala, age five and seven, are being screened:

Why did you come to the United States?
I don't know.
How did you travel here?
A man brought us.
A coyote?

⁹ I would like to thank Hilary Levison for pointing out the connection between translation and testimonial writing at the 2019 ACLA annual convention held at Georgetown University. See her *Disturbing Translations: Distance, Memory, and Representation in Contemporary Latin American Literature* (2015).

No, a man.
 Was he nice to you?
 Yes, he was nice, I think.
 And where did you cross the border?
 I don't know.
 Texas? Arizona?
 Yes! Texas Arizona.
 (Luiselli 2017, 55-6)

Stealing a sad smile from the reader, Luiselli shows how complicated things are when lives are being translated into a place that does not seem to want them. The fear of saying the wrong thing or getting in trouble often determines the wrong answers, and by recording them Luiselli points to the paradox of the interpreter's predicament: the correct answers to the questionnaire are those that as a human being she would not want to hear as they refer to the violent circumstances the children are fleeing; yet they are those that she dutifully records and conveys to the lawyers because she knows that they can 'strengthen' the children's cases:

Thirty-nine: "Are you scared to return?" In this same conversation, Alina also tells me that she brought the girls over after some pandrilleros from the gang that killed Manu's friend started waiting outside her eldest daughter's school every day, following her slowly back home on motorbikes as she walked along the side of the road, trying not to look back.

Up until then, the idea of letting the children travel alone with a coyote had been unimaginable - crossing borders, mounting La Bestia. Suddenly the idea of allowing them to stay in Tegucigalpa became even more unimaginable. (89)

According to the UN statistics, the numbers of global migrants were at their highest before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, numbers and maps do not convey the horror that is taking place across the continents with the same impact as images and stories. Translating and recording the children's stories has been Luiselli's act of witnessing. Ours begins in the event of reading, or in what Attridge calls our "readerly hospitality, [our] readiness to have one's purposes reshaped by the work to which one is responding" (Attridge 2004, 81). Both artists discussed in this essay make palpable the ways in which migration touches our lives directly through images and stories that sometimes come back to haunt and perhaps shame us but yet cannot be ignored. As we have seen, both Jacir and Luiselli tell their stories *via* translation and it might be interesting to follow their lead and use translation as the way to read current stories of migration. The step forward that a reflection on migration through the lens of

translation offers, therefore, is to see the broad spectrum of translated lives around us but also to ask some important questions of ourselves as readers, critics, translators, and intellectuals receiving and interpreting these stories.

4 Translation Literacy and Global Citizenship

In his recent public lectures, Homi Bhabha has turned his attention to the usefulness of the humanities to understand the cultural and political “lifeworlds” of our times. In his words,

[h]umanistic disciplines articulate the changing relationships between cultural meaning and social value as they shape civic ‘agents’ who participate in the creation of public opinion and the definition of public interest. (2018, 7)

While it goes without saying that the relationships between cultural meanings and social values change according to place, time, politics etc., the same does not seem to apply to our educational methods, our intellectual categories or our disciplines. A case in point is the shared view of language, culture and translation that still circulates in most western educational models. Viv Edwards and Maria Tymoczko, among others, claim that, although we are accustomed to imagining monolingualism as the norm, it might be the case that plurilingualism is more common worldwide (Edwards 2004; Tymoczko 2006): this is almost always invariably true in postcolonial contexts where translation emerges from within the culture itself as a major mode of communication and self-expression. Thus, theorising language and culture from within the social, cultural, and political contingencies of today means engaging with migration as a fact of our culture, with plurilingualism as the normal condition of planetary cultural life, and with translation as a way of life, perhaps even as a model of ‘the good life’.

On the other hand, translation, as the works by Jacir and Luiselli show, indicates much more than mechanical processes of transferring concepts and texts from one language, literary or cultural tradition, to another on an illusionary horizontal plan of equity and equivalence. Rather, it speaks of the many and diverse life experiences of millions of people who move individually or collectively across borders and touches us daily, in books, on television, online, at school, sometimes without us even realising it. A “translation literacy,” as Brian Baer insightfully points out, should become a pressing concern, next to digital or information literacy, in our global university syllabi (2000, 157). In fact, seeing translation and translations around us allows us to achieve an understanding of globalisation *also* in human-

istic – and educational – terms and to see translation, to use a visual metaphor, in high definition, outside of “a Romantic discourse of loss and distortion” (140) as is still often the case. The study of translation through the lens of migration allows us to close the gap that is often left open between our experience of the world and the theoretical categories through which we make sense of that experience. Translation is here understood not as an action to be performed or a skill to be learned but as a condition of living – temporary or permanent – and a form of “worldly knowledge” à la Said (Said 1993).

What I have chosen to explore through the close reading of Jacir’s and Luiselli’s works is the central role of translation as a key epistemological concept as well as a hermeneutic and ethical practice in relation to the phenomenon of global migrations and their cultural representations. As Lawrence Venuti writes (2013), translation changes everything it touches: a translation methodology can radically change the way we see the world but also ourselves, the way we hear other people’s stories, and the way we “view, practice, share, and develop knowledge” (Blumczynski 2016, 30). Indeed, like a *vaporetto* in Emily Jacir’s *Stazione*, translation carries us across, in body and spirit, and creates a space not only for what Homi Bhabha calls the in-betweenness of cultural translation (1994), but also for the thought process through which, as cultural agents, we make sense of what we see. What is occupied by translation is not really an interstitial space; it is, rather, a semantically and semiotically overcrowded space where signs and concepts contain multiple meanings at the same time, as Jacir’s *Via Crucis* installation powerfully shows, and enable unique and embodied hermeneutic experiences. This is perhaps the aspect of the connection between migration and translation that fascinates me the most in the works analysed in this essay – the interwovenness of the physical and intellectual experience that both translation and migration entail, the concreteness of relocation and the abstractness of its categories, the theories that explain migration and the practices through which it takes shape.

In *Ubiquitous Translation*, Piotr Blumczynski writes that

translation is not just a matter of gaining access to information, but coming to grips with it, positioning oneself against its WHAT as well as the WHOS involved: those it is coming from or going to as well as those whom it concerns. (2016, 48; emphasis in the original)

Using translation as a method to come to terms with and position oneself *vis-à-vis* migration has been the aim of this essay. And it offers not only a useful and different perspective on what translation is, or who the translator is or can be, but also on who is at the receiving end of this process.

Within a translative framework, in fact, a person, a text, a cultural or political event does not just speak, it speaks to me in a particular way and may ask that I set aside or re-examine my received ideas or preconceptions (Blumczynski 2016, 59-61). Therefore, for a text to be able to communicate, there needs to be a reader or a listener willing to do the work to receive it and make sense of it. As we saw in the case of Luiselli's essay, the author translates the children's stories for the court system, but also for us as readers who, by reading, become concerned and touched by these stories, too.

The shift that is generally used to describe the semantic transfer in translation affects the receiver as much as the enunciator and it is well illustrated by postcolonial literature, that is to say, the language practice *par excellence* to be shaped by the nexus of migration and translation. As the most visible body of literature to have emerged out of the colonial journey, the postcolonial is emblematic of all migrant writing: on the one hand, it highlights the extent to which it is only the direction of the global journey that has changed from colonial times; on the other, as Rushdie writes in *Shame* - his signature translation-al novel - "the immigrants [and] the *mohajirs*" now have "the job of rewriting history" (1983, 86). Bill Ashcroft goes as far as to cast the reader of postcolonial literature as 'translated' - to match the image of the postcolonial writer as a 'translated' writer - as a reader who is willing to respond to the profound reconfiguration of the literary event that occurs in all migrant writing (Ashcroft 2009, 159).

A similar radical perspectival shift is available if we adopt translation as a lens for reading contemporary texts about migration. As readers and scholars, we might not be able to identify with the protagonists of current stories of migration and, for many reasons having to do with the type of privileged lives that we lead, we should not; but we can hear, see, read those stories and allow them to challenge our view of the world, or the canon that defines our disciplines, or the definition of home and land, or the meaning even of common words such as 'ice'. In *Tell Me How It Ends*, for instance, Luiselli talks about the meaning of *la hielera* (the icebox) in the context of pan-American migrations which highlights the sinister echoes that the word 'ice' rings with to a Central and North American ear:

The ice-box derives its name from the fact that the children in it are under ICE (Immigration and Custom Enforcement) custody. The name also points to the fact that the detention centers along the border are a kind of enormous refrigeration for people, constantly blasted with gelid air as if to ensure that the foreign meat does not go bad too quickly - naturally, it must be harboring all sorts of deadly germs. The children are treated more like carriers of diseases than children. (2017, 22)

Another word that is being re-signified by migration, especially on the European front, is *relocation*.

Commonly used to refer to the redistribution of migrants in so-called 'receiving nations', relocation also indicates the material experiences lived by people who have crossed national borders and are being relocated; therefore it needs to be understood in its double signification of control and hospitality - on the one hand as a form of containment and policing and, on the other, as a form of assimilation, articulation, and agency. In other words, when we consider migration through the lens of translation, the responsibility *for* and *to* the other that translation entails is immediately foregrounded.

Derek Attridge has written eloquently on the topic of our ethical responsibility as readers, and, as a literary critic, I find his observations particularly pertinent to the view of translation that I have tried to articulate here. Translation is the ideal concept to discuss the responsibility for the other and to the other not as something that is intentionally embraced; rather as something that constitutes the pre-condition of all translative acts and defines us as agents of translation at either end of the spectrum.

Translation establishes a call-and-response relationship between its actors and in it we find ourselves - always and already - responsible for the other. "A responsible response", in Attridge's words, "is one that allows the work of art to refigure the ways in which I, and my culture, *think* and *feel*" (Attridge 2004, 125; emphasis added). If we apply Attridge's model to the works of art analysed, we see that it fully illuminates the testimonial aspect that both artists have wrought into their works and that makes them so compelling as cultural texts. "Without responsibility for the other", Attridge writes, "there is no other" (127). Nothing perhaps more than this single point makes translation the ideal partner concept to migration within the current cultural debate and a translation literacy a pressing concern for "an aesthetic education in the era of globalization", to quote the title of Gayatri Spivak's famous book (Spivak 2012). What this essay wants to suggest is a different approach to translation as an appropriate tool to conceptualize the complexity of contemporary forms of migration and to apply it to an analysis of different kinds of representations in order to break the commonly held divide between art and politics that relegates the humanities to an ancillary role when it comes to understanding the problems of the 'real' world.

In conclusion, translation, seen through stories of migration, requires a theoretical apparatus that re-thinks its own foundations in constructive ways, going beyond a critique of disciplinary structures, and even cultures of scholarship complicit with national and imperial languages (Mignolo 2000, 273), and that, instead, puts forth a model of education of the mind and the heart - the aesthetic and sentimental education that Sommer, Spivak, Mignolo, Santos have been call-

ing for - that moves from the “lifeworlds” (Bhabha 2018, 7) around us in order to work out the categories adequate to their study. Global migration is one of the major defining events of our times, and it poses important challenges to our understanding of cultures, peoples, and languages as neatly separated. At the same time, migration cannot be solely reduced to a political, social or economic ‘problem’, it is a human, living, and knowing condition as the work of the artists, critics, and educators mentioned in this essay illustrate. And it is our responsibility as readers, translators, and critics, to establish a new vocabulary for reading it.

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