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# *Cultus*

THE JOURNAL OF INTERCULTURAL  
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***MEDIATING NARRATIVES OF MIGRATION***

2020, Volume 13

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BOLOGNA – ITALY

# **CULTUS**

*the Journal of Intercultural Mediation and Communication*

## **MEDIATING NARRATIVES OF MIGRATION**

2020, Volume 13

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## A Conversation about Translation and Migration

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This conversation is the result of an invitation extended to us by the guest editors of the present special issue. We reflect on our shared interests in translation, interpreting and their intersection with migration, while keeping in mind the overarching theme of this collection: *Mediating Narratives of Migration*. The resulting dialogue is, in many ways, both the continuation and the materialization of a longer, ongoing conversation, which we have conducted mostly at a distance, by reading each other's work, but also through occasional direct exchanges. These culminated, in preparation for this piece, in three hours of free-wheeling on-line discussion on our personal and academic trajectories, our current interests and preoccupations, our sense of where the future of research in translation and migration may be headed. While that real-life conversation turned out to be far too rambling to be of use to any reader, it was certainly productive for us and we have tried to maintain at least some of its tone and pace in the pages that follow. In line with that choice, we have included some of the key questions we agreed to reflect upon. References, on the other hand, will only be given as a list of 'Further readings' to be found at the end of our discussion.

### **What led you to carry out research on translation and migration?**

**Loredana:** For me, the choice to connect these two areas of research was a gradual move but, at the same time, almost an obvious, unavoidable one. My early work was on travel writing. First on travelers to Italy and the whole Grand Tour tradition. Then on Italians as travelers and explorers. At the same time, I developed an interest in translation and

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started to think about how both travelers and translators are engaged in forms of mediation of difference, of alterity, as well as in the negotiation between what is distant and what is close. Both are invested in the construction of identity: our own and that of others. Coming from a background in literary studies, there was, also, a strong methodological appeal in combining those two areas and approaches. One, travel, took me towards socio-historical reality, towards ethnography, towards macro-phenomena and broad notions of culture. The other, translation, held me close to the text and to the texture of language. Combining the two provided me with an interdisciplinary space that gave me a lot of freedom, both in terms of objects of study and methodology. They set me free, in particular, from the disciplinary boundaries of Italian studies, which is where I formally belonged, allowing me to work comparatively (as I would have said then) or transnationally (as I would put it now).

At a certain point, though, the notion of travel was no longer enough for me. I remember reading James Clifford's seminal article on 'Traveling Cultures', where he puts travel and translation side by side and sees travel as a 'translation term' which, like all such devices, is tainted, takes you a certain distance and then falls apart. For me, translation didn't really fall apart, but 'travel' certainly did, because it was becoming too restrictive, too narrow, too closely linked to a white, male, middle class, Western set of practices. It didn't relate enough to the reality out there – which I definitely wanted to deal with. I was reading more and more in areas that connected translation with ethnography, with the emerging field of mobility studies, with postcolonial theory and gender studies. The field of migrant writing (or migration writing or translanguaging writing – there are many labels we can use and they are all 'tainted') was also becoming more visible and important, both in the Anglophone context and in Italian studies. From a professional point of view, all of these influences, taken together, reinforced my dissatisfaction with the word 'travel' and with travel writing as a form. 'Migration' became a much more relevant term.

**Maira:** May I ask you a question about that? Did it have anything to do with what was going on increasingly in Europe, at around that same time, with regard to migration from former colonies to the EU?

**Loredana:** Yes, definitely. I really wanted to escape that bourgeois, middle class notion of travel, and I was working increasingly on colonial and postcolonial travel writing, looking precisely at the history of colonialism and its aftermath, its memory. This was particularly relevant

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for me as an Italian and a scholar of Italian studies. There had been a few precursors, but it is my generation of researchers that started to get really interested in the history and the memory (or the lack of memory) of Italian colonialism. This did not happen by chance. It was partly because we were working within a transnational perspective, but also because suddenly, or not so suddenly, there was a postcolonial Italy, there was an Italy that was more evidently and inescapably diverse. An Italy in which the question of racism, for instance, had to be tackled, in which you couldn't ignore attitudes towards diversity any longer. The growing visibility of migrants in Italy also raised another question about memory and forgetfulness: that of Italy's history of emigration. A number of scholars – me included – were increasingly focusing on this double erasure in Italian culture: of the country's colonial past and also of its history of diaspora. These were two things post-war Italy wasn't really interested in speaking about. There is still a lot of work to be done, but things are changing and the 1990s/early 2000s, in this sense, were a historical juncture, both for Italy and more generally for Europe, with the resurgence of populist nationalism and the increasing popularity of formulas such as 'Fortress Europe'. So, researching migration and translation definitely has a political dimension and connects academic work to the world out there. It allows us to reflect on what is happening around us and hopefully to have an impact, however small, on it. For me, the increasing visibility and prominence of the notion of migration was very much part of that move towards a form of research which tries to engage with social reality. Plus, of course, there is an experiential dimension to my interest: as an Italian citizen who has lived the majority of her life in the UK, including the Brexit years, and is now in the process of moving to the US, the question of migration and of the kinds of translation it demands of us is definitely personal.

**Moir:** This is true of my own biography as well. I have always lived amongst first-, second- or third- generation immigrants in my own family and also many friends' families. My mother was born and raised in Ireland but left to study nursing in London, from there went to Toronto, and finally to New York where she met my father, a second-generation immigrant whose parents, my paternal grandparents, had migrated to New York from Sicily in the early part of the 20th century. When I finished my undergraduate degree, I began working as a paralegal and Spanish language translator and interpreter with immigration attorneys in Boston, and at one point worked for a non-profit with an attorney who specialized



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in asylum and refugee law. This was the 1980s and we were processing a lot of asylum applications from Central Americans and Eritreans whose countries were embroiled in civil wars. A few decades later, in the early 2000s when I was at Goldsmiths in London teaching translation theory, news articles started appearing about Europe's "immigration crisis". At that point, drawing on my past experience working in the US on preparing asylum applicants for interviews and hearings, I embarked on a series of research projects funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council concerned with the role of interpreters in political asylum cases in the UK. The research focused on interpreters as social agents situated within social and political processes and sought to locate applicants' views of interpreting activity within the wider social and institutional contexts in which interpreted events occur. It set out to foreground how interpreters practiced their roles within the various situated institutional practices that constitute the asylum application process in the UK, critically examining the notion of a value-free, de-contextualized model of the interpreter mechanically transforming meaning from one language to another.

In my more recent book, *Translation and Migration*, I decided to explore other types of migration experiences, not specifically to do with refugees or asylum seekers. In many ways, that book was my response to a problem I perceived when I returned to the US in 2007, having been in London for over a decade. It seemed to me that there were a lot of people in the US who seemed to have forgotten their own migrant histories, or perhaps were willfully erasing those experiences. This erasure, which is different but very much connected to what you were saying about Italy, was not serving the forging of relationships between previous generations and newly arriving immigrants very well. So the book really was my attempt to address this by reframing the phenomenon of migration as simultaneously a synchronic and a diachronic experience and to address what I feel to be a problematic tendency these days to present the concepts of assimilation and transnationalism as binary and mutually exclusive, rather than focus on their dialectical relation. I am interested in revealing what makes the experience of migration at once universal and particular, not universalizing in the sense that the experiences of all migrants or migrant groups are the same, but the idea that all sentient beings experience migration or the effects of migration, in one form or another, whether internal or external, temporary or permanent, voluntary or involuntary.

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**We are both interested in migrants' stories and stories about migrants. These stories tend to have some themes in common, regardless of whether we are talking about a fictional or non-fictional experience. Are there different challenges in translating fiction and non-fictional account? Do the translators/interpreters who translate these different stories have to be more closely connected to the experiences conveyed to do them justice?**

**Moira:** Yes, as you noted in our conversation, I also included a lot of stories in *Translation and Migration*. These were mostly based on historical accounts and records, and ethnographies I read when I was researching material for the book, with some fictional and autobiographical sources included as well. Part of my training as an academic was in ethnography and I think that continues to influence my research and writing, even when what I'm writing about doesn't involve fieldwork that I have personally conducted. In researching a particular social or cultural phenomenon, I try to re-present as carefully as I can the voices of those involved, even when relying on secondary sources, fully aware that my decisions about what to include or exclude are part of the story. It's not ethnography, strictly speaking (although sometimes I include others' ethnographic research), it's just my best attempt to "fixate on the occasion, the real," here I'm quoting Barbara Folkhart writing about translation, with regard to the situations of different categories of migrants. I suppose what I am really attempting to do in juxtaposing different categories of migration is to widen the frame of reference regarding the experience. This is itself an act of translation I think, in the sense that it invites us to reflect on certain phenomena in a broader context and, in the case of migration stories, better understand the relationship between past and current experiences. Is this what fictional migration narratives are aiming for and does it matter whether their authors have experienced migration directly or not? What about the translators of these fictional narratives? Can a shared history, language, culture, gender or country of origin necessarily be equated with shared experiential knowledge? Can experiential knowledge be reduced to such commonalities?

One of the things I observed in conducting fieldwork on asylum seekers in the UK was the complex relationship that existed between asylum applicants and interpreters who, though they shared a common country of origin, were on opposite sides of a political or ethnic divide. Under these circumstances, there was much animosity and little trust

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between them. To a certain extent, this might be said of all migrants who share a country of origin but are deeply divided by class, wealth, education, religion, race, etc.. This certainly was the case and remains true to some extent in the Italian American diaspora between migrants coming from the north and the south of Italy in the 19th and 20th centuries. A similar observation has been made about the Latino diaspora where white and light-skinned Latinos' resistance to talk about how white privilege operates in their communities contributes to the erasure of Indigenous and Afro-Latinos both within and outside of those spaces. The gaps between individuals who migrate from the same place, like those between privileged cosmopolitans who move rather freely across borders and others who risk their lives to leave home under political duress or economic hardship, reveals a potential paradox of one of the assumed benefits of transnationalism, namely the idea of a seamless and borderless inter-connectivity in communities of the same race or ethnicity. I think it's very important to acknowledge these forms of internal erasure, against the promotion of cultural, regional, or national essentialism which, though sometimes strategically beneficial, ultimately tends to benefit the privileged and perpetuate the marginalization of the disenfranchised.

You mentioned the juxtaposition of ethnography and the texture of language. Does your interest in this relationship have any bearing on what I'm saying here?

**Loredana:** Given my academic background and the trajectory I described, I suppose the question of how language presents and represents experience was always going to be central for me. Translation is a paradoxical activity, in this sense, or at least it can be. It is, ostensibly, primarily a linguistic practice, but if we understand it as a process that 'simply' replaces one code with another in a linear fashion (or as a mechanical transfer of meaning from one language to another, following your image of mis-constructed notions of interpreting), we risk precisely what you described as forms of erasure or even self-erasure. Translation as 'perfect' substitution deletes what was there, leaves no trace of it, controls and contains the difference that is at its core – that gives it its reason to exist – by effectively silencing it. Understood as this neat act of substitution, translation imposes a very tough set of requirements on the migrant. It demands that you translate yourself into 'one of us', replace what you were with something new, starting, precisely, with the learning of a different language: that of the host community or the dominant group. In this perspective, then, migration literally demands a linguistic

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translation or a self-translation – but language also becomes a proxy for something else: by learning ‘our’ language you are showing your desire to become ‘one of us’ and that makes you a good migrant. So your (self-) translation and your erasure of what you were become the basis for a moral judgement and, more often than not, also the basis for decisions about your future, your rights, your chances to be allowed to stay and settle among us. It is a huge price to ask someone to pay, a violent gesture that can be experienced as trauma or lead to a sense of schizophrenia, as it separates someone from their past self (that is how Tzvetan Todorov described his own experience of bilingualism and biculturalism in a famous essay). I think the fact that the diachronic dimension of migration is often difficult, as you noted, is linked to these forms of erasure. But something that is under erasure is always felt as a gap: erasure is a presence of an absence as Derrida taught us, so the lack continues to be felt, it does not go away.

This is not how every migration story ends, however: we do not have to stop at negative images, whether these are the narratives of active exclusion (of racism, nationalism, class privilege, and so on) or the mirroring tales that represent being erased as migration’s only possible outcome (though this can be perceived either as a story of soaring success or crushing defeat). Instead, I am interested in forms of translation that make the question of language visible, audible and, through that, also tell us something about the complexity of the ethnographic gaze and, ultimately, of lived experience. It is that ‘messiness’ of experience that got me interested in narrative accounts that focus on stories of migration and on practices of self-translation. So I suppose in my case too, I was searching for ways to enlarge the frame of reference – but, instead of looking at ‘the real’, in the sense of ethnographic fieldwork or the ‘archive’ of historical migrations, I looked at fictional and semi-fictional accounts. I was trying to find two things: ways of talking about migration that moved away from the strictures of official discourse (though, of course, no type of narrative is ever entirely free from constraints); and traces of the plurality of languages and experiences that are inscribed in migration and in its processes of translation. It is following those narratives and also working with writers who engage in processes of self-translation – by producing multiple versions of their own work in different languages, or by foregrounding polylingualism as a constitutive element of their texts – that I started to think about a notion of translation that does not insist on substitution and erasure but that can make space, instead, for co-presence. Migrant narratives seem to me to reach out for a form of translation that

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is not perfect, linear, harmonious or easy, but which can bear the traces of multiple experiences, positionalities, forms of identification and, indeed, languages. These narratives are themselves translations. They are not perfect, nor perfectly equitable, certainly not universal or universally shared, but they try to harness the power of narrative to talk about the experiential complexity of migration, the mix of pain and desire that goes with it, its sense of fragmentation but also its transformative dimension, the productivity and creativity that can come of it. Translations of this kind do not even hope to resolve the ‘messiness’ of lived experience, but do something to allow us to see it at least a bit more clearly. And they also counter the monotone of negative discourse about migrants and migration.

**What about the question of agency? Who are the key agents when translation and migration meet? And how do translation, interpreting and mediation differ in terms of agency?**

**Loredana:** Focusing on narrative also foregrounds a series of other questions, which relate to agency. I have been talking of writers and of their narratives of migration as forms of self-translation – but what about translators and interpreters, whether professional or otherwise, in that ‘real’ world to which other kinds of narratives belong? Here, the question of who gets to tell whose story, in whose language(s), and for whom remains very fraught and poses a number of ethical problems. The conceptualization of translation as substitution that I was talking about before neatly aligns with rigid notions of identity and their mono-logical assumptions, which ask us to choose, to identify with one category, one group, one language. Take the case of asylum seekers or refugees which, perhaps unsurprisingly, is the focus of increasing attention (to the point that at times it seems to be seen as co-extensive with migration, even if it is not). When a translator or an interpreter is faced with the difficult complexity, the ‘messiness’, of the life stories told to them, the temptation and perhaps also the most effective solution, in many ways, is to turn that into a narrative that follows the required patterns, that will be recognizable and understandable from the point of view of the host community, of the people who hold the power to decide what happens next. This shifts the perspective, however, making our narrative models central and requiring, once again, a form of translation that erases what does not fit. We want a ‘neat’ story that we can place into the appropriate box, and translation helps with that. First, because it reinforces the idea that a migrant is

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‘other’, different from ‘us’: the fact that they speak ‘their’ language proves it. Second, because ‘their’ language also allows them to be identified and catalogued: this is what practices such as LADO (Language Assessment for the Determination of Origin) do, by placing both people and languages into boxes – and those who do not pass the test are marked as potential liars, criminals, undesirables. All of this also helps to reinforce the idea that migration is an exceptional phenomenon (and requires a state of exception in response), while the reality, as you said, is that all human beings experience migration and/or its effects, in one way or another. And the same goes for translation.

I am not saying that any process of translation that adapts a narrative to accepted models is bad – but we need to be aware of and to acknowledge what it does. I think one of the effects of translation, even when it is motivated by the best of intentions, is that it shifts the focus on ‘us’ (whoever that may be in any specific case), on what ‘we’ can do for ‘them’, and in doing so it imposes our vision, our values, our categories, once again. In the way we talk about translation you and I take it as given that a translator has agency, that translation is about more than a supposedly mechanical transfer of information, that it tackles also what remains unspoken. In this sense, we do not make a rigid distinction between translation and mediation, just as we do not separate language from meaning or from culture. Yet that distinction is often made. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), for instance, provides a separate descriptor for mediation and states that it is ‘not limited to cross-linguistic mediation (passing on information in another language)’. The CEFR also gives mediators a lot more agency than interpreters/translators, though for me, decades after Jakobson or the ‘cultural turn’ or work on ‘rewriting’ and on ‘the translator as communicator’, the idea that paraphrase is a clearly distinct process from translation, for instance, is rather surprising. More to the point, if we separate translation from mediation, what happens when mediators are not trained as translators?

Then there is the question of loyalty, which is an old one in translation studies, but I think is much more complicated than choosing between the source and the target text (or author, reader, culture). In our conversations, the two of us also instinctively tend to assume that, in the context of migration, the translator’s or the interpreter’s loyalty should be with the migrant, that they have an ethical responsibility to the voices and to the narratives of those who are positioned as the weaker party in the exchange, even if that implies not being entirely ‘neutral’ (whatever that

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might mean), or mediating and re-telling a story in ways which will make it more acceptable and therefore will also make the migrant more 'desirable'. But is that always the case? And, if it is, is that best served by maintaining or by erasing a sense of difference? Can the 'messiness' and the co-presence (of positionalities, languages, identifications, performances and memories of oneself) be translated? When discussing these issues, by the way, it seems to me that today we tend to shift towards the perspective of the interpreter, rather than the translator, to imagine and to privilege the immediacy of the interpreter's embodied presence, their role and their ethical position. But this is something about which you know a lot more than I do...

**Moira:** First, I need to say that the research I conducted on interpreting in the asylum context in the UK taught me never to assume that the translator's or the interpreter's loyalty will be with the migrant! I interviewed a lot of individuals who worked in different capacities, e.g. lawyers, judges, interpreter coordinators and trainers, and interpreters themselves, who had witnessed many instances of bias on the part of interpreters who, even if they didn't verbalize their disdain for the person for whom they were interpreting, would intentionally embody their feelings through facial expressions or other bodily movements or gestures. A judge I interviewed told me about an occasion in which she sensed the bias of an interpreter when he (whom she referred to as a predator) placed his chair as far away from the applicant as possible in the hearing room to demonstrate his contempt for the asylum seeker and disbelief in his version of events. And this was before the hearing had even started. In other instances, reported to me by eye witnesses, an interpreter would interrupt an asylum interview to verbally discount the veracity of the asylum seeker's claim or to disparage an applicant for using dialect, informing the judge that the asylum seeker was just being difficult by demanding a different interpreter. In all these instances, interpreters took advantage of the cultural insensitivity and ignorance that some immigration department officials displayed, effectively colluding in behavior designed to weaken asylum seekers' credibility.

The matter of agency and mediation aims to get to the heart of how to think about the presence of the translator or the interpreter with regard to the communicated message. It's hard to fathom why - given that it is they who make it possible for the communication to take place beyond the source text language - the presence of either could or should ever go unnoticed. Whatever the degree of authority or autonomy granted to

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them, translators and interpreters leave their marks on the texts they translate. Unwittingly or not, they can find themselves and their translations upholding or reproducing harmful narratives that are used to frame the experiences of certain groups or individuals or cooperating with the very institutions engaged in marginalizing or silencing others. Amongst the fictional and autobiographical migration narratives written about the United States in English, some authors reproduce the trope of the American Dream, others strongly critique it, and some fall somewhere in between. In translating these stories, how these narratives are re/deconstructed and transformed may contribute to the reproduction or the demise of this trope, but is it the translator or is it the reader who ultimately decides how they will be read or re-read? With respect to interpreting, I have suggested to students that they think of the interpreter as the person in charge of the interaction, but not of the individuals taking part. What I mean is that interpreters don't try to speak *for* others but facilitate others speaking for themselves. This includes language competency of course, but also an awareness of the relationship between the speakers and the institutional context in which the communication is situated. But even this is not straightforward. It's not uncommon, for example, for participants in an interpreted interaction to turn and speak to interpreters directly, catching them off guard, sometimes to say something they don't want the other person to hear, even when the interpreter has made it clear that they will interpret everything that is said. What do you do in this case if what is said is offensive to the hearer or might cause trouble for the speaker? But it's also important to remember that, in many cases, an interpreter is the only witness to what is taking place, so the question of interpreter agency and mediation becomes very real in instances where unfairness, mistreatment, or outright discriminatory practices are taking place that affect the communication and/or the outcome.

Do translators have any more control over this space, over the messiness of co-presence? I don't think so. In one of Maureen Freely's published accounts of the experiences surrounding her translation of Orhan Pamuk's novel *Snow*, she describes the moment she knew that, as she put it "the translation was already off the page," when she realized that words she used both in the translation and about the translation were being distorted and used against her to prop up a particular political agenda. This raises the question of what, given the unpredictability of the reception of any text, might be the most effective use of mediation and agency in relation to translation? Is it more effectively enacted as a subtle



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act that operates at the level of the text, or more overtly in the decisions one makes about what, where, and for whom to translate? The simplest (and probably unsatisfactory) answer to that question would be that it really depends on the situation and the context.

**Why is it that we both turned to art as a means of translating migrant stories in our more recent research?**

**Maira:** I started thinking about art in relation to translation in 2012 after reading a quote in a paper by Carol Maier about a Chilean interpreter, one of Carol's students, who wrote of being haunted after an interpreting assignment involving a young woman who had been abused and had attempted suicide. The student felt unprepared to deal with the emotional aspects of interpreting which left her feeling distraught. In response to this, and to interpreters I had interviewed in my research who had expressed similar feelings, I turned to visual art and the work of two artists, Kazimir Malevich and Mark Rothko, to understand better how in privileging and encouraging the use of formal discourse in certain interpreted interactions and translations, including some literary texts, we can tend to limit rather than enhance the representation of meaning, particularly in emotive texts. I was interested in how both Malevich and Rothko had at some point in their careers renounced figurative expression because, as Rothko put it speaking for himself, "a time came when none of us could use the figure without mutilating it." That thought stayed with me and I returned to it again more recently in thinking about cases where the words of a particular migrant narrative as well as the responses to them by the institutions in which they are received, become treated as ends in themselves rather than vehicles for expression in the hands of translators and interpreters. In the context of migration control, for example, the procedures individuals are obliged to follow to gain entry to a particular country, which include filling out forms and participating in oral interviews, are often purposely designed to produce truncated narratives that prevent the adequate elucidation of the motivations for fleeing a country or region. I fear that the translators of these narratives may be unwittingly (and sometimes wittingly) complicit in what the philosopher Miranda Fricker refers to as epistemic injustice, in this case of the testimonial kind, which she describes as unfairness related to trusting someone's word and that occurs when a person is not believed because of their gender, race or more broadly speaking, their identity. I think that this suggests the need for additional translational tools through which

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narrative content can be framed – for me that includes art and artefacts not normally considered forms of communication for translators or interpreters or the individuals they represent. There are types of media (art, music, poetry, for example) that tend to encourage a withdrawal from the literal into a more sensual form of encounter with others. Specifically, the interplay between the verbal and visual, and the human and non-human – by this I mean the material technologies and techniques that underpin translation – can enhance and even alter understandings of particular phenomena associated with migration, particularly for those individuals and institutions who are inclined to negate, dismiss or disparage certain migrants’ experiences.

The kind of media I have in mind might be embedded in written or spoken narratives, juxtaposed with them, or even replace them in some cases. An example of this is the Darfur genocide in the early 2000s where there was overwhelming evidence that the Sudanese government had been training, arming and paying Janjaweed militias to kill non-Arabs and clear them off the oil-rich land. At one point a researcher from the human rights organization “Waging Peace”, while on a fact-finding mission regarding the events that took place, was told by Darfuri women in a refugee camp in eastern Chad about the horrendous things their children had witnessed when their villages were being attacked. This prompted her to talk to the children who ranged in age from 5 to 18. With the help of interpreters who spoke Arabic and the languages of Darfur, she asked the children to write down their memories. One of them asked if they could draw instead. They drew pictures showing their villages full of tanks and armed men on horseback, houses on fire, and helicopters circling the skies. Villagers are shown under attack, women are led off in chains, and civilians are shot at, and try to defend themselves with spears and arrows. Helicopters bear the markings of military aircraft and the men in camouflage are labeled by the children as Janjaweed militia. The interpreters asked the children to tell them what was in their pictures, and wrote their explanations down on the back of each one. In November of 2007, the drawings were submitted to the International Criminal Court in The Hague by “Waging Peace” and were accepted as contextual evidence of the crimes committed in Darfur and used in the trials of the accused as a graphic illustration of the atrocities. Taken together with other documents, they helped confirm the fact that the Darfur population had been attacked by the Janjaweed militias. The original 500 drawings have since been donated by “Waging Peace” to the University of South Florida Libraries, Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center. Another example that

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stands out for me is the Syrian artist/sculptor Nizar Ali Badr who gathers stones on the beach near the ancient port city of Ugarit, Syria, where he lives, and uses them as the medium for highlighting the millions of Syrians forced to flee their homes due to the ongoing violence. His images are composed entirely of small solid rocks arranged in such a way as to display the wide-ranging emotions attached to this experience. When he can't obtain glue to give them permanence, he'll take a photo and then reuse the stones. Some of his images were published in a children's book entitled *Stepping Stones* (2016) written in English by the Netherlands born Canadian author Margriet Ruurs and translated into Arabic. The translator, Falah Raheem, a Canadian Iraqi translator and writer, said that when the book was first sent to him, there were no images, just the text, so when he received a first draft and saw Badr's work, he felt compelled to revise his translation in light of the illustrations. The first thing he revised was his original title, *The Threshold of Departure*, because he realized that the stones were the real medium of communication and needed to be mentioned in the title. In an attempt to capture the double meaning of the English title of the stones as a kind of hurdle but also of progress on the journey, he titled it *The Stones of the Roads*.

For me, both these examples reveal the potential of inter-semiotic translation to be a powerful mode of communication, carrying source texts, objects and figures across sign systems, creating a dialogue between the signs and their forms of representation. In thinking of translation, we tend to focus on the content of the written or spoken message, hence the obsession with notions like fidelity or neutrality. But translation can also be thought of as a medium of communication that is used to reconfigure human association and action and, in the case of migration, awaken us to both its harsh and hopeful realities. You mentioned something similar I recall about the artists you've been working with, how the combination of their material and aesthetic practices revealed complex layers of meaning that would simply not be evident using words alone.

**Loredana:** I definitely recognize your search for additional translational tools. I may risk coming across as very impatient (which I probably am), but for me the need to think more actively about the visual as a form of translation came from an increasing sense of impatience, precisely, with the insufficiency of verbal language, with its inability to take me to the core of the experiences I was trying to understand and to describe. I am a very logocentric person, I have always put the word, written or spoken, first, so my entry point into the experiential dimension

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of migration and of its multiple processes of translation was through narratives understood in a narrow sense, i.e. as stories told and retold through verbal language. After a while, however, I felt I was going round in circles (an image I am stealing from you and from our conversations): I was getting frustrated by trying to prove or to argue points about translation which were somehow staring me in the face, but which resisted the confines of the metalanguage we use to talk about translation and, more broadly, about human verbal behavior.

It happened with teaching first. Nothing as traumatic as the examples you gave, but I was asking students or participants in workshops to describe their personal experience of translation and of self-translation – and all I was getting was constant repetitions of the same formulaic responses: translation as a transfer of information, languages divided in accordance to neatly contoured national territories, idioms split into “mother tongue” and “all the rest”... One day I asked people to draw, instead of writing, and after a couple of minutes of panic and blank staring I found I had a wealth of different maps, metaphors, journeys and stories. Something similar happened with artists. In some cases, they found me, and in others I found them, but exploring visual art that engages with migration and, especially, establishing conversations with the artists who produce it has meant that some aspects of the migration experience and of its entanglement with translation have become highlighted, have gained relief. One such element is performativity or, more precisely, the performative nature of each of the stories we tell about our histories of migration and of their many subsequent translations and re-translations. As with processes of identification or with the mechanisms of individual and collective memory, each narrative has its own complex relationship with “reality” and “truth”. How we narrate, translate and retranslate migration has to do with our perceptions of ourselves and others, as well as with the audiences we are reaching out to, their expectations and our relationship with them. Another characteristic of translation which becomes particularly visible when dealing with visual art is the fact that (especially, but I think not only in the context of migration) its function is not one of substitution but rather of co-presence, as I was saying earlier. That co-presence extends beyond verbal languages and also incorporates visual codes as well as embodied experiences, with their physical and emotional dimensions.

A number of the artists I am interested in – such as Angela Cavalieri, Luci Callipari Marcuzzo, Filomena Coppola, or B. Amore – work with a range of media and codes which include verbal language, in its written or

aural forms, but are not limited to it. Their techniques range from paint to collage or, in the case of Angela, to adopting the graphic shape of written words as the building block of her entire visual production. But what they are interested in is not just the narrow capacity of individual human idioms to carry meaning among members of a language group. They also use the verbal sign for its aesthetic, social and political power, and they mix multiple tongues as well as multiple media to compound that effect as well as to convey the layering of personal and shared experience, of individual and family memories, of collective histories of exclusion, assimilation, trauma, or survival. At the same time, these artists (and I think it is interesting that the ones I named are all women) combine traditional media and genres such as painting, drawing, or sculpture with creative practices associated with women's work: their production incorporates crafts like sewing and embroidery, the preparation of food, or everyday objects with their materiality. These practices trace genealogies of gendered labour and maps of female memory in which, for a long time, the written word was not the dominant nor the most common language. Rather, it was at most one among many ways of telling and remembering important tales, of passing on essential knowledge.

This co-presence of languages and codes, the combination of material and aesthetic planes, also helped me capture and bring together, the epistemological dimension and the metaphorical labour of translation, on the one hand, and its material, embodied and often gendered elements on the other. A powerful example of this is the image of weaving. This is a metaphor which has been repeatedly used to talk about translation, but which is often overlooked in favour of other images, such as bridging, transporting, mirroring. For a while, I had been working on the idea of "translational fabric" as a way to encapsulate how deeply enmeshed translation processes are not just in our linguistic behavior but in our social and emotional life. And here I was, working with artists who use exactly that image and that language – but also those techniques: weaving, embroidery, sewing, stitching together – to produce art that speaks about their experience of life as first, second or third generation migrants. Luci Callipari Marcuzzo, for instance, talks of her art performances as a way of tracing the threads of her family's past, as her parents and grandparents migrated from Italy to Australia; and she describes her mother's 1960s treadle-powered sewing machine, used in these live events, as a translation tool. Recently, another Italian Australian artist, Filomena Coppola, sent me images of her contribution to a collaborative global project called *@covid19quilt*. The work is an embroidered spiral going from magenta to

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indigo – the colours of a bruise, she said – covering the Earth globe. But the most interesting thing for me was that she sent two photographs, front and back, with the working side of the embroidery showing all its “messy”, “knotty” materiality and openly displaying the labour that goes into the perfect circles that are on show, for the viewer, on the other side. That double image reminded me of the Chinese term for translation, *fan yi*, which Maria Tymoczko discussed in one of her articles as linked, precisely, to the two sides of an embroidery, only one of which allows us to see the signs of its construction. It is the capacity to encapsulate this complexity of epistemological and material processes that really fascinates me in the way visual artists engage with translation as both a metaphorical notion and a practice.

**What are the gaps and the opportunities as we continue to develop research at the intersection between migration, translation and mediation?**

**Loredana:** If I think about what we have been saying throughout our conversation, it seems to me that we are both dissatisfied with notions or practices of translation that narrow it down to a “linguistic” activity or a “neutral” professional concern. I certainly do not want to move too far away from language, but I also don’t want to de-couple that dimension of translation from the cultural, the experiential, the embodied. It is precisely the intermeshing of these dimensions that interests me – and that interweaving is very much in evidence when translation and migration connect. So, if I had to point to two items on the research agenda, for the present and the future, the first would be the question of enhancing interdisciplinary dialogue and sensitization. Whether it is with the field of cultural mediation or with English as a lingua franca, research in translation needs to be open to dialogue with cognate disciplines, and vice versa. But we also need to look further afield. I keep saying that translation and interpreting are too important to leave them only to professionals: we need to sensitize the users of those services and that means, in the case of migration, that everyone involved in its processes and procedures should be made aware of the role that languages, narratives and their multiple translations play in how people are seen, treated, allowed (or not allowed) to live a human life. I think of this as a form of activism, of resistance against what I call “language indifference”. That is also why I think the notion of neutrality is at times used too readily and simplistically: I always tell students that being neutral does not

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mean not taking a position – on the contrary, it usually aligns us with the more powerful side in any exchange.

The other point I would make, is about how we carry out and communicate our research. It may well turn out to be futile, but I think we must at least try to reach wider audiences, beyond students or professionals specializing in translation. This is closely linked with the idea of sensitization as one of the key goals of research and education, which I just mentioned. It also means privileging different forms of writing or of public speaking and going beyond academic channels, even though this may be difficult or uncomfortable: when we relinquish the “protection” of formal academic writing, what we do and say may feel personal, at times even confessional, or in some cases appropriative with respect to other people’s experiences. This is where creative writing or the visual arts have an advantage: they do it so much better. But I would still like to think that we can do our work in a way which maintains that sense of the human, which upholds the fact that we are dealing with human beings, their lives, their stories. That is why I like translation in all its “knottiness” and “messiness” and I would never want to see it as a problem to be wished away, whether via some form of universal language or the advances of Artificial Intelligence.

**Moira:** I completely agree with everything you’ve said here Loredana, and couldn’t have said it any better! I’ll take this final turn then to thank Christina Schaeffner and Raffaella Merlini for allowing us this space to dialogue about migration in a way that would likely never have happened in quite the same way otherwise. As you mentioned in the introduction, we’ve been reading each other’s work for over a decade and had the occasional stolen moment of conversation, but this interchange of ideas over a short but concentrated period of time has really allowed me to see clearly what we share and what we can learn from one another. Thank you for being such an inspiring conversational partner.

**Loredana:** I’ll second all of that!

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