

TRANSLATING A NARRATIVE OF MIGRATION

Reflections and strategies in the Italian version
of Russell Banks' *Continental Drift*

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ABSTRACT • Collective identities and power relations are the result of converging projections deriving from history, geography, language, religion, memories and customs that – informed by more or less acknowledged ideologies – contribute to shaping them. Translation too, as a language interface, plays a relevant role in both representing Self and the Other and confirming or challenging power relations through various operations that include discourse shifts and a questioning of accepted meanings and practices. This paper revolves around the approach adopted in the translation of Russell Bank's novel *Continental Drift* into Italian at a time (2009-10) when political discourse in the target culture mainly constructed immigrants as an undifferentiated category threatening citizens' jobs, health and safety. Although written in 1985 and set in America around that time, the novel focuses on economic crises and tragedies of migration which call to mind aspects of contemporary Italy. In the context of fear and social conflict promoted in Italy by the then political forces in power to justify restrictive laws, the translator envisaged herself as an "agent of social change" (Tymoczko 2003) who did not want to be complicit with such discourse. Therefore, in translating the novel, a kind of "pre-emptive critical discourse analysis" was adopted, whereby lexical items, syntactic structures and the resulting pragmatic contexts were weighed in the light of how the target text would inscribe itself in the receiving culture so as to avoid – as far as possible – resonances and associations that might support prejudice. Some of the translator's considerations and solutions will be discussed as attempts (however ideologically connoted too) to avoid an a-critical use of language and find a balance between ethical issues and the "naturalness" usually required by the publishing sector.

KEYWORDS • Translation, ideology, migration, critical discourse analysis.

1. Introduction

Ideology, power and discourse have been shown as interconnected and providing a framework that, as many translation scholars have pointed out (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990; Venuti 1992; Tymoczko and Gentzler 2002, among others), certainly affects, besides various social and cultural issues, the choice of books to be translated and the role they will play in the construction of the collective. In countries like Italy, where political power and the media have been closely intertwined for decades, public discourse gains an even greater import and translators inevitably play a role in shaping it. Therefore, it seems crucial for them to be equipped with critical tools that enhance their ability to recognize the influence of language on the perception of the world, especially in areas of experience where it may confirm already existing prejudice in readers or promote ideologically connoted positions. This article deals with

the issues its writer faced while engaged in the translation into Italian of Russell Banks' *Continental Drift* – a novel in which migration plays a crucial role – at a time when the political forces in power in the target culture mainly constructed immigrants as an undifferentiated mass of threatening invaders. I am going to briefly outline the novel against the backdrop of the sociopolitical landscape at the time of the translation; then, I will discuss some considerations arising from the factual context of the target culture; finally, the most important issues arising in translation and some of the solutions adopted will be illustrated. As a practising translator and a teacher, I feel responsible for my contribution – however small – to public discourse and I believe it is necessary to problematize translation choices. As in the here and now of the receiving culture the choice of certain lexical items, syntactic structures and pragmatic situations might generate a cumulative effect seemingly endorsing a widespread xenophobic rhetoric, ways should be explored in order to defuse such potential.

2. The source text

Continental Drift, published in Italy for the first time at the close of 2012,¹ is a novel written in 1985 by American author Russell Banks, who develops two plots about characters desperately trying to improve their lives. One is the story of a white American man in his early thirties swapping his unexciting but relatively secure life in Catamount, New Hampshire, for the promise of big money in Florida; the other, the journey of a young woman with a baby and a teenage nephew leaving poverty-stricken Haiti to join relatives in Miami. Only at the very end do the two stories intertwine, in that the man finds himself involved in a trip to illegally ferry migrants to Florida and, because of unfavourable circumstances and inexperience, he surrenders to his mate's cold-blooded decision to throw the passengers into the rough sea when a patrol boat approaches, thereby causing the death of all but one. The novel closes with an act of redemption by the man, who gives the only survivor, the woman, the money made through that journey and is then killed by a group of young thugs.

Racism is not thematized in the novel, which mainly exposes the underside of the American dream and focuses on the dehumanizing consequences of two journeys in search of greater wealth. However, race becomes an issue every time the characters meet others, even suggesting a kind of hierarchy which reminds of old racial classifications, with the Haitians (often related to Africa) at the bottom, the humblest and most defenceless. From the point of view of a target text reader, it was especially the section of the novel devoted to the journey from Haiti to Florida, and its tragic end, which was likely to trigger analogies with the Italian situation².

3. The socio-political context in the target culture at the time of the translation

Rendering this narrative of migration into Italian meant facing one of the most politically and ideologically charged issues of the last few years. Italy awoke to the issue of immigration in 1991, when suddenly the southern ports of Brindisi and Bari received large inflows from

¹Banks, Russell (2012), *La deriva dei continenti*. Trans. P. Brusasco. Torino: Einaudi. The translation was carried out in the period 2009-2010, but the publication was postponed for editorial reasons.

²The analogy was actually highlighted in a review of the novel and interview to Russell Banks, who even pointed out internal migration as a similarity: south to north in Italy and north to south in the novel. (Guerrera A., "Siamo tutti continenti alla deriva, è il tempo di un nuovo Furore". in "La Repubblica", 2 gennaio 2013)

Albania (27,000 people on March 7 and 20,000 on August 8 respectively) following the collapse of the communist regime; later, migrants arrived from eastern Europe (early 2000s), while more recently many refugees have come from Africa as a consequence of social unrest, war and extreme poverty.

When the translation was commissioned (2010), the Italian government was headed by Silvio Berlusconi, who owned three national commercial TV channels and had considerable control over state television, as well as over a relevant section of the print media. Such a situation implied tremendous power on information and language, as well as the potential ability to shape attitudes and mind-sets. Moreover, one of the biggest parties in the then majority coalition, *Lega Nord* (Northern League), had defined immigrants as the most urgent and dangerous problem for the country and, fostering racism and xenophobia, was threatening extreme measures and positing “them” against “us” through an aggressive rhetoric which peaked during the electoral campaigns of 2008 and 2010. Immigrants were often represented in public discourse as an undifferentiated category threatening citizens’ jobs, safety and health, thus increasing hostility especially at a time of high unemployment and economic crisis.

During a talk at the 2011 Nida School of Translation Studies, Vicente Rafael, reflecting on the weaponization of language by the US military, said “translation detains us”. Interestingly, the only other way in which the verb “translate”, i.e., *tradurre*, is used in Italian is actually in collocation with “prison”, and usually in the passive (e.g., *sono stati tradotti in carcere*, literally “they have been traduced into prison”). In November 2010, a 13-year-old girl disappeared from a town in northern Italy and was found dead some months later. During the investigations, phone calls from and to her mobile were scrutinized, as well as those to and from her contacts. In a matter of days a man from Morocco was arrested and charged with murder because he was reported to have said on the phone “May Allah help me, it wasn’t me who killed her”. A few days later, he was released as other translators gave very different versions of the sentence, mainly having to do with a prayer for a creditor to settle his debt. To this day, sixteen translations have been provided, not all converging on the meaning, but essentially invalidating the main accusation.³ Besides highlighting the performative value of translation in Austin’s terms, this was literally a case of being “traduced/translated into prison”. The connection suggests both translation’s potential inroads into real life and a kind of reductionist approach to what is foreign, whereby it is re-thought and re-worded within the constraints of the target language and culture or – as in the example given – within scenarios which fit pre-constructed notions of who the other is.

Given its geographical position, the first destination immigrants from Africa head for is Lampedusa, a small island which has become the largest camp in Italy. When immigrants reach Lampedusa or other places along the coast – whether they are rescued from overloaded boats or found upon coming ashore – they are taken, and hence “traduced/translated”, to special collection centres that with a revealing oxymoron used to be called until a short time ago *Centri di permanenza temporanea*. Interestingly, a translation adopting a functionalist approach could be “Temporary Detention Centres”, but in this case a word-for-word translation (“Temporary Permanence Centres”) would best reveal the clash between the announced temporariness and the actual length of the detention, which is usually prolonged to months. Nowadays such centres are more explicitly termed *Centri di identificazione ed espulsione*, i.e., “Identification and Expulsion Centres”, which find their British equivalent in “Immigration Removal Centres” (formerly “detention centres”).

³ Ubbiali G. (2013), “L’ultima traduzione scagiona Fikri”, in “Il Corriere della Sera”, 24/05/2013. http://archiviostorico.corriere.it/2013/maggio/24/ultima_traduzione_scagiona_Fikri_co_0_20130524_4df_e1718-c431-11e2-93cb-34427e741622.shtml.

4. A few more considerations

Contrary to the heroic connotations traditionally ascribed to exploration journeys setting off from the metropolis in search of new lands, this modern-day journey in the opposite direction rather seems to conflate the etymological layering of the word “travel”. Related to its French and Latin precursors, *travailler* and *trepalium* (an instrument of torture), according to the *OED* “travel” includes such meanings as “torment”, “toil”, “put to work”, “gain knowledge through study”, “suffer the pains of childbirth”. The perilous, painful journey undertaken by migrants towards a metaphorical and physical translation into a new self and a new life with better prospects seems to fit the definitions provided above. However, differently from the celebrations of exploration journeys, the completion of today’s journeys often gets stopped in the deterritorialized space of so-called “hospitality centres”, which can be read as fragments of the promised land reduced to caged non-places, deprived of name and only labelled through a general noun (i.e., the centres mentioned above) in preparation for the travellers’ back-translation to origin. What may be perceived as a contradiction between the humane label given to such centres and the conditions inside can be better understood by resorting to Derrida’s investigation of hospitality (2000). Hospitality is etymologically related to *hospes*, which refers to both “host” and “guest”, with the latter evolving to include also the notion of “foreigner” and enemy. Derrida reflects on the law of hospitality, which implies opening the door to who/what is other, accepting at the same time the fact that the guest will become less of a stranger, thus acquiring power on the place. Ultimately, Derrida suggests, hospitality cannot be fully unconditional: being hospitable relies in fact on an assumption of ownership, mastery and the existence of boundaries. So, what Derrida sees as a possible dimension of hospitality involves opening to the guest, but exercising some degree of control, ultimately making the Other more other. Unconditional hospitality, then, becomes impossible as a category because giving up any kind of control and welcoming anyone would undermine the defined self and ownership which provide the necessary basis for the very concept of hospitality. This controversial relationship applies to translation too, often debating the degree of permeability to what is foreign and the need to define the boundaries of acceptance and recognizability of the Other in the receiving culture.

There seems to be a polarization at work: Italianness needs to be strengthened,⁴ while the unwanted “guest” needs to be othered along lines of binary opposition. Such a promotion of nationalistic values shows the need to solidify historical continuity and legitimize provisional political entities through various actions: a selective forgetting of a hybrid past and the celebration (or invention) of ancient, monocultural and heroic traditions constructed on “authentic” ethnic identities; an emphasis on “national” traits by elaborating binary oppositions to resort to in categorizing the foreign(er); the adoption of symbols and iconographies to boost unity; in short, the creation of an “apparatus of cultural fictions” in which “imaginative literature plays a decisive role” (Brennan 1995: 173).

⁴ While the translation was in progress, an attempt to enhance the perception of a shared Italian identity could be seen in the preparations for the 150th anniversary of national unity in 2011, which resulted in celebrations, shows and historical exhibitions reconstructing the path towards unity and which prompted countless people to display the Italian flag on their balconies for the whole year.

5. The translation

As Bassnett and Lefevere (1990) pointed out, translation is primarily contextual, it is grounded in history and entertains a two-way relationship with the target culture, being shaped by it while also shaping it. Similarly, Critical Discourse Analysis starts from the assumption that “all discourses are historical” (Meyer 2001: 15), that they are “way[s] of signifying a particular domain of social practice from a particular perspective” (Fairclough 1995: 14) and therefore they can be manifestations of power but also sites where power and social relationships can be challenged. It is therefore my conviction that translators should be familiar with CDA principles and cautious of the ways in which target texts inscribe themselves in the receiving culture in order not to exacerbate tensions, nor – considering the elements outlined so far – consolidate discursive practices that construct immigrants as hostile aliens spreading illnesses and crime. While *Continental Drift* reveals a certain degree of uneasiness in dealing with race, it does not in and of itself promote xenophobic attitudes. However, in translating I carried out a sort of “pre-emptive” CDA of the target text and envisaged myself as an agent of social change (Tymoczko 2010) or at least an agent of resistance to a dominant discourse instrumental in creating fear and hence consensus to increasingly aggressive policies of security. The approach adopted in the translation of *Continental Drift* did not reject any of the well-known theoretical contributions positing literal fidelity as against sense for sense translation, formal correspondence versus dynamic equivalence, or *skopos* as the ultimate principle determining translation strategies; rather, it drew on all of them, recognizing however the extra dimension of ideology in and around the text. Such an approach assumes meaning not as stably contained in texts, but rather construed and constructed by the participants in a communicative situation depending on the circumstances. The traditional idea of translation as mere transfer, as Venuti claims, relies on an “invariant”, i.e. “an unchanging essence inherent in or produced by the source text and freely accessible to the translator, regardless of the time and place where the translation occurs” (2013: 13). However, especially in non-technical fields, translation is the process and product of an act of interpretation which results in the selection of “one interpretive possibility among many” (*ibid.*). According to Venuti, translators apply formal and thematic interpretants that determine the way in which the translated text will come to stand for the source text in the receiving culture. Reviewing my approach in this light, I would say that while formal mediators (equivalence, style and genre) were activated, my main interpretants were thematic, relying on a reading concerned with ideology and representation precisely because of the specificity of circumstances of time and place.

While aware that trying not to subscribe to the dominant ideology meant embracing an ideologically determined position too, the issue of loyalty to the author in Nord’s terms (1997; 2006) was not perceived as relevant as no agenda was traceable in the source text other than Banks’ prophetic criticism of a way of life and a system that some twenty-five years later would prove to be falling apart. Moreover, while migratory flows generally reproduce the same pattern (from an economically defined south of the world to the north), the fact that the source text was written and set in America in the 1980s allowed for a certain freedom as its relation to present-day Italy would not be so straightforward. In a way, I espoused Tymoczko’s view that translators and interpreters shape their words and their texts to the needs of the moment, which in this case seemed to be the questioning of a localized version of the grand narrative of the war on terror.

In approaching the translation, my reflections echoed Gentzler and Tymoczko’s question: “given that we are always already formed by the discourses of the age in which we live, how can anyone effect cultural change?” (2002: xvi). Looking for ways to challenge polarized

discourse, I identified some areas which, beyond being symbolically significant, would also allow some margin for linguistic negotiation.

5.1. Lexis

Given the topic of the novel, key terms include a cluster revolving around migration. The most common words used in Italian to refer to the actors of the process are *immigrati* and *clandestini* (“immigrants” and “clandestines/illegal immigrants”), categorized by Wodak as a spatializing actionym and a criminonym respectively (2001: 88),⁵ as well as *stranieri* (“foreigners”) which in its nominalized use thematizes non-belonging; all of these convey implicit social stigma. In order to test the groundedness of this perception, the terms were checked through some corpora⁶ which confirmed that they often collocate, among others, with words conveying negative meanings such as *emergenza*, *problema*, *droga*, *traffico*, *criminalità*, *sbarchi* (“emergency”, “problem”, “drugs”, “trafficking”, “crime”, “clandestines coming ashore”). In the source text, Banks very often used the term “the Haitians” to refer to the group trying to reach Florida, sometimes repeating it at very close distance. Generally speaking, repetition is more acceptable in English than in Italian, so the choice does not strike the reader as particularly marked. However, the frequency of use of “the Haitians” may be read as a way to avoid other terms, e.g. “migrants”, “black people”, “foreigners”, which also in English would convey negative connotations. This impression is reinforced by the preference shown by the author for terms referring to origin (the Inaguan, the Englishman), which may be read as ways of avoiding reference to race. In order not to end up with a target text which – set against the backdrop of contemporary public discourse – might express more negative bias than originally intended, my decision was to try and distinguish, as far as possible, between contexts where the source text created stigmatizing associations and more neutral ones, where the denotative value of the terms prevailed. In the former case, the “direct” Italian equivalents were used, with all the associations they trigger.

“Whew! It really is funny, though, when you think about it.”

“Yeah? What exactly?”

“Oh, shit, man, you know. The two of us, a coupla hicks outa the hills of New Hampshire, ending up like this. Running coke from Colombia and niggers from Haiti. [...] (Banks 1985: 284)

– Però! È davvero buffo quando ci pensi.

– Ah sì? Che cosa esattamente?

– Oh, merda, lo sai. Noi due, no? Due bifolchi delle colline del New Hampshire che finiscono in questo casino. A trasportare coca dalla Colombia e negri da Haiti. [...] (Banks 2012: 370-71)

[...] and when he discovered they were Haitians, which he did when, by poking them with his foot, he woke them and heard them speak, he did not turn them over to the town’s one police officer,

⁵ Both terms are used by Wodak (2001: 88) in her analysis of “Austria First”, a petition launched by the right-wing Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) in 1992. Wodak contends that throughout the text actors are constructed as falling into two groups, Austrian citizens and the indistinct mass of the others, represented in terms of their actions and supposed non-compliance with the law.

⁶ Queries were carried out using *itTenTen* (<http://www.sketchengine.co.uk/>) and *Corpusitaliano* (www.corpusitaliano.it), which are large corpora of contemporary Italian texts taken from the web; *CoLFIS* (<http://linguistica.sns.it/CoLFIS/Home.htm>), which is a corpus of texts taken from newspapers, magazines and books, and *La Repubblica* (<http://sslimit.unibo.it/repubblica>), based on newspaper articles.

who had nothing to do that day anyhow and would have welcomed the opportunity to drive to Nassau to turn the illegal aliens over to the immigration office. (Banks 1985: 195)

[...] e, scoprendo che erano di Haiti – cosa che accadde quando, toccandoli con un piede li svegliò e li sentì parlare – non li consegnò all’unico poliziotto del paese, che quel giorno comunque non aveva nulla da fare e sarebbe stato ben lieto della possibilità di andare a Nassau e portare i clandestini all’ufficio immigrazione. (Banks 2012: 255)

Elsewhere, other strategies were used to avoid unnecessary emphasis, i.e.:

1a) omission: as Italian conjugated verb forms change depending on the subject, the latter can be, and often is, dispensed with without hindering comprehension and actually streamlining sentences. This was especially the case with “the Haitians” which, kept as frequently as in the source text, would have burdened the translation and drawn special attention to the item; also, if co-referents had been used to replace it, the same problem of potentially charged “equivalents” would have arisen. Therefore, in some cases, a repeated subject was left out as its referent would be implied by the related verb.

With the Haitians off in the bush for one of their African voodoo ceremonies, Tyrone thinks, they might as well postpone the crossing to Florida until tomorrow morning anyhow, and he hopes Dubois doesn’t panic when the mate does not return quickly to the boat, that Dubois will simply wait for him all night anchored in the bay, even if it takes Tyrone till daylight to get back, as, with these crazy Haitians, it might. Haitians aren’t like other people [...] (Banks 1985: 293)

Con gli haitiani chissà dove nella boscaglia per uno dei loro riti vudu africani – Tyrone pensa – tanto vale rimandare la traversata per la Florida fino all’indomani mattina; spera che Dubois non vada in panico vedendo che lui non torna, e semplicemente lo aspetti tutta la notte all’ancora nella baia, anche se dovesse metterci fino all’alba, cosa da non escludere con questi pazzi di haitiani. Non sono come gli altri [...] (Banks 2012: 382)

2a) reference, i.e. a relationship of identity between two or more semantic items within the text, spanning along a continuum from repetition to pronominal reference. The third person plural subject pronoun *essi* is rarely used in Italian and makes sentences sound highly formal or awkward; its object form, *loro*, commonly replaces it in the spoken language, but meets some resistance in writing as, strictly speaking, incorrect. In the translation, *loro* was often used in dialogues and sometimes in descriptive passages. Overall, subject pronominal reference did not play a major role, as dialogues often carried expressive meaning and the Italian “charged equivalents” would be functional to the communicative intentions of the speakers.

3a) endophoric synonymy was created through the use of *gli haitiani* (i.e. the Haitians) and *i passeggeri* (i.e. the passengers), while superordinates and general words such as *tutti* (i.e. all), *il gruppo* (i.e. the group), *quelle persone* (i.e. those people) were occasionally used to refer to the migrants.

The Haitians are mostly lying down, a few seated on their heels and eating, one or two talking in low voices, several evidently asleep. (Banks 1985: 307)

Quasi tutti sono coricati, alcuni mangiano seduti sui talloni, un paio parlano a bassa voce, parecchi sembrano dormire. (Banks 2012: 403)

5.2. Forms of address

In Italian, people can be addressed as *tu* or *Lei*, each with its related verb forms and possessives, depending on familiarity, degree of formality of the communicative context and power relations. A third pronoun, *Voi*, can sometimes be found as a singular mode of address, but it is mainly regional, rural or archaic. Although relying only on personal observation, I would say that in everyday situations one often hears immigrants addressed by native speakers of Italian as *tu*, which implies either familiarity or an asymmetrical power relationship. It has to be acknowledged that Italian has been undergoing a general process of “informalization”, which involves a widespread use of *tu* even in contexts, like a shop-assistant greeting a customer or a host addressing a guest in a TV show, that used to be characterized by greater formality. Also, one could surmise that the choice of *tu* is dictated by the desire to increase understandability as the more polite *Lei* is matched by third-person-singular verbs and possessives, which may not be properly decoded unless one masters the language well. However, this interpretation tends to be belied by the fact that no other facilitating strategy – e.g. slowing down, reformulation, lexis or syntax simplification – is adopted to help non-native speakers. In the translation, both *tu* and *Lei* with their correlated verb forms were used depending on the communicative situation, thus allowing also the Other to be addressed with *Lei* where no conflict or intentional slighting was perceivable.

“You’re Haitian, right? That’s a Haitian accent, right?” (Banks 1985: 352)

– Lei è di Haiti, vero? È un accento di Haiti il suo, giusto? (Banks 2012: 463)

Suddenly [...] Vanise steps away from the group of refugees and touches the mate on his naked shoulder.

Eh? What do you want? (Banks 1985: 112)

All’improvviso, un braccio intorno al piccolo che stringe al petto, Vanise si stacca dal gruppo di profughi e tocca il secondo sulla spalla nuda.

Eh? Che vuoi? (Banks 2012: 149)

5.3. Syntax

Great attention was paid to the semantic role of the participants independently of the linguistic encoding of the situations, i.e. their agency. Thus, resorting to transitivity analysis as used in CDA, both source and target texts were looked at through the notions of participants, processes and circumstances in order to identify and suitably reproduce roles. Assuming that the core or process in a clause is what expresses happening, being, doing, saying or thinking, on a referential level one may argue that verb voice does not really change the result of the process, which might lead the translator to opt for active or passive forms on the basis of an alleged greater naturalness of formulation or more widespread use. However, considering that the perspective shown is likely to influence the reader’s reaction, I resorted to a stricter literalism so as not to delete or mix agency and responsibility.

[...] the men came back down again, the brown Inaguan and the Englishman [...] sending Claude with the baby aft while they raped his aunt” (Banks 1985: 185)

[...] gli uomini tornarono – quello delle Inagua e l’inglese [...] – e mandarono Claude a poppa mentre violentavano sua zia (Banks 2012: 243).

While the corresponding passive clause *mentre sua zia veniva violentata* would be acceptable as no particular emphasis is placed on the agent in the source text, such a translation would indeed focus on the horror of the act but at the same time remove the doers from the scene. The same approach was adopted when the wrongdoers were on the other side of the racial divide:

When the Haitian men came down, Claude was surprised, for they behaved like the others, even the man with the pipe, who tried to grab Claude when he stepped away from them, grasping at the boy's trousers and yanking on them, and when Claude fought and squirmed free, the man hit the boy in the face with his fist [...]" (Banks 1985: 185-6)

Quando scesero gli haitiani, Claude rimase sorpreso perché si comportarono come gli altri, perfino quello con la pipa, che cercò di ghermirlo mentre si allontanava, afferrandogli i pantaloni e tirando, e quando lui, divincolandosi, riuscì a liberarsi, gli piantò un pugno in faccia [...]" (Banks 2012: 243)

Here too it would have been possible to highlight the receiving end of the action, or patient, choosing for example a similarly informal but agentless rendering: [...] *quando lui, divincolandosi, riuscì a liberarsi, si prese un pugno in faccia*, but it would have gone against the attempt to always show who was doing what.

Even sentences with the determiner "no one" as subject, which may be easily transformed using the passive, were translated keeping all the participants.

No one will model himself on Bob Dubois; no one will reinvent him and remember the man in order to invent and make memorable himself. (Banks 1985: 364)

Nessuno prenderà Bob Dubois a modello; nessuno lo reinventerà e lo ricorderà al fine di inventare e rendere memorabile sé stesso. (Banks 2012: 479)

The decision to highlight actors (or, conversely, goals, depending on where the focus of the source text was) never implied attributing agency where it was not present in the source, which would mean manipulating the text. Rather, it meant identifying agency and trying to maintain it in the target text too.

5.4. Foreign language

In the source text, the Haitians often use French Creole terms or resort to code-switching, especially in culture-specific areas such as food and voodoo, when they are in highly emotional conditions or when the reader is given access to their thoughts. In literary translation, words that in the source text appear in another language are normally left untranslated in the target text, but this rarely applies to long sections, which are naturalized or at least shown in translation in a footnote. In *La deriva dei continenti* the choice was never to translate them: the rationale was that this would on the one hand challenge the widespread assumption of ignorance connected to an imperfect knowledge of the language used at destination, and on the other it may awaken the reader to at least one dimension of the displacement one feels when confronting a foreign culture. On a more market-conscious level, while this decision is not reader-friendly, it was nonetheless acceptable both because French, even in a creolized version, still retains a fair degree of transparency for many Italians, and because such strings were often reformulated in English in the source text or elements were provided to help the reader make sense through the mechanisms of cooperation in conversation.

The old man goes on complaining about “le peuple, les gens, les Haitians... dipis temps y’ap pa’lé sou moin! Pilé pied’m ou mandé’m pardon. Ça pardon-là, wa fait pou’ moin?” And Tyrone finally interrupts him and asks to know where they’ve gone tonight.

[...]

“Merci, monsieur. Jé wè bouche pé,” he warns – see but don’t say. “*La famille semblé...*” he whispers, and he looks warily over his bent shoulder, like a dog warning off other dogs as he’s about to eat. “*Soso na pé tué, soso, jodi-à!*” A pig is to be killed today. “*Pour Erzulie, ‘Ti Kita, Gé Rouge, Pié Sèche. Pour les loas, les Invincibles, monsieur!*” (Banks 1985: 290-291)

Il vecchio continua a lamentarsi. - Le peuple, les gens, les Haitians... dipis temps y’ap pa’lé sou moin! Pilé pied’m ou mandé’m pardon. Ça pardon-là, wa fait pou’ moin? – *finché Tyrone lo interrompe chiedendogli dove siano andati tutti.*

[...]

- Merci, monsieur. Jé wè bouche pé, – lo avverte: guardare, ma non parlare. – La famille semblé... – bisbiglia, guardando con circospezione oltre la spalla curva, come un cane che diffidi di altri cani mentre si appresta a mangiare. – Soso na pé tué, soso, jodi-à! – Devono ammazzare un maiale oggi. – Pour Erzulie, ‘Ti Kita, Gé Rouge, Pié Sèche. Pour les loas, les Invincibles, monsieur!” (Banks 2012: 379)

6. Conclusion

While *Continental Drift* is not a novel about immigration or racial relationships, but rather a disillusioned portrait of the moral corruption and desperation brought about by the pursuit of material happiness, race does appear as a site of tension. Characters often find themselves in “zones of contact”, usually portrayed as sources of anxiety for whites. The interactions of the white male protagonist with African-Americans are generally marked by fear and prejudice, while the Haitians, with the exception of the other protagonist, the Haitian woman, appear as an indistinct group. One linguistic aspect that does not raise particular problems in translation, yet may generate doubts about Banks’ position towards the Haitians is the fact that they are mainly portrayed through relational processes, i.e., defining what something/someone is, what they are like or what they have, as in “how silent and obedient, how passive they were” (Banks 1985: 305), “their eyes seem glazed” (1985: 302), “All the people on the deck are up on hands and knees now” (1985: 111). The static quality thus conveyed, combined with the scarcity of material processes (i.e., processes of doing) in which they are engaged, results in a representation of the Haitians as an inert mass, which reminds of well-known stereotypes. All in all, however, the novel cannot be said to be supportive of xenophobic attitudes.

Reconsidering the approach to the text and the translation choices, I realise that, broadly speaking, I have challenged the usual requirement of the publishing sector, namely facilitate fluent reading by making the target text sound natural and removing obstacles to understanding. In this case the publishing house – which has a well-established tradition of political engagement and openness to experimentalism – accepted my take, although a few solutions had to be negotiated. It has to be acknowledged, however, that naturalness was sought, especially in dialogues, but the aspect of resistance is to be found in the critical assessment and reflections which preceded the actual translation. In the light of the situation in the receiving culture, it was my desire to use words critically, i.e., gauging their potential effect. To a certain degree, this resulted in a stricter literalism in potentially charged areas in order to try and keep in the Italian rendering the same ideological position as that in the source text. In a way, my approach to the translation may be seen as an attempt at de-weaponization of the language; also, in part it embraces a foreignizing approach meant to retain and show aspects of the Other in the target text. While the debated notion of fidelity to the source text and author was undoubtedly a

guiding principle, the reader's potential reception was also taken into account. In bringing into the target culture a novel that, because of its content, shows remarkable analogies with the local situation, my concern was to question an a-critical use of language which, to say it with Susan Sontag (2003), has inured us to the pain of others.

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