

Translation Revisited:

Contesting the Sense of African Social Realities

Edited by

Jean-Bernard Ouédraogo,
Mamadou Diawara
and Elísio S. Macamo

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

TRANSLATING AFRICA ELSEWHERE:

THE 'TASK' OF SHALJA PATEL

SILVANA CAROTENUTO
UNIVERSITY OF NAPLES, ITALY

To the "Doors" of Abbas Kiarostami: to the Activism of Mahasweta Devi

Every translator is committed.
(J. Derrida)

In what follows, I will propose a 'reading as translation' that probes intimate to the textuality it reads (Spivak, 1993). My proposal is intimate to what I learn of translation in my research in the writing – theatre, performativity and visual art – of female diasporic authors. In *The Language of Cleopatra. Deconstructive Translations and Survivals* (Carotenuto, 2008), I read the Queen of the tragedy by William Shakespeare, the African woman, in her role of 'translator' – between Egypt and Rome, the colony and the Empire, the scene of the 'other' on the Renaissance stage. This role is envisioned in the dialogue, the theoretical textile woven by Deconstruction, Postcolonial Theory and Historical Materialism, around the seminal essay by Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator" (Benjamin, 1996). Provoked by the solicitations of the conference "Africa N'Ko II", my 'reading as translation' chooses, in its intimacy, the life and art of another African woman, less fictional but similarly complex, who, like Cleopatra, exposed to the diaspora between the Orient and the Occident, brings to global attention the task of the female translator. Her creative commitment resounds – in music, as I will try to show – with what the German philosopher writes on the 'problem' of translation, rewritten – "à ma manière" – by Jacques Derrida (1985: 219), Paul de Man (1986), Gayatri C. Spivak (1993; 2000) and Teaswini Niranjana (1992).

Shalja Patel, third-generation East African Asian, born in Nairobi, migrated to America, and a founding member of Kenyans for Peace, was

named one of Fifty Inspirational African Feminists for the 100th anniversary of International Women's Day. She is known for her creative activism: *Migritude*, the piece of spoken-word theatre staged in 2006. The written text in 2010¹ materialised her poetic performances, reproduced on the internet, presented at media events, and followed by a global public. Among these, I will read the poem "Drum Rider" devoted to the Zanzibar musician Bi Kidude who, after her death in 2013, has been internationally celebrated by the music documentary "As Old as my Tongue", directed by Andy Jones (2009). In his tribute to the African 'drummer', he finds inspiration in Patel's hymn.

Migritude and "Drum Rider", the encounter of performance and writing, poetry and music, signs Patel's assumption of the role of female translator of Africa 'elsewhere' – in Great Britain, America, in her returns to Kenya,² in the globalised world that loves her publications and public apparitions. *Migritude* is the *oeuvre* that narrates her 'apprendistato' of the task of 'translator' – herself, a woman, a female artist, as opposed to the critical debate that refers, only, and always, to the 'translator' called by the original to 'his' task of translation³ – in relation to a 'trousseaux of saris' received by her mother as a 'gift of creativity'. Benjamin says that "the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds" (1996: 258). Black thinking theorises it as the writing of "material animation, invaginated grammar, transferential graph" (Lipitt, 2003: 1340). In Patel, the soft textiles reflect and expose her life and the life of Kenya, remembered and experienced – 'translated', if, as Derrida insists, "Experience is translation" (1985: 234). This translation is on the stage and in writing, through her personal exile, and in African history,

¹ On the book that 'translates' the theatre performance on the page, Patel explains, "The publication of 'Migritude' was driven by others who really wanted to see it on the page, and pushed the project forward to make it a book. And now that it's published, it's wonderful because it's being translated more and more and it just crosses borders without me, which is fabulous" (Reed, 2014).

² Remembering her return to Kenya, to the expectation that she, as all migrants, should bring something back, Patel replies: "I brought *Migritude*. A tapestry of history, politics, poetry into a suitcase, embedded in my body, rolled out into theatre. An accounting of Empire enacted on the bodies of women" (96).

³ It will be a question of 'gender'; in his essay, J. Derrida (1985, 181) notices (in parenthesis) that Benjamin never considers the task of the 'female translator': "... from the very title... Benjamin situates the *problem* ... as the problem of the translator and not that of translation (nor, he it said in passing, and the question is not negligible, that of the translator's)". 'Female agency' is one of the main contributions offered by G. Spivak to the debate on translation (1993: 2000; see, also, Spivak 2008, which deals with the question of 'African translation').

starting with her birth in Nairobi in the 1980s, and developing in the present of the Asian diaspora in the world. Due to this legacy, Patel is twice forced to migrate, carrying the set of saris and her determination to create. To 'translate' – in *Migritude* she 'animaterialises' (Molten, 2003: 18) her maternal textiles with the 'touches' of translation evoked by Benjamin: the 'caress', the 'contact' and the 'contract' with alterity as remarked by Derrida; the rhetorical alienation 'misread' by Paul de Man; the ethical and materialist praxis of 'living-in-translation' urged by Spivak and Niranjana in postcolonial times. In Patel's artistic rendering of these traits, it is the representation – of "Born to a Law", as the last poem in *Migritude* titles: the 'intention', the 'declaration' and the 'execution' of her role as the female translator called by Africa to its transability, survival, afterlife.

"Drum Rider" is the poem that, in a similar way, is called into existence by the historical time of the life of Bi Kidude, after decades of musical experience in the African tradition of 'tarab'.⁴ The legacy urges the gesture of her worldly recognition: a further flight of its veils, and Patel's poetry brings on the creative scene the most radical and utopian 'promise' – "already an event" (Derrida, 1995: 191) – of the debate on translation. The task of the translator, Benjamin affirms, is to remind or to prophesise for humanity, the realm of the reconciliation, the commonality and affinity of languages, the translation bringing the language of the original to its sacred enlargement, extension and maturation, evolution and growth.⁵ In a similar way, Patel's voice, intimately translating the sound of Kidude, reaches the limitless element of air, where it unfolds the

⁴ "Tarab" is a slow, gentle, and nostalgic music, that mixes Kiswahili, Arabic and old Indian Bollywood music from the 1940s-50s. In "It's Just Not Fun Anymore", Laura Fair traces the journey of Tarab through the Zanzibar Revolution: in the early '60s, Tarab clubs in Zanzibar were controlled by women, who decided the audiences, bands, and content of what was sung and produced. In 1964, the year of the Zanzibar Revolution, under the Afro-Shirazi Party, the state took control of the clubs, appointing men to decide what women would perform.

⁵ The flight of Patel's saris is meant "to enlarge... the audience's concepts of what is desirable. To make rage beautiful and grief compelling. To keep expanding the definition of beauty" (81). In another context (Byrd, 2014), she uses the term 'amplification': "Nobody on the planet is really silent. There is nobody on the planet who is unable to speak for themselves. The difference in power and the severe inequality comes in who has a platform which allows them to be heard... my job as a poet is never to claim to speak for anyone else and certainly never to insult anyone else by telling them they're voiceless. It is to use the spaces that I am privileged to occupy and the platforms that I am offered to *amplify* the voices of those who need to be heard" (my emphasis).

reminder and the prophecy of the – utopian and earthly, certainly African – messianic affinity of the languages of poetry and music. “Drum Rider” ends with the desire that, ‘if’ we experienced god with Bi Kidude’s puissance, ‘if’ god owned her expressive strength, the world would join the poem’s final ‘call to prayer’:

I would call the faithful to prayer:
 Bomba Kidude! Kidude Saafi!
 And they would holler back: Saafi!
 They would holler back: Saafi!
 They would holler back: SAAFI!
 And we would all be
 god.

Migrinude and “Drum Rider” – the pride of the migrant, the beat of music. A set of saris, the ‘khangā’ worn round the hips: Patel’s ‘royal robe/precious sari’ of translation is ready to touch its original, inscribe its fleeting movements in the world, write the ‘law’ of translation in the souls and the bodies of her audiences, in loving commitment.

The ‘Royal Robe’/ ‘Precious Sari’ of *Migrinude*

Translation is poetic transposition.
 (J. Derrida)

“The Task of the Translator” signs Walter Benjamin’s “Preface” to his translation of Baudelaire’s *Passages*; *Migrinude* starts with “Prelude” (it will then be “Migrant Song”, and, often, “Mother’s Voice”, as if music always already informed poetic destiny/action) that defines the translation at stake: “How Ambi become Patsley?”, recites the subtitle. If, according to Benjamin, “Translation is a form” (1993: 40), in Patel’s ‘launch of an investigation’, the form par excellence is Ambi or *Botel*, a teardrop, a peacock feather, half a heart, an s-shaped curve, the outline of the mango dear to all migrants from the Global South. Tracing its origin, Patel imagines being taken to India, but Ambi returns her back to Babel. In reference to the ‘confusion of languages’, Derrida thinks of the legendary Babel as “a proper name ... the need for figuration, for myth, for tropes, for twists and turns... the translation of translation” (1985: 165).⁶ In

⁶ For biblical Babel, Derrida says, “This story recounts, among other things, the origin of the confusion of tongues, the irreducible multiplicity of idioms, the

Patel’s search, what matters is that, in Babel, Ambi identifies with the tree of life, the myth of fertility blessed by Astarte, the goddess appearing in caves (as painted in a poster hanging in Patel’s home, in Nairobi).⁷ According to the legend, in Kashmir, the shape is associated with the footprint of the goddess Parvati when she walks through the mountains of the Himalayas (“drumming the world into being” (76), the goddess’ footwear opens Patel’s performance).⁸

Divine origins cross the stage of history and offer the form to the weavers of ‘mousteen’, from Mosul, the town in Iraq where the craft originated. The trade travels to Egypt, to Rome, to Masulipatnam in South India and to Dhaka in Bengal. The incredible ‘glory’ – which, in Benjamin, signs the original’s survival (1993: 41) – of the two cities proves provocative to the British colonisers, who decide to chop off the weavers’ “index fingers and thumbs” (5) and, when Kashmir is annexed in 1846, let the ‘bandits’ of East India Company abduct the trade to Patsley, the village in Scotland. “Kashmir become cashmere. Mosulsten become muslin. Ambi become patsley” (7). Colonial translation proves its force of law, which is not to be undone. Inscribed on the embroidered materials, Ambi cannot be restored to any mythical or legendary origin. The task of the translator, the launch of Patel’s investigation, knows the inevitability of enforced history. No transparency, or univocity, but rather the commitment lies in questioning. “The question mark ought to be the

necessary and impossible task of translation, its necessity as impossibility.” (1993: 171).

⁷ The Nairobi painting is important in that it refers to the question of the ‘name’ or ‘signature’ of the translator: “Astarte, shameless goddess of the fecund feminine... my mother always told me it was ‘my picture’... my name: the carvings and paintings of the goddess in the mountain caves are called *shailija* or of the mountains. The Sankriti word *shail* – mountain stone – is the root of the English *shale*” (75).

⁸ *Migrinude* is “a complex weaving, a work of genius... an illuminated manuscript with each letter crafted with intent and purpose” (Ikonya, 2012) – that presents a singular design. It consists of drawings that accompany the writing; 17 chapters or ‘poetic vignettes’ (Piccolo, 2008), with notes; ‘WHAT CAME OUT FROM THE SUITCASE’ (the troupe’s ‘observations’ of the saris); *Shadow Book* (the “behind-the-scenes and after-the fact vignettes, memories, and associations”, “the underside and the offshoots” that illuminate the performance, 74); *The Making and Other Poems* (‘the groundwork’ left out from the performance because of stage cutting, yet essential part “of the wider tapestry that *Migrinude* grew out of”, 100); *The Journey* (the timeline of the historical “migrations between the Asian and African Continents” (128) and two interviews).

biggest part of the alphabet in history” (Ikonya, 2012) – the colonial legacy with touches of translation that forge their ‘acts of word’:

How many ways can you slice a history? Price a country? Dice a people? Slice a heart? Entice what’s been erased back into story? My-gritude.

Have you ever taken a word in your hand, dared to shape your palm to the hollow where the fullness falls away? Have you ever pointed it back to its beginning? Felt it leap and shudder in your fingers like a dowsing rod? Jerk like a severed thumb? Flare with the forbidden name of a goddess returning? My-gritude.

Have you ever set out to search for a missing half? The piece that isn’t shapely, elegant, simple. The half that’s ugly, heavy, abrasive. Awkward to the hand. Gritty on the tongue.

Migritude (7)⁹

I wanted a word that would capture the idea of migrant attitudes, migrant with attitude. I was playing and riffing off the idea of *negritude* and migrants. *Negritude* was the movement in the 1960s that reclaimed and celebrated Black African culture as something powerful in its own right, something that didn’t need to be measured or assessed according to the standards of European culture. So, I was asserting the same thing for migrants and migrant movements, saying there is a voice, a world view, a space that migrants inhabit that is unique and powerful and defined by itself, not by how close they’ve come to assimilation, not even by where they came from, but the state of being a migrant. (Reed, 2014)

“At the beginning was the word” (Benjamin, 1993: 49). ‘Migritude’ is the ‘rough to the tongue’ word – the philosopher calls it ‘the arcade’ (ibidem)¹⁰ – that allows for the appearance of Patel’s task of translation on the stage of critical thinking. ‘Migritude’ refers to Aimé Césaire’s and Leopold Sédar Senghor’s concept of ‘*Negritude*’ translated into the ‘love

⁹ Patel’s exile plays an essential role in her forging the word ‘migritude’: “Well, I am a migrant. I have migrated continents twice in my lifetime, and speaking from the voice and the politics of a migrant, inhabiting the space of understanding the global forces that drive migration has always been central to my work, getting people to understand the politics and the economics of migration and breaking down the barriers in their heads of “us” and “them,” that migration is something out there, outside me.” (Reed, 2014)

¹⁰ Benjamin (1993: 26) underlines that it is “the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade”.

poems’ of Arundhati Roy,¹¹ the condition of exile experienced with the dignity of a generation of migrants “who speak unapologetically, fiercely, lyrically, for themselves” (Reddy, 2010: 13). ‘Migritude’ names the ‘pride’ – “so fierce it threatens to incinerate us” (41) – of those who have been kept outside history, the dissonance of their tongues, the haunting presence of their remains, the ethical condensation of their destinies, the vindication of their experiences for the future of humanity.¹² In intimacy with the soft and light touches of the saris, what Patel chooses as her task (*Aufgabe*) of translation is the ‘law’ that will change everything in her life and art.

Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point, establishing, with this touch rather than with the point, the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity – a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux...

(W. Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator”)

... to touch “that” which one calls “veil” is to touch everything. You’ll leave nothing intact, safe and sound, neither in your culture, nor in your memory, nor in your language, as soon as you take on the word “veil.” As soon as you let yourself be caught up in it, in the word ... nothing will remain, nothing will remain anymore.

(J. Derrida, “A Silkworm of One’s Own. Points of View Stitched on the Other Veil”)

Turning history inside out, smelling it out, touching it... you can touch her dedication. You can touch her thread of life in the arts. Her golden thread around her wrist. This poetry is written in her blood and with her blood.

(P. Ikonya, “Shailja Patel: Dressed in scarlet she strides danger zone”)

¹¹ Roy is particularly appreciated for her style of writing: “Everything Arundhati Roy writes, reads like a love poem to me. She does not separate her heart from her politics. Her humanity from her brilliance and piercing analysis” (145).

¹² According to Ikonya (2012), the appeal to ‘humanity’ is central to Patel’s work: “The writer takes us from Babylon to Uganda, to Kenya, to America and India, East, south, north and west without losing her compass. Her direction is *humanity* and she fails not.” (my emphasis). The critic has just mentioned the question of ‘in-humanity’ as what marks difference in ‘un-ethical’ behaviours: “Idi Amin is not the only person who rejected East African Asians. Some intellectuals, citizens and politicians in Kenya still bear a grudge against them. And everywhere most of them have gone, they have only flourished. In England, they rate among the most successful people in all that they strove to engage in after Amin Dada. Uganda beckons them back. *Humanity* and inhumanity. Where is the learning?” (my emphasis).

Some day I'll start a museum/ Where all Works of Art/ Are for touching...
(S. Patel, "Please do not touch")

At the crossing of her personal story with African history, inscribed on the saris unfolding in light and shadow, "this movement of love, the gesture of this loving one that is at work in the translation" (Derrida, 1987; 190) starts at home, in the formative years of 'the subject of translation' (Ibid: 179). "Part I: Nairobi, Kenya (1972-1989)" sets Patel's birth in the Asian diaspora in Kenya, exposed to colonial violence – and to her 'indebtedness' as a translator – when she is still a child. In 1972, on the threshold of national borders, in Uganda, the military coup led by the dictator Idi Amin, and supported by Britain, Israel and the United States (in the theatre, Patel shakes the folds of her sari with a snap), expelled the whole Asian population, stripping them of all possessions.¹³ Violence crosses borders: in Nairobi, people help, with water, bread and clothing, the mute and dumb creatures travelling on the trains that traverse Kenya. On one side, there is 'no respect'; on the other side – which is the same side – there is no claiming of 'roots'. On the same side, there is the need to 'reinvent oneself in order to survive'; on that side, the cry of a man breaks "the foundations of the world" (78).

James Baldwin says, "When a black man does not stay in his place, the sky and the earth are shaken to the foundations". In Patel, the anguished 'cry' – "Image that haunted my childhood" (11)¹⁴ – indelibly 'echoes' (Benjamin 1993: 47) with the 'call of alterity' of/in the original, its 'translatability' presiding over her surrendering. It is what Spivak demands from the post-colonial feminist translator (1993: 183) – to the contract of translation: "I knew from childhood that one of the epics I would write when I grew up and became an author was the tale of Asians being thrown out of Uganda" (78).¹⁵ To respect her signature, she positions her

¹³ Ikonya (2012) notes that "She is a poet bringing out all those voices we strangled and put into suitcases in Idi Amin's times in Uganda. The disappeared. She is a poet opening the wounds that we want to superficially heal. She is the cutting edge of a sharp knife which we need to cut the lies out of our fabric and make sense of history. She promised you no less. "Have you ever sliced a heart on a curve? Which piece would you keep?"

¹⁴ Patel remembers, "Idi Amin was the villain of my childhood", adding that the image of the 'crying man' "seared itself on my imagination. Crying while he held a child... can Daddies really cry? Wouldn't that split the foundations of the world?" (78).

¹⁵ Derrida reads the exceptionality of the 'contract' of translation: "The topos of this contract is exceptional, unique, and practically impossible to think under the ordinary category of contract: in a classical code it would have been called

performative writing in the space she knows best: the story of her family. The mo(ve)ments of her relation – duty, commitment, debt, responsibility, task – to the maternal saris reveals a confrontation experienced in aporetic responsibility; or, as she fears, in "the terrors of telling a story" (79). Commitment is to translate the valuables 'elsewhere': will she share the decision of her family to keep them safe? Should she rather ex-pose them to her task of translation? With Derrida reckoning that translation's "openness allows receiving and giving" (1985: 190), Patel opens the trousseaux of her sari.

The story goes that, because of what happens in Uganda and crosses Kenya, Patel's father and mother decide to bring – to translate – their valuables into safety. Crossing confines, immigrations and controls, they reach Midland Bank in England. Here, a case, the list of objects inside the box, the signature on the receipt; the possessions are safe forever, safely alienated, taken away, only to be remembered: "*First and foremost, make sure your uncle has paid the yearly fee...*" (14). Announced by the commitment of art, Patel's responsibility works in a different way: *Migritude* opens "History Lesson" unveiling what has been kept un-translated, for instance (here, exemplarity is at stake) in 'pacified' Independence of Kenya.¹⁶ What 'History Lesson' hides and unfolds, at the same time, the same stroke, the same line, is the resistance of the Kenyan people, reclaiming the land dispossessed by the British, fighting the

transcendental, since in truth it renders possible every contract in general, starting with what is called the language contract within the limits of a single idiom. Another name, perhaps, for the origin of tongues: Not the origin of language, but of languages – before language, languages" (1985: 186-187).

¹⁶ Patel explains, "the history I was taught in school was all lies. We learned in school that we attained independence peacefully, without bloodshed. We were the model the rest of Africa was supposed to look to, a happy, multiracial nation where Whites, Asians and Africans all lived in harmony. In Kenya's war of independence, fewer than 100 Whites and over 25,000 Africans died. Half of the Africans who died were children under 10. Sixty thousand White settlers lived in Kenya at independence in 1963. The new Kenyan government was required to take loans of 12.5 million pounds from its ex-colonial master, the British government, to buy back stolen land from settlers who wished to leave" (Reed, 2014). For Ikonya, (2012), "History Lesson" marks Patel's counter-signature to the colonial strategy: "She wants history open with its intestines, blood and oxygen.... The choice to teach ignorance in the name of history is painful, a strategy. So that Kenya is Gikuyu and Mumbi. So that Mau is not a struggle of Kenyans but of the biggest tribe. So that tribalism is comfortable. So that the so-called "Other" is always on the run. It has not only started now. It is not done alone by some strange dictator suddenly coming out of nowhere".

soldiers who killed 25,000 people, built camps, imposed torture, abused women and children: “*They would be tied in bundles of six bodies*” (18). In the theatre, Patel dresses the crimson sari: “Each knot a dead child... a glowing rope of knots, a testament to children killed by Empire” (80).

‘History Lesson’ changes the meaning of the saris, too, which now unveil a different texture of sense.¹⁷ Nobody has ever told Patel that women would work, go into battle, and labour in their saris. As a child, she heard her mother associate the sari with protection, safety and beauty: “... combining virginity with hip-swinging sex appeal” (22). If ‘seduction’ constitutes “a simple mining of the responsibility of the trace of the other in the self” (Spivak 1993: 179), the sari can unfold the translator’s responsibility. In *Migritude*, if, on the one hand, historical erasure leaves a mark on Patel who, as a girl, swears never to wear a sari that might impede her movements, on the other hand, “Mother’s Voice” announces that her daughter’s choice will be to translate her life ‘beyond the beyond’ of safety, into “the hardest, worst, most dangerous things” (24).¹⁸ “Tracking commonality through responsible translation can lead us into areas of difference and different differentiations” (1993; 193). The thinkers involved in the critical debate on translation know that the only safety enjoyed in ‘danger zones’ is love, a ‘different’ kind of love.¹⁹ ‘Shilling Love I’ is devoted to the affection that Patel’s father, the enduring stoic, and her mother, the general, feel for their daughters, never embellished by words but practiced, only and always, through ‘acts of accountability’. “Count and save” to make their girls attend the best schools; “count and save” to teach them to fight as women-to-come (27).²⁰

¹⁷ ‘Opening’ is devoted to Patel’s “willingness to be a flute/hollow open at both ends” (101); *The Guiana Quarter* by Wilson Harris uses a similar image: “When the music of the bone flute opens the doors, absence flow in, and the native imagination puts together the ingredients for quantum immediacy out of unprecipitable resources” (quoted in Spivak, 1993: 196, note 314).

¹⁸ In “Shadow Book” (85-86), Patel narrates the story of how, as a child, she was ‘saved’ by a family of Christian missionaries.

¹⁹ ‘Praxis’, as the outcome of theory in the discourse on translation, is given by the fact that Benjamin ‘prefaces’ his own translation of *Passages* by Baudelaire; that Derrida is determined to translate Deconstruction in sensitive knots of Western thought; de Man carries Deconstruction in America, tasking his ‘misreadings’ with the translation of European romanticism; Spivak’s English translations host Jacques Derrida and Mahasweta Devi; Naranjana calls for a ‘historical materialism’ that translates the destinies of humanity into future forms of justice.

²⁰ “Shilling Love” signs the origin of “Migritude”: after a performance of the poem in San Francisco, Patel is approached by the theatre director Kim Cook, who

‘Accountability’ is the question in postcolonial praxis of translations; in Patel’s life, its urgency comes with the experience of exile, the encounter in herself, and outside in the alien world, of dispossession, poverty, and solitude. “Part I: United Kingdom and United States 1990-2004” starts with political turbulence in Nairobi, and a plane ticket for Patel and her sister to “icy/alien England” (28). It is the chance, decision, and assumption of her task: “The Making (Migrant Song)” is the work made out of “the sari/that wraps you in tender celebration” (32), tainted with rage, representing an excavation of swallowed and regained words, created in the longing for her mother, out of the scars and calluses on her father’s hands, that have suffered, and still suffer, from the brutality of colonial history:

*This is for the hands
hacked off the Arawaks by Columbus and his men
lopped off Ohlone children by Spanish priests
baskets of severed hands presented at days’ end
to Belgian plantation masters in the Congo
thumbs chopped off Indian weavers by the British
I make this work
because I still have hands* (35)

Hands that are signed, hands that sign: the “light and easy touch” of translation (Spivak, 1993; 191) is ‘making’ its work. Patel leaves Britain, carrying with her, once again, the set of saris and her desire to create. To ‘poetize’: in California, at the post office – if she cannot provide a

proposes that she work on the story of her trossesaux of maternal saris. ‘Shy’ Patel contacts her one year later, marking the beginning of ‘Migritude’: “I trained for two years with two different dance coaches and choreographers and a director to develop the movement vocabulary, to find a conversation that we could have on stage that would make the saris a part of the story rather than simply props. So, from the beginning, I worked with a brilliant director, Kim Cook, who was very committed to creating good art and to excellent stage craft and to making an integrated piece of theater that was not just political, that was not just driven by a political agenda, but that was good theater and good art and good storytelling... The final show, *Migritude*, was 70 minutes long. Originally, we had over four hours of material, of text and different pieces and different performance segments, and we had to cut, cut, cut, cut and some of that was heartbreaking and brutal because some of my favorite pieces ended up on the floor, but it was a process of constant editing and rearranging and splicing and experimenting to find what was the final form and the best possible final show” (Reed, 2014).

permanent address – arrives the green card, and, unexpectedly, a cheque for her first published work. The arrival marks the poetic ‘connection’.

To me, poetry is one of the most powerful ways of distilling the truth and then communicating it ... Poetry cuts through our mental defences. It enters us through the gut and through the heart. It creates a space where we’re allowed to feel, really feel, even if it’s just for a moment what it’s like to be human, what it’s like to be larger than our contracted space of just the daily struggle for survival, and in that moment, we connect with what it is to be alive and to be human and feeling on the planet and that alters us (Reed, 2014).

Benjamin thinks of a ‘vital’ connection:

“Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original – not so much for its life as from its afterlife” (1993: 254). Translation originates in ‘survival’, in the ‘afterlife’ of the original; for him, this marks “a transformation and a renewal of something living” (ibid.: 256). In Derrida’s philosophy, it marks a deconstructive legacy; in Patel’s poetry, it is the advent of lucid awareness: “I know what I carry in my suitcases, I carry my history, I carry my family, over my sari I wear my sisters” (41).

I knew I wanted to tell the stories of Empire and the stories of women’s bodies. To me, the stories of the saris were the stories of women’s bodies, and what isn’t known about women under colonialism. ... I really think of the saris as my collaborators. There was one in particular which was a scarlet chiffon sari, which was the one used for the Mau Mau piece, and to me it spoke of war and it spoke of blood, and it just naturally connected with liberation struggles and the very bloody battles that were fought for independence (Reed, 2014).

“The ‘literary’ ... is the means by which one can constantly try to reach collectivity” (Spivak, 2012: 153); from now on, Patel’s hands will be good at ‘lateralizing’ the ‘afterlife’ or ‘gendered agency’ of her original, taking care of what it desires, requires, mandates, commands (at this point, in the theatre, she enters the stage lying flat on her back, pulling a black cloth and unfolding it into a long line). A case in point: example – a documented fact in the history of Kenya, negated until 2002 when it filtered through the media, was the testimony of the *survivors* of the women and the boys brutalised by British soldiers since 1965, two years after Independence, up to 2001: “*Survivor 171*,” “*Survivor 587*,” “*Survivor 613*” (45–47).²¹ ‘Blood

and rape’: writing inscribes revenge on the page (on the stage, the river sari is pulled around the artist’s elbow and shoulder, binding the curve into its vortex), in-between the riots of Maasai women outside the British High Commission, and, as “Mother’s Voice” laments, the state re-enforcement of “gates, askaris and fences” (49).

Translation has had its ‘Prelude’; it has found its form, hosted by a committed translator who makes her aporetic, that is, more responsible choice, signing the contract with the alterity of women, with the resistance of women fighters. From now on it follows the dream, the energy, the gift, and the law of translation. The dream belongs to the ‘mother tongue’. If its idealisation – ‘mother country’, ‘belonging’, ‘soil and blood’ – provokes, with different intensity and in increased timelessness, the forces of racism in history, “Dreaming in Gujarati” knows *matrubhasha* – for Spivak, *matrin* or ‘maternal debt’ (2000)²² – is an oneiric creation that can weave the whole experience of her life *à nouveau*. If Benjamin thinks of the ‘pains of gestation of the foreign word’, the changes affecting the translator’s mother tongue in contact with the language of the original that is on transformation itself, in *Migriftide*, Patel goes back in memory, when, as a girl, she used to be mocked by white and brown children alike,

The many the British have hidden away. She quotes Caroline Elkins in ‘Imperial Reckoning: The Untold story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya’. Blood and rape. The shameless murders and extirpation of a humanity hidden away from the eyes of the world. And how it continues in the politics of the day in Afrika. ... Rape is rape is rape is rape”. (Ikonya, 2012)

Spivak wonders how *matrin* might be translated: by a word, or in an ethics of responsibility to the world and to its epistemic violence? Invested with the maternal gift, the female translator feels to be betraying her mother tongue, because in her practice she renders it as one among the many. Her desire to repay the maternal debt (what does not and cannot enter any economy of exchange) is necessarily experienced in aporetic responsibility: the female translator will translate her experience of life (‘childbearing’ is, the postcolonial critic another untranslatable word) into the encounter (‘reading-as-translating’) with the reality of the lives and the stories (writing) of other women, hosted in herself, and translated within love. The question of the ‘unplayable debt’ resounds in Patel’s relation to her maternal sari: “I had this suitcase full of these exquisite heirloom saris that I felt tremendously guilty about because I wasn’t wearing them. I wasn’t using them in my daily life as an artist and an activist. So, I began to think about how I could integrate them into my life, how I could bring out their stories and use them for performance. And as I began to research their histories, as I began to take each sari an unfurl it and trace the motifs and the design and the weaving, they began to tell me stories about Empire, about colonialism, about migrations going back thousands of years, and the histories we don’t know of how Empire was enacted on the bodies of women.” (Reed, 2014)

²¹ Patel’s research inhabits colonial archives: “She knows about sealed documents.

for her blackness and her uncertain use of Gujarati. Growing up, her acceptance of western values proved despicable to ‘grammies in white saris’; in her actual exile, the assumption of the American language necessarily resounds with words instrumental of the death of two million Iraqis. ²³ Painful is the question: “Their tongue – or mine? Have I become the enemy?” (52). The question touches the migration of languages itself: “What becomes of a tongue of/milky-heavy cows, earthen/pots, jingling anklets, /temple bells, /when its children grow up/in Silicon Valley? To be programmers?” (53). Historical and rhetorical ‘migritude’ allows no purity, only the force of reality (the five languages spoken by her father sound subaltern when confronted in English) in contrast with the dream – of the children who ask Patel, in Gurayati, to nurture and take care of them. Tasking herself with the chance of a reply, her responsibility dreams, inside the dream, of taking back the ‘words’ of her mother tongue, intimately, as a supreme ‘act of love’:

The children in my dream
 Speak
 In Gujarati. Bright as butter, succulent
 Cherries sounds I can paint on the air
 With my breath, dance
 Though I like a Sufi mystic.
 Words I can weep and howl
 And devour, words I can kiss
 And taste
 This tongue
 I take
 Back (54).

At the wake, Patel feels the burst of an increased energy. Her parents arrive in the United States going through interminable borders control; waiting outside the gate, in sensing the smell of the humiliation, offense and indignation of their exhausted bodies, she understands the un/reason of her task:

Something is
 bursting the wall

²³ “Eater of Death” (109-113) is written in honour of Bibi Sardar, whose husbands and children were killed in Kabul in 2001 by US military action, pp. 109-113. In this respect, Patel explains: “Since the U.S. invaded Iraq, thousands of Iraqi women and girls have been abducted, vanished, a phenomenon unknown under Saddam Hussein. When societies are blown apart, women become prey” (20).

of my arteries
 Something is
 pounding its way
 up my throat
 volcano rising
 finally I understand
 why I’m a poet (58).

It is an act of pure energy, the perceptive opening of volcanic *puissance*, the beating of the heart. Understanding is blessed by the gift: Patel’s mother sends ‘Mangral Sutra’, which should be given by the husband to the bride, but that, in a revolution of tradition and rule, is passed on by the mother to the daughter. A letter accompanies the gift, to explain it as the blueprint for creative life, a celebration of youth, a dream of happiness, the miracle of life, the ‘thread of good will’ woven with three knots of commitment: ‘intention’, ‘declaration’ and ‘execution’. At the giving, the mother still expects an economy of safety for her daughter, hoping that, after so much independence, she might want the normality of marriage. Once again, Patel chooses a different task of the ‘hymen’: beyond safety, her intention inhabits the ‘danger zones’ of translation; her declaration shouts hidden stories to other ‘fugitives’ – herself, and all migrants of the planet. ²⁴ Her execution forges glittering songs with words, traits and traces, voices and gestures, that celebrate the beauty of ‘saris that speak’ (62). It is the difficult but necessary ‘law’, the injunction of the ultimate task of translation; in the last address/redress to her mother, Patel acknowledges the inevitability of ‘iving-in-translation’ for ‘us all’:

²⁴ It is interesting to note that, as Derrida (1987: 189; Appendix: 233) remarks, for the point of contact between the original and its translation, Benjamin uses the word ‘fugitive’ – *flüchtig* (translated in English as ‘fleeting’). In Patel, ‘fugitive’ also resounds with the political reasonings of S. Harney–F. Moten (2013).

Because Manny
 You of all people
 Know
 How we were born to a law
 That states

Before we claim a word
 We steep it
 In terror and shit,
 In hope and joy and grief,
 In labour, endurance,
 Vision coasted out
 In decades of our lives.

We have to sweat and cruse it,
 Pray and keen it,
 Crawl and bleed it.

With the very marrow
 Of our bodies
 We have to earn its meaning (68-69)

‘A soft worn khanga round her hips’: “Drum Rider”

*Our story was
 the concreteness
 of this becoming
 shared*

by air
 (F. Moten, *The Service Porch*)



Bi Kidude, from “As Old as my Tongue” by A. Jones. (Courtesy of the Author)

In Patel’s understating of the law in which we are all born, a special moment is incised, evoked, and sung in “Drum Rider”, the poem devoted to the life and the music of Bi Kidude, translated into Patel’s life, and in the lives of those who reply to its poetic appeal. Patel discovers the figure of the extraordinary singer from Zanzibar in the time of her ‘translability’, ‘afterlife’, or ‘survival’: her work, the rhythm of her drumming, the absolute singularity of the woman at ninety-five, her life-long experience of disseminating the tongue of African music. In Patel’s poem, it is now Kidude to assume the role of the female translator organically bound to the task of her rhythmic and instrumental beating. The khanga around her hips, the drum welded in indissoluble supplementarity to her body, the drummer and the drum, ‘one, and yet many’ (Lippitt: 2003; 1337), in erect position, are ready for ‘work’. ‘Planet Kidude’ is *à l’oeuvre*, in a lineage

ancient of decades of performances in Africa, the persistent struggle against the refusal of her 'unusual' style, her journeys into the profundity of rhythm, her heart beating with "the lives of the powerless/ stories unfurled in language of street and market/ poetry buried in the bodies of women".

It is an extraordinary and unique spectacle: the goddess riding a tiger, in cosmic creation. In this universe, other planets orbit around the sun. Following Kidude's teaching, kangas around their bodies, a group of women start dancing, their muscles tensed to sign the contract with the original: women 'with' women, women 'for' women. Tuned to the beat of Kidude's drumming, the dancers caress, contact and contract with 'all of us': the waitresses who work in hotels, always and only servants, never to be 'seen'; the tourists obsessed with the western standards of beauty; the circumcised girls; the women suffering from AIDs. The bind/bond of translation carries "the bounty of women's bodies/ back to the center of the world". In celebration of life – "yes... yes... yes... yes," chants the poem – it surges the beauty and the power of a knowledge that refuses to hide but opens itself to the pleasure of those bodies that, in human mortality, claim and dress freedom.

Critical thinking says, "Knowledge of freedom is (in) the invention of escape, stealing away in the confines, in the form, of a break. This is held close in the open song of the ones who are supposed to be silent" (Harvey-Moten, 2013: 51). Bi Kidude, the woman who should be silent but who, in fact, keeps drumming and singing beyond life and death, teaches Patel never to fear 'aging', for example, if she feels the drummer's generation of power, if she, with and for Bi Kidude, inhabits "the center of fertile creation, where sound begins". Sound claims a larger resonance, perhaps, the largest echo of all: the end of "Drum Rider" marks an act of belief, a profession of faith which, in listening to the African drummer surrounded by her women dancers, in truth, thinks of god. In fugitive flight, the messianic promise evoked by Benjamin touches Patel's poetics of translation. If the realm of reconciliation and integration of languages is, for the philosopher, the promise always destined and never realised, yet resounding in all 'just' translations, for her part, Patel concludes her hymn with the chance of 'if': if god were Bi Kidude, if god resembled her 'riding puissance', his name might express the genius of 'all of us', appealing to our common divinity:

I believe in Bi Kidude
the way I don't believe in god.
But if god were a ninety-five-year old, ebony black
Swahili woman,

who claims to be one hundred and twenty,
with a mouth full of broken and missing teeth
hands veined like banyan trees
a drum between her legs
a kifiti at her defiant, all-knowing lips
a shilingi-mia-kumi note flapping out of her neckline;
if god chanted wickedly satirical shairi
about the dangers of the very deathstick
she sucks on;
if god embraced irony, lust, contradiction
heartbreak, imperfection;
if god flaunted her struggles like a velvet cape,
rearranged the atoms of the world
with the rhythm of her gut
then maybe I would believe
in that god.
That god who is only a name
for the genius in all of us
that makes us our own inam and prophet
our own divinity.

I would call the faithful to prayer:
Bomba Kidude! Kidude Saafi!
And they would holler back: Saafi!
They would holler back: Saafi!
They would holler back: SAAFI!
And we would all be
god.²⁵

The divine prayer, the echo of 'call-and-response', the ensemble of 'harmony' and 'accord', is Patel's celebration of Bi Kidude and of the African women dancing around her, the alliance of her task of translation to the promise of a future, planetary and cosmic, human communication.

²⁵ In his interpretation of Benjamin's essay, Derrida underlines that "Translation, the desire for translation, is not thinkable without this *correspondence* with the thought of God" (1985: 182). 'Elsewhere', the philosopher proposes the *correspondence* with his thought of 'messianism without the messiah'.

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