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TRANSLATION AS REGENERATION
On the Works of Paulette Nardal, Véronique Tadjo and Werewere Liking

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Abstract – The article presents three case studies: Paulette Nardal, who translated American texts for French-speaking authors of the Négritude, creating a connection between Black writers from three continents at the beginning of the 20th century; Véronique Tadjo, who wrote an African myth in French, self-translating it into English; and Werewere Liking, who mixes many African languages in her literary production, which is the result of living in Ky-Yi village in the Ivory Coast, where she has been hosting artists from all over Africa for more than thirty years. All of these are examples of women translators who were able to promote possible social, political and cultural change through their adaptation work, all of which is presented as a unique ethical translation project.

Keywords: cultural studies; interlinguistic translation; intersemiotic translation; self-translation; Black Francophone women.

1. Introduction

Studying linguistic phenomena is not enough when we approach translation: an in-depth study of the cultural universe where languages belong, placing language-cultures at the heart of the problem, is always necessary. No one has ever summarized the ultimate aim of such an operation better than Antoine Berman: "La traduction est mise en rapport ou elle n'est rien" (Berman 1984, p. 16). The verb *traduire* comes from the Latin prefix *trans-* (passage) and the verb *ducere* (*dux*, *ducis*); to lead, to carry and, therefore, to cross: this is the *mise en rapport* as movement and displacement where the etymology of the verb *to translate* lies. But what kind of *mise en rapport* do we talk about in the context of the cultural production from the southern hemisphere? This article provides food for thought by briefly investigating the translation activity of three French-speaking women who are emblematic of this hemisphere, especially for the breadth and originality of their production. Above all, they have been iconic for their *engagement* shown here by providing concrete case studies, in order to demonstrate the double dimension of *défense et illustration* of their cultural background. This refers

to a double dynamic which accounts for more than one global "south" and distinguishes "the south" from the global "north".

The case of French-speaking authors is very stimulating as they live and write in multilingual and multicultural contexts where French is nourished by constant mutations and encounters. One of the salient features of their production reflects on language and "sur la manière dont s'articulent les rapports [entre les] langues / littératures dans des contextes différents" (Gauvin 1997, p. 11) at the centre of their identity. From the verb *articuler*, which means above all *joindre* (connecter, enchaîner), important questions emerge about the act of translating by female authors who, in the cases investigated, experience not only a situation of *entre-deux*, but of *entre-plusieurs*. For this reason, the different modes of expression which are present in their art – never an end in itself, but rather a total art to be considered as discursive, artistic, musical, corporeal – determine the development of that "surconscience linguistique" about which Lise Gauvin speaks (Gauvin 1997, p. 11).

Linguistic and cultural plurality is precisely the *fil rouge* underpinning their productions, hence the difficulties in the act of translating, like a chess game so dear to Ferdinand de Saussure (Saussure 1995, p. 168) and later taken up by Umberto Eco in his *Introduzione* to *Esercizi di stile* (Eco 1983, p. 19). Because translation must not only *say* (an act understood in the sense of the horizontal dimension), but *make*, according to the idea made explicit by Henri Meschonnic (1999, p. 17). The task of translation is also to return textual, intertextual and extratextual elements, including that polyhedral complexity that leads back to the vertical dimension. It must transmit the progressive stratification of cultural polyphony, according to Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Thick Translation* (1993) and to Paul Bandia's studies when Bandia insists that "il faut accorder à l'éthique de la différence sa juste place dans la théorie et tenir compte des questions de la position traductive (translation position, ethics of location) et du contexte global d'échange culturel" (Bandia 2001, pp. 136-137). This is ethical in the sense of a profound knowledge, capable of passing through the "chair des mots" (Rancière 1998) for restitution that knows how to "construire des comparables" (Ricœur 2004, p. 10) and, in a final analysis, to outline a wider-ranging project that goes *Oltre l'Occidente* (Bollettieri Bosinelli, Di Giovanni 2009). Indeed, the reading of these three women's work allows us to glimpse the creation of a liminal space that preludes that form of transition dear to Édouard Glissant when he states "il n'est frontière qu'on n'outrepasse" (Glissant 2006, p. 16). Nowadays we still insist on claiming that "traduire, c'est aussi échanger, diffuser et véhiculer des idées, des histoires d'une région à d'autres du vaste monde comme contribution à son évolution" (Huerdo Moreno, Robert 2023, p. 26) and this is exactly what Paulette Nardal, Véronique Tadjo and Werewere Liking, as examples of activists-

translators, are able to offer.

2. Translation as multiplication: the case of Paulette Nardal

Originally from Martinique, Nardal ("Le François", 12 October 1896 – Fort-de-France, 16 February 1985) was the first of seven sisters (listed in order): Paule, known as Paulette, Émilie, Alice, Jane, Lucy, Cécile and Andrée, who distinguished themselves through study and commitment: "The seven Nardal sisters were among the very first women of African descent to be educated in the French colonial system. The Nardals organized social reforms, published widely and influenced some of the most important politicians, artists and intellectuals of their time" (Musil Church 2013, p. 375). What they did was an example of activism.

In 1920, at the age of twenty-four, Paulette entered the Sorbonne to study English and was the first Black woman to graduate from that prestigious university. Once in Paris, she realized her solitude, in the sense that there were no spaces for Black people to congregate and, for this reason, she opened the doors of her house located in Clamart, in the Parisian banlieue,[1] in the period between the two World Wars (1920-1939), starting an important literary salon which served as a springboard for magazines to which she herself would actively contribute (Umoren 2018, p. 17). On Sunday afternoons, artists who were the force behind the Harlem Renaissance could meet. These included pan-Africanist activist Marcus Garvey and the Jamaican novelist Claude McKay, together with the couple Suzanne and Aimé Césaire, the politician Félix Eboué, the young Léopold Sédar Senghor, the 1921 Prix Goncourt winner René Maran and many young Black intellectuals fighting for their civil rights. In particular, the Nardal sisters

> surent offrir l'occasion de s'exprimer librement aux écrivains issus de ces îles et surtout à ceux des États-Unis connaissant peu le français. Démultipliant ainsi auprès des Haïtiens et des Africains, peu entraînés à parler l'anglais, les valeurs révolutionnaires que leur livrait la lecture des poèmes, essais et romans américains. (Achille 1992, p. x)

Paulette Nardal spoke good English, read Black American authors in their original language, was endowed with an extraordinary critical sense, wrote about literature, politics, gospel music, was very active and enterprising, and was above all a pioneer in urging unity among Blacks, whether they were African, African American or Antillean (Edwards 2003, p. 119). Several

[1] 7, rue Hébert.

testimonies of her work as an interpreter remain, in particular a conversation between the Martinican René Maran and the Jamaican Marcus Garvey, a difficult undertaking in which she had to co-construct a discourse between Jamaican English and French languages from Africa and the West Indies and incorporate the distant political situations of those who belonged to different colonial empires. Paulette Nardal, however, is mainly remembered for her work as a translator. In 1927, she contacted the Parisian Éditions Payot to propose a translation of Alain LeRoy Locke's work, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, published in America in 1925, which she did not manage to sign. In January 1928, she joined the team of the pan-Africanist journal *La Dépêche Africaine* (1928-1956). Around October 1931, Paulette and Jane Nardal, together with their cousin Louis Thomas Achille, founded the bilingual magazine *La Revue du Monde Noir / The Revue of the Black World* dedicated to the condition of Black people in the world, their art and literature, the Creole language, the complex Creole society and the trauma of slavery.[2] Each issue, starting from the first of November, is presented bilingually, with each page divided into two columns, French on the left and English on the right. This is curious given that both English-speaking and French-speaking authors are present in the different issues, almost as if French were the language of departure, when this priority is not always accurate. This editorial adventure, which consisted of six issues, ended in April 1932, officially due to economic difficulties, but essentially because the Ministère des colonies, one of the financiers of the enterprise, renounced its participation as it saw a certain danger to its supremacy in the dominated territories.

Paulette Nardal's work is intimately linked to the magazine she founded. She worked there as a secretary, as a translator from French into English and vice versa, as well as being the author of two articles. The first, *Une noire parle à Cambridge et à Genève*, published in the debut issue, is dedicated to Grace Walker (*La Revue du Monde Noir* 1, pp. 40-41). The second, *Éveil de la conscience de race*, is important for three reasons (*La Revue du Monde Noir* 6, pp. 343-349). The author argues for the uniqueness of the experience of oppression faced by Black women. She openly manifests the intention to "créer entre les Noirs du monde entier, sans distinction de nationalité, un lien intellectuel et moral qui leur permette de se mieux connaître" and above all, referring to Latin culture, she clearly states "nous entendons dépasser le cadre de cette culture / we want to go beyond this culture" (*La Revue du Monde Noir* 6, p. 349), making explicit the need for cultural independence, well ahead of its time.

[2] The chosen title evokes the *Revue des Deux Mondes* founded in 1829 and still active because of the common objective of proposing a space for the comparison of European and American ideas.

Nardal crossed continents, she created a physical and mental space for herself, and produced a form of oral and written dialogue. Maryse Condé, interviewed in 2004 for the film *Paulette Nardal, la fierté d'être une négresse*, adds that Nardal was a revolutionary, because she was the initiator of Black culture and the first to oppose the collective imagination of the Black woman as an erotic object. Her work made it possible for the founders of Négritude to meet and encounter important works of this American movement that she had discovered, had studied and translated. Thanks to her multiple activities as scholar, researcher, translator and "ferrywoman" of texts and ideas from one side of the ocean to the other, from one language to another, she nourished the pages of her magazine, because every single text had to be shared.

And yet, despite all this, Nardal returned to Martinique in 1939, but she was not given any credit. Césaire never admitted his debt to intellectuals of her calibre, she was not mentioned by Senghor in his 1948 *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, nor was she a participant in the two *Congrès des Écrivains et Artistes Noirs* in Paris and Rome.[3] This was a rather significant oversight for Nardal capable of occupying multiple places and marking occasions for encounters between languages and cultures, precursor of Black feminist activity and godmother of Négritude, whose portrait would not be complete without paying tribute to this *passeuse de cultures* "dont la personnalité mêlait hérédité africaine, éducation familiale, culture créole, formation universitaire et chic parisien" (Achille 1992, p. xvi).

3. Translation as weaving: the case of Véronique Tadjo

Perfectly at ease with her father's Baoulé language, her mother's French and the English of her upbringing, Véronique Tadjo (b. 1955) grew up in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. She studied Anglophone literature at the Sorbonne University in Paris and, after several years spent first in Kenya and then in South Africa, now lives in the UK.

A prolific author and multifaceted artist, poet and novelist, painter and illustrator of children's and young people's books, Tadjo boasts a production that is attentive to the socio-cultural problems that afflict the African continent as a whole; from the recovery of the founding myths to the value of masks, from the importance of everyday objects, such as the polychrome and variegated fabrics of the *pagnes*, to the African legends that populate orality.

[3] The two *Congrès des Écrivains et Artistes Noirs* in Paris (19-22 September 1956) and Rome (26 March-1st April 1959) have been published by Présence Africaine (see also Mouralis, Raschi, 2019).

Her work is faithful to the idea of the transversality of disciplines and the sharing of knowledge as well as experience. Talking about translation in the case of Tadjo allows us to focus on the ethical issues raised by her effort to recover ancient knowledge in order to transfuse it into the present day and thus create connections. It can share and create bridges between the past and the present, for work that goes beyond the dichotomous definitions of prose and poetry, orality and writing, in order to exalt research committed to strong pedagogical values. The linguistic path that has led Tadjo from the research and rewriting of the founding myths to the colourful illustrations, realized with a decisive stroke, combined with an innate talent and great care for the texts, make her authorship, particularly original, evident in her books for children. In them, the *fil rouge* is always about Harmony lost and then found again on condition that Man listens to Nature to re-conquer it.

Writing for Tadjo means recovering, modulating and reinterpreting the ancient founding memory, rewriting it according to the needs of contemporaneity. Often, among her protagonists, we find figures from the African oral tradition, both Anglophone and Francophone, in particular in the initial volume dedicated to *Mamy Wata et le monstre*, or Mummy Water in the English-speaking world (Tadjo 2000). The character is a sort of siren, exalted for her magical powers of salvation, about whom Tadjo writes in French and then self-translates into English on the same page. In addition to her personal commitment as author and illustrator, there is also the effort of research, as in the case of the collection *Talking Drums*, an anthology of Anglophone and Francophone African poems, initially proposed in English with her translation and illustrations (Tadjo 2000), and later presented with a translation project entirely in Italian for the Giannino Stoppani publishing house in Bologna (2005).

A writer with a highly personal and intense style, sometimes apocalyptic, Tadjo emphasizes her strong affiliation with African tradition and history in its entirety,[4] as when she publishes the legend of the very young Queen Pokou who sacrifices her only son by throwing him into the Comoé River to save her people. This legend from the 18th century is common to both English-speaking African countries such as Ghana and French-speaking countries such as the Ivory Coast (Memel-Fotê 1991, p. 270). As this production spans the entire African continent, Tadjo succeeds in creating an admirable travelling adventure not only through the amplification

[4] The myth of Abla Pokou, a queen from Ghana who did not hesitate to sacrifice her only son for the salvation of her people, can be found in the following works: Dadié B. 1936, *Assémien Déhylé, roi du Sanwi*, Album officiel de la Mission pontificale, Dakar, pp. 201-221 (first edition); Dadié B. 1954, *Légendes africaines*, Seghers, Paris; Adiko A. 1971, *L'Épopée de la reine Abla Pokou*, Imprimerie commerciale, Abidjan; Zègoua Gbessi Nokan C. 1984, *Abraha Pokou et trois autres pièces*, Paris, Présence africaine; Tadjo V. 2004, *Reine Pokou*, Actes Sud, Paris (Grand Prix de la Littéraire Noire de L'Afrique 2005).

of space and time, but also through drawings and colours. The versatility of her travels and encounters is the basis of her open-mindedness, which also leads her to mix subjects of study and cultural interests. While it is true that she feels a deep attachment to this creative journey, it would be limiting to speak only of physical displacement, travelling is a useful activity to allow her to question herself, to put things into perspective and to hold all the threads together, such as her translation of children's stories, a weaving of voices that highlight the movements from which they emerge and which they are capable of provoking.

The *finesse* of the writing is reflected in the plurality of the translation that becomes interlinguistic (French and English that merge and are mirrored on the same page, as in the case of *Mamy Wata*). It is also intersemiotic (a text that is amplified and enriched thanks to illustrations, as in the case of *Masque*) (Tadjo 2002). It is a piece of total art already enclosed and made explicit in that programmatic summary contained in the opening poem of her first collection where Tadjo declares:

> ET NOUS N'AURONS PAS BESOIN
> DE FOUDRE
> POUR TISSER
> DES SOLEILS (Tadjo 1984, p. 5).

Translation is understood as a weaving capable of creating order through the original fusion of an interlinguistic and intercultural project by the international conference, organized in Tadjo's honour at the University of Johannesburg from 23 to 26 November 2013 entitled *Véronique Tadjo: Literary Postcoloniality, Post-Feminity or Asserted Africanness?* The proceedings were published in the volume *Écrire, traduire, peindre VÉRONIQUE TADJO Writing, Translating, Painting* where the two languages French and English express a form of constant dialogue that is absolutely necessary to embrace the entirety of the African continent, thus pointing the way to a possible lasting and peaceful development (Baram *et al.* 2016).

4. Translation as polyphony: the case of Werewere Liking

Originally from Cameroon, an officially bilingual country (French-English), Liking (b. 1950) settled in Côte d'Ivoire in the 1980s and founded Village Ky-Yi, in Abidjan, in 1985. She welcomes and trains artists there from all corners of the continent and, with them, fulfils a project given over to total art and community life. An eclectic author of poems, novels and songs, a painter, singer and multi-instrumentalist, she proposes and stages *pièces* that travel the world enriched by instruments, costumes, giant puppets and sets entirely

realized within her pan-African micro-reality. In her works, Liking manages to merge the most distant cultural elements, essentially on stage, as the written text always follows the performance (Liking-Gnepo 2003). Continuous sharing, discussion and exchanges lead to the questioning of traditions in order to reinterpret ancient cultures in a modern way, paying special attention to women's rights.

Her first work as a translator was *Un Touareg s'est marié à une Pygmée* (Liking 1992), a musical epic, more precisely a *mvett* epic that revolves around a type of five-string harp-guitar of fundamental importance to the traditional African culture (Ndoutoume 1970). The protagonist is a Tuareg, a person who symbolizes rebellion and nomadism, who, having set out from the desert in search of water for life, travels through different African spaces on a musical journey to the heart of the continent. Each new stage sees the insertion of a song in a different indigenous language, in the order Bété, Malinké, Fou, Bassa, Lingala, which the author transcribes and inserts into the *pièce*. The linguistic pluralism on the page refers to the crossing of spaces and the need to give voice to all African peoples in their spatial, cultural and linguistic plurality. The perfect union of this Africa "plurielle, [...] multiple, [...] unique" (Liking 1992, p. 22) can only be realized after overcoming the nine frontiers or "barreaux de segrégation" (Liking 1992, p. 11), a syntagma with which Liking stigmatizes the cartographic fragmentation of the African continent. The final union between the Tuareg and the Pygmy refers to the union of the desert and water, of the *brousse* and the forest, giving hope for a radiant finale capable of re-founding the existence of the entire continent. Based on those values that African people know how to bring to "jouer sa partition / au concert des nations" (Liking 1992, p. 16) and thus testifying as central to the dialogue as expressed by the multifaceted artistic disciplines and cultural realities that, though distant from each other, are recovered here, transcribed and translated for a confrontation that becomes a synthesis.

The same polyphony is manifested in *Médée. Les risques d'une réputation* (2007) in which the artist takes up versions by Euripides, Seneca and Christa Wolf, a play that opens and closes on a convention of *conteuses* analysing the myth, multiplying voices and doubts with numerous questions and consequent, often antithetical answers (Liking 2007). The stage version of the play (three months of performances at the Teatro Baretti in Turin which began in January 2005) featured seven women from different countries whose encounter occurred mainly linguistically since their languages, respectively French, Guéré from the North of the Ivory Coast, Neapolitan and Serbian, are clearly present on stage when Medea hurls her curse at the people of Corinth who accuse her of evil as a witch and a foreigner. This is a stratified and complex play characterized by the game of mirrors and cross-references, by reports on the myth and by the voices of the myth, in which the

strength of a language emerges and becomes prose and poetry, leaving room for singing that reinterprets the classical myth according to the dictates of African tradition. This refuses infanticide, and in light of the most pressing current problems of rejecting the foreigner as different or 'other'. The multilingualism of the actresses on stage, where music, songs and gestures accompany the audience's understanding, is not present in the version signed by the author who, however, inserts at that precise moment, so dense with tension and pathos, a song in Bassa, the language of her origins, followed by her self-translation into French (Liking 2007, pp. 30-34). This closes the central scene of the play: an absolutely necessary line, as Liking claims in an interview published at the end of the volume (Liking 2007, pp. 137-142). Since Medea hurls her own curse at those guilty of totally rejecting her as the foreigner, her words, shouted and immediate, can only spring from the deep treasure chest of the mother tongue, which, because of its disruptiveness, is capable of disturbing the addressee to the point of touching the apex of Medea's grief as a woman and mother.

To consider this work as an art form expressed only in writing would be limiting, since theatrical translation is an interweaving of voices that never fails to move towards other experiments and forms of dialogue, highlighting that movement that constantly renews the play between transparency and opacity. With the complexity of her production, Werewere Liking embraces the entire continent from which the work emerges and offers a significant example of the multicultural dimensions that animates it and that is essentially pan-African, especially through the amplification of languages used in a synergetic manner, whereby the secret of translation seems to be that of not neglecting any of the variations inherent in this polyphonic world.

5. Conclusion

As wide-ranging productions, these examined works reveal a "molar knowledge" (Eco 2003, p. 191) of the intricate network of relationships within which they operate, with editorial characteristics and translation choices that are sometimes very explicit. Indeed, by using different tools, they construct narratives that impose a widening of a gaze beyond boundaries to the other, to the different, to the foreigner, making translation a physical place, a forum for exchange and a subject for reflection. In this interdisciplinary confrontation / meeting, the texts presented become the experimental site of experiences of interlinguistic and intersemiotic translations of concrete and critical works. Such projects demonstrate, from time to time, the importance of choices linked to the cultural contexts, in the analysis and restitution of the texts in translation, or in their composition in order to offer a self-translation, united by their capacity to indicate possible

changes in social and political perspectives. These are aimed at embracing different Global Souths in order to promote a form of internal dialogue and extend the cultural knowledge beyond these areas.

The examination of the three selected cases of women-orchestras, whose work stands out for being multifaceted, polychromatic and polyphonic, reveals an act of translation articulated in research and reflection, writing and rewriting, translation and self-translation. It is able to produce a constructive dialogue that amplifies linguistic and cultural forms to the point of dilating their boundaries (which is the point from which the paper starts), allowing a glimpse of other forms of publication, capable of realizing that *conciliation of contraries* about which Heraclitus spoke. These women translators of languages and cultures, impose themselves thanks to a "mise en fonctionnement de la langue par un acte individuel d'utilisation" (Benveniste 2008, p. 80). Each offers a personal contribution to the definition and multiplication of spaces that have always been characterized by a problematic relationship between languages, history and literature, memory and identity because in these spaces, the cultural encounters have never been "généré de Genèse" (Glissant 1997, p. 36). The past is a "trou", like "la cale du bateau négrier" or a "tabula rasa", whose "naissance sans commencement" (Chamoiseau 1997, p. 225) needs to be recounted through a "parole" which is deprived of any form of linear diachrony that "n'est pas comme un palmier droit et lisse", but that can "commence depuis la première racine et [...] va bourgeonnant sans arrêt jusqu'aux nuages" (Glissant 1964, p. 170) like the "rhizome" dear to Édouard Glissant (Pellegrino 2022).

It is precisely the fundamental image of the rhizome that seems to me to be the key to the reinterpretation of the translation projects just proposed. It is not just about *reparation*, as Bandia argues (Bandia 2008), in terms of looking back at the painful past of colonial domination. This paper asserts that it is mainly a matter of *regeneration*, in the sense of overcoming the limits imposed, thanks to the propulsive thrust generated by new languages, literatures and pedagogies, where multiple levels of writing and rewriting are configured. The articulation of ways to co-construct the text, connections to share meaning by recipients as linguistically, culturally and generationally varied as possible, releases its potential and points the way to deeper transformations.

Indeed, these works cast a different light on the authors' relationships with space, which corresponds to a precise invitation to seek, in order to experiment with other models of crossing. By putting into perspective the way in which the three categories of seeking, constructing and translating are articulated by these women, the article argues that the question of the political dimension is renewed and amplified through translation choices that are able to build a cultural universe understood as one whole (Tymoczko 2007). All this is made possible thanks to their ability to dominate entropy, to

generate co-participation and to "oser inventer l'avenir" (Gakunzi 2012) by promoting an ethics of translation which can travel far and wide across the *éclaté* world of the African matrix, in order to recompose it, giving it form and life.

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