

Michela Baldo

## **Painful Italianness**

### **Translating the (post)migrant female body<sup>1</sup>**

**Michela Baldo**

#### **Abstract**

This paper examines the recent translation into Italian of the Italian-North American works by Louise De Salvo, *Vertigo* (2006) [*Vertigo*], Kym Ragusa, *La pelle che ci separa* (2008) [*The Skin Between Us*] and Tina De Rosa, *Pesci di Carta* (2007) [*Paper Fish*]. These works use the painful and ill body as a source for writing about the experience of growing up as an Italian-American woman in US, and have been selected for translation by the publishing house *Nutrimenti* under the series *Specchi* [*Mirrors*] for their reference to the condition of marginality that they portray. In this paper I will explore whether a nostalgic national discourse of returning the Italian migrant back to Italy through translation (observed by the author in the translation of Italian-Canadian writing for example) is also at work in the Italian translations of the three works mentioned above, notwithstanding their feminist and post-colonial agenda. The analysis of the treatment of some textual instances of bodily descriptions in translation, discussed also in the translator's prefaces and afterwords, and in email correspondence or interviews with the translators, constitutes an attempt to shed some light on this phenomenon.

**Key words: Italian-American writing, women's writing, literary translation, body, illness.**

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was given at a seminar held on the 18<sup>th</sup> June 2014 at the Institute of Modern Languages Research of the University of London as part of the activities of my research fellowship period at the Institute.

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to discuss the recent translations into Italian by the Roman publishing house “Nutrimenti” of three literary works by Italian-North American women writers: two memoirs, *Vertigo* (1996) by Louise De Salvo (translated in 2006 as *Vertigo*) and *The Skin Between Us* (2006) by Kym Ragusa (translated in 2008 as *La pelle che ci separa*), and the novel *Paper Fish* (1980) by Tina De Rosa (translated in 2007 as *Pesci di Carta*). Not only have more translations of Italian-American women’s writing appeared lately, filling a gap in the narration of past Italian emigration recounted mainly by male voices, but the translations *Vertigo* and *La pelle che ci separa* also won literary prizes: respectively, the Literary Prize Acerbi for women’s writing in 2008 and the John Fante’s Prize in 2009. The three translations focus on the troubles and pains of post-migrant female bodies and are part of the book series *Specchi (Mirrors)*, which includes biographies, autobiographies and memoirs addressing issues and marginal cultures of Southern countries.

My choice to analyse these texts together stems from the fact that, first, they were published by the same publishing house within a three-year span, and two of them were translated by the same translator, Caterina Romeo, who was responsible for both *Vertigo* and *la Pelle che ci separa* (the latter translation was in collaboration with Clara Antonucci). Caterina Romeo also encouraged the translation of Tina De Rosa’s *Paper Fish*, suggesting the work to the publishing house and revising and writing a preface to the translation. Second, the writers of the source texts are themselves linked, as Ragusa was a MA student of De Salvo in the Creative Writing Program at Hunter College in New York. Third, both *Vertigo* and *The Skin Between Us* are memoirs, and,

Michela Baldo

although *Paper Fish* is a novel, it shares many characteristics with the memoir, through the use of memory and autobiographical features.

In my previous research (Baldo 2011; 2013), I have demonstrated the existence, in literary circles, political institutions and publishing houses, of a powerful discourse, which invoked the return home of the past emigrant through translation. Such a discourse is not only used to describe translations but also promotes them by appealing to an idealised concept of *italianità* (Italianness) shared by Italians in Italy and abroad. In this paper, I aim to test whether this nostalgic discourse of return is also at work in the corpus of translations mentioned above, despite their feminist agenda and a non-idealised portrayal of Italianness imbued with painfulness. Before undertaking the analysis of the translations, I will outline the phenomenon of Italian-American women's writing and present the three works (by De Salvo, Ragusa and De Rosa), discussing their relationship with the concept of bodily illness.

### **Characteristics of Italian-American women's writing: De Salvo, Ragusa and De Rosa**

Virtually ignored by reviewers, critics and academics for a long time, Italian-American women writers, as stated by Bona (1987: 87), have had to forge their own literary identity. Helen Barolini, whose novel *Umbertina* (1979) became the manifesto of Italian-American women's writing, said in the introduction of *The Dream Book* (an anthology of Italian American women's writers, published in 1985) that the factors that have contributed to the silence of this literary group are due both to the cultural assumptions informing Italian-American self-perceptions and to those that govern literary opinion in America. As for the first point, she is referring to the self-hatred

Michela Baldo

experienced by Italian-American writers, which has stood in the way of the development of a literary tradition.

For example, just after its publication, in 1979, Barolini's *Umbertina* was out of print (in the same way that *The Dream Book* was), and was rediscovered when republished in 1998 by the "Feminist Press"; a similar case is Tina De Rosa's *Paper Fish*. According to Giunta (2003a), this novel was praised by its first readers as a masterpiece, and a pre-published portion of the manuscript received the Illinois Arts Council Literary Award. Fred Gardaphè spoke of the book as one of the greatest works he had ever read. In 1985 Helen Barolini included an excerpt of *Paper Fish* in *The Dream Book*. Despite this, De Rosa's novel remained in the shadows for fifteen years until it was republished by "The Feminist Press" in 1996 (see 2003a) with an afterword by Edvige Giunta. A different trajectory was taken by *Vertigo* and *The Skin Between Us*, both of which received more attention from the public and were translated into Italian not long after being published in English.

Writing, for Italian-American women, is a way to courageously break the silence imposed upon them by family. American education was perceived among Italian-Americans as a threat to the survival of the family and thus Italian-American women find themselves writing in a void. For women writers who entered a world that stood in contrast to the domestic sanctum of Italian womanhood, the struggle was arduous, as testified in the plots of the three works under analysis in this paper.

### ***De Salvo's Vertigo***

Memoir is a genre that invokes memory, a memory and remembering in which there is a continuous re-imagining and re-inventing of the past rather than an accurate recollection of it (Romeo 2005), and a portrait of the reality of memory (with its

Michela Baldo

ambiguities) rather than the facts. In *Vertigo*, memory is associated with vertigo, dizziness. The protagonist describes her many fainting episodes throughout her book, along with some episodes of asthma after the suicide of her sister, episodes that will be the topic of the subsequent memoir, *Breathless* (1997). In critical moments of her life the protagonist feels she is fainting or lacks air. The title *Vertigo* is taken from the 1958 Hitchcock film and from the claustrophobic climate that Louise breathes at home and at school, a general sense of discomfort, due to ethnic gender roles with which, as a third generation Italian born in Jersey City in 1942, she does not identify:

I am, inescapably, an Italian-American woman with origins in the working class. I come from people who, even now, seriously distrust educated women, who value family loyalty. The story I want to tell is that of how I tried to create (and I am still trying to create) a life that was different from the one that was scripted for me by my culture. (De Salvo 1996: xvii)

In De Salvo's words there is a gap between the aspirations of Italian-American women and the script written for them by society. This produces a sense of physical, familial and social disorientation, which provokes a difficult relation between internal and external space. Louise as a teenager, for example, worries continuously about not being able to find her way home. For this reason she always carries a note of telephone numbers, addresses and bus numbers. This disorientation, which is also found in Mary Cappello's memoir *Night's Bloom* (1998) (in which the protagonist talks about the agoraphobia of her mother), stems from the sexual abuse Louise experienced as a child and which was perpetrated by her aunt. It is after a process of auto analysis that Louise remembers some episodes of this abuse, which are narrated in *Vertigo* as though the author was holding her breath, in breathless mode, with no pauses, commas or full

Michela Baldo

stops. *Vertigo* is thus the vortex of thoughts and emotions that leads De Salvo to write, and is also the root of the word 'vertere' (from Latin): to versify, to turn a phrase. Louise discovers that she can transform dizziness and pain into writing:

Vertigo: dizziness, an endless turning. Verse: an act of turning toward, somehow linked to the word "worth". Vertigo: verse. The one, then the other. The one or the other. These words, through the years, become linked for me at a very deep level. To turn a phrase in the midst of my invisibility. By versifying, to transmute my instability, my vertigo into something that is worthwhile. (De Salvo 1996: 8-9).

Writing a memoir can have therapeutic effects as it can help the violated subject (in this case the protagonist Louise) to re-establish the authority of her/his own life. The trauma can thus be transformed into language. In *Vertigo* there is a refusal of the recovery narrative that focuses on the end result, and instead what is valorised is *healing* perceived as a material process. Writing is an instrument of personal, social and political analysis and transformation, through which the voice of the single person merges with that of the community. It becomes a political act of condemnation of sexism, patriarchal mores and racism.

### *Ragusa's The Skin between Us*

Kym Ragusa is a writer from New York and a documentary filmmaker of Italian-American and African-American descent (she is the daughter of a black mother and a third-generation Italian American father of Sicilian/Calabrese descent). One of the key themes of her memoir *The Skin Between Us* is race. Ragusa's biography is the story of a subject in a continuous tension between whiteness and blackness. Her parents'

Michela Baldo

families express strong racial prejudices in relation to each other: her Italian father does not tell his family he has had a daughter with a black woman until Ragusa is three years old and Kym's maternal grand-mother fears having black people as new neighbours. Ragusa's maternal grand-mother, on the other hand, calls her Italian dad *white trash* as he belongs to the working class, contrary to her. Both families reproduce and re-enforce the forms of racial hierarchy deriving from American social system. Italians' whiteness was questioned during the early stage of their settlement in the United States, and, historically, Southern Italy in general, and more specifically Sicily, have been seen as belonging to Africa rather than Europe. Because of this, Italian immigrants to the US have constantly tried to reinforce their whiteness, creating a distance between their community and the Afro Americans and the Hispano-Americans (Giunta 2003b). It is interesting to see, for example, how Myriam, the maternal grandmother, attributes some of Kym's African racial characteristics to her father and not to her mother, as indicated by the following passage:

Myriam railed against my father, whose hair is also tightly curled, for ruining mine, for tainting it, those damned Sicilians and their African blood. (Ragusa 2006: 56).

The emphasis on looks and racial characteristics dominates Ragusa's childhood, as she undergoes constant physical scrutiny on the part of both relatives, especially her grandmothers, important figures in her life and on whom Kym Ragusa bases two documentaries: *Passing* dedicated to Myriam, her maternal grandmother, and *Fuori/Outside* dedicated to Gilda, her paternal grandmother (Tenzer 2002). Not only at home, but also at school, Kym's skin represents a problem:

My skin only caused me trouble - it was always too dark or too light, always a problem'.  
(Ragusa 2006: 109).

Michela Baldo

At school Ragusa is teased by the other black boys and girls for being too white, to the point that she would like to climb out of her skin, to be invisible. Her skin, her body, is thus the painful site of a division, of a conflict:

I was beginning to see myself as wrong, that something about myself could make other people angry. I would need to hide to protect myself, to be invisible, so that I didn't offend (Ragusa 2006: 56).

I was made in Harlem. Its topography is mapped on my body: the borderlines between neighbourhoods marked by streets that were forbidden to cross, the borderlines enforced by fear and anger, and transgressed by desire. The streets crossing east to west, north to south, like the web of veins beneath my skin (Ragusa 2006: 26).

Being considered either part of one or the other community is painful and Kym needs acrobatic skills to be able to be only what other people want to see. What Kym craves for is the recognition of the many contradictions in herself and her families, represented for example by the fact that her Sicilian father has blue eyes (considered a Northern characteristic) and her grandmother Miriam has not only African but also native American, Chinese and German blood. Giunta (2003a) confirms the difficult position occupied by Kym Ragusa in her family and community when she writes about the discrimination suffered by Italians, and her own ambivalence towards passing:

I became acutely aware that passing is a strategy for survival adopted to escape damning racial identification, but one adopted at a certain cost in terms of one's sense of cultural and personal integrity. I may speak Italian, but there is something inauthentic about my Italian identity: I have adopted and adapted, but remain an outsider. (2003a: 22).



However, Kym's situation changes over the years as her two grandmothers, as described at the end of the memoir, develop an unlikely friendship late in life which represents for Kym a connection to roots, as well as the possibility of the resolution of her interior conflict as stated in the following:

We have almost the same colour skin. This image is the truth that this image has captured. Gilda's thin, wrinkled skin like paper left out in the sun, Miriam's plump, barely lined, mine always a mark of difference, even here, even though it is not all that different. Three variations on ivory, yellow, olive, refracted between us like a kaleidoscope. **The skin<sup>2</sup> between us:** a border, a map, a blank page. History and biology. The skin between us that kept us apart, and sheltered us against the hurt we inflicted on each other. **The skin between us:** membrane, veil, mirror. A shared skin. (Ragusa 2006: 25).

The reconciliation between the two women is expressed through the myth of Persephone. At the end of the memoir, while visiting Sicily (where the myth originates), Ragusa stages herself as an embodiment of Persephone, who must shift between the African-American world of her mother's family and the Italian-American one of her father's.

### ***De Rosa's Paper Fish***

The novel is the story of the *Bella Casa* family in Chicago's Little Italy from 1949 till 1958. Three generations are narrated, from grandmother Doria to her son Marco (a policeman married to a Lithuanian woman, Sarah), and to her granddaughters Doriana and Carmolina. Doriana is beautiful but inexplicably damaged while Carmolina (who

---

<sup>2</sup> Bold type here and elsewhere constitutes my emphasis and are not in the original texts.

Michela Baldo

is also the main protagonist) is strong but suffers for her sister's illness. Marco's indomitable mother, nonna Doria, watches the troubled young family from across the alley and remembers her girlhood in the hills of Italy, a world very different from Chicago. As stated by the translator, Laura Giacalone (2009): "Far from any cliché, Tina De Rosa recalls the lost world of Little Italy without falling into the traditional portrait of the cheerful and noisy Italian American family, also avoiding the stereotyped visions promoted by *The Godfather* and *Goodfellas* movies. She rather drags her characters into a territory free from prefabricated categories, where the power of imagination reigns supreme."

Asked by Gardaphè (1985) about the title of the book, Tina De Rosa said she had chosen it because the people in the book were as beautiful and fragile as a Japanese kite, while the fish stands for Jesus and there is a constant reference to the sea and the blue water. The afterword to the novel by Edvige Giunta provides some useful background information. Giunta (2003a) says that *Paper Fish* (as in the other two memoirs analysed) testifies to the struggle between conflicting cultural values sustained by Italian-American women. The novel is for Tina De Rosa, as she says in an interview, an attempt to *go home* (return) after having moved away from the family and the working class position in society and a realisation that she can't go home anymore, no matter how much she tries (De Rosa 1980: 39). So the family, like the homeland, can be visited only through writing. Her writing represents an attempt to make the absent present by remembering it, as the novel was written after the deaths of her grandmother and father.

Although *Paper Fish* can be considered as favouring the topic of the quest or coming-of-age story, the novel structure is unconventional as it breaks from a previous tradition with its emphasis on a non-linear and fragmentary narrative structure, on

Michela Baldo

non-chronology, interior monologue and multiple perspectives. De Rosa captures memories and translates them into poetry. Her prose is sensual, musical and imaginative and this can be found also in the titles of the chapters (the preface is called prelude for example). The style is impressionistic and evokes a surreal atmosphere, where past, present and future overlap and are inseparable, becoming a mythical time (for this treatment of memory, in fact it shares a lot of similarities with the memoir genre). The depository of memory is represented in the book by grandmother Doria:

Grandma's eyes are weak. (...) They are watery, they are blue. She is the strongest woman in the world. [...] Grandma was the only one in the family with blue eyes because she crossed the ocean to get to America. It took her so many weeks to cross the water it turned her eyes blue. (De Rosa 2003: 15-16; 98).

As Bona (1987: 92) puts it, Carmolina “uses her grandmother’s memories of the homeland as the subjective topography of her own fertile imagination”. The spiritual life that pervades the narrative draws upon Doria’s Southern Italian roots. Blending folklore and Christian beliefs, Doria manufactures tales to explain the world to Carmolina, to teach sorrow and joy:

There is a mountain in Italy filled with candles [...]. Each person has his own candle. When he is born, the candle is lit; when the candle goes out, he dies. (De Rosa 2003: 24).

There is a sort of humanising of religion in nonna Doria, which will be found also at the end of the book when she will be carried like the Madonna on a chair to see Carmolina dressed as a bride before she dies. Carmolina accepts the legacy of selfhood from her mentor nonna Doria, who will transmit to her “the heat, the vitality, the love,

Michela Baldo

the fierce pride of who we are at heart” (De Rosa 1980: 39), qualities that might not make Carmolina’s life easy to live, as the American milieu is conditioned to suppress emotion. Memory in *Paper Fish* is a way of recreating home, of going back home and the journey is an important topic in this novel, as it was for the previous memoirs. It is not the journey of the migrant to the new world but the metaphorical journey of Carmolina towards adulthood and her physical escape from home for three days, in fear that her ill sister will be sent away from her, with the result of risking becoming seriously ill herself. So journey is linked to illness. Carmolina’s journey away from her family resembles the journey that her grandmother Doria wanted to make as a young girl to visit the circus. But it also replicates her sister’s psychic dislocation, her impossibility to find ‘her way home’ in metaphorical terms. Nonna Doria explains the autism of Carmolina’s sister Doriana:

“Doriana she get lost in the forest.” [...] “We no know where. We try to find her. We still try to find her. We look. We never stop looking”. [...] “Doriana she have a key to the forest. It a secret” [...] “One day Doriana go into the forest. She forget the key. She get lost in the forest.” (De Rosa 2003: 99-100).

In her broken English, Nonna Doria uses the image of the forest to reinforce, as Bona puts it, Doriana’s internal struggle to “come home” (1987: 101). The forest, which according to Doria is located behind her eyes, parallels the experience of the immigrants themselves, who struggle to find a place for themselves after leaving their homeland. Doriana’s instability, as Giunta states (2003a: 134) “reflects the dislocation of the Italian family in America.” The topic of illness then, is used both as a realistic comment on the prevalence of the sickness in underprivileged communities and as a metaphor for the immigrant experience of living in a world that does not accept

outsiders.

Italians are called *dago*; they are either trivialised or considered criminals. I am referring here to the Italian immigration to Chicago, mainly by Southern Italians, in the years 1880 - 1940. Italian-Americans in Chicago are connected to names such as the Mafioso Al Capone and texts such as Mario Puzo's *The GodFather* (Giunta 2003a: 138). Italian-Americans were not considered white and whiteness was a key for assimilation. The city is partially responsible for Dorian's illness. It is like a spider sucking the blood of the wonderful child. The city is described like a giant and its buildings are crushing Dorian into little pieces. De Rosa, however, defies the monster and puts together these little pieces through writing. At the end of the novel, we witness the demolition of the Italian ghetto, Little Italy, for renovation purposes. Illness is not described in sentimental terms and one does not recover from it. Rather it is suffered but accepted, as grandmother Doria states in describing Dorian:

“Dorian fight so hard to come home. She look out her eyes every day and try to come home. When you fight to come home, you beautiful”. (De Rosa 2003: 100).

### **The translations into Italian of *Vertigo*, *The Skin Between Us* and *Paper Fish***

In this section I will discuss the Italian translations of the three texts, taking into account personal correspondence with the publishing house ‘Nutrimenti’ and with the translators, along with the translators’ afterwords, prefaces and notes. My aim is to discover whether a narrative of return is circulating in connection with the three translations, and whether they pay attention to the specificities of post-migrant female bodies.

As indicated by the director of 'Nutrimenti', Andrea Palombo, the publisher was interested in works in which language and writing were used as tools for personal redemption. This point is confirmed by Caterina Romeo (2006) in the afterword of *Vertigo*, when she says that Louise De Salvo is part of a generation of women who started to call into question the marginality to which Italian-Americans, especially women, have been relegated in US. In the afterword of *La pelle che ci separa*, Romeo (2008b) mentions the term 'return'. She states that she has been collaborating with 'Nutrimenti' in the project of returning home (*riportare a casa*) Italian-American writers through translation, a project that could be of interest for an Italian public as expressed below:

The author's trip to Sicily, which features at the beginning of the book, represents for Kym Ragusa a return home in the same way that the translation of this text into the language of her ancestors represents a return home. To publish the texts of Italian-American authors in Italian it's a way of migrating again backwards, of bringing back to Italy an important part of the Italian culture, which, having developed in other parts of the world, returns back to enrich our culture (Romeo 2008b: 270)<sup>3</sup>.

Romeo talks about return also in the preface that she wrote for *Pesci Di Carta*, the translation of Tina De Rosa's *Paper Fish*, mentioning Italian as the original language into which the novel should be translated:

This autobiographical novel is a precious example of this literature, both national and transnational. The translation of Italian-American texts like this presents to the public a literary tradition ignored for a long time, and the recovery of this tradition gives back to Italy important parts of its culture disseminated around the world. The

---

<sup>3</sup> My translation into English.

translation of *Paper Fish* into Italian, in a sense the ‘original language’, represents a return home (Romeo 2007: 13)<sup>4</sup>.

A discourse of returning home is thus invoked by Romeo in framing her translations. Romeo talks about the return home of an Italian culture dispersed in the world, and mentions the importance of race and racism as topics of interest not only in the US but also in Italy, where they have been taboo for a long time. Only recently, thanks to the presence of a rising number of immigrants, she maintains, this topic has been brought to the fore, thus linking the present of Italy to its past of emigration and colonialism in Africa. The return seems for Romeo, therefore, to imply bringing back to Italy, through memory, parts of its colonial past. Caterina Romeo’s academic interests have indeed revolved around post-coloniality as she also co-edited a book with Cristina Lombardi-Diop on the topic, *Post-colonial Italy* (2012).

Not only the presence of a discourse of return, with its links to postcoloniality, is evident from the paratextual material discussed above (the preface and afterword by Romeo), but it also informs the strategies adopted by Romeo for the translation of linguistic terms relating to racism and to the notion of ethnicity and *italianità* (Italianness), as explained in the introductory note of *La pelle che ci separa* in relation to the term “nigger”:

The term “nigger”, for example, that in the American culture is very discriminatory, in the majority of cases in the Italian translation has been translated with negro, negra, which is stronger than “black” in English but not as strong as “nigger”. (Romeo 2008a)<sup>5</sup>.

---

<sup>4</sup> My translation into English.

<sup>5</sup> My translation into English.

Michela Baldo

Although there is not an exact Italian correspondence of *nigger*, certainly *negro* is preferable according to Romeo to the more neutral *nero* which would dismiss the history of racism linked to the word. The following are two excerpts from the source text and the translation in which the term is used. Kym is defended by her cousin against a racist remark shouted by one of her cousin's friends:

One of the boys looked over at me and shouted: Hey, *I think there is a nigger here!*[...] Marie came and stood next to me. *She's not a nigger*, she told them. *She's my cousin Kym. It's just dark outside.* (Ragusa 2006: 178-179).

Hey *c'è una negra li!* [...] Marie mi venne vicino. *Non è una negra*, disse, *è mia cugina Kym. È solo che si sta facendo buio.* (Ragusa 2008: 183)

Not only the specific translation of *nigger* is commented on, as a sort of reminder of the history of racism against the black community by immigrant Italians and indirectly to the history of Italian colonialism in Africa, but also the translation of other racist terms. For example, the Italian American parents defines Kym's mother as a *vergogna* (shame) for the community as she is a *moulignan'*. This term in Southern Italian dialect means "aubergine", but it was used as a negative label by Italian immigrants to refer to blacks. Romeo keeps this term in the translation as it appears in the English text (except from the fact that the o of *moulignan'* is taken away, as in *mulignan'*, to enable the same pronunciation for Italian speakers) and maintains the italics to forward its importance. Being a daughter of a *mulignan'* meant for Kym not being formally accepted by her Italian side of the family until she was three years old. It's the Italian great-grandmother Luisa who at some point sanctions such belonging in a conversation with Kym's father:



*Is this child really of your blood? He didn't deny it. Then she is **sangu du sangu meu**, she pronounced. Blood of my blood. (Ragusa 2006: 152).*

*Sei sicuro che questa bambina sia sangue tuo? Lui non negò. E allora é **sangu du sangu meu**, dichiarò. Sangue del mio sangue. (Ragusa 2008: 156).*

Luisa's words in Southern Italian dialects, in italics in the source and target text, were suggested to Kym by the translator herself who is from Calabria and had asked her mother Maria, her nonna Peppina, and a peasant friend of her mother, Concettina, how the sentence should have sounded in the Calabrese dialect.

Caterina Romeo explains in the introductory note to *La pelle che chi separa* that, since Kym Ragusa is half Italian-American and half Afro-American, it is very important to signal in the translation, by maintaining the italics for example, the presence of Italian or dialect italicised in the source text. She also mentions the fact that she was tempted to correct the spellings of many Southern Italian terms used in the text but then dismissed the idea after consultation with Ragusa who objected to the idea claiming that she did not know their correct pronunciation:

When in the source text there are single words in Italian or dialect, in this translation they appear in italics without any explanation in a footnote. When, on the contrary, there are entire phrases in Italian or dialect these appear in italics with a footnote that signals that Italian is in the original text. The “spelling mistakes”, in Italian or dialect in the text, have been maintained to reproduce in a more authentic way the voice of immigrants and their descendants. [...] (Romeo 2008a: 9).

Michela Baldo

Thus, codeswitched words in a Southern Italian dialect (Calabria and Campania are the regions of reference) in the source text are italicised to highlight their special meaning and often the italics are maintained in the translations. In *Vertigo* Romeo maintains in italics terms that in the source texts have to do with the condemnation by Louise of Italian sexism, such as *puttana* (translated literally as whore) and *disonorata* (translated literally as dishonoured). These are the terms through which Louise De Salvo is addressed for wanting to travel alone to the UK in order to do research on Virginia Woolf:

Oh yes, I now remember what women who do anything without their husbands are called. *Puttana*. Whores. [...] Well, given a background like that, you can imagine the way I felt as we flew high across the Atlantic. There I was, a *puttana*, alone at last. (De Salvo 1996: 220)

Certo, ora mi ricordo come sono chiamate le donne che fanno cose senza i mariti. *Puttane*. [...] Beh, con un retroterra del genere, si può immaginare come mi sentissi mentre volavamo alte sull'Atlantico. Eccomi qui, una *puttana* finalmente da sola. (Romeo 2006: 248).

In *Vertigo*, Romeo puts in italics also derogatory terms that in the source texts have to do with the stereotypical representation of Italians in US, as in the case of wop. The commonly accepted etymology for wop is that it originates from a southern Italian dialect term *guappo*, meaning thug. The example below shows the use of the term in the memoir:

Michela Baldo

“Hey, what kind of name is that? “ from the non-Italians. [...] “That’s gotta be a **Wop** name; who else but a **Wop** would have a name like that.” (De Salvo 1996: 76).

“Ehi, ma che nome è questo? “, dai bambini non italiani.[...] “Dev’essere un nome **Wop**; chi altri se non un **Wop** potrebbe mai aver un nome così.” (Romeo 2006: 97).

In *Paper Fish* a similar derogatory term to label Italians, *dago*, is used to refer to Carmolina by some people whom she meets in the street while running away from the family. *Dago* is not italicised in the source text and not preserved in the translation but instead a note is added to explain its meaning. This is a term used originally to refer to the Italian people or the Latin population who emigrated to the USA, and it might derive from the expression, ‘until the day goes’, or from the term ‘Diego’ or ‘dagger’:

The man behind the counter slid the bowl in front of her.

“Hey kid do you live here?”

“Of course I live here, Carmolina said.” [...]

She looked up at him.

“You’re a **dago** kid, ain’t you?” [...]

“Ain’t no **dago** kids live here”. The man rubbed the back of his hands on his apron.

“Ain’t no **dagos** here anywhere”. (De Rosa 2003: 77)

“Sei una **sporca mocciosa italiana**, vero?”

“Non ci sono **mocciosi italiani** che vivono qui. [...] qui non ci sono **mocciosi italiani** da nessuna parte.” (Giacalone 2007: 124-125)

Other common codeswitched terms used by nonna Doria are: *bella bambina* (beautiful girl), *faccia bella* (beautiful face), *faccia buffone* (funny face). Not only codeswitching

Michela Baldo

but also instances of ethnolect are found in *Paper Fish*. By ethnolect, I refer to the language spoken by a speaker born in a place where the language he/she speaks is not his/her mother tongue (Salmon Kovarski 2000: 68). The one found in De Rosa is the English language spoken by the first generation Italian immigrants in America and is characterised by prosody, intonation and phraseology which differ from other varieties of English spoken in the country and can be defined as syntactically incorrect English with a Southern Italian accent. The example below testifies to the ethnolect spoken by Grandmother Doria, a grammatically incorrect English with syntactical calques from Southern Italian dialects, as in the previously quoted example. There is no attempt, however, to reproduce this language in the translation and instead a standard Italian is used, with only some instances of colloquial syntax. In the example below grandmother Doria tries to make sense of her niece Doriana's illness:

“Her face, **she so** beautiful because Doriana **fight** so hard to come home. **She look out her eyes** every day and try to come home. When you fight to come home, **you beautiful**”. (De Rosa 2003: 100).

“Il suo viso, **quello** è così bello perchè Doriana lotta con tutta se stessa per tornare a casa. Ogni giorno **lei** si guarda intorno e cerca di tornare a casa. E quando lotti per tornare a casa sei bellissima.”(De Rosa 2007: 157).

## Conclusions

The analysis of the Italian translations of three Italian-American texts, namely *Vertigo*, *The Skin Between Us* and *Paper Fish* has shown that translation is a way for Italians to look at their past history of emigration and colonialism (Gnisci 2003: 83; Parati and Tamburri 2011), as it is perceived as a way to return the migrant back home by virtue

of the traces of *italianità* or Italianness that the source texts bear and which pull them towards their original source of inspiration, Italy. Drawing on Derrida, we can say that the source text is in debt towards a hypothetical translator, a text crying for translation (Derrida 1985: 398-399). *Italianità* thus is what seems to trigger this ethical call for return/translation. However, what sort of return is this? Is it the nostalgic return that I had witnessed in the translation of some Italian-Canadian works as in my previous study (Baldo 2011; 2013).

It seems to me that on this occasion the return home of the Italian emigrant, being framed within the recovery of the memory of Italy's colonial past, acquires more complex meanings. Instead of a praise of Italianness, we witness a controversial portrayal of Italianness, which, through the narration of womens' voices and ill bodies, becomes a site of painful conflict. Caterina Romeo, the translator of two of these works and the writer of the preface of the third work analysed, is an academic specialising in women's writing (and specifically on the works of Italian-American writers) who recently also co-authored a book on post-colonial Italy. Her translations can be inserted within the framework of feminist translation, for the choice of translating minority writers, and for making her agenda as translator visible in prefaces and afterwords or notes and footnotes in line with the principles of feminist translators (Simon 1996; Maier 2007). The attention paid by Romeo to the preservation of the Italian Southern Italian dialects in translation, contrary to Giacalone's choices in *Pesci di Carta*, can be understood as an attempt to give full life to the voices, even when controversial, of Italian-American women's writers. This is also evident when Romeo, commenting on the translation of *Paper Fish* in a personal correspondence with the author of this paper, expresses her strong beliefs on the safeguarding of the sound of

Michela Baldo

the source text authors, as the only way toward a restitution to the Italian reader of the intense and visceral effect that the Italian-American memoir is able to provoke.

### References

Baldo, Michela (2013) 'Lansdcapes of Return. Italian-Canadian writing published in Italian by 'Cosmo Iannone editore'', *Translation Studies* 6 (2): 199-216.

Baldo, Michela (2011) 'Translation and Opposition in Italian-Canadian Writing', in Asimakoulas and Rogers (eds) *Translation and Opposition*, (Bristol: Multilingual Matters), chapter 9: 161-181.

Barolini, Helen (1979) *Umbertina* (New York: Seaview books).

Barolini, Helen (1985) *The Dream Book. An Anthology of Writings by Italian-American Women* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press).

Bona, Mary Jo (1987) 'Broken Images, Broken Lives: Carmolina's Journey in Tina De Rosa's *Paper Fish*', *Melus* 14 (3-4): 87-106.

De Rosa, Tina (1980) 'An Italian American Woman Speaks Out', *Attenzione* (May): 38-39.

De Rosa, Tina (2003 [1980]) *Paper Fish* (New York: The Feminist Press).

Michela Baldo

De Rosa, Tina (2007) *Pesci di Carta*. Trans. Laura Giacalone (Roma: Nutrimenti).

De Salvo, Louise (1996) *Vertigo. A Memoir* (New York: Dutton).

De Salvo, Louise (2006) *Vertigo*. Trans. Caterina Romeo (Roma: Nutrimenti).

Derrida, Jacques (1985) 'Des tours de Babel', in J. F. Graham (ed), *Difference in Translation* (Ithaca and Londra: Cornell UP), 165-248.

Gardaphè, Fred (1985) 'An Interview with Tina De Rosa', *Fra Noi* May 1985: 23.

Giacalone, Laura (2009) 'Memories from a Lost World', *Italian Journal* 20 (I) in <http://magazine.italianjournal.it/author/laura/>

Giunta, Edvige (2003a) 'A Song from the Ghetto', Afterword of *Paper Fish* (New York: The Feminist Press), 123-149.

Giunta, Edvige (2003b) 'Figuring Race', in *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America*, ed. Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno (New York: Routledge), 224–234.

Gnisci, Armando (2003) *Creolizzare l'Europa. Letteratura e migrazione* (Roma: Meltemi editore).

Maier, Carole (2007) 'The translator as an intervenient being', in L. Jeremy Munday (ed.) *Translation as Intervention* (London/New York: Continuum), 1-17.

Michela Baldo

Parati, Graziella, and Julian Tamburri (2011) *The Cultures of Italian Migration*.

(Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press).

Ragusa, Kym (2006) *The Skin Between Us. A Memoir of Race, Beauty, and Belonging*

(New York: W. W. Norton and Company).

Ragusa, Kym (2008) *La pelle che ci separa*. Trans. Clara Antonucci and Caterina

Romeo. (Roma: Nutrimenti).

Romeo, Caterina (2005) *Narrative tra due sponde. Memoir di italiane d'America*

(Roma: Carrocci).

Romeo, Caterina (2007) 'Un ritorno a casa. Preface of Tina De Rosa's *Pesci di Carta*'.

Trans. Laura Giacalone (Roma: Nutrimenti), 9-13.

Romeo, Caterina (2008a) 'Nota della curatrice'. Introductory note to Kym Ragusa's

*La pelle che ci separa*. Trans. Clara Antonucci e Caterina Romeo. (Roma: Nutrimenti), 9.

Romeo, Caterina (2008b) 'Una capacità quasi acrobatica'. Afterword of Kym Ragusa

in *La pelle che ci separa*. Trans. Clara Antonucci e Caterina Romeo (Roma: Nutrimenti), 243-270.

Romeo, Caterina and Cristina Lombardi-Diop. (eds) (2012) *Postcolonial Italy*

*Challenging National Homogeneity* (London and New York: Palgrave).



Salmon Kovarski, Laura (2000) 'Tradurre l'etnoletto: Come Doppiare in Italiano l'

“accento Ebraico”’, in Bosinelli *et al* eds. *La traduzione multimediale. Quale traduzione per quale testo?* (Bologna, CLUEB) 66-84.

Simon, Sherry (1996) *Gender in Translation. Cultural identity and the politics of transmission* (London and New York: Routledge).

Tenzer, Livia (2002) 'Documenting Race and Gender: Kym Ragusa Discusses

"Passing" and "Fuori/Outside"', *Women's Studies Quarterly* 30 (1/2): 213-220.