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Translating Black Feminist Thought: Marie Moïse, Rahma Nur, and the Politics of Visibility in Italy

Barbara Ofosu-Somuah

Introduction

The global protests following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery in 2020 brought renewed attention to anti-Black violence, exposing structural inequalities that intersect with race, gender, class, and citizenship status. In Italy, demonstrations echoed global slogans, including "No justice, no peace" and "I can't breathe," while also highlighting local demands, including *ius soli* citizenship and remembrance of victims of racist violence such as Willy Monteiro Duarte and Soumaila Sacko. These events rehearsed what Camilla Hawthorne has poignantly called "the ever-growing roll call of Black victims of racist violence in Italy" (Hawthorne 2017, 155). The protest in Rome and others like it that took place all over Italy and globally that summer revealed how global Black struggles intersect across geographies, while also demanding recognition of Italy's specific histories of racism and exclusion. Moreover, they highlighted the persistent invisibilization of Black life in Italy and underscored the need for concepts and frameworks to make these experiences legible.

Translation has emerged as crucial in this process. The post-2020 surge in Italian translations of Black feminist texts mediates not only the circulation of U.S. Black feminist thought but also the articulation of Black Italian experiences. Central to this effort is Marie Moïse, whose translations of Angela Davis, bell hooks, Grada Kilomba, and others provide Italian readers with critical vocabularies for engaging with issues of race, gender, and structural violence. Moïse's translation practice is inherently dialogic: attentive both to linguistic precision and the political life of concepts, it enacts what Lorraine Leu and Christen Smith define as "collaboration between radical activists, intellectuals, and cultural practitioners in thinking and praxis between linguistic and geographic communities" (Smith and Leu 2023, 26). Poet, teacher, and translator Rahma Nur exemplifies how translation can provide both the language and conceptual tools to confront anti-Black racism in Italy, while also exposing the structural inequities that continue to marginalize Black Italian writers. In this paper, I examine how translation functions as more than a textual act; rather, it is a dialogic, political practice through which global Black feminist ideas intersect with local struggles, enabling new forms of articulation, solidarity, and critique.

Translation as Vocabulary and Kinship

In her essay "Black Mediterranean Geographies: Translation and the Mattering of Black Life in Italy," Camilla Hawthorne argues that diasporic translation in Italy functions as a form of Black feminist study and praxis. She emphasizes that this practice builds communities of care through the exchange of concepts, languages, strategies, expertise, and diasporic resources, all of which operate as mutual aid that help to produce a "basic grammar of Italian Blackness" (Hawthorne 2023, 15). As argued above, this Black feminist orientation is exemplified in the work of activist, scholar, and translator Marie Moïse, whose translations have furnished Italian readers with urgently needed vocabularies for grappling with issues of race, gender, and structural violence. Moïse is the translator or co-translator of a remarkable range of texts on Black and feminist thought: Angela Davis's *Women, Race and Class* (2018, *Donne, razza e classe*) and *Blues*

Legacies and Black Feminism (2022, *Blues e femminismo nero*); Sara R. Farris's *In the Name of Women's Rights* (2019, *Femonazionalismo*); Grada Kilomba's *Plantation Memories* (2021, *Memorie della piantagione*); The Care Collective's *The Care Manifesto* (2021, *Manifesto della cura*); bell hooks's *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (2022, *Da che parte stiamo: la classe conta*); Camilla Hawthorne's *Contesting Race and Citizenship* (2023, *Razza e cittadinanza*); adrienne maree brown's *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (2022, *Pleasure activism: la politica dello stare bene*) published in two volumes, Vol. 1 (2022) and Vol. 2 (2023); and Alexis Pauline Gumbs's *Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals* (2023, *Undrowned: lezioni di femminismo Nero dai mammiferi marini*). Taken together, these translations constitute a body of work that not only makes Black feminist theory accessible to Italian audiences but also reorients Italian debates on race and gender through a diasporic lens.

In her 2018 retranslation of Angela Davis's *Women, Race and Class*, which was originally published in Italian in 1985 as *Bianche e nere* (White and Black Women) in Margherita Caporaso's translation, Marie Moïse deliberately restores the term *razza* in the title. This choice directly challenges the entrenched tendency in Italian political and cultural discourse to avoid or censor the word because of its association with the Fascist "Manifesto degli scienziati razzisti" (Manifesto of Racial Scientists) and the anti-Semitic racial laws, both of which appeared in 1938.[1] The avoidance is already visible in Caporaso's title, which erases *race* altogether and thereby obscures one of the three conceptual axes at the core of Davis's analysis. Explaining her decision in the essay "Translation as Political Experience" and in her translator's note to *Donne, razza e classe*, Marie Moïse emphasizes that rendering *race* as *razza* does not reproduce the Fascist usage of the term. Rather, it draws on translinguistic and transnational political movements that have reasserted race as a crucial analytic for understanding inequality. She further clarifies:

> In this text, the term *razza* translates the English word "race," to which Davis assigns no biological meaning. On the contrary, her use of the term is purely political: it makes visible the theoretical construct that affirms racism as a structural relationship of domination. The debate on the use of this term remains open today. On the one hand, invoking "race" risks naturalizing it; on the other, refusing the term is not enough to deny the existence of a system of racial domination, and risks depriving us of the conceptual tools to challenge it. Substituting "race" with "ethnicity" is equally problematic, since it re-naturalizes a socially constructed category that continues to operate implicitly through binary and hierarchical distinctions (Davis 2018, 9).

Moïse argues that Davis uses *race* as a political rather than biological category, one that makes visible racism as a structural relation of domination. The debate on the term, Moïse notes, remains unresolved: invoking *razza* risks naturalizing it, but refusing it altogether deprives us of the conceptual tools to name and contest racial domination. Substituting it with *ethnicity*, meanwhile, only re-naturalizes difference through implicit hierarchies.

[1] Frank M. Snowden Jr.'s 1940 article, "Race Propaganda in Italy," includes translations of excerpts from the first three editions of the magazine to offer examples of how the fascist regime used the bi-monthly magazine to spread race propaganda in Italy. According to Snowden, "Italian racism was introduced to the public on August 5, 1938, in *La Difesa Della Razza*, a profusely illustrated 'scientific' document, edited by Telesio Interlandi, also editor of a violently anti-Semitic publication, *Il Tevere*. The cover of early issues is eloquent. It presents a group of three heads, one of a Jew and one of a Negro woman, and a third, that of a Roman separated from the others by a sword which is to preserve the division and maintain the purity of the Italian race" (Snowden 1940, 105).

For Moïse, restoring *razza* reclaims the term as an indispensable analytic for naming inequality and linking Italian antiracist struggles to transnational Black feminist traditions. Her translation practice is inherently dialogic, echoing Lorraine Leu and Christen Smith's definition in *Black Feminist Constellations: Dialogue and Translation Across the Americas*: "Anti-imperialist, transnational Black feminism must be dialogic. We define dialogic Black feminism as collaboration between radical activists, intellectuals, and cultural practitioners in thinking and praxis between linguistic and geographic communities" (Smith and Leu 2023, 26).

This dual commitment to linguistic precision and to the political life of concepts extends beyond the page. Moïse enacts translation as praxis in her work as a teacher and organizer, where texts become tools for reflection, critique, and community-building. It is in this spirit that, since 2022, she has co-facilitated the traveling workshops *Memories under the Skin: Decolonial Choreography/Graphics Workshop* with activist, scholar, and translator Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfaù, integrating dialogic translation into collaborative, embodied, and creative practices.

These workshops, complemented by curated social media posts by Moïse on topics such as anti-racism, decolonial feminism, and intersectionality, form part of the broader project *Decolonizing Knowledge: Practices of Anti-Racist Feminism*. In the workshops, Ghebremariam Tesfaù and Moïse draw on Black and decolonial feminist texts from the publisher Capovolte's catalog to enact translation as a political practice. Rather than simply teaching the content of the texts, they facilitate the workshops in ways that make concepts legible in the Italian context, connecting transnational ideas to local experiences while fostering critical reflection on power, positionality, and collective solidarity. As Moïse explains in an interview:

> We work on a situated word, just like the words of the authors whose texts we bring into the lab. These authors all have racialized backgrounds with colonial histories. Our goal is to address this specificity: we encourage participants to position themselves and question their position of power, 'the place of the word,' to mention Djamila Ribeiro's text, one of our references ("Memorie da sottopelle" 2023).

Through these engagements, which serve as a methodology, participants acquire the conceptual tools and vocabulary necessary to confront anti-Black racism in Italy. In this way, translation becomes not only a textual process but also a pedagogical and political practice, bringing to life the very principles Moïse enacts in her retranslation of Davis. This dual approach, which engages translation as both textual intervention and collaborative praxis, provides a framework for understanding the dynamics of Black feminist visibility and legibility in Italy, a framework that is vividly illustrated in the bell hooks translation in Italian, which demonstrates the possibilities and tensions of this transnational exchange.

The Boomerang of Translation

The global protests of 2020 brought renewed visibility to writings on Black life, circulating through reading lists, new translations, and social media, and underscored their importance as resources for naming, theorizing, and resisting racial injustice.[2] In Italy, this moment catalyzed an unprecedented surge in the translation of Black feminist works. Yet as Gayatri Spivak reminds us, translation is never a neutral act of transfer; it is always implicated in relations of power, shaping

[2] Examples include: The *New York Post*'s "7 Books about Racism Every Adult Should Read Right Now" (Cost 2020) and Hayley Maitland, "Lotta al razzismo: 12 libri da leggere ora."

who speaks, who is heard, and under what conditions (Spivak 2003). Lawrence Venuti likewise emphasizes that translation often produces "invisible" mediators, whose labor disappears behind the seeming transparency of the text (Venuti 2008). Reading the wave of Black feminist translations in Italy through this lens highlights not only what becomes translatable, but also who is asked to mediate translation and to what ends.

The case of bell hooks is instructive. Twenty years after the publication of her first three Italian translations: *Elogio del margine: razza, sesso e mercato culturale*, *Scrivere al buio*, and *Tutto sull'amore: nuove visioni*, the years following 2020 witnessed a remarkable spike in the publication of her work in Italian.[3] Between 2020 and 2025, publishers including Meltemi, Il Saggiatore, and Tamu Edizioni released fourteen volumes, including republications of those earlier texts.[4] This proliferation reflects not only hooks's renewed circulation but also the uneven geographies of Black feminist knowledge production. As Brent Hayes Edwards notes, diaspora itself is structured by décalage—the gaps, slippages, and disjunctures that emerge in translation across contexts (Edwards 2009). While hooks's prominence risks reinforcing U.S. hegemony in Black fe minist discourse, it simultaneously generates a productive décalage that allows Black Italian feminists to articulate their own positionalities.

The Radical Cultures series published by Meltemi makes this dynamic explicit. Each volume of hooks's pedagogy trilogy was framed by a paratext written by a Black Italian feminist: Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfaù and Rahel Sereke for *Teaching to Transgress*; Rahma Nur for *Teaching Community*; and Espérance Hakuzwimana for *Teaching Critical Thinking.* In an editorial note to the 2023 Italian edition of *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom,* the editors explained that a primary goal was to "give space to the voices of the protagonists of the trilogy: Black feminists" (hooks 2023, 5). These paratexts not only contextualize hooks's work for Italian readers but also articulate the conditions of Black life in Italy, offering critical language to name erasure and exclusion otherwise silenced in national discourse. If, as Venuti argues, translation risks erasing the translator's presence, the choice to commission essays and introductions from Black Italian feminists disrupts that invisibility by foregrounding their voices as interlocutors. These contributions serve to reframe hooks's ideas in dialogue with Italian racial and cultural formations. Nur's introduction to *Insegnare comunità* (*Teaching Community*), entitled "Ritrovarsi in bell hooks" ("Finding Oneself in bell hooks") illustrates this dialogic function of translation. Drawing on her own experience as a Black Italian teacher, she reflects on the paradox of Black Italians being formally included in Italy's "scuole libere, pubbliche, aperte a tutti" (free and open to all public schools) while still being stigmatized as foreign (hooks 2022, 9).[5] Entering predominantly white classrooms as a disabled Black woman, Nur recalls the insecurity of lacking the language to name these experiences—language she would later discover in the work of bell hooks. Describing her first encounter with hooks, Nur writes: "Ho 'incontrato' bell hooks con il suo libro *Insegnare a trasgredire* e mi si è aperto un mondo che avrei voluto conoscere molto prima" (hooks 2022b, 9; I "met" bell hooks through her book *Teaching to Transgress*, and it opened up a world that I wish I had known about much earlier). For Nur, translation thus is more than linguistic transfer; it is a political resource that enables her to connect lived experience with a broader feminist grammar. Although she encountered hooks's work decades into her own career, an encounter that Nur wishes

[3] Even after the works went out of print, and in the twenty years before new translations of hooks were published, Maria Nadotti claims that hooks' work "continued to circulate covertly" through photocopies on university campuses and within social movements: see Nadotti 2023.

[4] A complete list of these is available in the works cited.

[5] Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

had come sooner in order to spare her years of pain and uncertainty, this delayed discovery affirmed her commitment to a love ethic in her own teaching that led her to break away from traditional, comfortable teaching norms in favor of more authentic, alternative educational approaches. Building on hooks's reflections, Nur argues that shared experiences of discrimination, whether rooted in race, sexuality, or disability, can ground powerful alliances. She insists that Italian schools must diversify their faculties and confront the racist denial of Black Italian identity. Ultimately, for Nur, encountering hooks through translation reveals translation as a radical intervention—one that unsettles national silences around race and forges connections across diasporic identities.

Yet Nur's career also exemplifies what I call the boomerang effect of translation. Since 2012 her award-winning poems, essays, and stories have been widely published in journals, online literary magazines, and anthologies, including *Parole per Strada, Crocevia, El Ghibli, Formafluens, La Macchina Sognante*. In 2021 her poem "Fili Linguistici," translated into English as "Linguistic Threads," was presented in English at the Bologna Book Fair. That same year the translations were published with an accompanying essay on *Words Without Borders*, an international online translation magazine (Ofosu-Somuah et al. 2021). Nur's first book-length work, the poetry collection *Il grido e il sussurro,* was not published until 2022, the same year as her introduction to *Insegnare comunità*. Her recognition in Italy was thus mediated by translation outward beyond national borders: her work had to travel abroad before it returned home as legible and publishable. Translation here functions doubly in enabling her visibility while simultaneously exposing the structural conditions that delayed it.

This dynamic reveals how Black Italian writers are often positioned in a state of always being in translation. Their presence is mediated not only linguistically but also culturally, as they are tasked with authenticating Blackness for Italian audiences through their contributions to translated works. Such labor, while indispensable to the circulation of Black feminist thought in Italy, risks relegating them to the role of mediators rather than recognizing them as authors in their own right. To be "always in translation" is thus also to be always unhomed—by language, by nation, and by the publishing marketplace.

At the same time, this positioning opens a space of intervention. By writing paratexts, curating translations, and linking transnational Black feminist theory to local struggles, writers like Nur reorient Italian debates and carve out conditions for Black Italian voices to be heard. The politics of translation in this case disclose the asymmetries of power that shape who is published, who is cited, and under what terms. Attending to this boomerang dynamic allows us to see translation not as transfer but as a recursive, contested practice that can reproduce marginalization but also create openings for more just and reciprocal forms of feminist exchange.

Conclusion

The post-2020 surge in Italian translations of Black feminist texts reveals translation as a deeply political practice. Marie Moïse enacts translation dialogically, linking transnational Black feminist thought to Italian contexts while fostering reflection, pedagogy, and community. Rahma Nur exemplifies the "boomerang effect": her work gained recognition abroad before becoming legible in Italy, highlighting structural inequities in visibility and the demands placed on Black Italian writers to mediate transnational Blackness. Translation here is both enabling and constraining, as it opens spaces for voice and solidarity while exposing enduring power asymmetries in regard to who is published, read, and recognized. Attending to these dynamics positions translation as a site

of intervention in which Black feminist knowledge circulates across languages and geographies, thus reshaping local discourse. Ultimately, translation in Italy emerges not as a neutral transfer but as a dialogic, recursive, and transformative tool for imagining more just, interconnected, and reciprocal feminist futures.

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