

Shaping translingual writing and translation as intersectional practices: Nadeesha Uyangoda's *L'unica persona nera nella stanza* and *Sulla razza* as case studies

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ABSTRACT

This article takes into consideration those studies which have contributed to the development of an intersectional approach to translingual writing and translation by envisioning a new conception of language as a place to be shared and a border to be crossed, as well as a tool to interrogate the intertwined categories of race and gender. Specifically, it analyses Nadeesha Uyangoda's memoir *L'unica persona nera nella stanza* (The Only Black Person in the Room) along with the podcast *Sulla razza* (About Race), written and co-hosted by the same author with Natasha Fernando and Maria Catena Mancuso. Both productions focus on the lived experience of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) women in Italy who articulate, question, and re-imagine notions of race, ethnicity, citizenship, identity, belonging, and homemaking, while publicly denouncing power imbalances and acts of injustice. The memoir and the podcast also highlight the resonance that Black Italians may have in the contemporary Italian political context.

KEYWORDS

Language; translation; race; translingual writing; intersectionality; Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)

Introduction

In recent decades, migration flows have pointed towards a gradual reconsideration of concepts such as language, translation, belonging, mobility, nation, race, and identity. The present article takes into consideration the contributions of sociolinguists Steven Vertovec (2007), Jan Blommaert and Ben Rampton (2011), and linguists Alastair Pennycook (2009) and Suresh Canagarajah (2013), who, from different perspectives, investigate the linguistic forms and communicative strategies adopted within diasporic communities, migrant groups, or contexts marked by the local, national and global circulation of people, goods and cultures. The *fil rouge* (central theme) linking their research is, first of all, an unprecedented vision of language and language contact that is unfolded with different linguistic and cultural heritages and with the intertwined categories of race and gender. In examining these new conditions, Vertovec, a social anthropologist as well as linguist coined the term “superdiversity” to emphasize the change in migratory models since the 1990s that has facilitated the spreading of a new linguistic paradigm by abandoning the enclosure within national “borders” as its

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founding base in favour of trans-idiomatic uses and contexts as alternatives to nation-state communities:

[Superdiversity] is a notion intended to underline a level and kind of complexity surpassing anything the country has previously experienced. Such a condition is distinguished by a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple-origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants who have arrived over the last decade. (2007, 1024)

The paradigm of superdiversity is also an epistemological one, considering that the emerging phenomena of social contact and diversification generated by globalization, mobility, and migration have replaced the notion of the “speech community” and introduced new concepts. In particular, superdiversity recalls a multidimensional notion of fluidity and activates a movement that goes beyond the idea of language as a predefined structure, viewing it instead as the product of practice and of reiterated social activity – thus imagining identity as a variable characteristic that is molded through interaction with others.

Such theoretical premises serve to frame the analysis of the case studies under discussion, namely, Nadeesha Uyangoda’s (2021) memoir *L’unica persona nera nella stanza* (The Only Black person in the Room) along with the podcast *Sulla razza* (About Race), written and co-hosted by the same author with Nathasha Fernando and Maria Catena Mancuso (Mancuso, Fernando, and Uyangoda 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d). Both of these productions focus on the lived experience of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) women in Italy who narrate, examine, and re-imagine questions of race, ethnicity, citizenship, identity, belonging, and homemaking, while publicly denouncing power imbalances and acts of injustice. A terminological and conceptual clarification is necessary here. I opt for the use of “BAME” (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) as a broader label encompassing both Black and Brown subjects. As for Uyangoda, she defines herself as Black in spite of being effectively Brown and being aware of it, since this latter category is not used and recognized in Italy as an ethnic identity of its own. As a consequence, the overlap between being Black and Brown may engender some conflictual interpretations in the way that Black and other ethnic minorities have different histories of displacement and migration.

The memoir and the podcast also provide a discussion of the resonance that Black Italians may have in the contemporary Italian political context, in which old and new legislations have sought to enshrine new “chromatic” racial labels and categories (e.g. *nero*, *n***o*, *di colore*) by echoing old and new histories of imperialism, domination, segregation, and discrimination. To this end, the research goal here is to explore the extent to which such postcolonial and diasporic writers as Uyangoda, among others, can *creatively* negotiate their own place, space, and belonging through transidiomatic uses and contexts that are configured as alternatives to (imagined) national communities, eventually sketching a transnational vision of “Italianness”.

Crossing language boundaries and code-shifting from Italian as her mother tongue to Anglo American and Sinhalese expressions (i.e. *Suddek marry karala*, *Sudhu nona*, *Duwa oyata wada kaluine* [A white man marries Karala, white lady, daughter it's hard work for you]) is experienced by Uyangoda as an intimate process of translanguaging and as a primary source of inspiration. From this perspective, this article will serve to question

and deconstruct the rhetoric of naturalization, the discursive colonial imaginary, and the ethnolinguistic categories of “mother tongue”, “nativeness”, and “native speaker” through literary cases of translingual writing that foster a new aesthetics of migration and cosmopolitanism by connecting Italy and the United States, Africa, and Asia through the Mediterranean, metropolises and peripheries, and diasporic, migrant, and postcolonial subjects. From this renewed language perspective, Uyangoda’s narrative is presented as the reflection of deterritorialized and intersectional identities taking shape around a sentiment of belonging that can no longer be identified with a purely territorial dimension, and that finds its expression in the mixed idioms of translingualism occurring in such open spaces as those found along her migratory experience from Sri Lanka to Italy. In particular, her aesthetic pathway provides an illustrative example of the development of a postmonolingual paradigm based on new geolocalities and linguistic identities represented by the second-generation use of Italian as their own native language.

By moving the colour line towards a Black Italian imagery, I will scrutinize how Uyangoda uses her writing, as well as her joint podcast project, to try to uncover those linguistic and cultural links that define her narrative and collective enterprise, to undermine the discriminatory discourses and narratives related to the entitlement to citizenship based on *ius sanguinis* (right of blood) instead of *ius soli* (right of soil), and to subvert the intrinsic epistemic violence of local and national racist discursive practices. Crucially, in what follows I will discuss the political value of such a challenging project as *Sulla razza*, which aims to translate words and expressions from US culture into Italian in order to narrate the experience of being Black in Italy by problematizing translation as a site of ideological struggle in which gender, sexual, and racial-ethnic politics emerge as inextricably bound elements.

Shaping translingual writing: The intersectional narrative of Uyangoda’s *L’unica persona nera nella stanza*

A brief digression on Uyangoda’s background will help us better understand the intersectional features of her ambivalent relationship with her Sinhalese linguistic and cultural heritage. She was born in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1993 and currently lives in Milan, where she is a writer, podcaster, and freelance author. Her work focuses on race, identity, and migration, and her stories have appeared in *Al Jazeera English*, *The Telegraph*, *Vice Italy*, *Open Democracy*, *L’essenziale*, and *La Repubblica*, among others. Her debut non-fiction book *L’unica persona nera nella stanza* (2021) won the Anima Prize for Literature and the Rapallo Special Prize “Anna Maria Ortese”. In this sense, the publication of *L’unica persona nera nella stanza* marks a turning point in her career and provides a more representative biocultural profile, as we can evince from a reading of the first chapter (“Everything started from ...” [Tutto è cominciato da ...]), from which I have selected the following excerpts:

I was born in Sri Lanka, in the then-capital Colombo.

(Sono nata in Sri Lanka, nell’allora capitale Colombo.)¹ (Uyangoda 2021, 9)

Race, a thing that exists and at the same time does not exist, is the element that defined my existence the most. I am my skin, my hair, my name, my parents’ traditions. [. . .] I was – am – what English people, with a racist intent, call a *coconut*: Black outside, white inside.

(La razza, una cosa che esiste e non esiste allo stesso tempo, è l'elemento che più ha definito la mia esistenza. Io sono la mia pelle, i miei capelli, il mio nome, sono le tradizioni dei miei genitori. [. .] Ero – sono – ciò che gli inglesi, in maniera razzista, chiamano *coconut*, una noce di cocco nera fuori, bianca dentro.) (18; original italics)

These opening quotations envisage the thematic structure of Uyangoda's narrative, which evolves around issues of homeland, heritage, and displaced origins due to colonialism. Such discursive patterns are topicalized not as discrete units accompanying her narrative flow, but rather as intersectional features related to citizenship, Italianness, and race that prove to be the intrinsic leitmotifs of her composite existential and experiential writing. Indeed, Uyangoda recounts the experience of always being the only Black person in the room among white people and the implications this has for her identity formation as a Black Italian woman inhabiting her host country and its language as her own. Disruptively, her disavowal of identification with any restrictive label that may relegate her own existence to the status of an immigrant is significantly marked by the autobiographical power of the memoir. In fact, this choice is not a casual one; rather, it is motivated by Uyangoda's desire to entrust her story to this autobiographical genre, through which she can reclaim the collective history of minority peoples on the margins of Italian society. Crucially, the political value of Uyangoda's memoir lies in her ambition to create a narrative space for rethinking, as follows, the concept of race:

The concept of race, even before being a pseudoscientific, biological invention, if you will, is a tool invented by colonial capitalism to exploit masses of non-white men and women.

(Il concetto di razza prima ancora di essere un'invenzione pseudoscientifica, biologica, se vogliamo, è stato un mezzo ideato dal capitalismo coloniale per sfruttare masse di uomini e donne non-bianchi.) (2021, 114)

This brief definitional digression brings into question narrative accounts of the contradictions of the racial system centered on race as a biological attribute, but it also helps to reformulate this category so that it may be understood as a social construction in its many expressions, alongside gender, ethnicity, sexuality, social class, beauty, culture, and religion. Visible and legible traces of the extent to which the concept of race runs through Uyangoda's experience materialize in her skin, mark her name, infiltrate her hair and her beauty, and are blended in her parents' traditions. Here, a new diasporic aesthetics emerges, articulated around new social and cultural morphologies, overcoming the epistemological limits of ethnocentrism and giving visibility to dissonant voices, blurring the borders of modern nation states, and shaping the subject within new concepts of citizenship and Italianness. By embarking on her narrative voyage with a passionate determination to pursue her desire to confront old and new racial prejudices across Italy, and elsewhere, Uyangoda makes the condition of being the only Black person in the room, with its related feelings of alienation and isolation, the lens through which she can rewrite the story of oppression *and* the story of daily resistance.

From these premises, we can realize that the memoir blends personal and public narratives. For such an interpretation, we can rely on two complementary theoretical frameworks, based on Mona Baker's (2007) narrative theory and Teun A. Van Dijk's (1995) approach to critical discourse analysis, with a focus on its related enunciation strategies. More specifically, by assuming narrative as the author's only means of making

sense of the world and our relationship with the humans that inhabit it, Baker's socio-narrative theory distinguishes between four types of narrative: personal, public, conceptual, and metanarrative. Personal narratives relate to people's accounts of everyday life, of their individual dilemmas, personal suffering, fear, joy, and apprehension that appeal to our common humanity. They serve the purpose of making space for neglected or suppressed experiences by resisting and rewriting mainstream narratives, elaborating alternative accounts of the historical processes affecting the world, and opening up spaces for resistance and empathy, as in the case of Uyangoda's memoir. Accordingly, public narratives refer to shared stories elaborated by and circulated among small or large groups of individuals and constrained by the range of meaningful symbols and images that evoke collective emotions. All of these narrative properties mark Uyangoda's writing, along with her intimate need to establish intertextual and intellectual relationships with other contemporary writers who have thematized and problematized the same intersectional issues in their narratives. Specific references and critical comments are provided throughout the memoir with respect to such powerful transcultural works as those by Zadie Smith (*White Teeth*; Smith 2001; *On Beauty*; Smith 2005), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Americanah*; Adichie 2014) and Taiye Selasi (*Ghana Must Go*; Selasi 2013), among others. The significance of these intertextual references results from their crossing of linguistic and cultural barriers – that is, a poetic and political process that shapes a narrative continuum among diasporic textualities not merely to represent the feelings of loss and displacement, of lingering at a perpetual distance and separation from an original homeland, but also to rethink issues of race, ethnicity, citizenship, identity, belonging, and language.

In order to understand the inextricable relationship between the personal and public narratives of Uyangoda's aesthetic and political discourses in her memoir, we resort to Van Dijk's (1995) approach to critical discourse analysis to examine how Uyangoda composes her intersectional writing in rhetorical terms; that is to say, what enunciation strategies are used, how they can help her to construct her individual and collective identity as an engaged narrator, and how they strive to reconfigure issues of racial, linguistic, and cultural politics. Crucially, this research analysis takes into account the following enunciation strategies: the use of the "I"/"my" facets for individual self-affirmation and personal accounts; the use of the "we" facet for expressing collective affirmation and shaping collective narrative; and the construct of "us" versus "them" that defines transcultural schemata.

As for the first enunciation strategy, it is textually performed by the repetition of the "I" pronoun along with the possessive adjective "my" combined with the semantic chain of concrete nouns like "language", "mother", "homeland", and "experiences" that recall the condition and the identity politics of diasporic and postcolonial subjects, as we can infer from the following excerpts:

In May 2019 I decided to write a piece, I decided I'd call it *The Only Black Person in the Room* because I had just been through a series of experiences in which I was, as for most of my life, the only Black person in the room. [. . .] This book and that article were born from the experiences I collected when I stopped running away from race.

(Nel maggio 2019 decisi di scrivere un pezzo, l'avrei intitolato *L'unica persona nera nella stanza* perché ero allora reduce da una serie di esperienze in cui appunto ero stata, come per

gran parte della mia vita, l'unica persona nera nella stanza. [. . .] Questo libro e quell'articolo sono nati dalle esperienze che ho raccolto quando ho smesso di fuggire dalla razza.) (Uyangoda 2021, 12, 19)

Teachers suggested that I dress up like that ("with a typical dress from her country") and sing a song in *my* language. [. . .] I was forbidden to speak Sinhalese with my mom, but I could sing a song from my country of origin in a moment specifically designed for that purpose.

(Le educatrici avevano suggerito che mi agghindassi così ["con un abito del suo paese"] e che cantassi una canzone nella *mia* lingua. [. . .] Mi era proibito parlare in singalese con mia madre, ma potevo cantare una canzone del mio paese di nascita in un momento appositamente creato per quello scopo.) (43–44; original emphasis)

"How do you speak such a good Italian?" "How do you say dad in your language?" [. . .] "Your Italian is so good!" Yours is, too, I think to myself. "Yes, I have lived here since I was six years old". "So Italian is your second language". "No, it is my native language, too".

("Com'è che parli l'italiano così bene?" "Come si dice papà nella tua lingua?" [. . .] "Come parli bene l'italiano!" Anche tu, penso. "Sì, vivo qui da quando avevo sei anni". "Quindi l'italiano è la tua seconda lingua". "No, è proprio la mia lingua".) (68, 70)

The focus on the "I"/"my" facets contributes to reworking the way Uyangoda defines herself and the "loci of enunciation" (Mignolo 2011) which she is responsible for and intimately engaged with. Additionally, the suggestion here is to interpret the "I"/"my" enunciation strategy as a manifestation of the "I have a voice" paradigm – that is, what Lilie Chouliaraki (2013) defines as a disposition of symbolic recognition that creates community and solidarity by valorizing the personal experiences and conflictual stories of ordinary people that enable witnessing of the voice of displaced subjects.

The performative power of Uyangoda's narrative as a form of experiential and existential writing, as well as a personal and public one, also emerges in the use of the "we" facet for expressing collective affirmation, political stance, and intersectional identity, as the following excerpt clearly shows:

I am a feminist, I was brought up by women who believed in and supported the battles of the movement, but the movement needs to understand that my experience as a woman cannot be separated from my experience as a Black woman. We are Italian women and, as such, in the wholeness of this political self, we are entitled to our own place within Italian feminism.

(Io sono una femminista, sono stata cresciuta da donne che credevano e sostenevano le battaglie del movimento, ma il movimento deve capire che la mia esperienza di donna è inscindibile da quella di nera. Siamo donne italiane e in quanto tali, nella totalità di questo io politico, abbiamo diritto a un nostro posto nel femminismo italiano.) (Uyangoda 2021, 155)

Talking to Black and white women and men, her writing encourages awareness of the urgency to think and act intersectionally, thus outlining a new way of coexisting as Black Italian citizens by creating communities held together by common purposes and alliances of solidarity, rather than common racial or ethnic features. This interpretation inevitably recalls the concept of "beloved communities" theorized by bell hooks (1995), proposing the creation of communities in which all subjects – who come from subaltern ethnicities and cultures, overcoming in-group divisions arising from differences, belonging, and exclusiveness – cement bonds of alliance and new social and resistance relations both

within their racialized community and with their former oppressors. The collective presence of the “we” facet also enhances Uyangoda’s “loci of enunciation” from within Italian culture, in which she recognizes herself, notwithstanding its colonial history and racism, as further emphasized by her use of quotes when she firmly states that “I will always use ‘we’ to talk about Italian history” (Io userò sempre il “noi” per parlare della storia italiana; Uyangoda 2021, 29).

As an Italian with a South Asian heritage and intercultural critical awareness, Uyangoda situates herself in a tradition of a new generation of writers who experience and narrate from a postmonolingual condition. This is made evident in the way that she resorts to a set of translingual features that combine Anglo American, African American, and Sinhalese words throughout the memoir. All of them have been identified and classified as race-related words and expressions enabling uncommon linguistic combinations that emerge on a significant scale due to both the transcultural flows of people like mobility, migration, and displacement, and the substantial development of research studies on transethnic identities, multiracial subjects, and language contact across US academic debates. More specifically, the following examples show three narrative excerpts throughout which Uyangoda mentions Sinhalese race-related expressions:

Suddek marry karala (Sinhalese): she married a white man. It’s a sentence I have heard not rarely, uttered with a mix of admiration and aversion. I have always considered it as the image of the colonized, who cannot help looking at their ruler with adoration and repulsion at the same time.

(Suddek marry karala [singalese]: ha sposato un bianco. È una frase che ho sentito non di rado, pronunciata con un misto di ammirazione e avversione. L’ho sempre considerata l’immagine del colonizzato, che non può fare a meno di guardare il proprio dominatore con adorazione e repulsione allo stesso tempo.) (2021, 39)

Sudhu nona: Bewildered, she recounted the episode to me, she who was jokingly called by her own father a sudhu nona, a white lady – both for the color of her skin and for her arrogant attitude.

(Sudhu nona: Mi ha raccontato l’episodio, sconcertata, lei che da suo papà veniva scherzosamente chiamata sudhu nona, signora bianca – tanto per il colore della pelle quanto per l’atteggiamento superbo.) (46)

“Duwa oyata wada kaluine”, “amma suidui, duwa kalui”: I barely spoke any Sinhalese, but still enough to know they were commenting on my darker complexion.

(“Duwa oyata wada kaluine”, “amma sudui, duwa kalui”: quasi non parlavo singalese, ma era abbastanza per sapere che stavano commentando la mia carnagione più scura.) (47)

What emerges from these lines is the author’s attempt to show how the Sinhalese language intersects with Italian and challenges the idea of monolingual identities by problematizing the complexity of the Sinhalese cultural schemata towards those community members who have overturned their traditional ties in terms of personal choices. In reporting such episodes, Uyangoda’s critical awareness allows her to shed light on what she defines later on in the memoir as “the problem of colorism in ethnic communities” – that is, a form of internalized racism, sometimes comprised of involuntary actions and languages which also takes shape in subaltern and marginalized societies. More poignantly, as we will explore in greater detail in the next section, the word

“colorism” itself has been translated into Italian along with its historical and political semantic load by connecting Black US and Italian colonial history. But what I want to emphasize at this point is the impressive presence of translingual words and expressions that the author mentions (in English) throughout her Italian narrative flow and that are closely related to the issue of race and colourism. General race-related words are those which Uyangoda uses to label translational categories like BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) and BAME, to recall distinctive racializing processes which have characterized the US Black past and present (e.g. coloured, the n-word, negro, Brown, brownie, blackface and minstrel show, school to prison pipeline, knee on the neck) and thematized colourism (e.g. one-drop rule, tokenism, token Black character, light-skin privilege, passing for white, white saviour). The linguistic power and the political value of these expressions, that generally lack a corresponding vocabulary in Italian, will be discussed further in the next section as a part of a collective project which Uyangoda joined in 2021 with the specific goal of translating them from US culture into Italian. Accordingly, *L'unica persona nera nella stanza* has created new forms of personal and public imaginative discourse, through which Uyangoda explores a translingual and intersectional practice that departs from preconceived definitions of what native language, identity, culture, and belonging are supposedly all about.

Translating postcolonial transmediality: Envisioning the political value of the *Sulla razza* podcast

In April 2021, Uyangoda launched the podcast *Sulla razza* (About race) with her co-hosts Fernando and Mancuso, the former a scholar working in the fields of migration and identity at Westminster University, the latter a writer who operates in the non-profit world. The goal of their challenging project was to translate and discuss the following 12 Anglo American race-related words and expressions into Italian: race/*razza*; colourism/*colorismo*; one-drop rule/*una goccia di sangue nero*; the n-word/*la parola con la n*-; model minority/*minoranza modello*; mixed-race marriages/*coppie miste*; diversity and inclusion/*diversità e inclusione*; tokenism/*tokenismo*; postcolonial literature/*letteratura post-coloniale*; the Black athlete/*l'atleta nerə*; intersectional feminism/*femminismo intersezionale* and systemic racism/*razzismo sistemico*. As such, the podcast has joined the ranks of other similar podcasts tackling issues of race in Italy which have sprouted up recently. Among them, in 2020 the *Black Coffee* podcast on Black identities in Italy was launched by Ariam Tekle, a 33-year-old Italian Eritrean anthropologist and documentary film-maker, and Emmanuelle Maréchal, a French Cameroonian writer and translator, on the wave of the Black Lives Matter protests erupting across Europe and filling the streets demanding social justice. Against this background, the creation of podcasts in Italy has filled the void of media coverage on race and racism – and, in some cases, started the conversation around how to find the right words to discuss fraught topics in Italian. Because of the lower barrier to entry, podcasts have become an important medium – especially for content creators outside the realm of mainstream, predominantly white journalism – to connect with a wider audience on these and other important issues.

The political and social motivations supporting the podcast project *Sulla razza* developed from a more precise moment in recent cultural history: in November 2020, all 20 Italian soccer clubs in Serie A wrote a joint open letter to ask fans for their help in dealing

with the episodes of racism during matches, while promising to fight it in all its forms. A notable step in this direction was made by Juventus, which over the past ten years has undertaken a programme of engaging educational activities to make younger generations more aware of and responsible for the language they use. Thus, the podcast project reflects one of Juventus's goals; that is, "to initiate a conversation around race in Italy – and to do so using up-to-date language and via a format which will analyze, contextualize and explain the meaning of these terms" ("Al via il podcast 'Sulla razza' contro le discriminazioni" 2021). The show stems from the need to provide a new narrative on the way that Italians relate to race and racism, and to raise awareness on the matter by changing the words people use when dealing with them. In the specific cases of the *Black Coffee* and *Sulla razza* projects, the narrative power of the podcast format, which brings the conversation about race to a wider audience that generally shies away from the topic, can be connected to the performative function of postcolonial transmediality (Thon 2016). This epistemological lens is based on a grammar of storytelling conceived of as a cultural practice that may challenge and reorganize social barriers and binary oppositions such as center/periphery and local/global, thus undermining the very idea of the modern nation state. This assumption also echoes what postcolonial studies scholars and artists (Ceballos et al. 2009; Risam 2018; Rippl 2020) have highlighted with respect to the role that digital tools, along with social media, have also played by contributing to the creation and consolidation of a popular and decolonial culture that transcends class divisions, that has been able to resist cultural assimilation, and that has demonstrated its emancipatory potential by implementing a continuous process of self-criticism.

On the basis of these considerations, this section aims to discuss the extent to which the *Sulla razza* project problematizes translation as a site of ideological struggle and a controversial act of cultural agency which opens a window onto some of the crucial issues of racial-ethnic politics that, since the early 1900s, have had a great impact on both the United States and Italy. The discussion of these issues may contribute to reconsidering translation – as well as Uyangoda's memoir *L'unica persona nera nella stanza* – as an intersectional and politicized textual practice that can give resonance and visibility to diasporic subjects living in Italy and narrating about race, racism, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class, and that can also function as an act of recovery of historical memory across generations. Along with this educational purpose, the *Sulla razza* project also aims to fill a linguistic gap – that is, the lack of a shared vocabulary to talk about race, as Uyangoda herself states:

They tell us races are an invention. They tell us racism doesn't exist anymore. They even tell us that the word race should not be used [. . .] Does race exist or not? In Italy we are so reluctant to talk about race or racism also because we do not have the words to do that. [. . .] We want to build a vocabulary that can make it easier to share and understand stories and experiences that have so far remained without a voice.

(Ci dicono che le razze sono un'invenzione. Ci dicono che il razzismo non esiste più. Ci dicono addirittura che la parola razza non si dovrebbe utilizzare [. . .] La razza esiste oppure no? In Italia siamo così reticenti a parlare di razza o razzismo anche perché ci mancano le parole. [. . .] Vogliamo fornire un glossario che renda più facile condividere e comprendere storie ed esperienze a cui non è stata data voce.) (Mancuso, Fernando, and Uyangoda 2021a, 0:12–0:59)

By breaking up the rigid hierarchical simplification of race as a binary concept, the translation of the 12 words and expressions discussed in the podcast helps to resemantize the related chromatic racial labels along with the linguistic stratification that makes Uyangoda, Fernando, and Mancuso's translation project a polyphonic and palimpsestic narration. Indeed, by excavating their personal experiences as multiracial citizens living between two or more shores, they bring to life stories left outside or on the margins of mainstream media and official literature.

Accordingly, I want to discuss here the following three key questions. How do those 12 racializing terms and concepts, which have shaped the lives and stories of African American diasporic subjects, sound in contemporary Italian, a language whose political culture is currently characterized by new waves of xenophobia and hostility? How can Uyangoda, Fernando, and Mancuso perform their translation task in a country like Italy that, although it has experienced neither slavery in a plantation society nor Jim Crow segregation, treats new migrants coming from the coasts of Africa, for all intents and purposes, as either rejected or illegal slave labour? And finally, how can translation practice be re-imagined thanks to the critical discussion and renarration of those 12 terms in the context of the other linguacultural realities provided by the *Sulla razza* project? We may arrive at possible answers to these questions by assuming that Uyangoda, Fernando, and Mancuso undertake their translation challenge by following a precise narrative pathway for guiding the listener in each episode. They start with an historical excursus on the definitional evolution of the proposed words insofar as literal translations of those terms in the Italian target text could convey misleading and racist connotations. To avoid any risks of mistranslation, they suggest handling these words with care, as they involve the experiential, corporeal, and embodied knowledge that comes with the experience of being a Black subject. An emblematic example of the need to provide a clarifying historical context for the word under discussion is the following excerpt from the episode devoted to colourism:

Colorism: what do we mean when we talk about colorism? And how does this practice affect the lives of Italian Blacks? The word colorism was coined in 1983 by Alice Walker, but the practice dates back much earlier. It is well known how American slave owners would treat differently darker-skinned slaves (destined for field labor; field slaves) and lighter-skinned slaves (destined for house service; house slaves).

(Colorism/colorismo: cosa intendiamo quando parliamo di colorismo? E su come questa pratica storica impatti sulle vite degli Italiani neri? Il termine colorism è stato coniato nel 1983 da Alice Walker ma la pratica ha origini più antiche. È noto che gli schiavisti americani trattassero in maniera diversa gli schiavi dalla carnagione scura [impiegati nei campi; neri da campi] da quelli dalla carnagione chiara [impiegati per le faccende domestiche; neri da casa].) (Mancuso, Fernando, and Uyangoda 2021c, 1:03–1:08; 6:37–7:13)

What emerges from these lines is a prompt to recall the origins of the Black diaspora and the institution of slavery in order to understand the meaning of colourism as an historical practice, as well as to understand what kind of resonance it may possibly have in the current Italian sociopolitical context, in which legislation regularly comes out with new “chromatic” racial labels and categories on a daily basis. Additionally, by assuming the transnational political significance of the Black diasporic experience in the modern world, across several podcast episodes the authors also remind their Italian audience of

a memorable moment in the same history – that is, the memories of the southern Italian emigrants who migrated to the US beginning in the last decades of the 19th century. Among them, they mention the complex fact that Italians, particularly those from southern Italy, were considered “white ethnics” – that is, they were considered *ethnic* even though they were considered white – and classified as “dark whites” in the American racial hierarchy of the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. As they arrived in the United States, unaware that a colour line existed, Italians had complicated and contradictory experiences in relation to race and colourism. Italian people both endured severe racial discrimination (including lynching on several occasions), and enjoyed many of the numerous privileges of whiteness (Guglielmo and Salerno 2003).

A further narrative feature which characterizes the thematic structure of the *Sulla razza* podcast is the development of an intertextual and transmedial storytelling based on the use of different sources like literary and historical works or excerpts related to both the Black diaspora in the United States and to Italy’s colonial past and its racial laws, as an impressive recording from an original speech by Benito Mussolini made it resonate, as follows, in the episode devoted to race:

In terms of domestic policies, race is a particularly burning topic, because history tells us that empires are built with weapons, but they are kept in place with prestige, and prestige requires a clear and strict racial conscience, establishing not just differences, but extremely clear-cut hierarchies.

(Nei riguardi della politica interna il problema di scottante attualità è quello razziale poiché la storia ci insegna che gli imperi si conquistano con le armi ma si tengono con il prestigio e per il prestigio occorre una chiara, severa coscienza razziale che stabilisca non soltanto delle differenze ma delle superiorità nettissime. (Mancuso, Fernando, and Uyangoda 2021b, 7:28–7:58)

Crucially, the authors’ attempt to make their storytelling transmedial is also facilitated by the use of contemporary references to those Anglo American TV series that resort to the cultural practice of tokenism. This word is translated into Italian with a calque (*tokenismo*) and contextualized in both US and Italian TV culture, as the authors clearly state:

In the United States we associate the concept with its serial representation: in this sense the token is the subject embedded in an exclusively white narration that represents minorities in an obvious manner, so that the audience can recognize the differences and be satisfied with its own inclusiveness; [. . .] in Italy, cinema and TV series both have tokenism as a form of stereotyping, but the representation of non-whites in cinema and TV series is so insignificant that it might be hard to see tokenism as a widespread phenomenon.

(Negli Stati Uniti associamo il concetto con la rappresentazione seriale: il token in questo senso è quel soggetto inserito all’interno di una narrazione interamente bianca a palese rappresentazione delle minoranze etniche in cui il pubblico da una parte riconosce la diversità e dall’altra si compiace per la capacità di inclusione; [. . .] in Italia, nel mondo del cinema e delle serie tv esiste il tokenismo come forma di stereotipizzazione, una feticizzazione ma in Italia la rappresentazione dei soggetti non bianchi al cinema e nella serialità è tanto insignificante che forse è difficile parlare come fenomeno diffuso.) (Mancuso, Fernando, and Uyangoda 2021d, 10:38–11:01; 12:55–13:06)

This excerpt on tokenism causes us to reflect on the ways in which contemporary cultural representations of migrant and diasporic cultural subjects as ethnic minorities can still be perceived as race referents but can also vary according to their countries. Thanks to the

power of TV, in the United States the word “tokenism”, as well as “race”, has ceased to be a category that refers to a single concept and has instead become a floating, open signifier that serves to formulate new ways of elaborating the intersections between whiteness and Blackness, belonging and identity, gender and sex. Differently, in Italy, the semantic load of “tokenism” simply overlaps with misleading stereotyping interpretations.

The narrative structure of each podcast episode also encompasses regular comparative interlinguistic references to the use of the terms to be translated and to their related concepts. This is particularly relevant in the episodes on race, colourism, and the one-drop rule, through which the following new words and expressions are introduced and commented upon: ally/*alleato*; fairness/*chiarezza*; light-skin privilege/*privilegio associato alla chiarezza della pelle*; skin bleaching/*candegginamento*; one-drop rule/*ipodiscendenza* and mix-raced/*meticcio*. The analysis of these conceptual patterns provided by the podcast’s hosts reveals the emergence of elements concerning a discourse upon Blackness and race intertwined with a reflection concerning the new forms of Italianness, which need to be redefined through a comparative approach, where discourses on the colour line coming from the United States interact with Italian ways of talking about language, identity, and race. Their ruminations on the challenge of translating all of the race-related words and expressions mentioned so far evolve around a key question posed frequently throughout the episodes: Who is Black in Italy? In order to give an exhaustive answer to this question, the podcast’s hosts offer sophisticated comparative semantic views on the cultural and historical weight of their use in the United States and Italy, along with their critical awareness and knowledge of diasporic and postcolonial subjectivities and narrations that may help to redraw and reorientate the “color line” through an imaginary Black Italy in which discourses of race, class, and gender can affect translation resonance. Such an ethno-sociolinguistic reconfiguration reflects what Italian postcolonial studies scholar Caterina Romeo (2021) advocates in terms of “intersectional Italy”, namely, a more complex and original process of identity formation that needs to take into account the numerous connections between class inequality and social immobility, but also racial, ethnic, geographic, and linguistic factors, as well as questions of gender and sexuality that, by now, have become inseparable from issues pertaining to Italianness.

Concluding remarks

The theoretical reflections offered in this study have underscored the fact that a creative aesthetics of migration and cosmopolitanism, as well as a new intersectional translation politics, is being shaped thanks to such transmedial works as Uyangoda’s memoir *L’unica persona nera nella stanza* and the podcast project *Sulla razza*. These politicized discursive practices give resonance and visibility to such contemporary postcolonial and diasporic subjects as Black Italians whose sense of belonging can engender transcultural productions in an Italian context, where the Italianness of second generations must take into account national identity together with loyalty to family bonds, religion, and the ever-evolving sense of ethnic and cultural roots. Being Italian today is a more complex process of identity formation, one that needs to move the discourse on race and colour in Italy beyond the binary oppositions white/Black and racist/racialized, by interrogating the sociocultural and identity dynamics in which the reproduction of power, resistance, inhabitation, and re-inhabitation of the word “race” in its new semantic meanings coexist. Through the production of their own

cultural aesthetics, BAME writers like Uyangoda resort to the powerful role of translingual writing and translation, climb into the folds of diasporic and migrant legacy and vitality, and undertake the task of retelling painful histories with ethical intention and self-reflexive responsibility, empathy, and critical awareness. As such, both the concepts of translingualism and translation complement some of the existing notions of the current theoretical debate which have been used to capture similar thinking, including O. García and J.A. Kleifgen's (2010) idea of "emergent bilinguals" or Claire Kramsch's (2012) notion of "multilingual subjects". This deliberate shift in terminology therefore seeks to draw attention to the ways in which translingualism and translation are new heteroglossic practices which have marked a change from the paradigm of monolingualism to the postmonolingual condition, thereby challenging the ideologies underlying intercultural and interlinguistic interactions.

By adopting the spatial metaphor of translation as a contact zone that encompasses the image of the crossroads between Italy and Sri Lanka, as well as the idea of a dialectical or two-directional journey examining the realities of both sides of cultural differences so that they may mutually interrogate each other, this analysis of Uyangoda's memoir and the podcast project *Sulla razza* has attempted to demonstrate the significance of the authors' cross-cultural positionality and their experiential knowledge in advocating for more representativeness, more diversity, and more inclusivity. Since they experiment and project their linguistic repertoires onto a transformative social dimension and an aesthetic-political desirability, their translingual writing and translation projects stand as an imaginative/imaginary space where, as Edward Said (1978) put it, territories overlap and stories intertwine, pushing us beyond the objective and physical limits of the self-referential aesthetics that the white west has, at times, used to narrate itself exclusively.

Note

1. This and all subsequent translations from Italian are mine, unless otherwise stated.

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