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Minonne, Francesca

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Performative Translations in Syria Poletti's *Gente conmigo*

Francesca Minonne

For over a century, migration has shaped the histories of Italy and Argentina, as over three million Italians arrived in Buenos Aires in search of an “American Dream”; today, over fifty percent of Argentines can claim Italian heritage.¹ Moreover, both countries are currently experiencing a new kind of migration. Italy’s recent transformation from emigrant nation to immigrant destination, together with the simultaneous emigration of Argentines and the immigration of others into Argentina, have led to a renewed interest in the history of past migrations in order to better understand the present situation and perhaps anticipate what the future holds. Since the 1990s, many novels have been published in both Italian and Spanish exploring this long history of Italian immigration to Argentina and, in some cases, of “return” migration of Italo-Argentines to Italy. For instance, Mempo Giardinelli’s *Santo oficio de la memoria* (1991), Laura Pariani’s *Quando Dio ballava il tango* (2002), and Lucilla Gallavresi’s *L’argentino* (2003) are family sagas that span over a century, beginning in the 1800s. Massimo Carlotto’s *Le irregolari* (1998) and twin brothers Nicola and Fabrizio Valsecchi’s *Giorni di neve, giorni di sole* (2009) intertwine themes of Italian migration and identity with the history of the more than 20,000 Argentine *desaparecidos*. Finally, Antonio Dal Masetto’s trilogy *Oscuramente fuerte es la vida* (1990), *La tierra incomparable* (1994), and *Cita en el Lago Maggiore* (2011) narrates three generations of movement between Italy and Argentina.

However, decades prior to the publication of these works, author Syria Poletti was already exploring connections between language, culture, and migration in fiction. Born in Pieve di Cadore in 1922 and raised in Sacile, in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Poletti immigrated to Buenos Aires in 1939. She then made the decision to largely abandon the Italian language in order to improve her Spanish and establish herself as an Argentine author, saying of the experience: “Cambiar de idioma fue como cambiar de alma. Creo que fue lo más difícil; lo más doloroso y, quizá, lo más hermoso” [“Changing languages was like changing souls. I think it was the most difficult; the most painful and, perhaps, the most beautiful”].² She later expressed regret for this choice and, in private correspondence, lamented what she considered a rejection in Italy of her work.³ However, despite the language barrier, some Italians did recognize Poletti’s work during her lifetime, and interest in her writing within the field of Italian Studies has only grown since her death in 1991. Chief among the scholars, whose work helped integrate Poletti’s writing into the field of Italian Studies, is Silvana Serafin, who over the past decade has published numerous articles and edited volumes as well as founded the Centro Internazionale Letterature Migranti

¹ For a broad overview of the history of Italian migration to Argentina, see Fernando Devoto, *Historia de los italianos en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Biblos, 2006), translated into Italian by Federica Bertagna, *Storia degli italiani in Argentina* (Rome: Donzelli, 2007).

² All translations in this article are my own. Syria Poletti, *...Y llegarán Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Vinciguerra, 1989), 65.

³ Chiara Gallo examines a number of Poletti’s private letters in “L’inedito epistolario di Syria Poletti,” in *Contributo friulano alla letteratura argentina*, ed. Silvana Serafin (Rome: Bulzoni, 2004). Silvana Serafin also discusses Poletti’s regret, as well as the limited recognition Poletti’s writing has received in Italy, in “Syria Poletti: biografia di una passione,” in *Immigrazione friulana in Argentina: Syria Poletti racconta...*, ed. Silvana Serafin (Rome: Bulzoni, 2004).

(CILM) at the University of Udine and its associated journal, *Oltreoceano*.⁴ I follow Serafin, and others, who consider Poletti's writing to be ahead of its time and certainly comparable with that of later authors.⁵ As Italian literary scholar Susanna Regazzoni noted in 2011 of Poletti: "La autora demuestra una sensibilidad hacia la migración transoceánica de los siglos XIX y XX, que sólo más tarde se difundirá en la narrativa argentina" ["The author demonstrates a sensibility towards nineteenth- and twentieth-century transoceanic migration, which would not become widespread in Argentinian narrative until later"].⁶

Gente conmigo (1961–62), Poletti's first novel, represents an initial exploration of the themes that would reappear in much of her writing: Italian emigration, marginalization, physical deformity, and what she calls the *oficio*, or vocation, of writing.⁷ It takes place in the 1950s and narrates the story of Nora Candiani, a young Italian woman from a small town in Friuli-Venezia Giulia. Nora emigrates to Buenos Aires and becomes a translator, primarily assisting poor Italian immigrants with the necessary paperwork to bring family members to Argentina. She soon meets and falls desperately in love with Renato, a fellow Italian who belongs to the upper class, and begins translating documents and signing off on translations for his friends. The novel's structure alternates between the present—when Nora is waiting to be put on trial as a result of the translations signed for Renato—and a recounting of past events, through Nora's diary, reflections, and conversations with others.

In this essay, I focus on the role of the performative translations in *Gente conmigo*. Literary criticism related to Poletti's use of language tends either to analyze her mastery of Spanish⁸ or to comment on her use of colloquial speech, particularly her use of dialogue.⁹ More broadly, numerous articles examine the powerful role writing plays in her work, as a means of uncovering the truth as well as a bridge between past and present, us and them, and Italy and Argentina.¹⁰

⁴ I cite Serafin's articles and edited volumes throughout this article. For information on CILM and the journal *Oltreoceano*: <http://oltreoceano.uniud.it/it>, accessed May 5, 2016.

⁵ See Ilaria Magnani, *Tra memoria e finzione: l'immagine dell'immigrazione transoceanica nella narrativa argentina contemporanea* (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 2005); Susanna Regazzoni, "Italia Argentina una historia compartida: Syria Poletti inmigrante italiana, escritura argentina," *Dimensões* 26 (2011); Federica Rocco "Produzione letteraria argentina tra gli anni '40 e gli anni '90," in *Ancora Syria Poletti. Friuli e Argentina due realtà a confronto*, ed. Silvana Serafin (Rome: Bulzoni, 2005).

⁶ Susanna Regazzoni, "Italia Argentina una historia compartida," 67.

⁷ Syria Poletti, *Gente conmigo* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1972). There is some confusion regarding the original publication date of *Gente conmigo*. My edition of the book states that it was first published in 1962, but on the back cover mentions that it was distinguished in the Concurso Internacional de Novela in 1961. Federica Rocco outlines the inconclusive research on this in "Produzione letteraria argentina tra gli anni '40 e gli anni '90." Other works include the novel *Extraño oficio* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1971), the short story collections *Línea de fuego* (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1964) and *Historias en rojo* (Buenos Aires: Calatayud, 1969), as well as the children's book *Las hadas hacen dedo* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1990).

⁸ Sagrario del Río Zamudio, "Syria Poletti y su lengua en *Gente conmigo*," in *Ancora Syria Poletti: Friuli e Argentina due realtà a confronto*, ed. Silvana Serafin (Rome: Bulzoni, 2005); Sagrario del Río Zamudio, "Syria Poletti y su lengua en *Extraño oficio*," in *Immigrazione friulana in Argentina: Syria Poletti racconta...*, ed. Silvana Serafin (Rome: Bulzoni, 2004).

⁹ Mara Donat, "El género policiaco en Syria Poletti: un estilo y un lenguaje propios," in *Ancora Syria Poletti: Friuli e Argentina due realtà a confronto*, ed. Silvana Serafin (Rome: Bulzoni, 2005); Renata Londero, "Alla ricerca del contatto: la mimesi dell'oralità nei racconti di Syria Poletti," in *Ancora Syria Poletti: Friuli e Argentina due realtà a confronto*, ed. Silvana Serafin (Rome: Bulzoni, 2005).

¹⁰ Renata Londero, "Alla ricerca del contatto"; Susanna Regazzoni, "Italia Argentina una historia compartida"; Susanna Regazzoni, "Escribir y vivir es lo mismo: experiencia existencial/motivo literario in Syria Poletti," in *Immigrazione friulana in Argentina: Syria Poletti racconta...*, ed. Silvana Serafin (Rome: Bulzoni, 2004); Federica Rocco, "La donna argentina e la scrittura," *Oltreoceano* 2 (2008); Silvana Serafin, "*Extraño oficio*: Il potere

Poletti herself says: “Escribir y vivir es lo mismo” [“Writing and living are the same”].¹¹ However, none of these works focus their attention on translation. Serafin comes closest to the lens through which I will examine Poletti’s novel when she writes: “Implicita è l’ideologia (nella scrittura di Poletti) che interpreta la letteratura come azione” [“Implicit is the ideology [in Poletti’s writing] that interprets literature as action”].¹² I, instead, focus on translation as action in *Gente conmigo*. I draw loosely from the concept of “performative utterance” as theorized by philosopher of language John L. Austin, who explained the various ways in which “the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action.”¹³ My analysis of Poletti’s novel concentrates on how Nora’s translations perform actions or “do things,” that is, they serve to help her clients assimilate into Argentine society.

I maintain that Nora consistently prioritizes cultural translations over linguistic ones, by breaking the conventions of the latter in order to facilitate the former. Translation involves movement from one language and culture to another, and the impossibility of creating a perfect translation opens the space for differences in meaning. Poletti’s novel places the focus on the tension between an original document and its translation, and on the limits of translation. Many of her characters are unable or unwilling to translate themselves completely in order to assimilate into Argentine culture. Anthony Pym’s writing on ethics in translation and sociologist Erving Goffman’s work on social interactions as performance guide me as I examine Nora’s interactions with four clients who request translations from her, as well as her own experiences as an immigrant. These interactions highlight identity as performative, and her translations are likewise performative, helping her clients immigrate to Argentina and adopt a, perhaps hybrid, Argentine identity. Poletti’s interrogations into the relationship between language and sense of belonging for immigrants would only be taken up again in Argentina and Italy decades later.

Gente conmigo explores the blurred borders of ethics in translation. Nora recognizes the impact her role as a translator has on others and in fact considers her job an *oficio*, or vocation. On the final page of the novel, she reflects on the words of her grandmother: “el oficio debe entrar en la sangre para que sirva” [the vocation needs to enter in the blood so that it can serve] (198). This service to others leads to Nora’s bending, and at times completely breaking, both the rules of translation and the law. Anthony Pym divides ethics in translation into two areas: the first, referring to the translator’s presumed “ideal loyalty to a source text, author or sender,” and the second consisting of “codes of ethics [...] for the profession of translation.”¹⁴ Moreover, he maintains that the ultimate purpose of translation is “to improve the intercultural relations with which they are concerned” (166). Nora takes this final view to an extreme by prioritizing the physical and social mobility of her clients over the desire to perform a faithful translation. In other words, her loyalty is to her clients and not to the original document or her profession.

Nora enacts her personal ethical code in her sustained interaction with a poor Calabrian couple and their many children, helping them bring their twelve-year-old son, Rafael, to Argentina. The mother explains that Rafael has a hunchback, which prevents him from migrating with the rest of his family. Nora’s efforts to help bring Rafael to Argentina are a prime example of her empathy for his situation, which leads her to omit crucial information in the translations

salvafico dell’arte,” in *Ancora Syria Poletti. Friuli e Argentina due realtà a confronto*, ed. Silvana Serafin (Rome: Bulzoni, 2005); Silvana Serafin, “Syria Poletti: la scrittura della marginalità,” *Oltreoceano* 2 (2008).

¹¹ Syria Poletti, ... *Y llegarán Buenos Aires*, 71.

¹² Silvana Serafin, “Syria Poletti: biografia di una passione,” 22.

¹³ John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 6.

¹⁴ Anthony Pym, *Translation and Text Transfer: An Essay on the Principles of Intercultural Communication* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992), 151.

she performs. When discussing the situation with her sister, Bertina, Nora thinks: “si ella llegara a conocer el problema de esta familia, se empeñaría en que yo lo solucionara” [“if she were to discover this family’s problem, she would insist that I solve it, assuming everyone follows the same ethical code”] (118). Nora justifies her actions because she has the ability, through translation, to reunite this family. In her first meeting with them, Rafael’s mother shows her the boy’s medical records, as well as a photograph of his back. Nora attempts to explain that her translations cannot make Rafael’s medical condition disappear: “Para mí no es una molestia traducir estos documentos. Es otra cosa. Entiendan: hay que traducirlos tal como están. Y tal como está, constituyen una especie de condena. Con este certificado, su hijo no entrará jamás en el país” [“For me it’s no trouble translating these documents. It’s something else. Understand: you need to translate them as they’re written. And the way they are now, they are a condemnation. With this certificate, your son will never enter this country”] (118). When they, confused, ask why such laws exist, Nora struggles to give an adequate response: “Las leyes son... leyes. Se hace en defensa de la gente... Y a veces se vuelvan contra la gente” [“Laws are [...] laws. They are created to protect the people [...] And sometimes they turn against the people”] (118). The words on Rafael’s medical certificate, combined with Argentina’s laws, indicate only one outcome: Rafael must remain in Italy. Translating the words that name his condition will do nothing to change this.

National borders, by their nature, serve to keep many out and allow only those with the correct documentation in. However, Nora herself is an example of how it is possible to exploit the space between original documents, laws, and physical reality. She has a similar medical condition as Rafael and, on her first attempt to board a ship to Buenos Aires, was also turned away. Her sister, Bertina, found a way to obtain documentation for Nora that allowed her to avoid a medical examination and thus migrate (27). From this experience, Nora understands that all laws have loopholes: “La vida impone las leyes y la vida enseña las trampas” [“Life imposes laws and life also reveals loopholes”] (28).¹⁵ Just as altered documents allowed Nora to migrate and settle in Argentina, her work as a translator facilitates others’ migration and integration. In the end, Nora removes the photographs of Rafael’s back from his file and writes a letter that lets him forego a medical examination, so that he would be allowed to join the rest of his family in Buenos Aires:

Traduje nuevamente las partidas de Rafael y alteré el texto del diagnóstico. Suprimí toda referencia a enfermedades crónicas y contagiosas. Hice figurar al menor como afectado de leve deformación que no disminuiría en absoluto su idoneidad para el desempeño de tareas útiles. Naturalmente suprimí también “esa foto.”

[I once again translated Rafael’s certificates and altered the diagnosis. I eliminated every reference to chronic and contagious illnesses. I made it seem like he was only affected by a minor physical deformation that would not at all limit his suitability to perform useful work. Naturally, I also eliminated “the photo.”] (151)

¹⁵ A non-linguistic loophole that Nora tries to exploit, but without success, is attempting to grant them an audience with Evita Perón, the wife of President Juan Perón. Nora hopes that, if they can speak with Evita and explain their situation she will step in and help them, but this effort is unsuccessful (124–25).

Nora's translation is able to erase Rafael's medical condition from official records and reunite him with his parents and siblings, but the condition, of course, remains. The fact that translations can change the legal status of a person but cannot cure illnesses is a recurring theme in Poletti's novel, and Nora herself feels the effects of this in her life. During her voyage to Buenos Aires years prior, she reflects on her own situation: "yo era como un producto deteriorado que debía pasar inadvertido, entremezclado con los productos destinados a la exportación; los emigrantes aptos" ["I was like a damaged product that needed to go unnoticed, mixed in with the products destined for export; the suitable emigrants"] (27–8). Nora, Rafael, and other "unsuitable" immigrants must work harder than others to find a place for themselves in society and Nora, in particular, never feels fully accepted.

When Rafael and his family come to thank Nora for her work, he is not the polite, intellectually curious young man she had expected. Rafael's mother told Nora in their initial meeting: "¡Sabe más que un abogado! ¡A los siete años leía el diario!" ["He knows more than a lawyer! At seven-years-old he was already reading the newspaper!"]. This led Nora to believe that they had more in common than their medical condition (117). Instead, when she asks him to read an Italian translation of a text from his school notebook, he admits he is illiterate: "¿Por qué no lees? No puedo [...]" ["Why aren't you reading?" "I can't (...)"] (155), and then attempts to seduce her: "intentó ceñirme de la cintura [...] Sos una linda mujer..." ["He tried to seize me by the waist (...) 'You are a beautiful woman (...)']" (157). This contrast between how a person is described (or describes themselves) and reality becomes even clearer when examining Nora's work with two other clients: Prince Zedir and Gastón Richard.

Nora's interactions with the "príncipe Zedir" are an extreme example of social interactions as theatrical performance. In the 1950s, having analyzed how individuals attempt to present themselves in a certain way, the sociologist Erving Goffman proposed that everyone who takes part in a social interaction operates under a set of guidelines that help this performance run smoothly.¹⁶ A flawless performance projects a stable identity (what Goffman calls the self) while awkward or unexpected occurrences can destabilize identity.¹⁷ Prince Zedir is a well-known pianist who pretends to be Arab but is actually Northern Italian. The conversations between Nora and him again highlight Nora's need to feel empathy for a client in order to feel justified in falsifying a translation to help him, and also demonstrate the role of dialect as a means of informal communication.

When Nora first sees the prince up close, after having attended one of his concerts, she realizes he is not as exotic as his name implies: "El príncipe Zedir me decepcionó por su baja estatura" ["Prince Zedir disappointed me due to his lack of height"] and decides that his eyes are the only sign of his true personality: "Entonces advertí que sus ojos eran auténticos. Digo los ojos porque todo lo demás, barba, palidez, ademanes, eran tan decorativos que parecían postizos" ["Then I realized that his eyes were authentic. I say his eyes because everything else, beard, paleness, gestures, were so decorative they seemed false"] (46). When Zedir speaks in Italian, he affects a foreign accent: "Su italiano era exótico y como remoto" ["His Italian was exotic, as though from far away"] (47). Nora spends much of their subsequent time together attempting to

¹⁶ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

¹⁷ Goffman writes: "Audiences tend to accept the self projected by the individual performer [...] as a responsible representation of his colleague-grouping, of his team, and of his social establishment" and, "When an event occurs which is expressively incompatible with this fostered impression, significant consequences are simultaneously felt" (242).

destabilize his performed identity in order to tease out an authentic reaction from him and thus understand his true personality.

Nora and Prince Zedir's conversations are characterized by constant linguistic negotiations, as they move between French, Spanish, Italian, and what Nora refers to as the Lombard dialect. Goffman outlines the differences between what he calls two "language[s] of behavior," the frontstage, which is more formal, and the backstage, which is more intimate and may include the "use of dialect or sub-standard speech" as well as cursing (128). Goffman also notes: "By invoking a backstage style, individuals can transform any region into a backstage" (128). Nora and Prince Zedir's frequent linguistic changes signal their uncertain relationship with one another. Italian scholar Renata Londero points out "la dinamica tra avvicinamento all'interlocutore e allontanamento da lui" ["the dynamic between approaching the interlocutor and estrangement from him"] in Poletti's writing, which these conversations exemplify.¹⁸ These characters risk a breakdown in communication, not because of limited linguistic ability but, instead, because Nora attempts to use backstage language to highlight the similarities between them, while Prince Zedir prefers to maintain a formal distance.

Their first private meeting, when he comes to her office with documents to translate as part of his application to become an Argentine citizen, is awkward; Nora keeps pushing for a backstage language, while Prince Zedir attempts to maintain his persona, which risks breaking down in informal situations. When he hands her his birth certificate, she learns his name is Antonio Croatti and that he was born in the province of Cremona. In an attempt to elicit a more authentic reaction from him, she speaks in his dialect:

Hubiese podido hablarle en italiano. Pero me dominó un oscuro afán de escarnecerlo. Entonces, esgrimí su dialecto:

—Chiaravalle es una linda aldea.

—¿Usted es lombarda?

—No.

—Como habla ese dialecto.

—¿Su dialecto? —sonreí son sorna.

—Yo, en realidad, viví muy poco en provincia...

[I could have spoken to him in Italian. But I was overcome by a dark desire to mock him. Thus, I employed his dialect:

"Chiaravalle is a beautiful town."

"Are you from Lombardy?"

"No."

"You speak the dialect well."

"Your dialect?" I smiled sarcastically.

"Actually, I didn't live there long..." (50)

Prince Zedir thinks Nora's use of dialect is an attempt to create a sense of camaraderie between them and immediately distances himself from it, by claiming that he has little knowledge of his hometown and, by implication, the regional dialect. He has no interest in a personal connection with Nora, viewing her as a mere tool through which to obtain Argentine

¹⁸ Renata Londero. "Alla ricerca del contatto," 92. Londero uses the short story "El tren de medianoche" in *Línea de fuego* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1966) as an example of this.

citizenship, while Nora sees him as a fake who has abandoned his identity in order to obtain fame: “Yo me había dejado subyugar por su personalidad y él sólo me había visto como una máquina de traducir. Y no pude evitar el deseo de que él me sintiera como un ser humano” [“I let myself be charmed by his personality and he just saw me as a translating machine. And I couldn’t escape the need for him to see me as a human being”] (54). She has little interest in helping him if they are unable to move beyond such a superficial connection.

Their conversation continues, as Nora continues to push Prince Zedir to employ a backstage language, and his assumed persona begins to linguistically unravel:

–Me gustaría saber si usted insulta en dialecto o en qué idioma...

–¿Yo? ¿Por qué habría de insultar?

–¡Me refiero a solas! ¿No maldice, no injuria, no manda al infierno?

–Bueno. A veces... En francés.

–Cuidado, príncipe –reí–. Está hablando en italiano... ¡No se olvide del acento exótico!

[“I’d like to know if you curse in dialect, or in another language...”

“Me? Why would I need to curse?”

“I mean when you’re alone! You don’t swear, insult, tell someone to go to hell?”

“Well, sometimes... in French.”

“Be careful, Prince” I laughed. “You’re speaking in Italian... Don’t forget your exotic accent!”] (51)

Nora wants Prince Zedir to admit to using a backstage language by asking him to think of a time when he is alone and angry, thus an instance when he is presumably at his most authentic. He again refuses to match her level of informality and says he uses French at such times, which corresponds with his identity as Prince Zedir but not with how Nora expects him to behave when he is alone. As she makes him increasingly uncomfortable, he forgets to concentrate on his speech and his Italian loses its artificial accent. The ellipses in the text are another sign of Prince Zedir’s inability to react quickly to Nora’s unexpectedly personal questions, and of the emotional distance between these two characters.

Prince Zedir finally explodes in anger, when he asserts that documents cannot encapsulate a person’s identity, and then reveals some of his real personality: “Usted creyó saber todo porque tuvo en sus manos unos documentos! ¡Se equivoca! ¡Usted ni siquiera sospecha por qué razones cambié de identidad! ¡En las actas legales no figura la historia del hombre! ¡Y tampoco la verdad de su vida y el porqué de sus actos!” [“You thought you knew everything because you had a few documents in your hands! You’re wrong! You can’t even imagine why I changed identities! Legal documents don’t include the history of a man; neither the truth of his life nor the reason for his actions!”] (52). Nora is well aware from her own experience that documents do not tell the whole story of a person’s life, and may even omit crucial information about a person. However, her initial disappointment at Prince Zedir’s behavior blinds her to this.

Prince Zedir also explains that the creation and adoption of this persona help him not only attract more attention for his career but also to more easily hide aspects of his personality: “¡El disfraz puede ocultar más reserva que la actitud más auténtica! ¡Pero usted nunca podría comprender la mueca que oculta la sonrisa de una máscara!” [“A disguise may hide more restraint than the most authentic behavior!”] (52). After he leaves, Nora learns that he has

tuberculosis and realizes that his exaggerated act is also to hide his illness. She reflects: “Muchas personas saben que el príncipe Zedir es el músico Antonio Croatti. Y todos aceptan el desdoblamiento como un requisito indispensable para alcanzar el éxito. En cambio, ninguno sabe que esté enfermo” [“Many know that Prince Zedir is the musician Antonio Croatti. And everyone accepts this doubling as an indispensable requirement in order to achieve success. However, no one knows that he is ill”] (54). Thus, when people learn that he is Italian, they believe they have uncovered the truth of his identity and do not consider the fact that there may be another layer of concealment. From this point, Nora becomes more sympathetic to Prince Zedir’s request and more willing to bend the rules for him.

In Nora’s final conversation with Prince Zedir, months later, she decides to alter his birth certificate, and conveys her decision through the use of dialect. In a conversation that echoes their first meeting, dialect becomes a way for them to communicate without others understanding them, as well as an intimate, shared backstage language. As his illness progresses, Prince Zedir ends up in a clinic for treatment. After obtaining citizenship, he asks Nora to help him with the paperwork to begin receiving a pension from the Argentine government, but his birth certificate declares him too young to be eligible. His letters to Nora become more desperate over time as he, increasingly sick and with no money, begs her to do what she can to help him.¹⁹ Finally, Nora visits him and, as they talk, she resolves to alter the birthdate on his birth certificate and to send a translation of the now-altered certificate to the Argentine government. She communicates this decision using dialect:

Entonces, dije en dialecto lombardo:

–Chiaravalle es una linda aldea.

–¿Chiaravalle...?

[...]

–Antonio Croatti: le hablo en su dialecto. Esto debe quedar entre nosotros, Usted no nació en 1907. Nació en 1905. No lo olvide.

[Then, I said in the Lombard dialect:

“Chiaravalle is a beautiful town.”

“Chiaravalle...?”

[...]

Antonio Croatti: “I’ll speak to you in your dialect. This needs to remain between the two of us; you were not born in 1907. You were born in 1905. And don’t forget it.”] (60)

Once Croatti understands, he replies: “Y por primera vez dijo algo natural y lleno de sentido: – ¡Qué lindo es el dialecto!” [“And for the first time he said something natural and full of emotion: ‘Dialect is so beautiful!’”] (60). In this interaction, Antonio Croatti has become simply an Italian man with advanced tuberculosis, with none of the affected speech or mannerisms of Prince Zedir, the well-known pianist and personality. Nora appreciates his authenticity and her use of dialect becomes, not a means of goading him as it was in their first sustained interaction, but a gesture of solidarity. Croatti’s response, although in Spanish and not dialect, shows an acceptance of their shared heritage and, to revisit Londero’s quote, a sign of “avvicinamento”

¹⁹ His supposed friends no longer contact him and now refer to him as “pobre Croatti” (57), a sign that his persona can only be maintained when he can feign being healthy.

that is markedly different from his previous distancing language.²⁰ The paperwork for Croatti's pension is approved, but he dies before receiving his first paycheck. As in Rafael's case, a translation cannot cure Croatti's illness, but Nora's initial translation for him does culturally translate him into an Argentine citizen.

Gastón Richard is similar to Prince Zedir/Antonio Croatti in that he is another Italian member of the upper class who has adopted an exaggerated persona; Gastón Richard presents himself as a gay French fashion designer. However, when Nora attempts to destabilize this performed identity, again using dialect, she finds that the only secret he is hiding is his humble origins. This, in her opinion, is not enough to justify falsifying the translation of the birth certificate he will use to apply for Argentine citizenship. In fact, she only breaks the rules of translation at her boyfriend Renato's request, admitting to herself, "es la única historia para la que no encuentro justificación ética en mi proceder" ["it is the only story for which I cannot justify my actions ethically"] (169). In this case, Nora's unfaithful translation serves to erase her client's true origins and justify his place in the Argentine upper class.

Gastón Richard was born Giuseppe Marcuffi in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, the same Northern Italian region that Nora and Renato are from. When Nora meets him, she suspects that his homosexuality is as much an act as his Frenchness, "una hábil mimetización impuesta por el ambiente" ["a skilled imitation imposed by the environment"] (172). Thus, any speech act runs the risk of exposing the gap between Gastón Richard's performed and "real" identities. Similar to Prince Zedir, Gastón Richard constantly distances himself linguistically from Nora with a more formal frontstage language. His first words to her when they meet are, "Parlez-vous français?"—a choice of language that is furthest from their origins or current linguistic environment. When Nora responds in the Italian dialect they both grew up with, saying, "creo que nos entenderemos mejor hablando nuestro dialecto" ["I think we will understand one another better if we speak our dialect"], he is horrified, exclaiming in French, "¡Imposible! ¡Imposible!" (170).²¹ With his linguistic choices, Gastón Richard emphatically denies his Italian lower-class origins and rejects the connection between himself and Nora implicit in her use of "our." While they share similar origins, they occupy widely different social spaces in Buenos Aires. Nora remains in constant contact with lower-class Italians and considers herself one of them. Gastón Richard, instead, has culturally translated himself into upper-class society in Buenos Aires. However, his adopted gay, French, upper-class identity is unstable and being in contact with Nora, who is in reality not so different from him, puts that identity at risk.

Nora and Gastón Richard reach an uneasy linguistic compromise that allows their conversation to continue and keeps the performance going. They settle into a standard Italian, although one influenced by other languages, and he uses what Nora considers an "acento divertidísimo: el acento nórdico, el tono [...] del barrio Norte [of Buenos Aires] y [...] las erres a la francesa" ["very funny accent: a Northern European accent, the tone (...) from the Northern neighborhood (of Buenos Aires) and (...) a French r"] (173). As is the case with Prince Zedir, speaking in Italian does not undermine Gastón Richard's assumed French identity. When Renato first tells Nora to translate Gastón Richard's birth certificate from Italian, not French, she asks,

²⁰ Renata Londero. "Alla ricerca del contatto," 92. The fact that the Lombard dialect is not Poletti's native language (she is Friulian) is just another instance of her ability to navigate multiple languages and make connections with others in all of them.

²¹ It is important to note that, aside from the initial "Parlez-vous français?," while the narrative voice tells us that Nora speaks in Italian dialect and Richard replies in French, the text remains Spanish. Other authors, including Laura Pariani and Mariangela Sedda, frequently insert words and phrases from multiple languages into their narratives.

surprised, “¿Y no se hace pasar por francés?” [“And doesn’t he pose as French?”] to which Renato replies, “No; ahora no. Todos saben que es italiano” [“No, not anymore. Everyone knows he’s Italian”] (170). Being Italian is not a social impediment for Gastón Richard, but having lower-class origins is. For this reason, Gastón Richard refuses to speak Italian dialect and insists that the translation of his birth certificate legitimize his current social standing.

After their linguistically awkward initial conversation, Nora and Gastón Richard begin discussing her initial translation of his birth certificate, which he finds unacceptable. As they speak, it becomes apparent that Gastón Richard does not want an accurate translation but, instead, one that hides his humble origins. He attempts to convince Nora to stretch the rules of translation to such an extent as to essentially sever the connection between the original and the translation. Gastón Richard is, as written on his birth certificate, the son of a newspaper delivery man “diariero” and a peasant “campesina,” in Italian “giornalaio” and “contadina” (170). Gastón Richard, with many expressions of “¡qué horror!” and “¡Dios mío!” explains to Nora that *giornalaio* would be better translated as *periodista*, journalist, while *contadina* is an embarrassing misprint of *contessa*, countess (170). This transparent attempt by Gastón Richard to adjust language in order to replace his lower-class origins with a proud and noble lineage represents a desire to justify his current position in the upper class and to erase his connection with the poor.

Gastón Richard becomes increasingly flustered when Nora does not immediately agree to his suggested modifications and, as their conversation progresses, his carefully constructed persona begins to break down linguistically. First, when explaining the supposedly incorrect translation of *giornalaio*, Nora notices that he “replicó olvidándose de la erre francesa” [“replied forgetting the French *r*”] (170). The power dynamic between the two characters begins to destabilize as it becomes clear that Nora, in her role as a translator, has the ability to ignore Gastón Richard’s requests. As they continue to discuss the word *giornalaio*, Nora asks a question in French, while Gastón Richard continues speaking in Italian.²² Finally, when Nora continues to question the need to change “peasant” to “countess,” suggesting that the misspelling of *contadina* with two *ds* is an orthographical error and not a complete mistake, he exclaims, “Ma que ortografía coglioni!” in a mix of Italian and Spanish (170). In this moment, when a linguistically correct translation challenges Gastón Richard’s performed identity, that very identity almost entirely breaks down and he inadvertently employs an informal, backstage language. A client’s entrance interrupts their conversation, giving Gastón Richard the chance to recover and adopt his constructed persona once again. In the end, Nora follows his instructions and Gastón Richard is able to become the son of a countess and a journalist, at least according to the Argentine government.

Nora can take such liberties with the translations I have examined so far—for Rafael, Prince Zedir, and Gastón Richard—because, once the translation exists, the original document is superfluous. All of these characters expect to settle in Argentina and remain there, even those who remain in contact with friends and family in Italy. However, the final character I analyze, Valentina, is an example of someone for whom Nora cannot complete a translation, because others in Argentina will report any mistranslations. Valentina’s situation allows me to return to Austin’s reflections on performative utterances and is a further reminder of the limits of translation.

²² “¿Cuál es el otro horror? –dije en francés” (174).

Valentina is a young Sicilian woman married by proxy to Esteban, a Northern Italian man, with a marriage certificate signed before she immigrated to Argentina.²³ However, during the religious ceremony the day after her arrival, she decides she no longer wants to marry him. A conflict arises because, in Valentina's opinion, saying "I do" during the ceremony is the utterance that performs the act of marrying. Thus, when in church she says: "¡No! No quiero casarme! ¡No quiero!" ["No! I don't want to get married! I don't want to!"], she believes she is invalidating her signature and is therefore not married (72). Everyone else sees signing the marriage certificate as the performative action and the ceremony as just a formality.

Austin discusses the act of saying "I do" as a performative utterance, and then delineates a series of what he calls "infelicities," or "*the things that can be and go wrong*" when a phrase is uttered.²⁴ These infelicities can be divided into two categories: misfires, during which "the act in question, e.g. marrying, is not successfully performed at all," and abuses, in which case "the act *is* achieved, although to achieve it in such circumstances, as when we are, say, insincere, is an abuse of the procedure" (16).²⁵ Valentina sees the marriage ceremony as a misfire, since she does not say her vows, while Esteban and others consider it an abuse, as her saying the vows does not determine whether or not they are legally married.

Valentina's refusal to believe that signing a piece of paper makes her a married woman becomes relevant to Nora's translations when the woman requests her services, so that she would be able to work legally in Argentina. The discrepancy between official documents, which state that she is married, and her own insistence that she is single, mean that she is unable to obtain a work permit. She asks Nora to translate the necessary documents to say that she is single. Their conversation, in which Nora attempts to explain why such a translation will not resolve Valentina's predicament, is an example of a case in which Nora is unable to falsify documents, because Esteban has the originals:

- Ante las leyes estás casada.
- ¡Una mujer no puede estar casada por un pedazo de papel!
- Vos firmaste esos papeles.
- ¿Y por una firma me casé? Sé buena: poné 'señorita'...
- Sería inútil. Descubrirían el error...
- Claro... Porque él tiene otros papeles que dicen que estamos casados

[“By law you’re married.”
 “A woman can’t be married by a piece of paper!”
 “You signed those papers.”
 “And with a signature I’m married? If that’s the case, put down ‘Miss’...”
 “It wouldn’t work. They would find out the error...”
 “Of course... Because he has other papers that say that we’re married.”] (99–100)

Nora desperately wants to help Valentina, as she believes that the institution of marriage by proxy is outdated and exploitative, but she can only offer to help Valentina obtain a divorce,

²³ It is unclear why he is called Esteban, although this is likely the Spanish version of the Italian name, Stefano.

²⁴ Italics in the original. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words*, 14.

²⁵ Italics in the original.

which Valentina refuses on the grounds that she does not consider herself married.²⁶ In the end, Valentina attempts to live with Esteban for a time but then commits suicide because, as Corina Mathieu says, “la muerte se convierte finalmente en la única salida” [“death ultimately becomes the only means of escape”].²⁷ Similar to Prince Zedir, whose falsified birth certificate cannot halt the progression of his illness, an unfaithful translation of Valentina’s documents would do nothing to improve her situation.

Nora’s clients demonstrate varying degrees of success in making lives for themselves in Argentina and becoming Argentine. However, in each of their cases, Nora’s linguistic translations only move in one direction, from Italian to Spanish, as do the cultural translation of individuals, from Italian to Argentine. In addition, as we have seen, these translations cannot erase medical conditions, which limit the characters’ job prospects and their relationships. This limitation is most apparent in Nora’s own life as, in the final chapter of the novel, Renato leaves her for a young woman from a rich family and compels her to have an abortion. As Renato explains his future plans to Nora, he drives home the view that her physical deformity is a sign that she will never fit into the upper class. He reminds her of the rejection and embarrassment she faced when initially turned away from the port at Trieste, and says of their unborn child, “¿Qué sabés vos cómo puede nacer? ¿O te olvidaste de Trieste? [...] Yo quiero un hijo sano, normal, que tenga un buen nombre” [“What do you know about how he might be after birth? Or have you forgotten about Trieste? (...) I want a healthy, normal son, who has a good name”] (191). Renato suggests that Nora does not truly belong in Argentina but is useful for her linguistic abilities. She can culturally translate others, but will never be fully accepted by Renato and his friends.

Nora’s abortion represents not only a rejection from Renato’s life but also a denial of the Argentine identity she has fought to adopt since arriving in Buenos Aires. Children born to immigrants more closely tie the family to their country of residence, and these second-generation Italians will presumably be accepted as Argentines. After the procedure, she reflects on its effects: “Pero extirpan todo, ¿sabe? Después, la raíz queda destruida, seca. Y esa cosa muerta sigue doliendo sangre adentro [...] esa cosa muerta lo invade todo” [“But they removed everything, you know? After, the root is destroyed, dry. And this dead thing continues aching blood inside (...) this dead thing invades everything”] (196). Nora’s abortion represents the end of her family line and also hints at a future in which the role of translator may become obsolete, as immigrants and their children become Argentine and have no more use for Italy or the Italian language. Nora’s *oficio*, passed down from her grandmother, cannot be passed on to a subsequent generation.

However, despite Renato leaving her, the abortion, and Prince Zedir and Valentina’s deaths, *Gente conmigo* ends on a somewhat hopeful note, as Nora pushes her own problems aside to devote herself more fully to her vocation: helping others through her writing. She remembers her grandmother’s words: “lo que escribiste ya no es tuyo. Es de la gente. Tu oficio es interpretar a la gente, ver por dentro y decir la verdad” [“what you wrote is no longer yours. It is of the people. Your vocation is to interpret the people, see them from the inside, and speak the truth”] (200). Therefore, rather than worrying about the future, or her own problems, Nora chooses to continue “doing things” with her writing, carrying out performative translations whenever possible and

²⁶ Part of the reason Nora is so invested in helping Valentina is her view that “El casamiento por poder debería suprimirse” [“Marriage by proxy should be abolished”] (103).

²⁷ Corina S. Mathieu, “Syria Poletti: Intérprete de la realidad argentina,” *Sin nombre* 13, no. 3 (April–June 1983): 91.

not letting setbacks deter her from her work. Through linguistic translations, Nora attempts to culturally translate her clients, while she herself remains by necessity between cultures and languages, as a bridge between Italy and Argentina, Italian and Spanish.

Gente con migo's bittersweet ending indicates that translations, and thus translators, may no longer be necessary once immigrants are accepted into Argentine culture. More broadly, the novel depicts the realities of migration in the mid-twentieth century, when the vast majority of Italian immigrants in Argentina were concerned with making a life for themselves, rather than with maintaining contact with Italian language and culture or developing a hybrid identity. The narratives I cited in the introduction, by Mempo Giardinelli and Laura Pariani, are more recent examples of books that narrate past experiences of migration, when the focus was on assimilation and homogenization. These works contrast with stories of recent movement between Italy and Argentina, including Clementina Sandra Ammendola's bilingual text, *Lei, che sono io / Ella que soy yo*, and the previously mentioned trilogy by Antonio Dal Masetto.²⁸ Novels set in the present allow for the possibility of a multicultural and multilingual society, in which translation is an ongoing negotiation between languages. Moreover, they are comparable to other works of migration literature published in Italy since the 1990s which, according to Graziella Parati, show "the inevitable coming together of different languages and cultural contexts in a process of geographical and cultural translation" or, as Jennifer Burns writes, "describe a broader process of intercultural accommodation."²⁹

Poletti's novel shows the consequences of a society in which assimilation is viewed as conforming to the linguistic and cultural norms of Buenos Aires. In this case, translations are useful insofar as they can facilitate this process of linguistic and cultural translation, whether through removing medical conditions, changing birthdates, or concealing poor origins. When viewed in this light, Nora's abortion becomes representative of the immigrant experience, during which Italy and the Italian language are excised and leave a hole that cannot be filled, even if an immigrant is able to culturally translate herself into Argentine society. The Italo-Argentine characters in these narratives occupy a dynamic gray area, highlighting spaces of tension between binary oppositions such as immigrant and emigrant, native and foreigner. However, while they have multi-faceted identities, official documents force them to define themselves by only a handful of characteristics, such as medical condition and nationality.

Poletti's narrative provides an early example of the role of translation, and more broadly language, in migration. It also seems to suggest that Italo-Argentines like Nora, who participate in both Italian and Argentine cultures but do not fully belong to either, are best qualified to narrate stories of migration and cultural translation. Furthermore, a 1998 translation of *Gente con migo* into Italian allows Poletti's words to continue bridging languages and cultures half a century after its initial publication and places this work into dialogue with recently published books.³⁰ All of these novels are narratives of cultural translation themselves, whose performative purpose is to remind their readers of the influence of migration and examine how immigrants negotiate multiple languages, identities, and cultural contexts in different time periods.

²⁸ Clementina Sandra Ammendola, *Lei, che sono io / Ella que soy yo* (Rome: Sinnos, 2005). This narrative is part of "I mappamondi," a series of bilingual books intended for use in Italian schools to teach young Italians and immigrants about immigration and different cultures.

²⁹ Graziella Parati, *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 59; Jennifer Burns, *Migrant Imaginaries: Figures in Italian Migration Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 189.

³⁰ Syria Poletti, *Gente con me*, translated into Italian by Claudia Razza (Venice: Marsilio, 1998).

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