

Dirty Pretty Language: Translation and the Borders of English

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Introduction

In the film *Dirty Pretty Things* (Frears), in a car hurtling out of a soured life in London toward the dream of a new life in New York, Senay (Audrey Tautou), a Turkish asylum seeker, calls her cousin, exultant at her escape: “Handa? Handa, it's me, Senay. You hear how good my English is? I'm coming to New York. I'm coming to New York!” Senay’s “coming to New York,” her ability to translate herself in and through the “compromised, impure and internally divided” border spaces of Britain and into Englishness (Gibson 694) hinges on this “good English”. This article explores the hinge between “good English” and the cultural politics of translation and mobility in a film that traces the trajectories of a handful of undocumented migrants living in London. Senay’s “good English” is rendered strange—and worth a second listen—by the actor’s own lack of fluency in English: Tautou played the part by memorizing her lines sound by sound, mimicking the accents of Turkish women met at cafés and on recordings (Farouky, Cavagna). While the film’s casting offers “an almost over-the-top *mélange* of culture and identity” noted by reviewers (Farouky), with actors who all “speak different languages,” almost the entirety of the film itself is monolingual in English. Like Tautou, a range of other characters in the film speak English, perform characters with strong accents, and emphasize the labour of learning and speaking English even as a kind of ventriloquism (Chow). In an interview discussing language in the film with director Stephen Frears, Carlos Cavagna mused, “the language—everyone struggling to speak the same language—is part of what gives the film its strange quality”. It is this “strange quality” of “everyone struggling to speak the same language,” English, in the border spaces and regimes of Britain, which this article seeks to investigate.

Existing scholarship on the film has explored many of the ways the film “allegorizes” (Davis 48) the politics of the border in Britain by studying bodies, economies, infection, and spaces in the film (Davis; Gibson; Whitakker; Zylinska). Scholars have focused on the film as a “metonym for the British nation, a space to negotiate who is or is not welcomed into Britain” (Gibson 693). As one reviewer noted, the film was “a drama of London's underclass, an essay in multiculturalism, a bit of a state-of-the-nation essay” (Romney), which marked a return to director Stephen Frears’s “social realism” (Rosello 16). For Joanna Zylinska (524), *Dirty Pretty Things* reveals the way migrants have become the “constitutive outside” of the British nation, “a secret source of life, which sustains and nourishes the [national] body proper”. These scholars agree that the politics of representation in the film reflect British national borders and belonging, even as the film is at once “an engrossing noir love story” (Bradshaw) and a “dark thriller” (Alberge). This article extends these arguments by

focusing not on place, bodies, or infection, but on the film's cultural politics of language. In particular, we trace performances of the labour of learning English, moments of inaudibility and mistranslation, stereotyped accents and cultural allusion. As other scholars have pointed out, the politics of language and borders matter because "language is hardly incidental" to immigration regimes, as immigrants find themselves called on "to articulate their lives in ways that at once conform to established codes and that stand out as deserving of attention and acceptance" (Epps, Valens, Johnson González 9). The relevance of our investigation is rendered timely by the introduction in 2016 of tighter English language requirements for British citizenship (Cameron), by moral panics over refugees, immigration, and Brexit, and recent recommendations from politicians, according to the BBC, that all migrants to Britain be compelled to learn and speak English.

Dirty Pretty Things follows a collection of characters in London, each with a tangled migration history, who become snared in a sordid organs-for-passports scheme run by a villainous hotel manager, Señor Juan (Sergi López, see Table 1 for a full list of characters). The story centres around Okwe (Chiwetel Ejiofor), a former doctor from Nigeria, a "virtuous man" haunted by the past while working as a hotel night clerk and daytime cab driver in London, and Senay (Audrey Tautou), a wide-eyed, skittish Turkish asylum seeker and hotel chambermaid, who rents Okwe her couch. The two work in the same opulent but seedy hotel where, as Señor Juan says, people do "dirty things," and the film begins with their lives in fragile, precarious balance. Once disturbed, when Okwe fishes out "a healthy human heart" from a hotel toilet and begins asking questions, the characters' fragility presses them into a dangerous criminal underworld of organ trafficking, bribery, risk, violence, and rape. Nevertheless, through tricks and favours from a network of friends, the two manage to foil the villain, escape the circling immigration authorities, and make their next move. This is a film about the precarity of living in the margins of Britain's migration regime: as a friend, Guo Yi, says to Okwe, "You're an illegal, Okwe. You don't have a position here. You have nothing. You are nothing". A constellation of other characters help and hinder Okwe and Senay: Juliet (Sophie Okonedo), a frank and naive London sex worker with a Cockney accent, who works johns in the hotel and calls Okwe an "angel"; Guo Yi (Benedict Wong), a friend of Okwe's and a "certified refugee" who works in a hospital morgue; Ivan (Zlatko Buric), the lewd and shifty hotel doorman; a bawdy Cab Controller (Jeffrey Kissoon), a café owner selling *chat*, an herbal stimulant, on the side (Kenan Hudaverdi); and a wicked sweatshop foreman (Barber Ali, see Table 1). A handful of other characters also living on the margins either ease Okwe's passage with a line or two, such as a hospital cleaning lady (Jeillo Edwards), or conscript Okwe to help them survive, as with Shinti (Sotigui Kouyaté), Shinti's daughter-in-law (Jemanesh Solomon), Shinti's son (Abi Gouhad), and Celia (Noma Dumezweni). Finally, an outer ring of characters generally just audible or silent (see Table 1)—cab drivers, other hospital staff and hotel chambermaids, shopkeepers, sweatshop garment workers, other "illegals"—surround this inner circle. Visually, the film's casting creates a racially and culturally cosmopolitan city with people from all over the world; audibly, in language, the effect is quite different.

Through language, we take up the filmic representation of migrants in the "compromised, impure and internally divided" border spaces of Britain (Gibson 694) as one of translation into the

imagined nation (Anderson). To parse the language politics of the film, and of the “strange quality” of actors and characters “struggling to speak the same language”—often literally struggling to translate the English of the script, but also struggling more figuratively to translate othered migrant characters into full, deserving subjects—we turn to Lawrence Venuti’s work on English translation practices in *The Translator’s Invisibility: A History of Translation*. Venuti argues that translations into English have historically been valued for their “transparency” and “fluency,” in which any trace of the source text has been smoothed out, and the English reads as if “the translation is not in fact a translation” at all (32). The transparent tradition prizes “easy readability” and “lucid and supple” prose (Venuti 28). It naturalizes the language and ways of seeing the world in the source text, which might feel foreign to an English-speaking reader, for example, into familiar English forms. Venuti calls this a “domesticating translation practice” (23-24). The trouble with it lies in the power relations, in the past and the present, between Britain and places that are not English-speaking (32). Postcolonial histories, “growing xenophobia and racism” across Europe (Ponzanesi 675), new immigration policies that retrace old racisms (Kyambi), all inform current English language policy at the border, for example. Transparent or domesticating translations slip in normative, even hegemonic ways of seeing the world that then seem natural, pervasive, always-existing, rather than culturally and historically contingent. In contrast to a domesticating translation, a foreignizing translation emphasizes the otherness (in time, in culture, in style or poetics, in ontology, etc.) of the source text. Foreignizing translations are neither more nor less “partial” than domesticating ones, but “tend to flaunt their partiality instead of concealing it” and to “[eschew] fluency for a more heterogeneous mix of discourses” that snag the reader’s attention on the inescapable “partiality” of translation (Venuti 27). Foreignized translations, therefore, might in fact make for “more democratic cultural exchanges” (Venuti 34).

While Venuti’s theory refers primarily to texts, we argue that this distinction between domesticating and foreignizing translations is useful to parse how linguistic and cultural foreignness might be translated in the English of *Dirty Pretty Things* from a broader, cultural perspective. This is translation and translator, as Rey Chow puts it, as “an arbiter of values, as embedded in disparate cultural literacies or systems” (Chow 268). Extending translation in this way “helps sharpen the focus on problems of unevenness that are inherent to postcolonial intercultural encounters” (Chow 570), such as encounters between precarious migrants and immigration authorities, and between undocumented migrant characters and the broader British public imagined as the audience of this “populist” film (Sandhu, Dalton). Therefore, while the present article explores the politics of cultural translation through language, it does not offer a linguistic analysis of the language in film; instead, it explores the way language is referred to, policed and performed in the film, drawn out and amplified, and given cultural weight and significance.

As seen above, from Venuti’s perspective domesticated translations are prized for their “fluency,” for the way the foreignness of the translated text dissolves into a flowing, stylish and idiomatic English (Venuti 9). Likewise, the film translates its non-English others into naturalized, idiomatic Englishness, smoothing out cultural difference. Scraps of other languages—French, Spanish, Somali, Turkish, and others—surface here and there in the soundscape of the film. These

languages are usually just audible, a kind of crowd noise, spoken by unnamed extras. With few exceptions—one, Juan’s Spanish curses and whispers as he loses consciousness, and two, a translation of ungrammatical, rough Somali—the English of the film does not generally incorporate these foreign words or references into its style, metaphors or allusions. We argue that the film smoothes away multilingual differences and hybridity, even as English more generally has become more and more of a Lingua Franca, characterized by hybridity and a proliferation of World Englishes (Seidlhofer), with new forms of English that mix expressions, ways of speaking, cultural references and metaphors in new ways. Instead, the film domesticates linguistic plurality and with it cultural difference. In so doing the film domesticates other ways of speaking and being, translating them into recognizable English forms. In particular, the characters’ passage through border space is based on how fluently the characters have self-translated into recognizable English idioms. This treatment of language in the film excludes otherness, difference, and whatever might be untranslatable.

To cross the physical and imaginary border into the nation, we argue, demands a kind of translation. As Epps, Valens and Johnson-González write about migrations, to cross a border is “also to tell a story, a tale, even a whopper, which if done successfully passes as truth itself; it is to play a part or to act in a way that strives to convince, persuade, or move another; and it is to convey a tendency or a trend, a mode of behavior, a way of being” (3). At the border, “to tell a story,” “to play a part,” “to convey... a way of being” means translating oneself into a recognizable “*proper self*” (9, emphasis in original). There is an unspoken but potent sense of the types of “good” or deserving, “hygienic” (Marciniak) migrants who may be recognized and belong as good subjects of the state, as well as the types who must be stigmatized as dangerous and forcibly excluded or detained (Ahmed; Luibhéid; Tyler; Shumam and Bohmer). Migration scholars write about how passing at the border, and living as one of the deserving, requires that migrants translate their experiences into a story which conserves and constitutes (Ahmed, Zylinska) the imagined nation’s sense of itself as, for example, liberal and modern, a place where, as Senay puts it, “it is easier to be a woman”. In *Dirty Pretty Things*, the characters’ relationships to speaking English illustrate some of the linguistic and cultural practices that render a migrant one of the deserving. In lived experiences of the border, migrants find themselves compelled to domesticate their bodies, their voices, their choice of words, and their cultural allusions and references, in order to convince adjudicating others that they can be physically translated into Britain. Through its politics of language, accent and sound, therefore, we argue that the film dramatizes the many acts of domesticating translation demanded of migrants.

Dirty Pretty Things produces Englishness through language and thus lays out the elements of a “domesticating” translation rather than a “foreignizing” one at the level of four fundamental and intertwined layers, which we explore in the sections that follow. First, the film dramatizes the labour of speaking English and proving oneself deserving through the bodies of the actors, especially Tautou and López. Second, the film treats a certain form of English only as coherent, rich language, associating multilingual speech with villainy and treating languages other than English as background noise or jumbled transliterations. Third, marked accents pile onto other qualities to produce national and ethnic stereotypes that mark the film. Finally, the film translates its characters into and through

recognizably English literary genres, particularly to Oxford literary mythology. Through laboured and fluent English, hierarchies of languages, stereotyped accents, and English cultural and literary allusion, we argue that the film works as an instrument of admittance, drawing “foreign” characters across an imagined border and translating them into recognizable, “domesticated” cultural forms. Before delving into the analysis of these layers, it is necessary to explain in more detail what we mean when we refer to borders, nations, and how we conceptualize the relation between these entities and language.

Theorizing Borders, the Nation and Translation

What do we mean by *nations* and *borders*? While the territory of a nation, framed by its borders, may represent the primary tenor of legitimacy of that particular nation,¹ borders and, therefore, nations, are of course not simple geographical structures, but also political ones (Alvarez 449; Gibson; Balibar). Nations are bounded by borders that are not *natural* but constructions determined by specific socio-historically embedded power relations. According to Anderson, a nation-state is a social construct, an “imagined political community” based on print capitalism, language and education; Anderson argues that through the printing press and industrial capitalism, a shared language became essential in the creation of narratives through which people could feel they belonged to a single political entity, to an “imagined” community. It is primarily Anderson’s understanding of nations and borders that we adopt in this article: on the one hand, as socio-historical constructs, and on the other hand, as capable of shaping a shared identity—however inaccessible for some, riddled with real heterogeneity and contradictions, however “imagined”—based on specific common characteristics and values. This view offers a particularly broad understanding of the notion of borders, which may thus be linked not only to geographical partitions, but, furthermore, with ethnic and racial constructs, different cultural traits, culinary preferences, religious affiliations, dress styles, and crucially, storytelling genres and cultural mythologies, as well as linguistic practices which have been associated with certain narratives and identities socio-historically defined as constitutive of a particular nation.

As Kroskirty (23) states, “language, especially shared language, has long served as the key to naturalizing the boundaries of social groups”. The perspective of ethno-linguistic nationalism poses the nation as a “natural, preordained entity, existing since time immemorial, possessing its own particular attributes” (Wright 15), out of which one of the most important is homogeneity. This is the paradigm of one nation—one language—one people: one distinct, homogenous language represents the soul of the nation and its people (May 61). Because national consciousness and identity are intrinsically connected with a national language (Wright 16), language becomes a determining marker for insider and outsider groups (Wright 18). As a legacy of the one nation-one language-one people paradigm, within the norm of homogeneity, “the ideal model of society is

¹ Of course, not all nations are necessarily defined through this principle of territoriality. Nevertheless, this remains the strongest defining element of most existing nation-states.

monolingual, monoethnic, monoreligious, monoideological” (Blommaert and Verschueren 195). Blommaert and Verschueren (195) suggest that within the current dogma of homogeneity, which is “demonstrably present across Europe”, differences within a society are perceived as dangerous. Nationalism is an endeavour to keep social groups “pure” and homogenous. This means that “pluriethnic or plurilingual societies are seen as problem-prone, because they require forms of state organization that run counter to the ‘natural’ characteristics of groupings of people” (Blommaert and Verschueren 195).

Language is thus seen as a distinctive characteristic of “natural” groups and can represent an “element of divisiveness between such groups” (Blommaert and Verschueren 202). In Britain, the year of *Dirty Pretty Things*’ release also brought the first ever controls on British nationality that required proficiency in English and a knowledge of and allegiance to British national history as a condition of citizenship (Liberatore). These acts “includ[ed] the English language test, Life in the UK: A Journey to Citizenship, and the ceremonial oath” (Liberatore 299). Explicitly, and more recently, former Prime Minister David Cameron connected his language policy to the idea of “One Nation Britain”, saying outright, “The reason for doing this [new language policy] is to build a more integrated country, to build a One Nation Britain” (Murphy). While the United Kingdom has, of course, always been a multilingual nation (see, for example Trotter), the government’s political discourse reflects national “homogeneity”: “demanding” (Cameron) English language learning will “integrate” the plurality of the national mix under one language as one nation. According to this position, the English language is a norming force capable of homogenizing dangerous cultural difference and binding the “imagined community” (Anderson) of the nation together. In *Dirty Pretty Things*, three elements of its English language—the emphasis on the performance and labour of speaking English, the combination of strong accent with cultural stereotypes, and the profusion of elite, literary English cultural allusions—demonstrate how this might work. These qualities of language in the film open up how English might homogenize the cultural differences of its liminal, foreign characters, translating them into the nation with a kind of domesticating violence (Venuti 18).

Dirty Pretty English: Performing the Labour of Speaking English

The quality of “everybody struggling to speak the same language” marks the cultural politics of translation in the film. While the cultural and linguistic diversity of the cast of the film as a whole was celebrated as part of its promotion as a liberal, cosmopolitan vision of London (Farouky), the almost exclusively monolingual English script called on cast members to act in English, in some cases without speaking English, as a kind of “ventriloquism” (Chow 44). Director Stephen Frears and the actors, especially Audrey Tautou, emphasized the struggle and effort undertaken to learn English, or at least learn lines in English, in order to make the movie (Farouky, Cavagna). Among the principal actors, neither Sergi López, a celebrated Catalan comedic actor in Spain, nor Audrey Tautou, fresh from her career-launching role in French as *Amélie*, spoke much English. Both struggled with the English script. Producers, actors and reviewers stress the way that “thanks to intensive training with a dialect coach, the actors learned to deliver their lines phonetically”

(Farouky). Tautou said later, “For me, it was a really, really huge amount of work because my English was not good, and I didn't have time really to learn English, so I had to start right into the Turkish accent” (Cavagna). Her efforts and resulting accent in the film therefore capture and perform the labour of learning English.

“Everybody struggling to speak” English reinforces the idea that the film can be interpreted through the lens of Venuti’s concept of fluency. While any actor may take on a new form of speech to play a role the story here is about actors disciplining their bodies to produce something fluent, smooth—“domesticated”—and therefore easily comprehensible to the English-speaking target audience. The efforts of the non-fluent actors to perform in English only serve to reinforce the status of English as the centre, the status quo into which subjects must translate themselves. Any significant line delivered in a language other than English would disturb the fluency of the narrative. A movie styled as a more foreignized translation, in contrast, might have had the characters speak ‘amongst themselves’ in shared languages in which either the characters or the actors were fluent, for example. Instead, English is the only language presented as full, coherent, rich, and meaningful: all of the characters and actors must domesticate their own languages into this English to be understood.

To play a Turkish asylum seeker in English after the wild success of her breakout role in French in *Amélie* (Jeunet), in which Tautou seemed to embody Frenchness itself (Peters), Tautou not only had to modulate the *délicatesse* or delicacy of Amélie to suit the furtive Senay, but also to lose her Frenchness. Tautou’s face had by 2002 come to stand as a fraught “celebrity icon” for French national identity (Peters 1057), as *Amélie* offered a nostalgic image of France untouched by plural, multiethnic political realities (Peters 1042). To distinguish the character as Turkish, Tautou worked to play Senay with a convincing Turkish accent in English, as a kind of double translation. Through work with dialect coach Penny Dyer, Tautou changed her mouth to reshape the learned Frenchness of her inflection and pronunciation, what Dyer called her “French muscular memory patterns” (“Production Notes”). In an interview promoting the film, Tautou described listening to Turkish women living in London talk in person and on tape for hours (Cavagna). She learned her lines in morsels copied from the speech of the women she met, colour-coding syllables and memorizing sounds (Cavagna). For Tautou, learning to speak like Senay meant learning to dislocate meaning from sound, from the feel of the words, and even their sense. As a result of this painstaking mimicry, she could not improvise (Cavagna).

Her accented voice testifies to the breathy effort of self-translation and of learning to sound English in the right way to pass through border space. Tautou’s voice, in its “ventriloquism” (Chow 44), becomes “a special sound effect” (Chow 45) of the labour of speaking English now required of some bodies at the border. In speaking a language she does not know, and mimicking an accent (a supposedly ‘natural’ relic of identity imprinting one’s speech), Tautou’s voice as Senay has a quality similar to that which Rey Chow notes in the Japanese actor in *Hiroshima mon amour* (Resnais) who delivers lines in French without speaking French himself. Chow argues that “the voice is both certain and uncertain, both heard and unheard. [...] Even as it holds forth in speech, this voice is also silent, un-voiced” (Chow 44). Tautou’s voice, as distinct from her French face, racializes her as

other-than-French, and becomes a separate kind of sign, like sweat or trembling, of the sheer effort of learning to speak English, the only complete, coherent language in the film. Through laboured English and ventriloquism, Senay becomes a Pygmalion or Eliza Dolittle in *My Fair Lady* (Cukor): a woman brought alive by a man's script and a normative, national English. As a "metonym" or "allegory" of crossing the border (Gibson 293; Davis 48), therefore, her laboured accent speaks to the violence and silencing of this translation process.

When it came to learning and performing in English, Tautou joked, "I wasn't the only one who didn't speak English, you know. Sergi López was worse than me!" (Cavagna). Like Tautou, Lopez laboured over his lines. In the film, Juan gets some of the wittiest lines—including the line which explains the "dirty pretty things" of the movie's title—in which his thick accent but mellifluous delivery belies the work of acting in a language he didn't speak. Throughout the film, Spanish curse words like "*joder*" (fuck) and "*hijo de puta*" (literally, son of a whore) punctuate and emphasize his speech. These mix with English curses, such as "what the fuck do you know about hearts, Okwe?" and "well, holy shit". Lopez is the only main character to use words in a language other than English often, but always in fragments and curses. Given his role and identity as the villain and even the story's "devil", his uniquely multilingual speech becomes associated with villainy. Juliet, the Cockney sex worker, swears plenty in English, but is one of the film's goodies; it is Lopez's mixed language that marks him in particular.

In the denouement of the film, as Juan swills a drugged beer and staggers into unconsciousness, his stiffly accented, error-pocked English spills out into smooth Spanish and (punctuated by more English curses) slides back to English again. The swift, fluent Spanish contrasts with the bluntness of his English: "Shit. That — is...*como se hacen las cosas* (murmur, how things go)...No? ... Jesus, was I speaking English then? What you say?" He continues, his speech slurring and drifting off, "*¿Por qué dices... qué me dices... por qué entiendes nada?*" (Why are you saying, what are you saying to me, why do you understand nothing...). The dialogue may be a single instance of code-switching (Poplack) in the film – where code-switching involves a bilingual or multilingual speaker mixing languages within sentences in ways that are "grammatical" (Poplack 2062)—it is significant that such a moment of embedded, rich, complex multilingual speech only happens once, from the lead villain, and as the character is losing consciousness. Juan's Spanish reveals itself as the language of interiority, the fluent feeling and stream of consciousness coursing under the surface of the character's composed English speech. As the villain comes undone, so does his English; he goes under anaesthetic and "under" English, and the Spanish leaks out. As an actor who, like Audrey Tautou, "spoke little English" before filming ("Production Notes"), Sergi López's slur into Spanish also unmasks the non-fluent migrant's ventriloquism. A more foreignized approach to language generally, in contrast, might have more coherent, full expressions in other languages; it might contain more moments of mixed language, and a foreignized English fleshed out with the heteropoetics and hybridity of the languages of its characters.

“Rather Dazzling” English, Inaudible and Garbled Others

The English of the script is rich with “smart talk, clever talk,” as director Frears put it, and full of pungent metaphors, curses, literary allusions, witty and “dirty” banter and jokes. In the production notes, Frears applauded the writing, explaining: “I like language in films. I like the kind of movies that have a lot of talk in them—smart talk, clever talk—so I can always instinctively hear someone being rather dazzling” (“Production Notes”). Wordplay and metaphors in English pepper the dialogue. Sneaky, the villain, presents his organ-trafficking plan for Okwe by saying “I just wanted to put a little wasp in your head” (instead of a “bug in your ear”). The cab controller who requests antibiotics from Okwe explains “my warriors cannot work with rotten balls”. The surprise of “wasp in your head” or “rotten balls” draws attention to language in the film. Where the English might be rich and nuanced, however, other languages, such as Somali and Turkish, are either inaudible or sound off, transliterated, even garbled. Excepting Juan’s Spanish curses and slips, and a line or two of French, other languages are barely audible, fragmented, and recorded as so much blurred background noise.

Their sound is background noise in conversations among women stitching in a sweatshop and out on the roof to dodge immigration inspectors, or among cab drivers waiting around the cab controller office. Worse, languages other than English are garbled, as in Okwe’s discovery of the organ trafficking scheme, when he encounters a Somali man suffering from a desperate post-operative infection in the hotel manager’s offices, looking for help. Okwe tries to find a common language with the man and his father: “You are here to see Senor Juan? Looking for work? *Vous travaillez?* (You are working?) Français? Yoruba? You speak Yoruba? Bantu?” Kouyaté replies, “*No, no, no. M'aidez* (Help me)”. In the man’s apartment, in which Okwe treats Shinti’s son (Gouhad) with stolen medical supplies, the dialogue is a ricochet of translation from English to broken and garbled Somali and back again. Watching the scene with one of the authors, Dr Idil Osman, a media scholar and fluent Somali speaker, described the Somali as poorly written, almost as if all of the actors were regurgitating the words phonetically. While Abi Gouhad (Harrison), who plays the sick man, Shinti’s son, was a Somali actor with a long career in British drama, none of the other actors playing in the scene are Somali—and his character groans more than he speaks. The character Shinti, the father of the man with the infection, is played by Sotigui Kouyaté, a renowned musician and actor, from Mali, who identified as Griot (Todd). Shinti’s mother-in-law, burning incense, is played by Jemanesh Solomon, a well-known Ethiopian actor (Gebeyehu and Edemariam 124). Osman noted that while the little girl spoke in a particularly jumbled way, which might be explained by her role as child interpreter and perhaps Somali learner within the world of the film, none of the other actors were fluent speakers to her ear, either (Osman). For example, Solomon’s line in Somali that the little girl translates as “He is English now” sounded incorrect and imprecise to her ear. While the film’s casting decisions were celebrated as offering viewers cosmopolitan intertextuality, they are particularly ironic in a film in which Yi gives Okwe a fake hospital ID featuring another man who looks nothing like him, and Yi responds with a joke on British racism: “Black is black”. That is, the film could cast a collection of black actors from all over the African continent, pass them as Somali with a transliterated script, and the imagined audience of the film would find nothing amiss. At the same time, the film preserves and enunciates the otherness of the characters through the

performance of heavy, stereotyped accents. That is, it domesticates them into the linguistic world of the film as flat, exaggerated, racialized, recognizable ‘types’ of foreigner, rather than as idiosyncratic, full subjects.

Domesticated Foreigners, Accent and Otherness on Film

When released, *Dirty Pretty Things* was lauded as a film with “things to say” (Bradshaw), and as “populist, socially engaged film-making of the highest order” (Sandhu) with a “weighty political dimension” (James). Indeed, the film was celebrated precisely for its politics of representation, set to move its audience to feel for migrants in the right way “to show compassion” (Tookey). Along this line, the film won dozens of awards, beginning with the humanitarian award at the Venice Film Festival, a Humanitas Prize, as well as an Oscar (Alberge 2002). What appears as a foreignization that gives an account of the lived reality of migrants, however, when analyzed closely, in fact domesticates the characters by including them as recognizable “others”. The characters are portrayed as easily recognizable stereotypes of foreigners through an English marked by a variety of strong, pronounced accents. Sara Ahmed explains that the figure of the stranger (or the foreign other), whether welcomed or excluded, does not exist in and of itself. Instead, the stranger is “an effect of processes of inclusion and exclusion, or incorporation and expulsion, that constitute the boundaries of bodies and communities” (Ahmed 6). It is by being recognized and identified as a stranger that another is in fact pulled into the circle of those who are knowable, but only as a stranger (Ahmed). Along this line, the film turns its characters into recognizable others primarily through the performance of nationally stereotyped accent, which, in turn, reproduces national borders.

Growing up, we acquire a certain way of speaking by interacting with the world around us. Inhabiting a new space with new linguistic rules, sometimes as language learners (such as Juan and Senay), the acquired way of speaking becomes an audible trace of our history. Trying to speak a foreign language converts such traces of history into accent. What needs to be highlighted is that phonetically inflected utterances are deemed ‘foreign accents’ only when measured against certain norms recognized as such by a certain collective (consciously or unconsciously). Even within a nation with highly differentiated ways of speaking English, in which Received Pronunciation sits at the apex of a hierarchy of uses, the migrant characters’ accents carry the traces of embodied, even racialized foreignness. As one film critic noted in a review, “bizarrely, given how the film goes out of its way to be multiethnic, it nevertheless manages to sneak xenophobia and even a sort of inadvertent racism through the back door” (Romney). Through their visibly distinct accents, in particular, the characters appear only as familiar, flat “others”.

Ethnic stereotypes appear through accent in the film. The characters’ accents potentiate a series of essentialized national characteristics, reinforcing the idea that language is naturally connected to nation and national identity. Guo Yi (Wong) speaks in clipped aphorisms, his Chinese accent amplifying the Orientalist (Said) stereotype of an Eastern “sage” figure. The Russian doorman (Buric) speaks with a thick accent to make his dirty jokes, playing out another Orientalist

(2003) stereotype of the lascivious Eastern man. Senay is probably the least proficient English speaker, her English ranging from non-idiomatic to awkward, her accent pronounced, relegating her in the world of the film to the most menial jobs and emphasizing her liminal immigration status. As with Wong and Buric above, Senay's accent is distinct from Tautou's own in English as herself, and the product of careful study and dialect coaching. Senay embodies the Orientalist stereotype of the exotic virgin, dancing dervish dances barefoot in her apartment, who needs to be "rescued" from Turkish patriarchal culture. On the other hand, Juan, a European, legal immigrant in the UK, speaks 'good' English, following most syntactic and lexical norms, but his Spanish accent combines with his silk shirts, slicked hair, gold necklaces, drinking and criminal activities in the construction of his "wonderfully sleazy" (Farouky) stereotype of a criminal Southerner character. The cab controller (Kassoon), who speaks with a West Indian accent and diction—"she look like a film star, boy"—only jokes about women and sex, asking Okwe to treat a sexually transmitted infection for him, and offering no soap in the taxi stand bathroom (Okwe is the hyperbolically clean and "hygienic" (Marciniak), even sterile, migrant in comparison). The sweatshop foreman (Ali), as one reviewer noted, might be "some sort of parody of stereotypical Bollywood baddies; if not, this is a horrifying characterisation"; the foreman's "Bollywood baddie" accent, however, makes the scene where he assaults Senay, given Tautou's fame for *Amélie*, read like "De Sade rewritten by [French far-right politician], Le Pen" (Romney). This profusion of accented voices, taken together, create a collection of recognizable, foreignized (Venuti 28) types whose identities are clearly cut according to essentialized national traits.

Dirty Pretty Things draws thus on a foreignization through accent which is based on the socio-historically constructed relationship between languages, nations and peoples. As discussed above, within such a paradigm, language becomes the tenor of legitimacy for the nation and its people, and difference in language reflects the natural divisions between linguistically and ethnically homogenous nations (Wright 15). Consequently, accents work as relics or residues of the speaker's origins and native language, a clear proof of difference, through which the immigrant characters of the film become outsiders. Thus, the purpose of accent is ultimately to domesticate the characters by constructing them into recognizable others, based on the "natural" association between languages and nations. Instead of fluid, complex, distinct people, the characters become fixed by their accents into the moulds of specific nations.

English Allusions and Genres: Oxford Literature and National Mythologies

Finally, and most subtly, English literary allusion works to domesticate the foreign otherness the characters represent. This domesticating translation (Venuti 26-28) draws the other into recognizable, familiar forms to appeal to its audience. The film's politics of allusion suggest that the British audience needs to recognize familiar, English cultural tropes in order to feel for the characters and accept them. By trope, we mean a story, image or other form that is circulated, iterated and common within a cultural community such that it feels recognizable to members of that community (Kellner). The film insists on its Englishness, in part, by knotting literary and mythological allusion through the script and by framing the key characters as cultural archetypes

playing out English literary genres. For example, one reviewer points out that “Sneaky is a modern Mephistopheles, buying bodies and souls” and who drops in “a line from Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*: “This is hell” (French). To drive this association further, in one moment, when Juan arrives, Ivan, the doorman, curses “Speak of the fucking devil!” The film also translates the characters of Okwe and Senay into figures of chivalric legend. Screenwriter Steven Knight referred overtly to this mythologizing project, because “we British have always been pretty poor at mythologising the world around us” unlike Hollywood, which “took the new immigrants of the 1920s and 30s and created the gangster movie” (Knight). Thus we can imagine the literary allusions in *Dirty Pretty Things* correspond not only to an aesthetic “naturalizing” foreign bodies into English language and culture, but also a self-conscious political project of creating a new filmic “mythology”. Inherited national “mythologies”, both old and new, shape who may see themselves as part of the national story, and who may not (Tolia-Kelly).

First, the film story is constructed around recognizable English literary tropes. These domesticating allusions may be subtle, but in fact they form the skeleton of the entire story, and thereby get under the skin of English-speaking audiences. Guo Yi, mortuary technician, chess partner and advisor for Okwe, serves as the film’s interior reader and myth-teller. He lends Okwe a battered but recognizable copy of *The Greek Myths* (Graves) by the Oxford University classicist and translator, Robert Graves. Guo Yi tells Okwe, “I found it on a body. It's blown my head wide open. You should read it. Medicine for your soul, Okwe”. This is not just any copy of the Greek myths. Robert Graves’s approach to translating classical texts into English is explicitly, even “radically domesticating” (Venuti 26); Graves specialized in turning classical sources into easy contemporary English for ‘the masses’ to understand, in what Venuti terms “the work of assimilation” (Venuti 26). Further, Graves’s *The Greek Myths* returns at the end of the film, handed through the car window from Okwe to Guo Yi in parting. While waiting for the get-away car, Guo Yi tells the Russian doorman, “You are Pylades. Pylades was the boatman who ferried the souls to the land of the dead,” and explains to the baffled, shivering man, “If you didn't put a coin under the tongue of your dead relative, Pylades wouldn't take them to Hades”.² Guo Yi’s literary allusion via Graves draws the sordid reality of the characters’ circumstances up out of abjection through literary allusion into English and Englishness through domesticating translation. The book offers not “medicine for your soul”, but a specific English cultural education for the film’s characters. As a battered paperback taken off a dead body, the book becomes a synecdoche for the durability and importance of elite English literary culture; as such, English provides “medicine to the soul” of a public anxious about the value of Englishness in a postcolonial, “super-diverse” (Vertovec) world. The book not only promises to heal what is ill in the displaced and anonymous migrant, but also seems to help the characters make sense of what happens to them as mythological and part of this literary tradition. Further, given the ambivalent status of language and ‘tongues’ in the film, the coin under the tongue might allude to the currency of English speech in exchange for passage. At the level of language, we

²Guo Yi misnames the Greek ferryman here, as the name should be Charon (IMDB). The mistake could be attributed to a slip by the screenwriter, or to the character’s lack of fluency with the book of myths.

hear the familiar and uneven burden of assimilation, in which migrants assimilate while the host stays unchanged. The book, therefore, stands in for the epistemologies of translation that govern the whole film.

Conclusion

The release of the film late in 2002 was both “provocative” and “timely” (Ojumu), as one reviewer noted, coinciding with widespread moral panic in Britain over asylum and migration (Philo, Briant and Donald; Tyler), and within a week of the closure of a refugee centre in Sangatte (Ojumu). The film is provocative and timely again in light of new moral panics around migration related to the EU Referendum vote, the clearing of migrant camps in Calais (BBC News), and explicit new UK Government policies requiring English fluency for some as a condition of British citizenship as part of efforts to promote “One Nation Britain” in 2016 (Cameron; Iqbal; Murphy). Cameron’s controversial policy points out the continued importance of speaking fluent English, and mastering certain historical and cultural knowledge, to the British national project (Fortier). These new policies retrench “longstanding forms of elite racism and classism which privilege English speaking, whiteness, education and economic capital” (Kyambi) in migration policy. While the cacophony of public discourse around migration in Britain may make it hard to hear how rules and forms around speaking English govern who may or may not be heard as deserving or belonging to Britain, the film makes some of these politics audible. As Sandra Ponzanesi argues, cinema “illustrates” “how new forms of representation and socio-political contestations are articulated in what we now refer to as the New Europe” (675). In this current context, the multilingual, the hybrid, the untraceably accented, and the untranslatable all become politically explosive.

This continued political significance of language in relation to borders have led us to revisit the way the politics of speaking English—especially the labour of learning and even parroting English, a type and intensity of accent that produces subjects as types, and genres of allusions—get reproduced as natural norms, which, under the guise of diversity, in fact homogenize cultural difference. In summary, we argue that *Dirty Pretty Things* reproduces English norms through the labour of performing otherness, accent, and allusion: it translates its international cast and the migrant subjects it represents by domesticating them into the accented stereotypes, the literary traditions and mythologies of normative, even elite English and Englishness. This politics of translation troubles the claims to ethical representation or humanitarian politics for which the film was celebrated. According to this film, to be recognized, migrants must both submit to the way accented English enunciates their otherness as stereotypes of their nations of origin, and perform their labour to speak accented English, even a parroted, uncomprehending English, to homogenize themselves into the “One Nation”. Further, to be welcomed, migrants must be translated—or translate themselves—into the cultural forms, the elite literary allusions and mythologized genres, of the nation. What appears to be a foreignized (Venuti 72) translation that preserves and mixes in different cultural and linguistic ways of being, in fact bears out the ultimate goal of domesticating the characters into English and Englishness. Filmic representation shows us the efforts required of migrants to translate themselves into recognizable forms.

Through this essay, we have investigated how it is that language might reproduce the border of the nation, the border of who may belong and who may not as a full and complete subject, through the operations of language. Going forward, we argue for special attention to the subtleties of language, in particular, because of the way that investigating language in *Dirty Pretty Things* disturbs its claims to a liberal politics of diversity and exposes the durability of cultural norms. In fact, as a popular and populist cultural object, the film only confirms Venuti's sense of the domesticating translation as perpetrating "ethnocentric violence" (16). We might direct future attention, also, to those films whose politics of language, like a foreignized translation or more "accented" cinematic modes (Naficy), open out "more democratic cultural exchanges" (Venuti 34) at the border. As he notes, "in foreignizing translation, the ethnocentric violence that every act of translating wreaks on a foreign text is matched by a violent disruption of receiving cultural values that challenges forms of domination, whether nationalist or elitist" (Venuti 121). We might look and argue for foreignized translating practice, therefore, in the current context of migration in particular, as a source of political potential.

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