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Los Angeles

Women's Voices  
in Italian Postcolonial Literature  
from the Horn of Africa

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Italian

by

Claire Genevieve Lavagnino

2013



ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Women's Voices  
in Italian Postcolonial Literature  
from the Horn of Africa

by

Claire Genevieve Lavagnino

Doctor of Philosophy in Italian

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Lucia Re, Chair

This dissertation analyzes works by two African Italian women writers of Somali descent, Ubax Cristina Ali Farah and Igiaba Scego, with a particular focus on representations of the voice and the body. Ali Farah and Scego, two of the most prominent authors of Italian postcolonial literature, address Italy's historical amnesia in their works through the personal stories/testimonies of their characters. The voices of Ali Farah's and Scego's protagonists narrate the intertwined histories between Italy and Somalia from Somalia's inception as an Italian colony in 1908 up to more recent events of civil war, piracy, and famine. The dissertation examines how multimodal storytelling in these authors' works helps capture the complexity of such histories, especially in the context of the Somali diaspora, which often requires a multitude of narrative modes in order to maintain personal bonds with a pre-civil war Somalia and with the

people who have been killed or dispersed by war. The voice is also examined as a counterpoint to the voiceless representations of East Africans that span from Italy's beginnings as a nation to today in literature, visual media, and journalistic reports in Italian.

Drawing from Adriana Cavarero's *A più voci. Filosofia dell'espressione vocale* [*For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*] (2003), the dissertation explores the interplay between orality and vocality, language and speech in two short stories and a novel by Ali Farah—"Rapdipunt" [Punt Rap] (2005), "Un sambuco attraversa il mare" [A Dhow Is Crossing the Sea] (2011) and *Madre piccola* [*Little Mother*] (2007)—and a short story and autobiographical novel by Scego—"Identità" [Identity] (2008) and *La mia casa è dove sono* [Home is Where I am] (2010). The "mashup," the process of layering/mixing together two or more narrative modes to transcend conventional meaning, is also considered as a narrative framework.

This dissertation of Claire Genevieve Lavagnino is approved.

Claudio Fogu

Thomas Harrison

Dominic Thomas

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2013

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Professor Dominic Thomas, for putting me to task and inspiring me to be better.

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My UCLA Department of Italian colleagues, especially Melina Madrigal and Carmen Gomez, for taking an interest in my work and for showing me true camaraderie.



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- . "What about the Half That's Never Been Told? Italian Violence from Ethiopian

Perspectives.” California Interdisciplinary Consortium for Italian Studies (CICIS), UC Santa Cruz. 1 March 2008.

- . “Rap di punti intrecciati: Migrant Youth in Uba Cristina Ali Farah’s ‘Rapdipunt.’” (P)Ages of Youth Conference, Rutgers University. 19 October 2007.
- . “Gabriella Ghermandi: Author and Performer with a Native Soul.” *The African Tribune*. May 2007.
- . Rev. of *Neotarantismo: pizzica, transe e riti dalle campagne alle metropolis* by Anna Nacci. *Annali d’Italianistica* Vol. 24 (2006): 430.
- . “Dialect and Language in Italian Hip Hop.” First Annual Ethnomusicology Undergraduate Student Organization Conference, UCLA. 20 May 2006.

## Introduction

The topic of Italian colonialism still remains somewhat of a rarity in Italy—let alone outside of the boot—despite historians’ greater accessibility to colonial archives, increased immigration to Italy from or via former colonies (for example, Libya), the international media’s attention to civil war, piracy, and famine in East Africa, scholars’ relentless work in the field of Italian postcolonial studies, and, not least of all, the migration and postcolonial narratives in Italian that have grown exponentially since the early 1990s. From its very inception as a nation, Italy made colonial pursuits: first in Eritrea in 1890, followed by Somalia (1908), Libya (1912), Dodecanese Islands (1923), Ethiopia (1936), and Albania (1939).

My first encounter with the subject of Italian colonialism happened as an undergraduate student in an intermediate Italian language class at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Giulia Centineo had the class read an article about contemporary migration to Sicily and deemed it important to give some background on how it connected with Italy’s colonial past. Besides a vague understanding of Mussolini’s occupation of Ethiopia, I attributed my ignorance of Italian colonialism to the fact that I did not grow up in the Italian education system. So, when I went to Bologna, Italy, to study abroad for a year (2003-2004), I thought for sure I would be able to discuss the matter more in-depth with the Italians I would meet. To my surprise, many of my Italian peers knew less than I did. Occasionally we even got into arguments about Mussolini’s “harmless” acts. The dismissive nature of many of the people with whom I approached the topic only increased my drive to learn more. It was through the study of Italian colonial and postcolonial literature at UCLA that I was able to delve into the matter more deeply. Professor Lucia Re’s courses on Italian colonialism, futurism, fascism and the notion of *il confine/confino* [border/control] in 1930s Italian literature, as well as courses on Italian postcolonial and

migration literature taught by visiting Mellon Fellow Alessandra Di Maio, made it clear that Italy's colonial history has shaped a large part of Italian national identity.

This dissertation is a result not only of intense curiosity—it humbly seeks to contribute to a significant effort to scrutinize Italy's past and present racism in the hope to transform it. Literature certainly holds an important place in this scrutiny. Even the labels applied to the literature and authors that deal with such history are not without their prejudices. In a way, they are reminiscent of the distancing techniques employed in some of the first conversations I would have with Italians about their country's colonial history. Migration literature, migrant literature, second-generation literature, *scrittore migrante* [a writer who migrates], and *migrante scrittore* [a migrant who writes] have taken on different connotations according to the point of view of the literary critic. The question of whether authors who write in Italian yet were not born in Italy or who were born in Italy to parents not ethnically Italian are actually authors of Italian literature still hangs in the air. Juggled around in the mix are the notions of postcolonial literature in Italian and Italian postcolonial literature.

Although not separate or unrelated to migration literature, Italian postcolonial literature presents its own unique characteristics and histories, which would be oversimplified if considered solely in terms of immigration to Italy in the last thirty years. On the other hand, since the first works of what is now called migration literature were published in 1990, written by three male authors residing in Italy—Pap Kouma, Salah Methnani, and Mohamed Bouchane—yet originating from, respectively, Senegal, Tunisia, and Morocco, it would be impossible not to be mindful of the dialogue between migrant authors from other European ex-

colonies and those from, or with origins in, former Italian ones.<sup>1</sup> These first autobiographical narratives in Italian, impetus of a social, literary, and legal “phenomenon,” sparked fervent debates among literary critics who alluded to issues of language proficiency and co-authorship, or what is known as “a quattro mani,” of cultural value (some considered migrant autobiography as purely sociological and not artistic in nature), and duration (skeptics predicted the works to be short-lived and sporadic) as obstacles to any serious literary scholarship.<sup>2</sup> However, more than twenty years later, critics of migration literature come face to face with a diverse range of writing styles, languages, sophistication, and social, political, generational, and historical contexts to the extent that it is no longer plausible to amass works into one schematized framework.

A substantial amount of work written by women, particularly women identified with the African diaspora and with former Italian, French, and British colonies, has layered the nuances of migrant and postcolonial literature in Italian, problematizing the estrangement, marginality, and invariability initially associated with such literatures. Given the particular representation of East African women in Italian visual culture (print media, photographs, and film) and literature,

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<sup>1</sup> Khouma, Pap. *Io, venditore di elefanti. Una vita per forza fra Dakar, Parigi e Milano*. Milano: Garzanti, 1990.

Fortunato, Mario and Salah Methnani. *Immigrato*. Roma: Theoria, 1990.

Bouchane, Mohamed. *Chiamatemi Alì*. Milano: Leonardo, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> These works belong to those written “a quattro mani,” alluding to the collaboration between migrant authors and Italian writers. In the case of Methnani, Mario Fortunato’s name appears on the front cover as an author. Most of these works’ prefaces are written by the “co-authors.” There has also been much debate about the editorial process involved in the publication of several works of migration literature where experimental language has been compromised for a more “standard Italian.” Even Oreste Pivetta, who in the “a quattro mani” style edited Pap Khouma’s *Io venditori di elefanti: una vita per forza fra Dakar, Parigi e Milano* (published in 2010 in English by Indiana University Press as *I was an Elephant Salesman: Adventures between Dakar, Paris, and Milan*), referred to early works of migration literature as sociological documents, and not necessarily as literature. Khouma became a professional writer and has since published two non-autobiographical novels and numerous articles “a due mani.” He is one of many examples of the expansion and dimensionalization of the genre.

women authors in Italy who have ties to the Horn of Africa contend with a whole range of issues that are not captured in the broad category of migration literature. As Gabriella Ghermandi, author of Italian, Ethiopian, and Eritrean descent, affirms, “Io dico sempre che il colonialismo nella mia famiglia ha creato danni a quattro generazioni di donne, e io sono quella che chiude.”<sup>3</sup> [I always say that colonialism harmed four generations of women in my family, and the harm ends with me.] Thus, the generational and gender aspect of Italian postcolonial literature need particular attention.

Reconstructing historical memory represents a particular characteristic in authors with personal connections to the Horn of Africa and to Italy. In contrast to colonization in Libya, *madamismo*, a term which describes domestic and sexual relationships equivalent to marriage between Italian men and East African women in the colonies, created more complicated and nuanced histories between the colonized and colonizer in the Horn of Africa. Thousands of women and children were abandoned due to a number of reasons: severe racial laws; their Italian partners were already married back home; and local tensions with occupying forces. To speak out in Italian as an East African woman and/or child of a mixed relationship carries a powerful charge when in dialogue with Italian colonial history, gender roles, and current immigration policies.

### **Italian postcolonial literature and criticism**

Scholars such as Graziella Parati engaged in serious study of migration and postcolonial literature early on within the field of Italian studies. Her books *Mediterranean Crossroads* and *Migration Italy* were seminal in confronting Italianists’ dismissal of these “newer,” “un-Italian”

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<sup>3</sup> Comberiati, Daniele, ed. *La quarta sponda. Scrittrici in viaggio dall’Africa coloniale all’Italia di oggi*. Roma: caravan edizioni, 2009. (157).

writings.<sup>4</sup> Parati calls attention to the migratory and heterogeneous characteristics that have constituted a large part of Italian culture. Initially she made correlations between Italian American and Francophone literature with what she identified as contemporary “Italophone” narratives. At this point there was still the need to respond to literary critics who were highly skeptical of these works’ artistic value and whether they would sustain a literary genre in their own right. She focused on the different manifestations of themes of exile, diaspora, migration, and hybridity in migration and postcolonial literature in Italian. *Migration Italy*, in particular, called for a re-elaboration of heterogeneity in contemporary Italian culture through concepts of race and gender relations. Modifying her original term “Italophone” in regard to migration and postcolonial literature, Parati came to the conclusion that “the concept of Italophone literature is a term too limiting to describe the phenomenon of the construction of an Italian destination culture.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, rather than evaluating narratives on the basis of linguistic standards and traditions exclusive to the Italian language, Parati considered the expressivity of multiple languages as integral features of contemporary Italian literature.

Armando Gnisci, professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Rome, is another scholar who gave particular attention to Italian postcolonial narratives from their inception. Although less focused on gender relations in his analyses, Gnisci authored and edited several publications, including *La letteratura della migrazione*, *Diaspore europee e Lettere migranti*, and *Poetiche africane*, which feature essays by Somali author, Ali Mumin Ahad,

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<sup>4</sup> Parati, Graziella. *Mediterranean Crossroads: Migration literature in Italy*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999.

Parati, Graziella. *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> (*Migration Italy* 71).

discussing oral and written Somali literary traditions, as well as *Decolonizzare l'Italia via della decolonizzazione europea n. 5* and *Nuovo Planetario Italiano*, which includes a chapter by Mumin Ahad that specifically addresses Italian postcolonial literature from the Horn of Africa.<sup>6</sup>

Alessandra Di Maio's numerous publications and translations, in addition to her essay "Black Italia," in *Black Europe and the African Diaspora* and introduction to the English translation of Cristina Ali Farah's novel *Madre piccola* [Little Mother], prove essential to any critical analysis of Italian postcolonial literature.<sup>7</sup> Di Maio brings to light East African artistic traditions and history in relation to feminist perspectives—what it means to write "al femminile". I am very much indebted to her mentorship.

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<sup>6</sup> Gnisci, Armando. *La letteratura della migrazione*. Roma: Lilith, 1998.  
Gnisci, Armando and Nora Moll, eds. *Diaspore europee e Lettere migranti. Primo Festival europeo degli scrittori migrant*. Roma: Edizioni Interculturali, 2002.  
Gnisci, Armando, ed. *Poetiche africane: Joseph Ki-Zerbo, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Fatoumata Ba, Pedro Miguel, Ali Mumin Ahad, Antjie Krog, Abdelfattah Kilito*. Roma: Meltemi, 2002.  
--- ed. *Nuovo Planetario Italiano. Geografia e antologia della letteratura della migrazione in Italia e in Europa*. Troina: Città Aperta Edizioni, 2006.  
--- ed. *Decolonizzare l'Italia via della decolonizzazione europea n. 5*. Roma: Bulzoni, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Di Maio, Alessandra. "A Poetics of Passage: the Prose of Ubox Cristina Ali Farah." *Metamorphoses* 14.1-2 (Spring and Fall 2006): 241-247.  
---. "An Interview with Ubox Cristina Ali Farah." *Metamorphoses* 14.1-2 (Spring and Fall 2006): 248-268.  
---. Translation of "Entirely" by Ubox Cristina Ali Farah. *Metamorphoses* 14.1-2 (Spring and Fall 2006): 269-275.  
---. *Wor(l)ds in Progress: A Study of Contemporary Migrant Writings*. Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2008.  
---. "Black Italia: Contemporary Migrant Writers from Africa." *Black Europe and the African Diaspora*. Clark Hine, Darlene, Tricia Danielle Keaton, and Stephen Small, eds. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009: 119-144.  
---. "Pearls in Motion." Introduction to *Little Mother* by Cristina Ali Farah. Translated by Giovanna Bellesia-Contuzzi and Victoria Offredi Poletto. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011.



Sandra Ponzanesi also focuses on women writers of East African origin in *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture: Contemporary Women Writers of the Indian and Afro-Italian Diaspora*, a comparative analysis with postcolonial Indian female authors.<sup>8</sup> Ponzanesi evaluates the applicability of postcolonial studies to Italian postcoloniality and highlights the specificities of Italy's colonial history and its artistic/linguistic and social repercussions through issues of miscegenation, colonial education, dialect and linguistic pluralism. Ponzanesi's invaluable work not only offers new insight into the diversity of postcolonial studies, but also challenges its limitations. As co-editor with Daniela Merolla, Ponzanesi expanded her comparative scope to include more European countries in *Migrant Cartographies: New Cultural and Literary Spaces in Post-Colonial Europe*.<sup>9</sup> Lidia Curti and Iain Chambers' publications on postcolonial Italy in the context of the Mediterranean also provide a more expansive scope.<sup>10</sup>

Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo's *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* offers significant analyses of Italian postcoloniality, especially in terms of gender studies.<sup>11</sup> Daniele Comberiati has enriched the field with his publications, *La quarta sponda*, a

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<sup>8</sup> Ponzanesi, Sandra. *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture: Contemporary Women Writers of the Indian and Afro-Italian Diaspora*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Merolla, Daniela and Sandra Ponzanesi, eds. *Migrant Cartographies: New Cultural and Literary Spaces in Post-Colonial Europe*. New York: Lexington Books, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> Chambers, Iain and Lidia Curti. "Migrating Modernities in the Mediterranean." *Postcolonial Studies* 11.4 (2008): 387-399.

---. *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*. New York: Routledge, 1996.

Curti's *La voce dell'altra: scritture ibride tra femminismo e postcoloniale* (2006) puts Italian postcolonial literature in the larger framework of global women writers.

<sup>11</sup> Lombardi-Diop, Cristina and Caterina Romeo. *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

collection of interviews with women authors of Italian postcolonial literature, and *Roma d'Abissina*, a selection of short stories centered around former Italian colonial cities.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, one cannot forget the proliferation of journals that the scholars mentioned here have contributed to, in both paper and electronic forms, addressing migration and postcolonial narratives and realities unfolding in Italy. Among the most prominent ones have been: *Caffè*, *El Ghibli*, *Voci dal silenzio*, *Letteranza*, and *Quaderni del '900's* special edition on Italian postcolonial literature.<sup>13</sup> A number of databases have been created to document publications of migration and Italian postcolonial literature. Besides *El Ghibli*, Banca Dati Scrittori Immigrati in Lingua Italiana (BASILI) is the most extensive and well known.<sup>14</sup> M. Cristina Mauceri and M. Grazia Negro's *Nuovo immaginario italiano: Italiani e stranieri a confronto nella letteratura italiana contemporanea* offers an informative discussion about publishing houses in Italy, some of which have created a niche market for migration and postcolonial literature.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Comberinati, Daniele, ed. *La quarta sponda. Scrittrici in viaggio dall'Africa coloniale all'Italia di oggi*. 2007. Roma: Caravan edizioni, 2009.  
--- ed. *Roma d'Abissina. Cronache dai resti dell'Impero: Asmara, Mogadiscio, Addis Abeba*. Cuneo: Nerosubianco, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> *Caffè*. <<http://www.archivioimmigrazione.org/caffe.htm>>.  
*El-Ghibli*. <<http://www.el-ghibli.provincia.bologna.it/index.php>>.  
*Culture e letteratura della migrazione*. <<http://ww3.comune.fe.it/vocidalsilenzio/>>.  
*LettERRANZA*. <<http://www.letteranza.org/>>.  
“La letteratura postcoloniale italiana. Dalla letteratura d’immigrazione all’incontro con l’altro.”  
*Quaderni del '900* Vol. 4 (2004).

<sup>14</sup> *Basili*. <<http://www.disp.let.uniroma1.it/basili2001/>>.

<sup>15</sup> Mauceri, M. Cristina and M. Grazia Negro. *Nuovo immaginario italiano: Italiani e stranieri a confronto nella letteratura italiana contemporanea*. Rome: Sinnos, 2009.  
Gnisci actually founded this book's publishing house, Sinnos.

Several feminist scholars have helped lay the groundwork for Italian postcolonial studies through their examination of gender relations and national identity under Italian colonialism. Patrizia Palumbo's *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present* contains notable essays by Lucia Re, Cinzia Sartini-Blum, Cristina Lombardi-Diop, and Robin Pickering-Iazzi which challenge one-dimensional notions of Italian exoticism in relation to the colonial experience.<sup>16</sup> Karen Pinkus draws attention to the colonial paradigm between East African women and Italian men with a particular focus on the image of the Somali woman in Italian print culture.<sup>17</sup> Giovanna Tomasello's and Maria Pagliara's analyses which outline common tropes in Italian colonial literature cannot go without mention.<sup>18</sup>

Reiterating the integral role of Italian colonialism in constructing national identity, Derek Duncan and Jacqueline Andall's compilations, *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory*, *Scontro/Incontro: The Hybrid Experience of Italy and Its Colonies*, and *National Belongings: Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures*, bring together traditionally separate

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<sup>16</sup> Palumbo, Patrizia, ed. *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Pinkus, Karen. *Bodily Regimes: Italian Advertising Under Fascism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.  
-----. "Shades of Black in Advertising and Popular Culture." *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture*. Beverly Allen and Mary Russo, eds. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

<sup>18</sup> Pagliara, Maria. *Il romanzo coloniale: tra imperialismo e rimorso*. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2001.  
Tomasello, Giovanna. *L'Africa tra mito e realtà. Storia della letteratura coloniale italiana*. Palermo: Salerio, 1994.

fields of history and literature to scrutinize the pervasiveness of colonial memory in Italy and its former colonies in contemporary culture.<sup>19</sup>

Last, but certainly not least, are the historians who scoured national archives to bring forgotten accounts of Italian colonialism to light. Although outside the field of Italian postcolonial studies, the work of Angelo Del Boca and Nicola Labanca has been indispensable to opening up debates about Italy's colonial legacy.<sup>20</sup> Giulietta Stefani has been instrumental in calling upon gender studies to inform historical accounts and Alessandro Triulzi has made great efforts to capture the voices of those affected by Italy's colonial history.<sup>21</sup> Historians Mia Fuller, Krystyna Clara Von Henneberg, and Sean S. Anderson also provide invaluable analyses in regard to colonial architecture.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Andall, Jacqueline and Derek Duncan, eds. *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005.

--- eds. "Scontro/Incontro: The Hybrid Experience of Italy and Its Colonies." *Italian Studies Special Issue* 16.2. (2006).

--- eds. *National Belongings: Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures*. New York: Peter Lang, 2010.

See also: Re, Lucia. "Italians and the Invention of Race: The Poetics and Politics of Difference in the Struggle over Libya, 1890-1913." *California Italian Studies* 1.1 (2010).

<[http://escholarship.org/uc/ismrg\\_cisj](http://escholarship.org/uc/ismrg_cisj)>.

<sup>20</sup> Only beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s were historians granted restricted access to the Italian state's colonial archives. Although prominent historians, such as Angelo Del Boca and Nicola Labanca, have written excellent analyses of such documents, personal accounts (especially from a woman's perspective) were few and far between.

<sup>21</sup> Stefani, Giulietta. *Colonia per maschi. Italiani in Africa Orientale: una storia di genere*. Preface by Luisa Passerini. Verona: Ombre corte, 2007.

Carsetti, Marco and Alessandro Triulzi. "Ascoltare voci migranti: riflessioni intorno alle memorie di rifugiati dal Corno d'Africa." *Il ritorno della memoria coloniale. Afriche e orienti. Rivista di studi ai confini tra Africa, Mediterraneo e Medio Oriente* 8.1 (2007): 96-115.

<sup>22</sup> Fuller, Mia. *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities, and Italian Imperialism*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

Clearly, the field of Italian postcolonial studies is a thriving one and extends beyond what I am able to list in this introduction. Unfortunately, many of these analyses still do not reach the wider Italian public. Besides setbacks in the education system, the media have great responsibility in keeping a lid on the connections between Italy's colonial past, current immigration, and the voices that are speaking out to wake Italians from decades of willful oblivion. Oftentimes, the media's portrayal of people of color is reminiscent of the racial stereotypes that existed during Italian colonialism. Just last summer in Italy I was able to catch the film *La ragazza dalla pelle di luna* on public television.<sup>23</sup> Advertisements for products ranging from chocolate to dyes for clothing equating skin color with products' features also recall those in the Italian colonial period. Every day in Italian newspapers and television reports, there are new accounts of "invasions" and "emergencies" of migrants. Even though many of these migrants are refugees from former Italian colonies, this information rarely gets relayed or contextualized within Italian history in the reports.

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Von Henneberg, Krystyna Clara. "Monuments, Public Space, and the Memory of Empire in Modern Italy." *History & Memory* 16.1 (2004): 37-85.

Anderson, Sean S. "Modernità and Interiorità in Colonial Asmara." "Scontro/Incontro: The Hybrid Experience of Italy and Its Colonies." *Italian Studies Special Issue* 16.2 (2006): 233-250.

<sup>23</sup> Directed by Luigi Scattini, this film stars Zeudi Araya, Miss Eritrea 1969 and daughter of an Eritrean politician. Araya, a Tazza d'oro model, was prominent in 1970s erotic Italian cinema. Scattini featured Araya in three films: *La ragazza dalla pelle di luna*, *La Ragazza Fuoristrada* and *il Corpo*. The nameless woman in these titles and the focus on the body with very little dialogue on Araya's part are very indicative of colonial gender relations. Araya married producer Franco Cristaldi and starred in films alongside the likes of Lino Banfi, Marcello Mastroianni, Renzo Montagnani, and Renato Pozzetto. She also became a singer with a successful hit. She has been featured in magazines such as *Playboy*, *Skorpio*, and *Playman*. After the 1990s, she continued her career as a producer. See: El Gamrani, Rabil. "Il cinema prima del calcio ha avuto il suo Balotelli: ed era bellissima." *A.L.M.A. Blog*. <<https://collettivoalma.wordpress.com/2012/07/23/il-cinema-prima-del-calcio-ha-avuto-il-suo-balotelli-ed-era-bellissima/>>.

Although Italy experienced a relatively short-lived and limited colonial history, it is not as if colonialism played a small part in constructing Italian national identity—either physically or psychologically. In fact, tangible evidence of such a history manifests itself all throughout the peninsula and the ex-colonies. From monuments to buildings, street names, neighborhoods, food, and media representations of Africa and Africans to residents themselves, and not least of all civil war and nationalist struggles, traces and layers of the colonial experience abound. The majority of Italians, however, consciously recollect scant historical memories (if any at all) tied to these cultural and political imprints. As if this latent historical amnesia were not harmful enough, there have been recent efforts to glorify Italian war criminals from the colonial period. The monument to Rodolfo Graziani in Affile, a town east of Rome, is but one example.<sup>24</sup>

The focus of this dissertation is to explore how postcolonial authors, two in particular, contend with such misrepresentations in the media and in the general public in their works, addressing how they make their voices heard amidst the daily bombardment of such negative images and reports. I suggest that the Italian media's deformation of migration and death (when nationality and skin color determine the degree of humanity, professionalism and integrity of the events that get chronicled, if they get chronicled) is a major factor in several narratives of Italian postcolonial literature. Uxax Cristina Ali Farah and Igiaba Scego, two African Italian women authors of Somali descent, make distinct connections with the stereotypes sustained by the mainstream Italian media. One of the ways they do this is by appropriating their own type of multimodal narrative storytelling. In other words, they find ways to enter the private and public spaces that the media pervades (homes, the cityscape, buildings, modes of transport. etc.). Since

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<sup>24</sup> Pianigiani, Gaia. "Village's Tribute Reignites a Debate About Italy's Fascist Past." *The New York Times*. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/29/world/europe/village-reignites-debate-over-italys-fascist-past.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/29/world/europe/village-reignites-debate-over-italys-fascist-past.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)>.

the media has become so pervasive, it often communicates with people on a subconscious level. In their unique ways, Ali Farah and Scego construct a language, or rather languages (their works are often multilingual), which brings this subconsciousness to the forefront of the reader's mind.

Ali Farah and Scego both grew up speaking Italian. They attended Italian primary and secondary schools, although in different continents, and received doctoral degrees from public universities in Rome. Therefore, Italian language proficiency and professionalism need not be an issue in the analysis of their works. I perceive their experimentalism with language to be much more fundamental than a mere stylistic choice. Multimodalism in their works draws language closer to the body in the sense that language is never impersonal. For me, the voice is at the heart of understanding multimodality in Ali Farah's and Scego's narratives and for this Cavarero's theory of the voice will be an important part of my analysis.

### **Adriana Cavarero's *For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression***

Western critics have traditionally considered literature by women to be more autobiographical and less structural than their male counterparts, oftentimes pointing to colloquial and diaristic narrative forms as evidence for such claims. Consequently, women's writing has been judged to be less literary and therefore less accomplished. In research of Italian critics' reception of migration and postcolonial literature in Italian, elements of orality were typically at the heart of literary debates.<sup>25</sup> Since the authors included in this dissertation are women of color who have ties to Africa, orality especially comes to the forefront in analyses of their work.

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<sup>25</sup> Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (1982) has been a seminal work in orality studies. He makes a distinction between oral cultures that do not have a system of writing and those that do. Ong defines second orality as a phenomenon connected to modern technology that combines both oral and written elements. Also known as residual orality, this style of language is familiar with writing, but it does not duplicate all its mechanisms in speech.

Critics such as Filippo La Porta expect a certain type of orality from Italian migration and postcolonial narratives and perceive a lack of innovative, colloquial speech in them.<sup>26</sup> In reference to Igiaba Scego and the anthology of migrant authors' stories that she edited (*Italiani per vocazioni*), which included Ali Farah's "Rapdipunt," La Porta writes:

Mi sembra però che i migrant writers di seconda generazione qui selezionati, depositari di molte identità e molte patrie e molti sogni, ci parlino di storie meticce ma usino un italiano neutro e un po' inerte, sintatticamente scolastico, come normalizzato. A volte anzi sono andato alla (vana) ricerca di qualche prezioso "errore," di qualche lieve ma significativa imperfezione morfologica ("Ma esistono" 5).

[It seems to me, however, that the second generation migrant writers included here, who are storehouses of many identities and many countries and many dreams, speak about mixed stories, but they use a neutral, and a bit inert, Italian that is as syntactically scholastic as it is normalized].<sup>27</sup>

In this sense, orality is welcomed as a potential break from literary language and structures.

Scholars such as Graziella Parati, Alessandra Di Maio, and Sandra Ponzanesi, however, perceive

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<sup>26</sup> A prominent literary critic, journalist and essayist, La Porta specializes in contemporary Italian literature and has published several books that provide a cross-section of the authors, canonical and non-canonical, that he deems most representative of Italian culture. Titles such as *Manuale di scrittura creatina: per un antidoping della letteratura* (Minimum fax, 1999) [Manual of Cretinous Writing: Toward an Antidoping of Literature], *Narratori di un Sud disperso: cantastorie in un mondo senza storie* (L'ancora del Mediterraneo, 2000) [Narrators of a Dispersed South: Storytellers in a World without Stories], and *Meno letteratura, per favore!* (Bollati Boringhieri, 2010) [Less Literature, Please!], convey his cynicism in regard to recent literary production in Italy.

<sup>27</sup> Unless otherwise noted, English translations are my own.



orality as a very literary element of these narratives and support their arguments by outlining social and literary histories in and outside of Italy. There are several interpretations of what orality is and what purpose it serves when materialized on the printed page. Adriana Cavarero's *A più voci: Filosofia dell'espressione vocale* (2003) [For More Than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression] offers a better understanding of orality and its many nuances, as well as makes distinctions between orality and vocality, speech, and voice.<sup>28</sup>

Cavarero divides *A più voci* into three sections—Come il *logos* perse la voce, Donne che cantano, Per una politica delle voci [How Logos Lost its Voice, Women who Sing, A Politics of Voices]—and outlines the ontology of the voice spanning from ancient Greece and the Old Testament up until today. Her main point of contention is that *logos*, or language, has taken precedence over all other human utterances for far too long:

È la strategia di devocalizzazione, che accompagna sin dall'inizio la storia del *logos*, a chiamare appunto in causa la voce. La chiama in causa e si premura di precluderle le vie del senso. Nell'economia del *logos* la sfera del vocalità è infatti obbligata a confluire nell'ambito del non senso. Dato che il semantico pretende di coprire tutto il territorio del senso, una *phonè* che si spogli della sua funzione *semantikè* diventa insensata, irrazionale: anzi—nell'ipotesi migliore perché ancora riconducibile alla funzione semiotica—animale. Dalla prospettiva del *logos*, la tematizzazione del vocalico è così incoraggiata a incanalarsi verso una nostalgia regressiva di un'assenza di senso in cui infanzia e animalità si confondono (198).

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<sup>28</sup> I am grateful to Alessandra Di Maio for introducing me to this book. All English translations of this work are by Paul A. Kottman.

[What makes the voice a necessary point of intervention now is the strategy of devocalization that accompanies the history of logos from the very beginning. This logos strives to prevent the voice from entering the realm of meaning. In the economy of logos, vocality belongs to the horizon of nonsense. Given that the semantic claims to cover the entire territory of meaning, a phone that evades its semantic function becomes meaningless, irrational—indeed, when reduced to its semiotic function, at best it becomes animal. From the perspective of logos, the vocal ends up being funneled into a nostalgic regression toward nonsense, where the infant and the animal coincide (181-182)].

According to Cavarero, this history of suppression of the voice has focused so much on universalizing language systems (especially semantics) that it has depreciated the value of other qualities of the voice such as tone, intonation, corporality, and pure sound. As a result, the voice continues to be distanced from meaning (which has been reassigned to language). Identifying this phenomenon as logocentrism, she makes the case that it is necessary to recognize the uniqueness of the voice in order to counter and eventually end the dichotomy between language and the voice.<sup>29</sup> Cavarero thus deems all human utterances meaningful and in her view, vocality serves a humanizing purpose.

In terms of gender, Cavarero focuses on the historical association of women with the voice, and therefore also with the body:

. . . Anche la tradizione androcentrica sa che la voce viene dalla “vibrazione di una gola di carne” e, proprio perché lo sa, la cataloga nella sfera corporea—secondaria, caduca e inessenziale—riservata alle donne. Femminilizzati per

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<sup>29</sup> Logocentrism is a term coined by Ludwig Klages, a German philosopher, in the 1920s. Cavarero’s mentor Jacques Derrida expanded on its discussion in *On Grammatology* (1967).

principio, l'aspetto vocalico della parola e, tanto più, il canto compaiono come elementi antagonisti di una sfera razionale maschile che si incentra, invece, sull'elemento semantico. Per dirla con una formula: la donna canta, l'uomo pensa (12).

[ . . . Even the androcentric tradition knows that the voice comes from 'the vibration of a throat of flesh' and, precisely because it knows this, it catalogs the voice with the body. This voice becomes secondary, ephemeral, and inessential—reserved for women. Feminized from the start, the vocal aspect of speech and, furthermore, of song appear together as antagonistic elements in a rational, masculine sphere that centers itself, instead, on the semantic. To put it formulaically: woman sings, man thinks (6)].

Cavarero evinces a long trajectory of sociolinguistic developments aimed to totalize speech. Through the process of totalization, “meaningful” language became disassociated from the feminine. Thus, speech has come to be understood through this type of language, a system that is male-dominated. Cavarero’s distinction that “woman sings, man thinks” (6) calls into question the meaning of subjecthood. She posits, “Al contrario del pensare, il parlare esclude che il suo protagonista sia un soggetto astratto e implica invece che i parlanti siano esseri umani in carne e ossa, con bocche e orecchie” (191) [Unlike thinking, speaking does not allow its protagonists to be an abstract subject; instead, it implies that the speakers are human beings in flesh and bone, with mouths and ears (175)]. Since abstraction in Western traditions is often equated with universalism, the speaking woman is its antithesis. In this sense, linguistic universalism denies the meaning of individual bodies, thereby reducing the voice to a purely

utilitarian state. Cavarero explains that this totalizing effect eliminates the meaning of the voice: “Se si assolutezza il registro della parola, magari identificandolo con un sistema del linguaggio di cui la voce sarebbe funzione, è infatti inevitabile che l’emissione vocalica non indirizzata alla parola non sia altro che un *resto*” (19) [When the register of speech is totalized—for instance, when it is identified with a language system of which the voice would be a mere function—it is indeed inevitable that the vocal emission not headed for speech is nothing but a remainder (12-13)]. By understanding speech through the voice, she believes that the speakers will be recognized as unique individuals/singular bodies.

Cavarero sees speech as a type of intermediary or meeting point for language and the voice: “La parola, intesa come parola che esce dalla bocca di qualcuno, più che essere il luogo verbale dell’espressione, è infatti il punto di tensione fra l’unicità della voce e il sistema del linguaggio” (21) [Speech, understood as speech that emits from someone’s mouth, is not simply the verbal sphere of expression; it is also the point of tension between the uniqueness of the voice and the system of language (14)]. Whether this tension leads to the recognition of an individual’s uniqueness depends on the role of the language system. If it takes a dominator rather than a partnership role, then the voice loses meaning. According to Cavarero, relationality is the key to accessing partnerships between unique beings/unique characteristics.

Since speech involves the act of listening, several factors influence the relationship between the speaker and interlocutor. Cavarero perceives a connection between speech and sight, which both can be disruptors to relationalities of uniqueness. She explains, “Fondata nell’ambito visivo del significato, la parola acceca la sensibilità naturale dell’orecchio” (195) [Founded in the visual realm of the signified, speech blinds the natural sensibility of the ear (178)]. Cavarero mentions the limiting and limited nature of the gaze in relation to the voice:

“Al contrario dello sguardo, la voce è sempre e irrimediabilmente relazionale. Non permette un orientamento distaccato sull’oggetto perché, in senso proprio, non ha oggetto” (194) [Unlike the gaze, the voice is always, irremediably relational. It does not allow a detached focus on the object because properly speaking, it has no object (177-178)]. In other words, listening requires the elimination of visual bias (objectification), and it is only when one is able to listen that relationality between subjects can occur:

Tale incapacità di ascolto ha molte e perniciose conseguenze. Essa, per esempio, fa sì che anche le filosofie volte a valorizzare il “dialogo” e la “comunicazione” restino imprigionate in un registro del linguaggio che ignora la relazionalità già messa in atto dal semplice comunicarsi, l’una all’altra, delle voci. Tematizzare il primato della voce rispetto alla parola, infatti, significa anche aprire nuove strade per una prospettiva che non solo può focalizzarsi su una forma primaria e radicale di relazione non ancora catturata dall’ordine del linguaggio, ma è soprattutto in grado di precisarla come relazione fra unicità (22-23).

[This inability to listen has many pernicious consequences. For example, it makes it so that even those philosophies that value ‘dialogue’ and ‘communication’ remain imprisoned in a linguistic register that ignores the relationality already put in action by the simple reciprocal communication of voices. To thematize the primacy of the voice with respect to speech, in fact, also means opening new directions for a perspective that not only focuses on a primary and radical form of relation that is not yet captured in the order of language, but that is moreover able to specify this relation among uniquenesses (16)].

Cavarero posits that the voice must be primary to speech in order for true relationality, or what she calls resonance, to occur. The act of listening highlights the plural nature of this relationality.

Perhaps the most exemplary relationship of resonance is the one between a mother and her child in the womb. In this relationship, Cavarero states that all sound is meaning. She claims that this resonance continues after the child's birth and cites the lullaby (a combination of music and speech, an interplay between echo and resonance) as a prime example of the voice's fundamental role in speech. She points out that the maternal voice is both voice and speech. However, Cavarero does identify a literary medium—poetry—where the voice takes precedence over language systems. Consequently, in poetry, speech is first and foremost defined by the voice. Rooted in rhythm and sonority, poetry, like song, has no meaningless emissions. Moreover, even when the words remain the same in poetry, song or any other composed medium, each voice renders them to be a unique expression of its particular being.

In this light, La Porta's train of thought that migrant authors' works in Italian are simply a facsimile of scholarly, formulaic literary language in Italy does not hold up since he completely ignores the unique qualities of the voice. When the relationalities created by the voice are neglected, the vocal (and not just the oral) aspects of literature lose meaning. Cavarero makes the case that studies on orality disregard the vocal nature of the text, i.e. the uniqueness of the voice and of singular bodies. Instead, they focus on a voice that is "di tutti e di nessuno" (17) [of everyone and no one (11)]. Critics such as La Porta focus so much on language (syntax and morphology) that they become blind to who is actually speaking; that is, language systems occlude the uniqueness of the speaker. This is paradoxical because the skin color and ethnic origin of the author and the protagonists in his/her narratives often influence literary analyses and

the reception of migration literature in Italian. However, these associations do not guarantee that the uniqueness of the voice will take precedence over stereotypes and visual bias established through language systems. Although Cavarero does not explicitly discuss racism in *A più voci*, it is considered by some to be a manifestation of logocentrism since language systems have traditionally been grand constructors and enforcers of domination (legal systems are a prime example and among the first to generate written language). This logocentrism also discounts the act of listening; it purposefully disempowers the speaker and the resonance of the voice based on both appearance and the establishment of exclusionary language systems (accessible to a select few).

Cavarero points to plurality as a way to break free from visual bias and to render language systems accessible and truly relational: “Non si tratta tanto di rivocalizzare il *logos*, quanto piuttosto di affrancarlo dalla sua sostanza visiva e intenderlo finalmente come parola sonora per riascoltare, nella parola stessa, la pluralità delle voci singolari che, congenere al gioco della risonanza piuttosto che alla generalità del suono, si convocano nella relazione” (195) [The point is not simply to revocalize logos. Rather, the aim is to free logos from its visual substance, and then finally mean it as sonorous speech—in order to listen, in speech itself, for the plurality of singular voices that convoke one other in a relation that is not simply sound, but above all resonance (178-179)]. According to Cavarero, the absence of language systems is not a prerequisite for resonance to occur; however, resonance cannot take place if the speaker and the interlocutor do not mutually recognize each other’s uniqueness (which in this context is transmitted by the voice). Therefore, the role of the interlocutor is fundamental to determining whether the speaker is a successful communicator or not. Cavarero explains, “Non si tratta però di una comunicazione chiusa nel circuito fra la propria voce e il proprio orecchio, bensì di un

comunicarsi dell'unicità che è, al tempo stesso, una *relazione* a un'altra unicità" (11) [At stake here is not a closed-circuit communication between one's own voice and one's own ears, but rather a communication of one's own uniqueness that is, at the same time, a relation with another unique existent (5)].

In the case of the two authors central to this dissertation, I posit that they are acutely aware of this relationality and as such shape their narratives to guide and challenge their interlocutors not to rely on the traditional devices of logocentrism. The connection of Ali Farah's and Scego's works to Cavarero's theory of the voice lies within the relationalities they construct not only between their characters, but also with the reader. Ali Farah and Scego write with the voice's qualities in mind to the point that even the protagonists in their stories comment on their own and each other's speaking and communication styles. Besides character references to dialect and intonation, Ali Farah and Scego call attention to the voice through multimodal storytelling, meaning that the authors employ various modes of communication to transmit their protagonists' voices. Multimodal storytelling also includes the visual realm, an aspect that Cavarero identifies as a possible obstacle to resonance, but one that is also capable of challenging language systems. In Ali Farah's and Scego's narratives, multimodality highlights and facilitates resonance between protagonists, yet it extends an invitation to the reader as well. Although their narrators/protagonists often speak in the form of a monologue (whether on the telephone, in person, on tape cassette, on video, in letters, etc.), they speak with an interlocutor in mind, thus emphasizing the act of listening. Their narratives call attention to the expansiveness and transformational nature of language systems when they are reconnected to the individual voice. Cavarero reminds us that this voice is inseparable from the body, and not just any body, but a specific one that ensures subjecthood.



Ali Farah and Scego are profoundly conscious of the power of vocality in their works, especially in the hostile contexts of European and Western xenophobia where people of color and migrants constantly undergo dehumanization through language, particularly in the media and in governmental policies. Under the current situation in Italy, visual stereotypes (skin color, dress, etc.) still—for the most part—influence notions of native Italian fluency and citizenship and foreign accents are still equated with ignorance, which complicates the recognition of the uniqueness of the voice. That is, if a person of color speaks Italian perfectly and with an Italian regional accent, his/her language proficiency/capabilities are still questioned and challenged based on his/her visual appearance. Migrants and people of color are reduced to a stereotype that fails to acknowledge the uniqueness of the voice. Ali Farah and Scego confront homogenizing yet discriminatory language by revealing the uniqueness of the voice through multimodality. I make the case that multimodality in their narratives is a means to circumvent the trappings of visual bias in connection with language systems. Since multimodality brings focus to different aspects of the voice and therefore also to the body, it can serve to affirm subjecthood. Ali Farah and Scego use the printed word to manipulate visual bias and are able to offer different perspectives of the body through multimodality.

One aspect of the body that I will explore in this dissertation is the body as an organism of memory whose consort is the voice. Again, multimodality comes into play for its ability to capture and transmit memory beyond mere language (references to photographs and the personification of land and cityscapes are some examples we will come across in the narratives). Multimodal storytelling is particularly effective when memory has been suppressed in the collective consciousness of a nation or a people as it is in Italy regarding Italian colonialism. Here too, vocality occupies a plural, relational role. In a narrative glossary entitled “Le parole

intraducibili” [Untranslatable Words], Ali Farah identifies a difference between memory and what Cavarero calls *logos* and between memory and the voice. She writes the following under the heading “Lingua” [Language]:<sup>30</sup>

Nella cultura orale la memoria è considerata una grandissima virtù e per questo incoraggiata e sostenuta con varie strategie, per esempio con la *luuq*, la tonalità del canto, vengono enunciati i versi. *Luuq* diversa da *luuqad* che significa lingua parlata sia in somalo che in arabo. Gli studenti di Asinitas che non hanno ricevuto una vera e propria educazione scolastica, sono quelli che ricordano più canti, detti e poesie e ci ricamano continuamente la propria voce. Questa vena giocosa e incredibilmente creativa per esempio gli uomini istruiti come mio padre, l'hanno persa (4).

[In oral culture, memory is considered a great virtue and therefore it is encouraged and supported through various strategies; for example, verses are uttered with the *luuq* and the tonality of song. The *luuq* is different from *luuqad*, which means spoken language in both Somali and Arabic. The Asinitas students who received a true scholarly education remember more songs, sayings, and poems and they continuously weave their own voices into them. Educated men such as my father have lost this playful and incredibly creative source of inspiration].

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<sup>30</sup> Ali Farah transcribed group sessions that took place at Asinitas, a nonprofit Italian school and cultural center in Rome. In these sessions, Somali refugees were asked to define key terms such as *casa*, *avventura* [home, adventure], etc., according to their personal experience. In my interview with the author, she related that she was not present for the actual sessions (Scego was); however, she told me that it was a very traumatic experience for all those involved because the refugees had to relive moments of incredible adversity.

Similar to Cavarero's insights on song and poetry, Ali Farah highlights that the musicality of the voice goes beyond mere functionality; it provides meaning in itself. She points out that when language is connected to the voice, it resonates in such a way that plurality rather than uniformity is the outcome. This contrast between the totalization of language (here, it is her father's education) and the uniqueness of the voice serves as a constructive point of tension; it is one that will form the base of my analysis in this dissertation. Throughout this dissertation, I will discuss how Ali Farah and Scego represent a plurality of unique voices and singular bodies (in the face of impersonalization) primarily through multimodal storytelling.

## **Structure**

This dissertation is divided into two chapters. The first chapter is dedicated to Uba Cristina Ali Farah and includes analyses of three of her works: a short story entitled "Rapdipunt" [Punt Rap], published in *Italiani per vocazione* in 2005; her first novel, *Madre piccola* [Little Mother], published in 2007; and a short story entitled "Un sambuco attraversa il mare" [A Dhow Is Crossing the Sea], published in the journal *Wasafiri* in 2011. Besides being in chronological order, these works follow a particular train of thought. Since my focus is multimodal storytelling and its connection with the voice (meaning also the body) and language systems, each narrative evidences different facets of this relationship. As the title suggests, "Rapdipunt" [Punt Rap] highlights the musical qualities of the voice, the tones that Cavarero associates with the uniqueness of the voice. The story depicts this uniqueness through regional Italian speech and the poetry of East African tales. *Madre piccola* [Little Mother] engages multimodal storytelling to narrate life in the Somali diaspora. In the novel, family members employ technological modes, such as the radio, telephone, tape cassettes and the videocamera, to achieve resonance even when entire continents span between them. "Un sambuco attraversa il mare" [A Dhow Is

Crossing the Sea] explores the poetic imagery of language, the images that reconnect language with the body.

The second chapter is dedicated to Igiaba Scego and includes analyses of two of her works: “Identità” [Identity], a short story published in 2008 in *Amori bicolari*, a collection of short stories by various authors; and Scego’s 2010 autobiographical novel, *La mia casa è dove sono*, the fourth novel of her professional career. Each narrative contends with the logocentrism inherent in racist discourse. Through my interpretation of the mashup, I posit that Scego’s multimodal storytelling subverts dehumanizing and impersonal language and reconnects it with the voice/body.<sup>31</sup> In “Identità,” the disc jockey represents multimodality and reconfigures images, language, sounds, and subjects to create identity. In *La mia casa è dove sono*, Scego maps identity with the physical spaces of two cities, Mogadishu and Rome. Through the physicality of the cities and their cartographic representations, language and extralinguistic features (drawings, cutouts, and spatial arrangements) combine to dimensionalize Italian postcolonial landscapes and identities.

The appendix of this dissertation includes an interview I conducted in Italian with Ali Farah on September 8, 2011, in Rome, Italy which I translated in English. My English translation of Scego’s “Identità” also appears in the appendix. I believe these translations provide further insight into Ali Farah’s and Scego’s multimodal storytelling. In her interview, Ali Farah discusses a spectrum of topics, including the various technologies integral to communication in the Somali diaspora, the role of gender in relation to these modes in her

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<sup>31</sup> Eduardo Navas’ chapter “Regressive and Reflexive Mashups in Sampling Cultures” in *Mashup Cultures* (2010) forms a large part of my interpretation. He defines the mashup as the “[use of] samples from two or more elements to access specific information more efficiently, thereby taking them beyond their initial possibilities.” (159). Therefore, the mashup is also a form of discourse or “Remix” that “depends on the recognition (reading) of a pre-existing text (or cultural code)” (157).

narratives, the plot of her forthcoming novel, and collaborative projects with other artists. The translation of “Identità” offers a more complete picture of the inner workings of Scego’s mashup.

## Chapter 1

### Ubax Cristina Ali Farah

#### Voicing body and personhood: Vocal resonance in diaspora

This chapter focuses on the various ways Ubax Cristina Ali Farah channels the voice in three narratives: “Rapdipunt” [Punt Rap] a short story, *Madre piccola* [*Little Mother*], a novel, and “Un sambuco attraversa il mare” [A Dhow Is Crossing the Sea], another short story.

Intonation, regionalisms, multilingualism, rhythm and tempo are some of the featured qualities of the voice which when coupled with the speaker’s body, can challenge traditional notions of national identity and citizenship. Although the body is integral to the voice, technologies also allow the voice to travel beyond it. Ali Farah experiments with the voice in these ways to portray the complexities of establishing identity and maintaining personal relationships in diaspora, particularly in the Somali diaspora. She also explores the various transformations the body undergoes in diaspora (during migration and upon reaching its destinations), which add texture to the voice.

Ali Farah is not only a prominent and powerful voice in Italian postcolonial literature; she is also a testament to the global relevance of the study of literature in Italian. Her works are important for a wide-ranging, yet interconnected series of nodes and traditions, such as African literature, feminist writing, postcolonial literature, migration literature, world literature, and diaspora studies.

Born in Verona, Italy in 1973, Ubax Cristina Ali Farah spent most of her childhood in Mogadishu, Somalia, until forced to flee from civil war under the Siad Barre regime at eighteen

years of age with her first child.<sup>32</sup> After a couple years in Pècs, Hungary, she settled in her Italian birth city; since 1997, she resides in Rome with her family (two sons, a daughter, and Giulio, her partner/father of her two youngest children) and teaches Somali language and literature at Roma 3, one of the capital's major universities. She has been a journalist for the online journal *Migranews*, and for several other publications in print, such as the national newspaper, *La Repubblica*. She has written for journals of migration literature, including *Caffè*, and the electronic journal, *El Ghibli*,<sup>33</sup> which she founded with a group of “migrant” authors. Ali Farah's parents' relationship was an anomaly in respect to typical colonial paradigms since her father is Somali and her mother Italian. The majority of relationships stemming from Italian colonialism were between East African women and Italian men.<sup>34</sup>

Even though she began filling notebooks with her writing in Mogadishu, it was not until after Ali Farah found more stability in Rome and pursued/earned a doctoral degree there that she began to write again and professionally. In Rome, she joined a study group on African writing and performed her poem, “Af Dabeyl ovvero Bocca di vento” (1997). The births of her two younger children (a son and a daughter) with her Italian partner in Italy have also made a

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<sup>32</sup> The father of Ali Farah's first son Harun was also a resident of Mogadishu and currently lives in exile in Canada.

<sup>33</sup> *El Ghibli*, in Arabic meaning wind in/from North Africa, is a free online journal founded, managed, and contributed to by authors of migration literature in Italian. The site includes authors' biographies, book reviews, short stories, poetry, and interviews. As of date, it is in its eighth year, thirty-fifth volume (March 2012).

<sup>34</sup> In *Colonia per maschi. Italiani in Africa Orientale: una storia di genere* (2007), Giulietta Stefani describes the Italian East African colonial campaigns as the building of a “colonia per maschi” [colony for men] since Italian media and propaganda heavily focused on the eroticism of black female bodies and white male virility. Ali Farah's father studied at a university in Italy as many men of the Somali intellectual elite did. It was during this time that he met his Italian wife, Ali Farah's mother.

significant impact on Ali Farah's repertoire. She has published several poems, including "L'inseguimento" (1999), "Rosso" (2004), "Strappo" (2004), "Imaan occhi di gazzella" (2004), "Nureddin" (2006), "Xawa Aden" (2006), short stories, "Rapdipunt" (2005), "Interamente" (2003), "Madre piccola" (2006), "Un sambuco attraversa il mare" (2011), and two novels, *Madre piccola* (2007) and the forthcoming *Il comandante del fiume*.<sup>35</sup> She cites Iberian epics, her Italian education in Somalia, and Somali women's poetry (*buraambur*) among her literary influences discussed in a noteworthy interview with Alessandra Di Maio, published in a special double issue (2006) of the journal *Metamorphoses* dedicated to "Other Italies/Italy's Others."

Thanks to her work as a journalist and oral historian, Ali Farah has conducted, recorded, and transcribed several interviews with immigrants and children of immigrants (often referred to as "second-generation," although this term is problematic) living in Italy, which have inspired the structure and musicality of her fictional narrators' language. Several aspects of the author's life have certainly had a great influence on her writing and artistic representation of women's space (becoming a mother of three, traveling and migrating in exile with a small child, and the relationship with her own mother in Somalia and in Italy<sup>36</sup>); however, it is not my wish to equate

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<sup>35</sup> Four of Ali Farah's short stories, "Rapdipunt," "Madre piccola," "Interamente," "Un sambuco attraversa il mare," and two poems, "Rosso" and "Nureddin," have been translated and published in English in the journals *Metamorphoses* and *Wasafiri*. Indiana University Press published the English translation of her novel *Madre piccola* in 2011. These translations attest to the author's significant contribution not only to Italian literature, but also to world literature, particularly highlighting the richness and depth of postcolonial literature beyond those more closely tied to former French and British empires. In approaching these English translations and even the originals, it is crucial to note some key socio-linguistic and historical features, such as the school system during and after colonial rule in the Horn of Africa and specifically in Somalia, as well as registers of Italian (high, low, formal, informal, etc.).

<sup>36</sup> "L'approccio al mondo femminile è legato al rapporto molto stretto e complicato che ho con mia madre: abbiamo pochi anni di differenza e fra noi c'è sempre stata una grande complicità, che però a volte è stata un'arma a doppio taglio" (*La quarta sponda* 56).



her biography with the literary works themselves. I hope to show how important men and women's real lives and testimonies are in Ali Farah's works, including their historical significance, without forgetting the literary medium itself, the type of translation and interpretation they have undergone, and the artistic legacies and traditions with which her works are in constant contact.

Although her works are quite varied, some overarching themes bridge them together. The main characters are tied to the Horn of Africa, specifically to Somalia, with much of the present-day activities taking place outside of the country in exile. In the narratives, Somalia materializes through memory and storytelling made vivid by the Somali language as well as by rhetorical style. Family ties or the lack thereof, movement, and citizenship form the backbone of these works.

These themes appear in Ali Farah's works from the time she wrote and published her first work in exile, "Af Dabeyl ovvero Bocca di vento." She dedicated the poem to her father, whose childhood nickname is the title (Af Dabeyl), translated as Bocca di vento [Mouthwind] in Italian; it refers to his intellectual skills and vocal ability: "Con il carbone bagnato scrivevi i versetti del Corano sulle tavole di legno./E da lì risuonava la tua voce melodiosa./Come il vento fluivano le parole./Da allora sei Af Dabeyl" (6) [With wet charcoal you wrote verses from the Koran on wooden tablets/And your melodious voice resounded from there./Your words flowed like the wind./Since then you have been Af Dabeyl].<sup>37</sup> Speaking as a daughter in the first person to her father, Ali Farah narrates how his voice was silenced/corrupted and focuses on finding, once

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[My approach to the female world is tied to the very close and complicated relationship I have with my mother. There's little age difference between us and there has always been a great complicity between us, which, however, has been a double-edged sword at times].

<sup>37</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the English translations are my own.

again, a voice in diaspora where both were/are living (her father in the Netherlands at the time, now in England, and Ali Farah in Rome). Finding a voice through writing appears as a common bond between the two. She evidences the emergence of her own voice and declares that as a mother in diaspora she is stronger than her father in diaspora: “adolescente madre, più forte di te che sei uomo” (6) [a teenage mother, stronger than you and you are a man]. The voice, like the wind, possesses the ability to change the course of an environment, people, and events as well as to provide the force and substance to emit and flow together words. This work illustrates how exile offers the father and daughter two very different fates as Ali Farah begins to come into her own and find direction with her voice while her father, on the other hand, loses hold of his life’s vocation to create a democratic and united Somalia. She tells him, “Oh, Af Dabeyl, scintilla agile e lucente, volevi diventare una stella, ma brillasti invano” (7) [Oh, Af Dabeyl, bright and nimble spark, you wanted to become a star, but you shone in vain]. The poem attests to how through her own voice, from her very beginnings as a professional writer, Ali Farah has provided a space for voices that would otherwise be suppressed, silenced, and distorted. She creates such a space through the historical and cultural markers communicated in particular words (as in her father’s nickname), in the flow of words (that we will examine in the storytelling, rhythm, and intonation of her characters), and also in notions of gender and familial roles.

In this dissertation’s introduction, I referenced Adriana Cavarero’s contribution to critical studies of the voice. In *A più voci* [For More Than One Voice], she outlines differences between vocality and orality, sound and language systems, voice and speech, identifying logocentrism as the root cause for the suppression and depersonalization of the voice. Ali Farah succeeds at circumventing such logocentrism through the very medium of the written word. Playing with semantics, rhythm and aural, oral and written cues (indications of spoken, sung, and written

words as well as sounds), she not only valorizes orality; she also calls attention to the uniqueness of individual voices.

Her adaptations of oral testimonies shape her written words in their sequence and musicality. She recognizes and captures the uniqueness of the voice of which Cavarero speaks. Ali Farah explains the process, referencing her short story, “Madre piccola” (not to be confused with the novel), as but one example:

Nella scrittura, nello scrivere, la cosa che mi sembra più importante in questo momento è il fatto di raccogliere testimonianze, e dunque tutti i racconti, anche questo di ‘Madre piccola,’ sono composti da una serie di interviste o di cose che mi sono state raccontate, da una serie di dialoghi che ho avuto anche con donne. Dopo la guerra le donne e gli uomini somali si sono sparsi per tutta l'Europa e il mondo, ed io ho raccolto tutti i ricordi che mi sono rimasti in mente, soprattutto anche di dialoghi telefonici perché anche con le persone più care, più intime, nonostante non ci si veda più, rimane sempre una sorta di reticolo di relazioni nel mondo che funziona anche telefonicamente (*Sagarana* 8).

[In the text, in writing, what seems most important to me at this moment is the act of gathering testimonies, and so all my short stories, even ‘Madre piccola,’ are comprised of a series of interviews and of stories told to me, as well as of a series of conversations I had with women. After the war, Somali men and women dispersed all over Europe and the world, and I gathered together all the memories, that I could remember, mostly telephone conversations, because with people you care about the most and are close to, despite the fact that you don’t see each other

anymore, there always remains a sort of network of relationships throughout the world that also works telephonically].

Thus, as I will examine later in more detail, relationality in connection to the voice takes precedence in the author's works. Ali Farah's sensibility as a poet carries over into her prose through her focus on the musicality of her speakers' voices. Relating Cavarero's thesis to Ali Farah's works, it is not just the fact that words are being spoken that give them their vocal quality; there is a keen focus on who is speaking and how the individual speakers/protagonists distinguish themselves through their utterances. Both Cavarero and Ali Farah locate personhood in speaking bodies.

Performance has the capacity to materialize various, multiple, and plural forms of voice. Thus, performance, both on the page and on the stage, is another key element to consider in this chapter. Notions of performance accompany many of Ali Farah's works since they largely incorporate monologues and choral aspects. She has recited her own poems during performances by *Le madrigne*, an all women group of poets to which she belongs. Performances of Ali Farah's works are a reminder of the importance of live performance and public audiences in socially engaged literature. Stage performance manifests the constructed quality of her literature, while at the same time providing the corporal aspect of realities all too often depersonalized and caricatured.

Ali Farah weaves Somali words and poetry into her works, which reveal the intercultural ties between Italy and Somalia. Through language (word choice, words as historical markers, dialect, etc.), Ali Farah's narratives span and reconnect generations through memories of colonialism, yet they also map out spatial disconnects and disrupt colonial hierarchies. For example, she deliberately uses Somali variations of Italian words—such as *defreddi* (tè freddo)

[iced tea], *draddorio* [trattoria], *farmashiiyo* (farmacia) [pharmacy], *fasoleeti* (fazzoletto) [handkerchief], *goonooyin* (gonne) [skirts], *istekiini* (stuzzicadenti) [toothpicks], *jabaati* (ciabette) [slippers], *kabushiini* (cappuccino), *kafey* (caffè) [coffee], *kiniini* (chinino) [quinine]—to overturn “i rapporti interni al binomio lingua-potere” (Di Maio *Metamorphoses* 262) [the interior workings of the relationship between language and power (251)]. Language, therefore, acts as a reminder of historical and generational relationships; however, Ali Farah’s narrators consciously use language to show just how dynamic these relationships can be. They adjust their speech/mode of communication as a means to amplify their voice and to ensure that their message is conveyed even in the face of adversity. Contrary to what some Italian literary critics (for example, Filippo La Porta) had anticipated or hoped for, Ali Farah does not “corrupt” language by hybridizing words and thereby creating a new culture; rather, she reveals already existing intercultural relationships through reconfigurations of narrative styles and registers.

Focus on the written word is equally important in these works. Ali Farah mostly writes in Italian, her mother tongue and the language in which she was schooled during her formative years in Mogadishu. The Somali language has only officially been transcribed since the 1970s and is often overshadowed by a rich and extensive oral literary history. By drawing attention to written traditions, in addition to creating her own, Ali Farah creates new, yet at the same time familiar, narrative structures that combine the lyricism, anecdotes, and orality of Somali culture with the legacy of the written Italian language.

In Ali Farah’s works, written language acts as a double-edged sword; in one sense it is a powerful weapon to show ownership and mastery of a language and in another it can undergo violence, disfigurement, and misrepresentation. The author plays on the concept of gendered languages; for example, the term “mother tongue” not only signifies a speaker’s first language,

but is literally the language spoken by the speaker's mother. Such references to gendered languages bring up issues of what it means to suppress or embrace a mother or a father tongue, instances of favoring one over the other, what they each have to communicate and in what way(s) they communicate.

Literary critic Daniele Comberiati posits that Ali Farah uses archaic Italian terms to show her competency, belonging within, and mastery of the Italian language.<sup>38</sup> It is also essential to consider the *italo-somalo* context of these words—that is, the linguistic microcosm of Italian in Somalia, including linguistic preservation as a result of limited exposure to contemporary language sources such as the peninsular Italian press and media. As apparent in my interview with Ali Farah, there is something uniquely italo-somalo about the author's word choice:

Io in Somalia frequentavo una scuola italiana che era principalmente frequentata da italosomali, quindi eravamo tutti bilingue. Però la nostra lingua italiana che si usava nell'interno della scuola non era condizionata dai giornali, dai media perché era molto isolata. Era un microcosmo in cui si formava la lingua un po' diversa senza anche le cadenze regionali. Non c'erano cose regionali forti.

[In Somalia I attended an Italian school that was primarily attended by Italian Somalis, so we were all bilingual. However, the Italian that we used within the school walls was not conditioned by the newspapers, the media because it was very isolated. It was a microcosm in which language was shaped a bit differently and also without regional accents. There weren't any strong regional influences. (169)].

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<sup>38</sup>*La quarta sponda. Scrittrici in viaggio dall'Africa coloniale all'Italia di oggi* (2009).

Upon arriving in Italy she became more aware of the variance in Italian linguistic registers:

Usavo tantissime parole in italiano che avevo letto sui libri che però non si usavano nella lingua dei miei coetanei. Quando sono arrivata in Italia molti mi dicevano ‘Ma che parola usi? È una parola desueta.’ Perché io l’avevo magari letta in un libro così. E non mi rendevo conto quanto invece non si usava nel parlato. Ci sono tante cose sull’italiano e il somalo che si uniscono.

[I would use a lot, a lot of words in Italian that I had read in books that, however, my peers didn’t. When I came to Italy many people would tell me, ‘What word are you using? It’s outdated.’ Because I might have read it in a book. And I didn’t realize how much it wasn’t used in spoken language. There are so many things regarding Italian and Somali that unite us (169)].

She also pointed out that Somalis who learned Italian in Somalia generally speak with a certain cadence (as in her father’s case and in the case of many other Somali intellectuals), which she aimed to capture in her characters’ speech.

Orality is an integral part of her work, though it is often taken for granted or glossed over where African literature in Italian or African-Italian literature is concerned. The idea of orality as archaic can no longer be sustained. Even as technology and globalization make literary and cultural texts more readily available, rhythm, intonation, speech patterns, timing/time limits, and spatial frameworks of the voice evidence the mobility, innovation, and contemporary nature of orality in Ali Farah’s works. The body is an essential anchor to the voice. Although disembodied voices prominently resound in societies increasingly dependent on technology, the body serves as an important conductor of the human voice and it often functions as a mode of

communication in itself. Ali Farah calls attention to the histories that migrating bodies have to tell often through the physical scars of the bodies' journeys (as we will see in *Madre piccola* and "Un sambuco attraversa il mare") or through the trajectory of the journey itself (evident in "Rapdipunt").

The presence of an interlocutor/interlocutors whether implied or imagined acts as another protagonist in itself in Uba Cristina Ali Farah's works. The narrators highlight and scrutinize the concept and modalities of dialogue, especially when it comes to the readers' role in their narrative space. For example, the use of *voi/voi* (you plural/us), questions, and gendered references directed at men or women all implicate the reader and an audience. Such features bring up the questions: To what extent does communication take place (between protagonists, readers, socio-cultural groups, etc.)? When is it necessary to simply listen and what does the act of listening entail? How do narrative modes influence the reception of the narrators' message? Internal monologues, stream of consciousness, one-sided phone conversations, letters, and testimonies all play off of human interaction and spatiality in the Somali diaspora depicted by Ali Farah. Multiple modes of communication, such as telephones, the radio and video camera, cassette tapes, letters, and translators, emphasize this focus of being on the receiving end of the communication line.

Representing history through personal testimonies is a major component of Ali Farah's writing. It is in these testimonies that she finds the essence of the voices in her narratives: "quello che voglio dire è cercare di essere autentici, di mantenere comunque le cose così come sono, per questo penso alle interviste, alle testimonianze dirette, cioè costruire delle storie con qualcosa di piccolo ma di vero, perché quello è il segno della storia che rimane attraverso la testimonianza dell'individuo singolo" (*Sagarana* 11) [what I mean is to try to be authentic, to



retain, anyhow, things as they are, that's why I draw upon interviews, primary sources; that is, to construct stories with something small but true, because it's the testimony of a single individual that leaves its mark on the story]. In this vein, history also signifies the art of listening. One must first listen to an individual's story by focusing on the qualities of the voice, taking in irregularities, deviations, peculiarities, etc., without attempting to conform it to a language system. Ali Farah's art shines through in her ability to place these testimonies within a larger frame of history while at the same time maintaining their individuality/personhood. This multiform process of recollection and dissemination of memory is evident in the following three narratives in which the only way to maintain an understanding of history is to access a variety of communicative modes. In these works, multimediality represents a way to combat the suppression of memory.

### **1. "Rapdipunt"**

The Ethiopian-Italian actress Caterina Deregibus performed the short story "Rapdipunt" on the stage. "Rapdipunt" is Ali Farah's first work set in Rome and her first depiction of "second generation" youths in Italy. The author did much research focused on a group of young people of East African descent who frequented the area around Rome's Flaminio subway stop in the late 1990s-2000. To develop the story, she conducted and recorded interviews with former members of the group, most extensively with Romano Beré.<sup>39</sup> Ali Farah explains the makings of her *favola*: "Ecco, avevo tutti gli ingredienti necessari per costruire una favola, viaggio iniziatico scandito dalla lingua metropolitana e ritmica, le cui pulsazioni dovevano andare a tempo con il

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<sup>39</sup> Ali Farah includes portions of Beré's interviews in her article "Tra noi."

rap. Noi tre tessitori di quella storia e il nostro immaginario” (15)<sup>40</sup> [You see, I had all the necessary ingredients to construct a fairytale, a journey of initiation fueled by a rhythmic and metropolitan language, whose pulsations had to follow the tempo of rap, of us three weavers of that story, and of our imagination]. Involving her eldest son, Harun, in the creative dialogue added another generational element. As we shall see, language infuses the story with momentum and movement capable of crossing boundaries and generations.

As with Ali Farah’s other interviewees (for example, East African migrant women in Italy), she incorporates their stories into the fabric of her narrative. However, unlike previous interviews where her interviewees would speak in Somali or in a non-native Italian, the interviewees for “Rapdipunt” spoke in a distinctly regional, city-specific Italian. Ali Farah refers to this language as a challenge in her writing: “Per quanto riguarda ‘Rapdipunt’ devo ammettere che è stato molto più faticoso per me ricreare quel linguaggio, perché non mi appartiene affatto” (“I nodi” 3) [In regard to “Punt Rap,” I have to admit that recreating that way of speaking was very demanding because it doesn’t belong to me at all]. The language in this short story reflects the oral interviews’ influence on Ali Farah’s writing, especially in respect to the musicality of the characters’ speech. In fact, it is within this musicality and cadence that the author sees potential for innovation:

Un'altra ricerca molto interessante che stavo facendo sempre in questo periodo sul potenziale di innovazione della migrazione e dunque del multiculturalismo, è sulle nuove generazioni dei ragazzi africani nati e cresciuti in Italia, che molto spesso non sanno la loro lingua d'origine, non conoscono il contesto di

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<sup>40</sup> In addition to Romano Beré’s instrumental role in breathing life into the story, Ali Farah cites the Ethiopian Italian actress, Caterina Deregibus, as another driving force in the narrative. Friendship between the two women led to Deregibus’ stage performance of the story.

provenienza e parlano un linguaggio italiano, un romano quasi più forte di quelli dei romani stessi. È uno sforzo di identificazione, di legittimazione, e allo stesso tempo hanno questo mito dell'Africa costruito, molto bello, così, molto immaginario (*Sagarana* 8).

[Another very interesting research project I was doing at the time was on migration's, and therefore multiculturalism's, potential for innovation on the new generations of young Africans born and raised in Italy who very often do not know their language of origin; they don't know specifics about their country of descent and they speak an Italian, a Roman dialect almost stronger than what's spoken by the Romans themselves. It's a push for identification, legitimization, and at the same time they have this constructed, very beautiful, very imaginary myth of Africa].

Thus, a deep linguistic Italian identity combined with myths/an imaginary version of Africa create new avenues beyond the dead end street of assimilation. That is, Panafrikanism and *italianità* need not be polar opposites or obstacles to the self-realization of Ali Farah's second-generation characters. She uses the framework of the *favola/fiaba* to chronicle a period of growth and consciousness in the youths' lives as well as to valorize myth-making processes that foster personal freedom and solidarity.<sup>41</sup>

A *favola* typically begins with the phrase "c'era una volta" (once upon a time), an expression that implies recounting a history, an understanding of past events. What used to be

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<sup>41</sup> Ali Farah employs the terms *favola* and *fiaba* to talk about the structure and inspiration for "Rapdipunt." Although both share common characteristics, the *fiaba* always communicates a moral lesson and has a pedagogical aim.

may be no more, yet the telling of the past keeps it alive and connects it to present realities, and has the capacity to shape future ones. While in many ways fantastical and magical, the favola/fiaba conveys a truth that can be a guiding principle in the present. Ali Farah wrote “Rapdipunt” with such a framework in mind: “La struttura della fiaba mi sembrava molto adatta a descrivere il percorso formativo di una adolescente che attraversa il periodo in cui più forti sono i dubbi e le riflessioni sull’ identità e sulla personalità” (“I nodi” 3) [The structure of the fable seemed very fitting to describe the developmental path of an adolescent girl who makes her way through this phase when doubts and reflections on identity and personality are the strongest]. She interprets the fiaba as involving narratives of transformation and therefore fitting to outline generational experiences and exchanges. Referencing favole and fiabe also highlights the oral component of the story since these narrative traditions started as spoken tales and continue to be voiced (even alongside and in conjunction with their textual counterparts). Ali Farah applies meaning to the favola/fiaba beyond the structure and characters of “Rapdipunt,” whose own protagonists mention mythical and fairytale figures; she creates a sort of *metafavola*.

In an essay entitled “Tra noi,” she puts forth the need to create symbols, imagery, and myths that reflect histories and realities not represented in traditional Italian historiography. With “Rapdipunt” and Ali Farah’s forthcoming novel *Il comandante del fiume*, the author collectively innovates a favola to embrace and inspire, yet also counterbalance other favole.<sup>42</sup> Rather than base itself on separatism, Ali Farah’s favola finds purpose through its representations of solidarity:

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<sup>42</sup> For example, the most widely diffused myths about Italian colonialism; the fairy tale-like narratives that Italians colonists brought civilization by creating infrastructures such as roads and schools.

Non ne faranno mai nulla se rimangono soli, mi dice Romano. C'è chi vuole parlare con la propria voce e confida poco negli altri. È un corpo a corpo costante, in cerca di fiducia. Poiché qui, si tratta di costruire la nostra favola, mettere insieme i simboli. A volte mi spavento a morte. Vorrei mollare tutto e scrivere solo di una questione privata. Ma non è questo il destino *tra noi*" ("Tra noi" 16).

[They will never do anything if they keep to themselves, Romano tells me. Some individuals want to speak with their own voice and reveal little to anyone else. It's a constant struggle, in search of trust. Because here, it is all about constructing our own fairytale, putting the symbols together. Sometimes I'm scared to death. I would like to drop everything and only write about private matters. But this isn't the destiny *among us*].

As in this essay, references to a collective *noi* are woven throughout "Rapdipunt," prompting the reader to examine his/her place within or outside of it.

Told in the first person by a female high school student in Rome, "Rapdipunt" chronicles a few days in the life of this good student who ditches school to hang out with her friend/crush Mauro and his all-male group of friends. As a young woman the narrator remains on the margins of the group, but the group is connected as a whole by their African descent, specifically the Horn of Africa, and by the consciousness of race in each member's day-to-day life. The group routinely frequents specific places in Rome, especially those reachable by train and subway—Termini, Flaminio, Piramide (with an excursion to Ostia)—and when away from the group, the narrator often sits in contemplation (writing poetry or lighting matches) in the quiet nature of Pincio, overlooking the city.

Within the overarching structure of “Rapdipunt” as a favola/fiaba, there is also a series of favole told by the story’s characters. Two youths visiting, one having lived in Cuba and the other in Canada, as well as an elderly man and the narrator herself, tell their tales in different modes. The *canadese* turns to English and rap to tell his story while the *cubano* uses the visuality of his dreadlocks and plant life to tell his. Later, while Mauro (identified by the narrator as the leader of the group) “stava combinando degli impicci” [he was wheeling and dealing (280)]<sup>43</sup> an elderly man approaches him and a favola set in East Africa unfolds (41). This encounter changes Mauro’s urban trajectories, inspiring him to explore the neighborhood of Trastevere and the *Orto Botanico*. In the botanical garden, the elderly man shows Mauro an incense plant native to East Africa. The next day (or a short time later), unable to find Mauro in his usual spots, the narrator locates him sitting alone under a tree.<sup>44</sup> Here, he recounts a sequence of extraordinary events during his time with the *vecchietto*. In turn, the narrator tells him about the East African fairytales her mother used to tell her (and of which Mauro was unaware).<sup>45</sup> Thus, the structure of the fiaba is reinforced once again as expressed by Ali Farah: “Nel racconto ho inserito la figura di un vecchietto che esattamente come nelle fiabe aiuta l’eroe nella sua ricerca. Anche il gigante appartiene al mondo delle fiabe” (“I nodi” 3) [I inserted into

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<sup>43</sup> All English translations of “Rapdipunt” are by Giovanna Bellesia and Victoria Offredi Poletto published as “Punt Rap” in *Metamorphoses 14.2* (2006).

<sup>44</sup> Mauro’s proximity to the tree should not go unnoticed since the shade cast by trees is a traditional location for storytelling in African narratives.

<sup>45</sup> The narrator mentions Gedi Babow the Giant: “gigante Gedi Babow che portava due grossi bracciali d’oro, il gigante Gedi Babow, quello che ha scoperto l’incenso e l’ha cominciato a coltivare in venti valli” (42) [Gedi Babow the Giant who used to wear two big gold bracelets that he buried under a tree. Gedi Babow, the same one who discovered incense and began to cultivate it in twenty valleys]. Earlier in the story, she refers to Mauro as “gigante Mauro” because he is so tall.

the story the figure of the elderly man who, exactly like in fables, helps the hero in his quest].

The story concludes at the Orto Botanico where Mauro uproots an incense plant and invites the narrator to follow his lead on an unknown journey. Hence, we will see how movement (throughout the city as well as in diaspora), storytelling, race, the natural world, solidarity, and leadership prominently factor into the protagonists' inquiry and introspection into identity—that is, the rap—in “Rapdipunt.”

The narrator first mentions rap when describing the canadese, yet the rap of the story is not the canadese's rap solo in English; it is the collective and plural rap inspired by the land of Punt, the Horn of Africa. Ali Farah creates this literary rap through the lyrical and musical elements of rap itself—sampling, timing, and storytelling. Through the most recognizable form of rap (performed by the canadese) she sets the stage for the overarching rap of the story and consequently contrasts it with the sterilized, homogenized images and sounds of rap and blackness in the global market. The narrator draws the reader's attention to this contrast through her disapproval of both the canadese and his friend the cubano. In the following passages describing the two, she reveals her contempt for the group's facile praise of male newcomers while she continues to struggle for the group's acknowledgement and respect. In her eyes, esthetics and the English language do not hold their own in the process of constructing identity—rap—in a postcolonial Italian context:

Questo amico non lo sopportavo più per quanto se la tirava, continuava a parlare in inglese e ogni due minuti diceva: ‘You know?’. Che palle, ma guai a dirlo a Mauro.

Se ne sta lì e si beve tutte le stronzate che gli racconta. Il canadese parlava di quanto era fico in America, che lì c'erano i fratelli che sapevano come farsi

rispettare dai bianchi e il rap, era roba tosta, e cominciava a cantare e tutti i ragazzi intorno che lo ammiravano e si facevano tradurre le parole (37).

[I couldn't take this guy any longer because he was such a show-off. He kept speaking English and every few minutes he'd say 'you know,' what a drag, but I wouldn't dare say anything to Mauro.

He sits there and sucks up all the fucking rubbish this guy tells him. The Canadian guy talked about how cool it was to be in America, how the brothers there knew how to get whites to respect them, and that rap was cool stuff and he would start singing and all the guys around admired him, and they had him translate the words (277-278)].

The narrator's skepticism lies within what she views as a false sense of empowerment since the male group members give precedence to outside influences as a source of power. In the cubano's case, she takes issue with a false sense of knowledge based strictly on appearances (skin color, gender, and hair styles):

Insomma, la più grande stronzata del canadese è stata quando s'è presentato il pomeriggio con un amico suo cubano, sempre tutti neri, perché i bianchi non ce li vogliono, e questo tizio c'aveva dei *dread locks* stupendi che tutti glieli toccavano. Allora uno dei ragazzi gli chiede come se li è fatti e quello comincia a parlare di una cosa che si fa con il succo delle foglie di cactus, che fa venire dei dread locks da paura e siccome era un nero, tutti credevano che conoscesse chissà quale tradizione e lo ascoltavano con attenzione (38).



[In short, the biggest bullshit the Canadian said was when he arrived one afternoon with a Cuban friend of his. Always blacks, because they want no whites, and this guy had wonderful dreadlocks that everyone touched. So one of the guys asks him how he got them and he starts talking about something you do with the juice from cactus leaves, that makes terrific dread locks and since he was black everyone thought he knew all those traditions and listened to him carefully (278)].

The narrator perceives the limitations of this misconception of appearances and feels doubly excluded from both being able to share her knowledge and to access alternative sources of knowledge. In the narrator's view, the mesmerizing, seemingly magical effects of the dreadlocks and rap in English on the male members of the group provide a fleeting, superficial sense of power. As we will see, the real magic of the fiaba/favola and the recapturing of the power of rap (for the narrator and in the end for Mauro) manifests itself in the transformational power of East African traditions and histories in an Italian context. Such power is derived from intergenerational interactions/storytelling (between mothers and daughters for the narrator and between community elders and youths for Mauro) as well as from a breakdown of gendered barriers (Mauro's willingness to hang with the narrator and to finally hear her out).

Mauro's encounter with the elderly man differs from interactions with the canadese and the cubano because the vecchietto's telling of the story of Said, a powerful East African hero and poet, provides Mauro with a direct link to his surroundings. That is, he begins to feel less out of place in Rome because, with the vecchietto's help, he comes to see and experience his own East Africa there. Unlike the fixed and distant geographical territories inaccessible to the youths and relegated to conjecture—"tutti i giorni pensiamo a un paese, perché al paese nostro non so se

vorrei andarci subito, magari fra un po', come dice Mauro, per abitarci davvero" (35-36) [Every day we think of a country, because as far as our country goes, I'm not sure if I would like to go there right away. Perhaps I'll go in a while, as Mauro says, to live there for good" (276)]—this territory lives beyond Mauro's imagination and inhabits Rome. In contrast to the aimless folklore the narrator perceives in the cubano's stories (his grand plan for procuring cactus leaves fails miserably) and to the canadese's essentializing rap, the vecchietto shows, through storytelling (he narrates how Said led his troops to courageously defeat Italian and British colonial troops in the Horn, evading capture and leaving behind poems to attest to his enemies' foolishness), that there is an elsewhere—a culture rich with history, art forms, and resistance—found in Rome, comprising an integral part of it. In this way, the leadership for which Mauro, the narrator, and the group were longing becomes more tangible and personal. Through the recognition and respect of East African culture, the vecchietto disassociates Mauro's skin color from criminality and foreignness—instead, he ties it to greatness (he sees a resemblance between Mauro and Said)—and the narrator's predilection for poetry is contextualized within a rich poetic tradition rooted in self-determination.

The concept of rap comes to terms perfectly with arguments by critics, such as La Porta, who claim that the language of migrant literature is too pure, while ignoring the innovative arrangement of narrative structures and organic language of the characters.<sup>46</sup> The story begins

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<sup>46</sup> It is unfortunate that the story itself was misconstrued as pure autobiographical testimony by La Porta, who was disappointed by a lack of morphological exoticism. Ali Farah evidences that it is possible to bear witness in a variety of avenues and modes through the art of her first-person constructions without sacrificing her accountability to the realities she portrays. La Porta grasped onto the phrase "la mia anima africana" uttered by the narrator in admiration of Pincio's natural beauty as proof of Ali Farah's nostalgia for her roots and self-removal/distancing from Italian society: "La italo-somala Ubx Cristina Ali Farah scrive di fermarsi volentieri al Pincio: 'mi piace starci e vedere le cose con un po' di respiro, questo mi sa che è per la mia anima africana...'. Anche lei ha come il bisogno di dichiararlo, di esibire la propria alterità, fatalmente

with Africa as a vague, all-encompassing identity that Ali Farah reworks and lyricizes to show solidarity found in its particularities, illustrated by the encounter in the botanical garden. In fact, Ali Farah refers to the story as collective and plural in its creation, performance, and audience. True to her vocation as a poet, she brings together seemingly disparate identities and reveals their complementary nature and lyricism. Thus rap, an extension/manifestation of poetry, provides a significant platform for issues such as sampling, imitation, and innovation—issues also relatable to canonical literary traditions and migration literature—however, Ali Farah never loses sight of their social applications. The African/East African/Italian/Roman youths in the story, Italian colonialism, and as a further extension “migrant” literature in Italian, are not mere imitations that pale in comparison to their “originals.” Instead, “Rapdipunt,” through the creative and collaborative medium of rap, does away with one-dimensional notions of identity.

The element of sampling in rap sheds light on the art of (re)appropriation and (re)contextualization fundamental to Ali Farah’s writing and to her protagonists’ journey and personal growth in “Rapdipunt.” Sampling entails taking available resources (beats, chorus lines, etc.) and making them your own, changing the perspective of the audience to appreciate the extraordinary qualities of the ordinary. It is a process of reconfiguring parts of a whole whose reconfigured parts reveal a different whole as in the process of reconfiguring Italian identity to reflect racial diversity. The female narrator/protagonist takes issue with the act of imitation, not rap itself, but rap whose globalized expression does not allow for personalized and

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imbevuta di esotismo. Culture e idiomi convivono nelle nostre metropoli, ma non si sono ancora mescolati tra loro. La lingua italiana in queste pagine non viene sufficientemente reinventata [...]” (“Ma esistono” 5). La Porta completely overlooked the function of rap in the story. Interpretations such as this one show what incredible bias still grips the Italian market and the segregated notion of *italianità* that dominates artistic/personal expression in Italy.

localized expression. Ultimately, she and Mauro gravitate toward a rap that is identifiable as from both the Horn of Africa and Rome.

The last lines of “Rapdipunt” bring all the elements of the Punt rap together. The incense plant replaces the cactus, the storytelling incorporates East African and Italian histories, movement takes on a higher and more expansive purpose, and leadership is based on a newfound solidarity:

Era una piantina piccola piccola, verde cenere, non molto diversa dalle altre, ma chissà perché a noi ci pareva una cosa magica.

Mauro controlla per vedere se c'è qualcuno, poi con le sue due lunghe braccia tira su il vaso. Inizia a correre in mezzo alle piante con l'incenso tra le braccia e prende la strada verso l'alto.

‘Seguimi,’ mi dice (42-43).

[It was a really tiny plant, ash green, not very different from the others, but for some reason it seemed magical to us.

Mauro checks to make sure there is no one around, and then with his long arms he picks up the pot. And he begins to run through the plants holding the incense in his arms and heading uphill. Follow me, he tells me (280)].

The magical element of the incense plant, although small and ordinary looking, symbolizes the story’s rap—it brings people together, it gets them talking, and it emanates a sacred sense of power. It is like a microphone that projects and amplifies the protagonists’ and their ancestors’ voices. The rap “di Punt” brings together all the pieces—poetry, localized, personal and family

history, connections to landscape and the natural world as well as solidarity and communality, leading to a path of empowerment. Mauro breaks away from the group's movement underground and on the train tracks; he moves to higher ground.

The youths in the story express their frustration with the historical ignorance imposed on them and the historical consciousness denied to them. Evidence for this frustration is shown in the eagerness of the male group members to grasp onto any bits of information they come into contact with (dreadlocks and rap) and is most poignant in Mauro's encounter with the *vecchietto*.

Così continuava a far domande al *vecchietto* e quello gli raccontava un sacco di cose e poi gli voleva pure far vedere una pianta che cresce dalle parti nostre, l'albero dell'incenso. E Mauro, che tutte queste cose non le sa, c'è pure rimasto male, perché hanno trovato la serra chiusa e diceva: 'Ma te pare che la tengono in una serra?!' ma il *vecchietto* gli ha spiegato bene che ci vuole un clima buono come il nostro per non farla morire (42).

[So he kept asking the little old man questions and he replied telling him all sorts of things and when they reached the botanical garden he even wanted to show him a small plant that grows in our country: the incense tree. And Mauro, who knows nothing of all this, was disappointed, because they found the greenhouse closed and he screamed: 'Why the hell do they keep it in a green house?' And the little old man carefully explained to him that it takes a good climate like ours to keep it from dying (280)].

For Mauro, the incense plant serves as a portal to another world view and restores purpose and meaning to his surroundings. The plant contains knowledge and consciousness, decipherable through a magical language.

Like in many fairytales, magic or allusions to magic in “Rapdipunt” connect with contemporary, worldly struggles. In this story, magic is derived from history (both social and personal, as well as linguistic) and is represented by everyday presences made extraordinary. Rap and English, dreadlocks, and cactus leaves hold kernels of magic for the youths, yet it is not until Mauro and the narrator connect with East African traditions that they are able to synthesize, that is “rap,” these elements. The search for this magic equaling power guides the group members’ movements throughout the city. Consequently, they designate sacred ground that fosters magical qualities in them where social restraints (namely racism and discrimination) are eliminated or at least weakened (the narrator still faces the obstacles of being a young woman). The botanical garden occupies a conflictual space in the sense that it cannot be freely accessed, yet it holds something that Mauro and the narrator deem to be vital to their identity. The incense plant is domesticated and illustrates the difficulty in re-appropriating one’s history and identity.

As the “Rap” in the title suggests, Ali Farah focuses on the musicality of the protagonists’ words, cadence, phrasing, synthesis, and sampling to construct her story. The nuances and range of Ali Farah’s oral components brilliantly shine through in “Rapdipunt” and provide another testament to the versatility, contemporary nature, and artistry of her writing. Besides representing actual speech that fills real life spaces in Rome, the regional dialect of the characters calls into question perceptions of race, national identity, and citizenship. The city’s Roman setting is communicated by speech before the narrator references any of its landmarks. On the first page Mauro asks, “‘Che te prendi?’” (35) [“Whatchavin?” (276)]. His Roman sound

resounds on the following pages: “‘Ma che t’è preso?!’” (36) [“What’s wrong with you?” (277)]; “‘Ma che stai a dì? Ma a te chi te capisce?’” (42) [“What the heck are you talking about? What do you know about it!” (280)]; “‘Oggi, quanto ce levi?’” (37) [“How much are you ripping me off for today?” (277)]. The last question receives an equally regional specific response from a café owner: “‘Come ce levi? Quello che me devi, me devi!: Non te sto mica a frega!’” (37) [“What do you mean, ripping you off? You owe me what you owe me. I don’t cheat you!” (277)]. Thus, the body speaks in its own right as a counterpoint to essentialist discourse and demystifies the disconnect between skin color and italianità. At the same time, the body functions as an indicator of spatial integration (to what extent it is achieved), registering both the tensions and uneasiness experienced by the characters as well as their sense of ownership and occupancy.

Ali Farah explains the importance of place—the story’s cornerstone—where the body, the city, and the self become one: “Mentre tutt’intorno la gente si aspettava qualcosa, appiccicava stereotipi, al Flaminio smettevi di essere nero, sfigato, ballerino, focoso e stavi tra noi, in quella nuda pienezza. Tra noi non è mai esclusivo, è qualcosa che comprende insieme, in compartecipazione. Avrei scritto il mio primo racconto su Roma partendo tra noi” (“Tra noi” 15) [While people all around us expected something, they attached us to stereotypes, at Flaminio you stopped being black, hapless, hot-blooded, a dancer, and you were among us, in its raw completeness. Being among us is never exclusive, it is something that encompasses togetherness, a shared experience. I would write my first story on Rome getting underway among us]. Romano Beré’s communal, collective experience proves fundamental in mapping out the group’s magical spaces, such as Flaminio, in “Rapdipunt.” Here he explains the power of Flaminio: “Quel piazzale era ‘l’unico posto dove io potevo dire quello che volevo. Quegli attimi

erano attimi di piena sincerità, tra noi. Dove non dovevi fare nessuna parte. Eri te stesso, mentre stavi tra noi” (“Tra noi” 15) [That small square was the only place where I could say what I wanted. Those moments were moments full of sincerity, among us. Where you didn’t have to pretend. You were yourself, while you were among us]. Flaminio serves as a place of refuge, a safe place to experiment with one’s identity, yet it is also a place of isolation. It is a place where perceptions and notions of home and homeland contradict each other at times and coincide at others. On afternoons at the Flaminio stop, the youths seem to enjoy freedom of expression—a delicate freedom that stares from passersby threaten to disrupt: “e siccome siamo tanti, la gente ci guarda e a me prende sempre l’agitazione, perché so che ci vuole un attimo e fanno a botte, soprattutto quando ci sono poliziotti, li provocano sempre e c’hanno sempre ‘sta cosa, che la polizia ci punta perché siamo neri, chissà poi fino a che punto è vero” (39) [Since there’s a lot of us, people stare. I always get unnerved by it because I know that it only takes a second for a fight to break out, especially when the police are there. They always provoke the situation and there’s this belief that the police target us because we are black. Who knows to what extent it’s true]. The dynamics of the group illustrate how place and space give rise to voice as well as take it away. The narrator deals with her marginality in the group by finding places for her own voice in the urban landscape—spaces associated with the natural world in Pincio and later in Trastevere with Mauro. Hence, the rap of the story involves mapping identity, topographically and figuratively, to reconfigure one’s relationship to the city and to create a new world view.

Striving to come into one’s own characterizes a typical adolescent stage in modern societies; however, this story shows some very particular complications to achieving this goal. Complicating the class struggle depicted in Pasolini’s works of youths moving about Rome, race



and Italy's colonial past become part of the urban movement of the youths in "Rapdipunt."<sup>47</sup> Easily singled out in Italian society for the color of their skin, the youths long to be visible for both their individual and collective strengths. Ali Farah employs the trope of the fairy tale and the fable to show such complexities and to create a message of hope that imagination and myth can lead to historical consciousness and racial justice in an Italy where new heroes are made and are in dialogue with their predecessors like Said. Both the short story "Rapdipunt" and the forthcoming novel *Il comandante del fiume* deal with adolescence, diaspora, and the city of Rome through the framework of the favola/fiaba. Ali Farah explained to me that themes of good and evil (*bene* and *male*) propel storytelling in *Il comandante del fiume*. In "Rapdipunt," the favola presents a way for youths living in Rome to connect with East African cultural traditions and represents a breakthrough on their journey in search of identity. Transition and transformation embody these favole. In addition to serving as a platform to chronicle the personal growth of its protagonists (learning a lesson), the favola/fiaba also reminds the reader of its origins in orality and folk traditions. Empowering storytellers on the margins of society—women, elders, racial and ethnic minorities—the favola/fiaba become a mode to circumvent rejection and exclusion. The collective storytelling within the plot of "Rapdipunt," as well as throughout its creative and performative process, functions as a source of power. Ali Farah perceives this collective aspect as imperative to her own work.

## **2. *Madre piccola***

*Madre piccola* (2007) won the prestigious literary prize, Premio Elio Vittorini (2008), and stands as one of the most successful and innovative works of Italian postcolonial literature.

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<sup>47</sup> Many of the youths of East African descent who would meet at Flaminio were children of ambassadors and foreign officials. Barbara Braccini writes about this aspect of the Flaminio group in her ethnographic study *I giovani di origine africana: Integrazione socio-culturale delle seconde generazioni in Italia* (2000).

Divided into nine chapters, with three alternating first person narrators/protagonists, *Madre piccola*'s narrations take place within numerous cities—Rome, Mogadishu, Kenya, Amsterdam, Utrecht, London, possibly Toronto, Helsinki, towns in Germany—between several continents—Africa, Europe, and North America—and portray the complex network of movement and communication within the Somali diaspora. Each chapter bears the name of its narrator: Domenica Axad/Axad/Domenica (three nominal variations for the same person) and Barni, two women who are paternal cousins and soul sisters from their childhood in Mogadishu, and Taageere, Domenica's new husband and father of her newborn son. Taageere is also from Mogadishu, but met Domenica in North America. In alternating chapters, these narrators mark the beginning, middle, and end of the novel: Domenica Axad is the title of the prelude, Taageere is the title of the interlude, and Barni is the title of the epilogue. At the epilogue's close there is also a glossary that defines the Somali words, expressions, and citations interspersed throughout the novel. The table of contents reads as follows: 1) Prelude—Domenica Axad; 2) Barni; 3) Taageere; 4) Axad; 5) Interlude—Taageere; 6) Barni; 7) Taageere; 8) Domenica; 9) Epilogue—Barni; Glossary. To give an idea of the intertwined network of relationships portrayed in the novel, I am including a list of main characters as it appears in the English translation, *Little Mother*.<sup>48</sup>

#### LIST OF MAIN CHARACTERS

- Ardo (1)= *Mother* of Barni  
*Wife* of Sharmaarke  
*Aunt* of Domenica Axad, Libeen, and Shamsa
- Ardo (2)= Young Somali woman Barni meets in Rome

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<sup>48</sup> The original Italian version does not have this feature, but Ali Farah expressed to me that she would have liked it to have had it there.

Barni= *Cousin* of Domenica Axad, Libeen, and Shamsa  
*Daughter* of Sharmaarke and Ardo

Caasha= *Sister* of Taageere and Luul

Domenica/= *Cousin* of Barni, Libeen, and Shamsa  
Axad *Daughter* of Taariikh and his Italian wife  
*Second wife* of Taageere and mother of his second son

Foodcadde= *Brother* of Sharmaarke and Taariikh  
*Father* of Libeen and Shamsa  
*Husband* of Xaliima

Libeen= *Cousin* of Barni and Domenica Axad  
*Brother* of Shamsa  
*Son* of Foodcadde and Xaliima

Luul= *Sister* of Taageere and Caasha

Shamsa= *Cousin* of Barni and Domenica Axad  
*Sister* of Libeen  
*Daughter* of Foodcadde and Xaliima

Sharmaarke= *Brother* of Taariikh and Foodcadde  
*Father* of Barni  
*Husband* of Ardo

Shukri= *First wife* of Taageere and mother of his first son

Taageere= *Husband* of Shukri first and Domenica Axad later

Taariikh= *Brother* of Sharmaarke and Foodcadde  
*Father* of Domenica Axad  
*Husband* of Italian woman

Xaliima= *Wife* of Foodcadde  
*Mother* of Libeen and Shamsa

*Aunt of Barni and Domenica Axad*

Every character is defined in terms of kinship in this novel. The novel's title is a play on the Italian translation of the Somali term for maternal aunt (*habaryar*). Ali Farah explains the term: "Habaryar significa zia materna e letteralmente tradotto madre piccola. In somalo si usa rivolgersi ai nipoti chiamandoli 'zia/zio,' o ai figli con 'mamma/papà'" (*Sagarana* 8) [Habaryar means maternal aunt and, translated literally, little mother. In Somali it is custom to address nieces and nephews by calling them 'aunt/uncle,' or children as 'mom/dad.'] She outlines why she chose this title for the novel:<sup>49</sup>

Il titolo, *Madre piccola*, è il calco della parola somala *habaryar*: significa "donna piccola," ma anche "madre piccola": è un termine che si usa per chiamare la zia materna. Ho scelto questo titolo per varie ragioni. In somalo, come in alcune regioni meridionali italiane si parla per esempio al bambino chiamandolo con il legame che si ha con lui: la mamma dice: "Vieni qua, (a)mamma!", e la zia: "vieni qua, (a)zia!". Si mette in piano la relazione che lega le due persone (Festival Conversation 2).

[The title, *Little Mother*, is a calque of the Somali word *habaryar*: it means 'small woman,' but also 'little mother:' it is a term used to name a maternal aunt. I chose this title for various reasons. In Somali, like in some Southern Italian regions, one calls out to a child by naming the relationship that exists with him: a

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<sup>49</sup> Ali Farah first used this title for a short story ("Madre piccola") involving a different plot and characters.

mom says: ‘Come here, (to) mama!’ and an aunt: ‘come here, (to) auntie!’ The relationship that bonds the two people is highlighted].

Through the course of the chapters, an ensemble of protagonists tell and retell multiple narratives that reveal intersected memories, which when taken individually risk being mistaken as scattered or esoteric, but when interpreted as a whole they communicate a greater truth and a lived trauma. The author sums up the novel’s premise as an act of reconstructing one’s world through a remapping of personal relationships and communal space:

La domanda che sta alla base del romanzo è: cosa succede a un individuo quando il mondo da lui conosciuto improvvisamente viene a mancare? I personaggi del romanzo cercano la risposta, personale e collettiva, a questa domanda. Ciò che ci permette di sopravvivere è il nostro immaginario e le relazioni, il dialogo e il continuo misurarsi con il mondo circostante. Ricostruire la propria mappa simbolica ci permette di ricollocarsi in uno spazio comune fatto di rapporti interpersonali (Festival Conversation 2).

[The underlying question of the novel is: What happens to an individual when the world he knows has suddenly gone missing? The novel’s characters search for the personal and collective answer to this question. It’s our imagination and relationships, dialogue and constant acclimation to our surroundings that allows us to survive. Reconstructing our own symbolic map allows us to relocate ourselves in a common space made up of interpersonal relationships].

As the character Barni states, “Ci sono dei nodi che si sciolgono solo quando li mostri” (182) [There are some knots that are loosened only when you reveal them (158)].<sup>50</sup> By evidencing these nodes the characters are able to confront/work through the great obstacles that have separated them. The narrators collectively show the ties that bind, yet they also disclose how some ties can be loosened and undone. Domenica Axad’s opening words focus on a constellation of nodes susceptible to reconfiguration: “*Soomaali baan ahay*,<sup>51</sup> come la mia metà che è intera. Sono il filo sottile, così sottile che si infila e si tende, prolungandosi. Così sottile che non si spezza. E il groviglio dei fili si allarga e mostra, chiari e ben stretti, i nodi, pur distanti l’uno dall’altro, che non si sciolgono” (1) [“*Soomaali baan ahay*,” like my half that is whole. I am the fine thread, so fine that it slips through and stretches, getting longer. So fine that it does not snap. And the tangled mass of threads widens and reveals the knots, clear and tight, that, though far from each other, do not unravel (1)]. The characters’ lives are represented by intersecting threads that loop, knot, and diverge from or converge on each other, yet they always remain part of a single cloth. The relationality between the chapters’ protagonists and narrators progresses in a similar way. The spatial configuration of the chapters develops various stages of contradiction, clarity, and solidarity in the narrators’ stories and life experiences. Each character has his/her own rhythm and rhetorical style.

Each chapter’s narrator also speaks to a named or unnamed person. Domenica Axad’s prelude, Taageere’s interlude and Barni’s epilogue ask questions and narrate stories that seem to be directed at the reader compared to their other chapters where their dialogues/monologues

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<sup>50</sup> All *Madre piccola* quotes translated in English are from the 2011 Indiana Press translation *Little Mother* by Giovanna Bellesia-Contuzzi and Victoria Offredi Poletto.

<sup>51</sup> Defined in the novel’s glossary as: “‘Somalo io sono,’ poesia composta nel 1977 da Cabdulqaadir Xirsi Siyaad ‘Yamyam’ (272) [“I am Somali,” 1977 poem by Cabdulqaadir Xirsi Siyaad, also known as “Yamyam.”

involve a specific set of ears and phantom questions and responses from an interlocutor. In her introduction (“Pearls in Motion”) to the novel’s English translation, Alessandra Di Maio mentions the dimensionalizing effect that the unknown interlocutors have on the characters: “On two separate occasions they converse with different interlocutors, who appear only in absentia in the novel but who, because of their ambiguous presence and inquiring spirit, help the reader to appreciate different facets of the protagonists’ personalities and to collate bits and pieces of their private histories” (xx). The chapters with named interlocutors are told in specific modes, whereas the prelude, interlude, and epilogue are testimonials without clear oral or written frameworks. For example: Barni’s first chapter is an interview conversation with a female Italian journalist; Taageere’s chapter 3 and Axad’s chapter 4 are phone conversations (Taageere speaks with his ex-wife Shukri and Axad speaks with Barni); Barni’s chapter 6 is a conversation with Axad and most likely the response to/other half of Axad’s chapter 4; Taageere’s chapter 7 is a conversation with an immigration interpreter/investigator; and Domenica’s chapter 8 is a letter she wrote to her psychologist. The prelude, interlude, and epilogue include verses of Somali oral poetry/songs (at times interpreted in Italian by Ali Farah) interspersed around the narrators’ words.

Domenica Axad/Axad/Domenica, a young woman in her late twenties/early thirties is the daughter of a Somali man and an Italian woman. She speaks of multiple beginnings, alluding to the various stages of her life as well as to the multiple origins inherited from her parents—her name itself attests to this multiplicity. Axad is the Somali/Arabic name (meaning “one” and therefore marking the first day of the week) her cousin Barni pairs with its Italian version “Domenica” before she (age nine) and her mother relocate to Italy. The duality and binarism manifested in these chapter titles chronicle the protagonist’s identity and physical journey to

come into her own. Domenica Axad focuses her narrations on the childhoods she spent in Mogadishu and Rome with each one equally divided in approximately nine-year periods. Axad describes her transformation into a refugee when, upon graduating from high school in Rome, she returns to Mogadishu only to flee immediately from civil war. The flight back to Rome and decision to break with her mother marks another nine- to ten-year period of the protagonist's life. Accompanied by her male cousin Libeen, Axad maps out geographies of the Somali diaspora as the two migrate together throughout Europe. Once Axad decides to continue her journey without Libeen, she embraces the Italian name given to her by her mother. This period culminates in Domenica's pregnancy with her son, Taarriikh (also the name of Domenica's father), her latest return to Rome, and a reunion with Barni after at least twenty years of separation. The dichotomies maternal/paternal, Italian/Somali manifest themselves in a variety of ways throughout these three chapters (by means of language, names, citizenship, familial relationships), yet, as we shall see, they ultimately find a resolution in Domenica's body.

Barni, whose father is the brother of Domenica's father, is the first person Domenica mentions and whom she identifies as "il mio principio" (1) [my beginning (1)], "mia sorella, la mia seconda anima, il mio completamento" (247) [my sister, my second soul, she made me whole (213)]. The older of the two female cousins, Barni acts as a sort of linguistic mediator. She facilitates the speech of several characters, including the young Domenica in Mogadishu, a Somali refugee nicknamed "il Muto" (Maxamed X) who is hospitalized in Rome where she has been living and working for years in exile as a hospital obstetrician (translated as a midwife in the English edition), and Taageere who confesses to an interpreter: "Non l'ho detto a nessuno, l'ho detto solo a una ragazza che ho incontrato alcuni giorni dopo. È grazie a quella ragazza che sono riuscito a parlare di nuovo. Si chiama Barni, la luminosa, è la cugina di mia moglie



Domenica” (213) [I have told nobody, I only told a girl I met a few days later. It was thanks to that girl that I began to speak again. Her name is Barni, full of light; she’s my wife Domenica’s cousin (185-186)].<sup>52</sup> Barni is the heart and soul of the novel and it is no coincidence that she wears a heart-shaped birthmark on her forehead, a feature she inherited from her father (who died as a martyr for democracy in Somalia).

She begins her narration in an interview with a female Italian journalist. A tragic event has just taken place, one that proves to be a compelling element in several narratives by other authors of Somali origin—the shipwreck and deaths of Somali refugees off the coast of Lampedusa, followed by a funeral attended by state and local officials at the Campidoglio in Rome on October 24, 2003.<sup>53</sup> This tragedy sparks a newfound interest in Somalia, disconnected as always from Italy’s colonial history, and leads Barni to connect events dispersed, isolated, and/or off the radar of the Italian media and public knowledge. She is concerned about her story being corrupted by the press’ written word and worries that the interpretation of events will be derived from a limited and simplistic scope. In order to tell her story, she tells an assemblage of

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<sup>52</sup> Barni attended Italian school in Mogadishu with Domenica and would help her communicate in Somali to match her level of proficiency in Italian, especially upon Domenica’s return from summer vacations in Italy: “Era Barni chi mi offriva riparo ogni volta che tornavo, era lei chi mi aiutava a scivolare rapidamente dentro l’altra lingua” (238) [It was Barni who gave me protection each time I returned, it was she who helped me slip quickly back into the other language (206)]. “Il mio principio è Barni quando tocca a me raccontare le storie, mi chiede quelle dei libri che leggo e traduce le parole che non so [...]” (2) [My beginning is Barni when it’s my turn to tell stories, she asks for the ones from the books I’m reading and translates the words that I don’t know [...]] (2).

<sup>53</sup> Sadly there were shipwrecks involving Somali refugees trying to reach the Italian coast before 2003 (1996 usually marks *anno zero* when documentation on shipwrecks started to emerge after two major ones occurred on April 25 and December 25, 1996 and claimed approximately 300 lives).

*Roma Capitale*.

<[http://comune.roma.it/wps/portal/pcr?contentId=NEW134119&jp\\_pagecode=newsview.wp&ahew=contentId;jp\\_pagecode](http://comune.roma.it/wps/portal/pcr?contentId=NEW134119&jp_pagecode=newsview.wp&ahew=contentId;jp_pagecode)>.

other refugees' stories, highlighting the importance of her winding narrative in staying true to the nature of the Somali diaspora. Barni employs *fioretti* (anecdotes) in her narratives to convey a message of accountability and civic-minded ethics, and speaks to open up inquiry, to connect to other stories and build upon them. Like Domenica, she recognizes the virtues of fragmented memories to fill in the lacunae of nationalist discourse.<sup>54</sup> For Barni, memory has a socially engaged purpose: "Ho una memoria selettiva, le premetto. Ricordo quello che voglio ricordare. E quello che voglio ricordare è una delle voci che vi sollecita a non dimenticare il vostro passato di emigranti. Storia circolare di povera gente mossa dal desiderio" (15) [I have a selective memory. I remember what I want to remember. And what I want to remember is one of their voices urging you Italians not to forget your emigrant past. History repeating the story of poor people spurned on by yearning...(14)]. Since her nations' memories (Somalia and Italy) are fleeting and selective, Barni (as well as Domenica and Taageere) counters and complements them in a non-linear fashion.

Although she does not descend from Domenica's maternal lineage as the title *habaryar/madre piccola*/little mother implies, I interpret Barni as the *madre piccola* of the novel since she is the essence of maternity and maternal nurturing, and the aunt of Domenica and Taageere's son Taariikh. Though she has no children of her own (she was once married to a Somali man, but they divorced), Barni's life centers on mothering. From looking after her mentally ill mother and Domenica as a child, to practicing her profession as a midwife, to providing support for Somali refugees, to entering into a partnership with Domenica to raise Taariikh, Barni provides the stability that a parent/mother ideally would provide:

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<sup>54</sup> These fragmented memories not only confront historical amnesia in Italy; they also confront rhetoric of Somali clanism.

Tutti vedono come “madre piccola,” la *habaryar*, Barni, la quale non è madre, in realtà, è una madre simbolica, un’ostetrica. Nella società somala, ma non solo, esiste un concetto di maternità condivisa, non legata strettamente all’esperienza della donna, ma partecipata anche da chi non è madre biologicamente. Nella diaspora, ciò consente alla donna di non crollare, di avere un punto di forza nel farsi madre, nel prendersi cura di qualcun altro (Festival Conversation 2).

[Everyone sees Barni, who is not a mother, as a ‘little mother,’ the *habaryar*. Actually, she’s a symbolic mother, a midwife. In Somali society, but not exclusively, there is a shared concept of maternity, not strictly tied to the experience of the woman, but also taken part by someone who is not a biological mother. In the diaspora, what keeps a woman from falling apart is the strength she derives from making herself a mother, from taking care of another].

Barni is a counterpoint to Taageere’s fatherhood, yet she is also a mentor to Domenica.

Taageere is an absentee father of two and Somali refugee in his thirties living in a metropolitan North American city. Described by Domenica as “l’essenza stessa dello smarrimento” (252) [the very essence of bewilderment (217)], his character is more complex than simply being a deadbeat dad and philanderer, as his life is deeply marked by civil war, trauma, and the separation, isolation, and distances (physical and emotional) that these experiences entail. His relationship with the mothers (Shukri and Domenica) of his children hinges on migrations to Italy since by the novel’s end both women are living in Rome.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Shukri left a refugee camp in Kenya with her infant son to join Taageere in Rome only to find that Taageere had already gone elsewhere. Domenica returned to Rome to find Taageere’s missing sister Luul and decides she wants her son to be born there, “terra mia madre di cui

Taageere's narrations over the telephone are yet another indicator of his ruptured personal relationships and the distance that shapes them. In chapter 3, his one-sided conversations are with Shukri, his ex-wife in Rome who is remarried to an Italian converted to Islam. Like Barni and Domenica, Taageere is also concerned with the narrative form of his speech.

At some point all three narrators make it known that they are conscious of their narrative style and structure, especially when they are being interviewed, questioned, or in the case of Domenica, during psychological treatment. In her first chapter, Barni draws the most attention to her narration, emphasizing the difference between oral and written accounts, interviews and life storytelling. Barni describes her accounts/stories as having rhythm, movement, and dimensionality outside of a single linear plane: "Sto raccontando come un'onda, su e giù, su e giù. Spero che lei riesca a seguirmi, comunque" (27) [I am telling my story like a wave rising up and down, up and down. I hope you can follow me anyway (25)]. Like water receding in a wave before it is propelled forward again, Barni must give background details and describe previous events before offering a more rounded perspective of recent and current events. The written word comes under suspicion during the interview, as it is more prone to manipulation (editing, reconfiguration of its components, concealment of personal truth, etc.). Barni states, "È della scrittura in sé che non mi fido" (27) [It's the writing itself I do not trust (25)].

Indiscriminant editing, in fact, represents a threat to the core of the protagonists' stories, the details that bind them together. Barni brings up this issue: "Troppi dettagli la annoiano? Vale la pena ascoltare. Nello scrivere può tagliare qua e là frammenti superflui. Credo—a tratti—di divertirla, per questo non tralascio i dettagli. Troppi? O troppo di fila? È un fitto ricamo" (43) [Do too many details bore you? They're worth listening to. When you come to write the piece,

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conosco risvolti della memoria, segreti della parola" (135) [my motherland, whose facets of memory and deepest secrets of language I know so well (119)].

you can cut out the superfluous bits. At times, I really believe that you're enjoying my story and for this reason I am not leaving out the details. Too many? Or too many all at once? It is a tight weave (39)]. Barni seems to be conscious of the depersonalizing effects of the logocentrism Cavarero writes about. For Barni, orality, yet more importantly vocality, captures and safeguards details and calls into question the press's judgment of what sounds/words and narrative structures are superfluous or deliberately lost when transformed into written form.

The vocal aspect of the novel's three main protagonists also allows them to ask many questions throughout their narratives, as we can see in Barni's quote above. These questions come about and are directed in various directions—sometimes they are presumably posed by the narrator's interlocutors and repeated by the narrators, other times the narrator asks them directly to the interlocutors, readers, or both. These questions, especially when asked by Barni and Domenica, often convey an ironic tone that challenges the interlocutors'/readers' perception of the protagonists' identity. Questioning highlights the relationality of human voices as well as disrupts barriers between the voice and the written word.

Ali Farah constructs speech that defines her characters' uniqueness, yet at the same time creates and reveals a network of relations. As I mentioned earlier, the language(s) spoken by Ali Farah's characters reveals varied generational, historical, and intercultural ties. In responding to a question about speech/language in *Madre piccola*, the author points out: "Per quanto riguarda la lingua, ho cercato di distinguere le voci dei vari personaggi: Barni utilizza spesso varianti somale di parole italiane (parole italiane entrate nel lessico somalo e modificate foneticamente). Invece il personaggio maschile, Taageere, inventa le parole, è una fonte perpetua

di neologismi” (Festival Conversation 2)<sup>56</sup> [In regard to the language, I tried to distinguish the voices of the various characters: Barni often uses Somali variants of Italian words (Italian words introduced into the Somali vocabulary and phonetically altered). Instead, the male character Taageere invents words, he is a perpetual source of neologisms].

Issues about language, communication, and the written word recur throughout *Madre piccola*; however, of all the novel’s protagonists, Domenica manifests these issues to the point of writing on her body and the page. The reader is made privy to this act briefly in Axad’s chapter 4 telephone conversation with Barni and at length in Domenica’s last chapter, which is a letter addressed to her psychologist. In the letter, Domenica composes a chronological and genealogical retelling of her life experience that illustrates the evolvement of her self-expression. She begins with her Italian education in Mogadishu and her role as an interpreter or *dissimulatrice* (233), as she states, for her mother. During time spent in Italy and Somalia, she describes the struggle between forgetting language (involuntarily and deliberately) and resurfacing it (with help and independently) in diaspora.

She becomes aware of the power of language as she experiments with silence: “Già da piccola, usassi il silenzio come arma. Se c’era qualcosa contro cui oppormi io smarrivo, deliberatamente, la parola. Tuttavia, così come la perdevo, la recuperavo con altrettanta facilità. Il mio non era un silenzio traumatico, era un silenzio volontario, consapevole” (252-253) [As a child I already used silence as a weapon. If there was something I needed to fight against, I deliberately lost my voice. And yet, just as easily as I lost it, I also got it back. Mine was not a traumatic silence; it was a conscious, voluntary silence (218)]. It is not until after she flees

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<sup>56</sup> Some of the Somali words derived from Italian that Barni uses are mentioned on page 4 and 5 of this dissertation. Some examples of Taageere’s neologisms are: “logicammino” and “aerofagia” (192).

Mogadishu and feels a growing distance between herself and her parents that silence changes meaning in her life: “Ma insieme al silenzio questa volta c’era qualcosa d’altro, assai più difficile da comprendere. I tagli riemersero” (253) [This time there was something else along with this silence, something far more difficult to understand. The cuts were resurfacing (218)]. Domenica explains that the *tagli* on her body started after she and her mom relocated to Italy and she was deprived of “una delle mie voci” (239) [one of my voices (206)], referring to Barni and Somali, her paternal language: “Alla fine della terza media, pensavo già che la vita fosse abbastanza insopportabile da non valer la pena di essere vissuta. Ricordo quel periodo perché fu allora che emerse il problema dei tagli. Le fratture riaffioravano, insieme alle rimembranze, e dovevo trovare il modo di tenerle a bada” (244) [By the time I finished middle school, I already believed life was so unbearable that it wasn’t worth living. I remember that period because that’s when the problem with the cutting started. The cracks resurfaced along with the memories, and I needed a way to control them (211)].

The inability to fully express herself verbally manifests itself on Domenica’s body. She inscribes her body as a means of survival and an attempt to make sense of her life when silence is no longer sufficient. In the letter to her psychologist, Domenica questions possible interpretations of the cuts:

Fu perché mi sentivo eccentrica e indefinita che cominciai a torturarmi la pelle?  
Credevo, forse, di poter separare con la lametta l’ambiguità della mia essenza?  
Mi aiuterà lei stessa a comprendere.

Posso dirle che quello di tagliarmi divenne quasi un piacere morboso, mi compravo le lamette al supermercato, programmando il luogo e l’ora in cui le avrei utilizzate. Erano, per lo più, ferite lineari, tagli netti da cui osservavo il

sangue defluire, incisioni che ripassavo meticolosamente, fino a disegnare una ragnatela di fili sottili sulla pelle.

Era forse per dichiararmi che mi incidavo con tanto accanimento? Non è per segnare una presenza che esistono i riti di iniziazione? Non so se riuscirò a chiarire a lei e a me stessa l'origine di quelle lacerazioni. Il mio fine ultimo è quello di fornirle tutte le coordinate possibili per prevenirne un'insorgenza futura. Affronterò nuovamente la questione, ma non prima di averle raccontato come fu che confluì nella diaspora assieme agli altri (245-246).

[Was it because I felt eccentric and undefined that I began to torture my skin? Did I perhaps believe that with the blade I could cut off the ambiguity of my essence?

You, doctor, will help me understand.

I can tell you that cutting became almost a morbid pleasure; I used to buy the blades at the supermarket, planning the time and place where I would use them. They were, for the most part, linear wounds, clean cuts from which I watched the blood flow, incisions that I reviewed meticulously until I drew a web of thin threads on my skin.

Was it perhaps to make a statement that I cut myself with such rage? Aren't initiation rites meant to mark a presence? I do not know if I will be able to explain to you and to myself the origin of those lacerations. My ultimate goal is to provide you with all the possible information in order to avoid a future relapse.



I will discuss this matter again later, but not before I tell you how I ended up in the diaspora with others (212)].

Critics have often interpreted Domenica's treatment of her body as mutilation, so much so that Ali Farah herself felt compelled to declare emphatically to me and in a previous conversation how much Domenica's treatment of her body is not *autolesionismo*.<sup>57</sup> In a conversation at the 2008 Festival Azioni Inclementi at Schio (later transcribed and published online), Ali Farah explained:

Su Domenica-Axad ci sono letture controverse, perché molti vedono il fatto di scrivere sul proprio corpo come autolesionismo. Per me non è un atto autolesionista; però va detto che Domenica è il personaggio che vive di più la frattura tra quello che è voce e quello che è scrittura. Infatti è l'unico personaggio che scrive, utilizzando, oltretutto, un linguaggio formale, altisonante, più controllato. È un po' l'esperienza mia e di quello che ho sentito da tantissimi ragazzi di seconda generazione: ci difendiamo attraverso la lingua. È un elemento che permette di formare una appartenenza, un'appartenenza che i personaggi del romanzo sperimentano in varie forme. Domenica-Axad crede di appartenere solo

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<sup>57</sup> Michele Pandolfo and Simone Brioni identify Domenica's *tagli* as *autolesionismo* or *automutilazione*. Pandolfo interprets Domenica's cutting as her rejection of an Italian identity. Brioni offers a more nuanced interpretation he calls "dermo-autobiografia," referring to the *tagli* as an act of writing, yet he identifies this writing as a pathological condition, "un'insana sostituzione del linguaggio" (3) [an insane substitution for language]. He posits that this condition stems from the malaise of a double/hybrid identity, from failed multilingualism, as well as from the Catholic tradition of expiation. According to Brioni, Domenica acts to be "riconosciuta in virtù di una caratteristica linguistica piuttosto che corporea" [recognized for her linguistic virtues rather than for her physical appearance]. I disagree that the body takes a secondary position to the message of her "dermografia" and believe that by writing on her body, Domenica transforms the perception, yet not the importance, of her body. Like Brioni, I see a connection between mutilation and Italian colonialism in Somalia; however, I do not perceive that mutilation in Domenica's treatment of her body.

al territorio della lingua di sua madre. Questo rapporto con la lingua e il proprio corpo è molto violento (4).

[There are many controversial readings about Domenica-Axad because many people interpret the act of writing on her body as self-mutilation. For me, it isn't an act of self-mutilation; however, it should be noted that Domenica is the character who most lives the division between what is voice and what is writing. In fact, she is the only character who writes, prominently using a formal, resounding, more controlled type of language. It's a bit like my experience and that of so many second generation youths: We defend ourselves through language. It is an element that allows for the creation of belonging, a belonging that the novel's characters experiment with in various forms. Domenica-Axad thinks she only belongs to the territory of her mother tongue. This relationship with language and her body is very violent].

In our 2011 conversation in Rome, Ali Farah reaffirmed this sentiment and emphasized Domenica's writing to remedy her silence and oral expressivity: "Io dico sempre che quello che dicono anche di Domenica, di autolesionismo—per me non è autolesionismo. Lei—come se fosse questo fatto della difficoltà del parlare che lei scrive, scrive sulla sua pelle, scrive dappertutto" [I always say that what's said about Domenica, about self-mutilation—for me is not self-mutilation. She—it's as if she writes because she has difficulty speaking, she writes on her skin, she writes everywhere (167)]. My analysis of Ali Farah's novel in the light of Cavarero's theory of embodied voice supports Ali Farah's contention that Domenica's inscriptions on her body are not mutilations, but rather writing. Writing on the body and on the page compensate

for her difficulty in vocalizing her identity as her body in Italian culture has historically been portrayed as dissonant with her mother tongue. Domenica becomes deeply aware of this discrimination stemming from Italian colonialism/racism when she moves to Italy with her mother and contrasts the experience with her life in Mogadishu: “Essere per metà somala divenne un’enorme scocciataura per la quale mi trovavo sempre a dover ‘giustificare’ padronanza linguistica e carnagione, senza godere di nessun vantaggio alternativo. Ero già abituata a domande simili in senso inverso, ma a Mogadiscio si trattava più di prendere atto che di isolare una differenza” (243) [Being half Somali became an enormous headache for which I always had to “justify” my linguistic competence and my skin color, without enjoying anything in return. I was already accustomed to this kind of question, but in reverse. However, in Mogadshu it was more a case of being aware of the difference rather than isolating it (209-210)]. When Domenica does refer to mutilation, she considers it in terms of language:

Tornando dalle vacanze italiane, ciò che più mi terrorizzava era la condizione di tabula rasa linguistica in cui mi riducevo. Non so se il fenomeno sia noto agli studiosi o se sia qualcosa che riguarda solo la mia natura, ma accadeva che, dopo due mesi di assenza, mi occorresse quasi una settimana per recuperare l’uso del somalo.

Vivevo questa incapacità comunicativa come una grave mutilazione, soprattutto perché si trattava di una competenza dimezzata che mi impediva di emettere suoni comprensibili, ma non di capire le imprecazioni contro la mia amnesia (237).

[What terrified me most, returning from my Italian holidays, was finding myself reduced to the state of a linguistic tabula rasa. I do not know if this is a well-

known phenomenon or if it is simply related to my nature, but it so happened that, after a two-month absence, it took me almost a week to regain the use of the Somali language.

I experienced this inability to communicate as a serious mutilation, especially because it meant that my linguistic competence was cut in half. It prevented me from emitting comprehensible sounds, but it did not spare me from standing people who were cursing my amnesia (205)].

In this sense, Domenica's real mutilation is not self-inflicted (autolesionismo) or present in the tagli; rather, it is imposed on her speaking body through moments of misrecognition (linguistic and identity) by colonial social norms still currently in practice. That is, the disconnect between the appearance of her body and the sounds of her speech *perceived* by Italians and Somalis, not by Domenica, is where the mutilation occurs.

Cavarero's valorization of the vocal sheds more light on Domenica's linguistic mutilation. In the tradition of logocentrism, Domenica's non-semantic utterances are stigmatized, whereas Cavarero interprets them as fundamental markers of one's unique existence: "La semplice verità del vocalico, annunciata dalle voci senza neanche la mediazione della parola, comunica i dati elementari dell'esistenza: l'unicità e la relazionalità, ma anche la differenza sessuale e l'età [...] (14)" [The simple truth of the vocal, announced by voices without even the mediation of articulate speech, communicates the elementary givens of existence: uniqueness, relationality, sexual difference, and age (8)]. In this light, the voice, even before language and sight, identifies Domenica. Cavarero describes how logocentrism occludes such identity: "Se si assolutizza il registro della parola, magari identificandolo con un sistema del linguaggio di cui la voce sarebbe funzione, è infatti inevitabile che l'emissione vocalica non

indirizzata alla parola non sia altro che un *resto*” (19) [When the register of speech is totalized—for instance, when it is identified with a language system of which the voice would be a mere function—it is indeed inevitable that the vocal emission not headed for speech is nothing but a remainder (12-13)]. By writing on her body non-semantically, Domenica gives meaning to the “meaningless emissions,” her voice, of her childhood.

The body emerges as a key element of reconciliation, recognition, and acceptance in Domenica’s last chapter where she correlates writing on her body with rituals and initiation as she argues reasons for circumcising her newborn son Taariikh. She does not associate mutilation with any of her personal rituals and does not advocate female genital cutting/mutilation (both she and Barni did not undergo the knife in this way). For Domenica, rituals performed on the body are presented as a way to assert one’s presence and identity. These rituals outline the inviolable boundaries necessary to maintain personhood. In this light, the *ragnatele* criss-crossing Domenica’s body do not signify discontent with her own body/self; rather, they represent a language that she can not only call her own, but one that also communicates a counter-discourse. By writing on her body, Domenica makes it impossible for the reader to neglect such a fundamental aspect of her being (physical presence) while at the same time she confronts colonial images of African women represented as voiceless bodies. Literacy and language proficiency uniquely come under the spotlight through the body and particularly by means of a woman’s body. Where vocal excess is interpreted as lack of accordance to logocentric thought and the notion of pure body equals no thought, Domenica finds a way to make her voice heard and recognized.

For Domenica, writing is a form of defense, a weapon to combat colonial paradigms. The pen literally appears as a sword Domenica uses to inscribe words on the page. Her words

challenge preconceived notions of her identity as described here during a run-in with the police in Rome, after the separation from her mother: “Tirai fuori la penna e cominciai a rispondere sulla carta. Scrivevo con le mie lettere fitte, usando consapevolmente parole desuete e fuori dal comune” (253) [I pulled out my pen and I began to answer their questions on paper. I wrote in my narrow handwriting, intentionally using rare and unusual words (219)]. Besides proving her Italian identity, Domenica’s unusual language also reveals her Somali roots.<sup>58</sup> Writing leads Domenica outwardly to reappropriate her identity and to once again express her audible voice: “Parlo difficile, uso costruzioni contorte. Lo faccio soprattutto in principio di discorso, perché voglio dimostrare fino a che punto riesco ad arrivare con la lingua, voglio che tutti sappiano senz’ombra di dubbio che questa lingua mi appartiene. È il mio balbettio, è il soggetto plurale che mi ha cresciuto, è il nome della mia essenza, è mia madre” (254) [I use difficult words, I employ convoluted sentences. I especially do it when I start talking, because I want to demonstrate how far I can stretch my language. I want everyone to know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that this language belongs to me. It is my childhood babbling, it is the plural subject that raised me, it is the name of my essence, it is my mother (219)]. Italian in Domenica’s life proves to be not just a mother tongue, but it shows how language is a mother in itself.

Writing on the body also signals a change in Domenica’s migratory path. The ragnatele delineate the complex network of relationships that she did not know how to communicate in any other way at the time. She is communicating a change in the configuration of her body in space. She inscribes her body with a sacred text and uses it to protect her corporal and identity integrity. Her body is not immune to her surrounding context/environment, especially in terms of language. On a brief return to a Mogadishu afflicted by the onset of civil war, Domenica

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<sup>58</sup>As mentioned earlier and cited in my conversation with Ali Farah.

expresses: “Per me, Domenica, vivere un giorno di guerra a Mogadiscio significava nascere di nuovo. Cambiare pelle, reincarnarmi” (99) [For me, Domenica, living one day of war in Mogadishu meant being reborn, changing skin, being reincarnated (88)]. In Mogadishu, language interacts differently with Domenica’s *pelle* than in Rome. In her phone call to Barni, Axad (Domenica) explains her need to change the way people respond to her skin and turns to language to remove this barrier:<sup>59</sup>

Ma io, piangere no, non volevo, piuttosto sollevarmi la pelle. Qualsiasi oggetto appuntito mi serviva. A incidermi, a vedere il colore del sangue. Ragnatele di segni sulla mia superficie. Mi chiedevano cosa mi ero fatta, in molti. Sussultavo: segreti svelati. Ma sai, ero talmente separata. Non riuscivo a parlare. Le braccia coperte da maglie lunghe, solo le mani si vedevano, intarsiate (99).

[But no, I didn’t want to cry; rather I wanted to raise my skin. Any sharp object would do. To cut myself, to see the color of blood. A spider’s web of marks on the surface of my skin. Many people asked me what I had done to myself. I shuddered: the revelation of secrets. But you know, I felt so detached. I could not speak. My arms were covered in long sleeves, only my hands were visible, my carved hands (88)].

I interpret the expression “sollevarmi la pelle” not as a literal act spawned by self-hate, but as one that seeks to call upon the transformational power of language and writing.

When examined through the voice, the body clearly acts not in rebellion against one’s self, but rather as a means of communication, as a signifier of some of the limits of the spoken

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<sup>59</sup> I refer to the chapter’s namesake (Axad).

word, and as a reminder of the multifaceted nature of silence. The body in Ali Farah's works is a speaking body and a scribe that alters perceptions of vocality, especially when considered within the tradition of African literature. Bodily migrations, traumas, and historical and social transformations have significantly changed traditional expressions and perceptions of orality. Ali Farah masterfully drives this point home through the spatial, mediatic, and technological frames of her narratives. Storytelling in her narratives no longer takes place under a figurative tree around which younger generations gather to listen to the wisdom of their elders. The tree is replaced by places such as call centers and hospital rooms, and the voice becomes digitalized, typefaced and edited in phone conversations, newspaper interviews, cassette tapes, digital recorders, and video documentaries.

I mentioned before how each first person narrator in *Madre piccola* speaks to various interlocutors, resulting in a network of inter- and intra-communication (intercommunication meaning between characters and intracommunication directed at an interlocutor beyond the narrative frame). Ali Farah creates such communicative spaces through multimodal storytelling that is also multimedial (despite being paperbound). For example, the telephone and the video camera facilitate intercommunication in the novel, whereas (as we will see later in this section) other audio sources, such as the radio, enable intracommunication. Through a kaleidoscopic lens of voices and speaking bodies, Ali Farah tests the limits of dynamic and static communication in diaspora. The telephone molds a total of three narrative structures in chapters spoken by Taageere, Axad, and Barni, an aspect Ali Farah insisted on keeping in discussions with her publisher.<sup>60</sup> In the workings of the telephone (making a call, receiving a call, the location, etc.), geopolitical boundaries and life in exile are vividly and intimately portrayed. Through telephone

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<sup>60</sup> Personal conversation with Alessandra Di Maio.



conversations, *Madre piccola* encapsulates ruptures in communication and the limits imposed on the Somali diaspora.

Taageere's character particularly calls attention to such experiences through his conversations with Shukri, his ex-wife, mother of his first-born son, and resident in Rome. Phoning out and from within spaces ranging from call centers to barber shops, Taageere draws attention to the struggle between concentrating one's time to convey vital, necessary information and maintaining close, intimate, and personal relationships in a vast diaspora. Taageere and Shukri's phone conversations, along with those of other call center clients, intermingle with the spaces and people around them: "Al call center fanno prezzi buoni come quelli delle schede, ma passa molta gente e tutti ti parlano come non fossi già al telefono: *haye* Taageere come va?, ah è tua moglie che ti sta parlando, salutamela; *haye* sorella, tutto bene? il bambino è cresciuto, *mashallah*, quanto tempo eh?" (59-60) [At the phone center they give you the same good rates as the card, but there are always lots of people passing through and everyone speaks to you as if you weren't on the phone: *Haye*, Taageere, how's it going? Ah, that's your wife who's talking to you, right, say hi to her for me; *haye*, sister, everything okay? Your little boy has got bigger, *mashallah*, long time, eh? (53-54)]. Taageere adds to the sensorial experience of the call center when he describes its smells and confined space [I can just imagine you crammed into that booth. And then, those booths at the phone centers stink, they reek of saliva and melancholy, the exact same smell everywhere, right? (80)]. As a result, the speakers' bodies in relation to the telephone offer a spatial visual to the voice.

The telephone walks a fine line between the disembodiment of the characters' voices and the incorporation of the device into the characters' actual bodies. Ali Farah perceives the

telephone as almost another part of the body since it serves as an essential lifeline for many Somalis:

I somali hanno un rapporto fortissimo con il telefono, quasi fosse una parte di sé, del proprio corpo: ci passano ore, chiacchierando con parenti e con amici lontani che magari non vedono da anni. Quello che viene fuori da queste telefonate sono i racconti del quotidiano: sembra paradossale, perché magari da un punto di vista più ‘occidentale’, se non ci si vede da anni sarebbe più normale parlare di quello che si è, del proprio ruolo nella società, dei passaggi esistenziali importanti, come per esempio un diploma ottenuto, la nascita di un figlio, un matrimonio. Invece no, quello che emerge sono i dettagli legati alla vita di tutti i giorni. Durante queste telefonate, che durano anche ore, si parla di ciò che si sta facendo in quel momento, del cibo che si sta cucinando, le mamme nel frattempo cambiano il pannolino e danno da mangiare al proprio bambino, raccontano per esempio che il piccolo in quel momento sta leccando il manubrio del triciclo e se arriva qualcuno in casa si inserisce nella conversazione. L’insieme di tutti questi dettagli è ciò che dà corpo alla vita e comporli significa dar voce alla diaspora somala, a questa comunità sparsa ma in qualche modo tenuta insieme. [...] (*La quarta sponda* 48).

[Somalis have a very strong relationship with the telephone; it’s almost a part of themselves, of their body. They spend hours on it, chatting with distant friends and relatives whom they might not have seen for years. What comes out of these telephone calls are stories of the everyday. It seems paradoxical, because maybe from a more “Western” point of view, with people who haven’t see each other for

years it would be more normal to talk about oneself, about one's role in society, about important stages in life, like for example, a degree earned, the birth of a son, a marriage. Instead, this doesn't happen. What comes up are the details tied to everyday life. During these phone conversations, which last for hours, people talk about what they're doing at that moment, about the food they are cooking, and in the meantime mothers change and feed their child. For example, they talk about how the little one is licking the handlebar of a tricycle at that moment, and if someone comes to the house, that person enters into the conversation too. All of these details together are what embody life and composing them together means giving a voice to the Somali diaspora, to this dispersed community that has somehow stayed connected].

Amid the everyday stories of these phone conversations, Ali Farah brings to light some serious transactions enacted by the telephone in diaspora. Transactions such as money transfers, repudiation, divorce, and marriage contracts change the life paths of the involved parties (as in Taageere and Shukri's relationship), allowing them to start new families, forcing them to alter the structure of existing ones, providing a lifeline and/or taking one away. She also shows the economic aspect of the phone calls themselves, whose termination is determined by minutes purchased on a phone card or allotted in a call center. Taageere's conversation with Shukri ends at the expiration of his phone card: "*You have one minute. Oh no, hai sentito la voce? Il tempo è finito. Solo un minuto. Ti prego, richiamami, richiamami. Ci dobbiamo ancora dire...*" (96) [*You have one minute. Oh no, did you hear the message? We're out of time. Only one minute. I beg you, call me back, call me back. We still have to tell each other...(85)*]. Ali Farah explained to me that in the earlier years of civil war in Somalia, call times were often limited to

three minutes—an incredibly short time to convey much of any information and sentiment. As a result, speakers had to prepare their conversations strategically or resort to recording their voices on cassette tapes.<sup>61</sup> Taageere shows that over the years, call times have increased, yet the “luxury” of more talk time does not necessarily ease family divides or help with wide-ranging time differences. To hear him first rejoice in a seemingly infinite amount of minutes (300 minutes) available on the phone card to later despair at the automated voice warning of an impending disconnection brings to heart the isolation, longing, and disappointment experienced in exile. The role of the telephone in *Madre piccola* also highlights the consumerism of maintaining familial bonds.

While the telephone exemplifies the uniqueness of the voice without sight (it projects voices from non-visible bodies), the video camera in *Madre piccola* combines the two. In Axad’s telephone conversation with Barni and in Taageere’s cross-examination with an immigration worker, we learn about Axad’s work on a film project to document the Somali diaspora. Conceptualized by her colleague Saciid Saleebaan, who is a friend of Taageere, the project begins in Europe and takes Saciid and Axad to North America where Axad and Taageere

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<sup>61</sup> “E quindi io mi ricordo, c’era a Mogadiscio, c’era questo ufficio postale dove tu andavi e compravi un tempo di conversazione. Quindi magari davi il numero di telefono e dicevi parlo 3 minuti—poi costava tantissimo—parlo 3 minuti, mi sembra 5, oppure massimo 10 minuti, massimo. E poi pagavi e aspettavi che chiamassero il tuo nome. Quindi tu andavi nella cabina telefonica e prendevi il telefono e la centralinista ti dice ecco, ecco ti sta rispondendo. E parlavi 3 minuti. Io spesso parlavo 3 minuti così. E quindi con quei 3 minuti tu dovevi concentrare tutto quello che—niente praticamente. Allora era molto usata invece la forma della cassetta che però è una forma più statica perché non è una forma dialogica” [And so I remember, in Mogadishu, there was this post office where you went and bought a certain amount of conversation time. You might give a telephone number and say I’ll speak for three minutes—and it cost so much—I’ll speak three minutes, maybe five, or maximum ten minutes, at the most. And then you’d pay and wait for them to call your name. Then you’d go into a phone booth and pick up the telephone and the operator tells you go ahead, someone’s answering. And you’d talk for three minutes. I used to talk for three minutes this way. And so with those three minutes you’d have to pack in everything—practically nothing. Therefore, the tape cassette was used as an alternative that, however, is a more static form because it isn’t dialogic (Interview 159)].

first meet. Axad's mother tongue and cinematography skills help capture the intimate history between Italy and Somalia. By speaking with the elder members of the Somali diaspora, Axad connects with her father's generation (some of the elders knew and studied with him in Italy) and reveals the linguistic ties that bind them. Taageere mentions this relationship several times in chapter 7: "I vecchi ce l'hanno proprio in fondo in fondo l'italiano" (192) [The old folks really have Italian deep in their souls (167)]. Like Domenica (Taageere favors Axad's Italian name and encourages her to embrace it), the elders communicate in a higher register of Italian: "È che i vecchi fanno così, usano parole italiane difficili. Io quella lingua l'ho studiata, ma non abbastanza per capire *aerofagia*. Ora ne so il significato perché me l'ha spiegato Domenica, mi ha spiegato tutto quando abbiamo rivisto la cassetta insieme" (192) [That's what the old folks do, they use difficult Italian words. I studied that language but not enough to understand *aerofagia*. Now I know it means excessive burping; Domenica explained it to me—she explained everything when we looked at the cassette again together (168)]. The videotape/video camera therefore captures what Domenica has been trying to communicate on her skin—ownership of the Italian language and a connection to her father. In fact, it is when Domenica becomes a videographer that the tagli stop. Taageere relates the video camera as an extension of Domenica's body in a way similar to Ali Farah's interpretation of the telephone in the Somali diaspora: "Ti dicevo dell'ex compagno di stanza di Taariikh. Tutto ringalluzzito per il successo della sua parola, ha ricominciato come se telecamera e faccia di Domenica fossero una cosa unica" (192-193)<sup>62</sup> [I was telling you about Taariikh's ex-roommate. Proud as punch at the success of his word, he started off again as if the video camera and Domenica's face were one

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<sup>62</sup> Taariikh is Domenica's father.

and the same thing (168)]. The merging of Domenica's face and video camera calls attention to a different type of gaze originating from a woman's perspective.

Taageere revisits Domenica's perspective when they watch the video footage together and replay the videocassettes several times. The images of bodies synched with their voices bring into focus once again the issue of language and identity. Speaking with the Somali elders in Italian in North America helps Domenica to reconcile disconnects between the speaker and the speech of her maternal language; that is, the image/physical attributes of these elders are not incongruous with the Italian language. In the videotapes, Italian brings joy to Domenica and inspires Taageere to study it more in-depth: "Per me [cianfrusaglie] era una nuova parola da tradurre, perché erano le parole difficili quelle che facevano ridere Domenica. Per questo me le sono fatte spiegare tutte quando abbiamo riguardato insieme il video, mesi dopo" (194) [For me it was a new word that needed translating because the difficult words were the ones that made Domenica laugh. That's why I got her to explain them all to me when we looked at the video again together, months later (169)]. Besides learning about Domenica's humor and personality through the Italian language, Taageere and Domenica also learn stories from the elders. Despite any distances that may separate them in diaspora they are able to listen to and watch them over and over again on videotape:

I discorsi di quella sera io me li ricordo a memoria. Ho visto e rivisto le registrazioni con Domenica almeno dieci volte. Domenica non si era accorta che ero lì dal inizio, ad aiutare i vecchi. Così metteva pausa ogni volta che usciva una mia inquadratura e rideva—come rideva—per la mia faccia a bocca aperta. Storie: ascoltarle e raccontarle è la mia predilezione (195-196).

[I remember all the conversations we had that evening. I've watched those recordings over and over again with Domenica, at least ten times. Domenica didn't realize that I was there from the beginning, to help the old folks. So she stopped the video every time I appeared on screen and she laughed—how she laughed—at my face with my mouth wide open. Stories: listening to stories and telling them is what I like best (170)].

The video recordings offer a rare glimpse into the older Somali generation's experience in Italy and also depict a re-embodiment of the voice in *Madre piccola*. Taageere's manipulation of the tapes (pressing stop, rewind, pause, etc.) and ability to watch them over and over again, increasing his affection for and understanding of Domenica, show how relationships in diaspora can easily fade without technological modes of communication. These technological modes paradoxically foster and maintain empathy and human understanding in the novel.

Through multimodal and multimedial storytelling, Ali Farah refracts bodies and voices to orient the reader to a sense of life in exile. Fragments of disembodied voices, as we will see with the textual incorporation of oral Somali poetry and song, construct a network of relations and differentiate each character's uniqueness. In *Madre piccola* (predominately in Domenica Axad's prelude, Taageere's chapter 3, Taageere's interlude, and Barni's epilogue), Ali Farah imbeds outside audio sources into the text through the use of italics.<sup>63</sup> Broadcast over Radio Mogadiscio, recited by a chapter's narrator, or derived from a known or unknown source, the audio captures words by Somali poets Maxamuud Cabdullahi Ciise and Cabdulqaadir Xirsi Siyaad, in Somali lullabies, song refrains (one in particular by Axmed Naaji), and the Somali

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<sup>63</sup> The Somali words used by her characters are also in italics; however, the italics that signal whole verses in Italian and Somali emphasize the verses' musical (singing, recitation) and multimodal (radio, cassette etc.) quality.

national anthem. These multimedial elements add texture to the novel's historical and political contexts, providing a backdrop to the period of Somali independence following 1960 and to the beginnings of civil war and its outbreak in 1991.

Ali Farah chose to interpret some of the poems with her own Italian versions of them, leaving key phrases in their original, such as the repeated phrase “soomaali baan ahay” (somalo io sono—I am Somali) in Cabdulqaadir Xirsi Siyaad's 1977 poem “Yamyam,” present in Domenica Axad's prelude. She explains: “Ho utilizzato testi di canzoni somale famose legate a momenti storici precisi. Le canzoni non sono tradotte, ma scritte ex novo, usando i testi originali come tracce” (“I nodi” 3) [I utilized famous Somali song lyrics connected to specific historical moments. I didn't translate the songs; instead, I re-wrote them using the original lyrics as a guide]. Her reasons for this format stem from the desire to effectively communicate the poems'/songs' content/sense and to avoid exoticizing their context.<sup>64</sup>

The alternation of verses, which regard patriotism, national identity, language, male/female relations, moral decline, and shortages of resources, with the narrators' speech creates a highly complex and challenging reading. In Domenica Axad's prelude, where she talks about her childhood years in Mogadishu leading up to her relocation to Italy, “una voce *waddani*” (a patriotic voice) is heard emanating from a radio at a boardwalk café. Ali Farah introduces the audio while Domenica Axad describes a day spent at the seashore, yet it continues to resound even when the protagonist narrates other episodes of her childhood (told in the present tense). The *waddani* voice also concludes the chapter: “*Sono la pelle tagliata, tagliata mentre pascolavo gli animali, chi l'ha tagliata è quell'uomo, ma il marchio è rimasto uno solo,*

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<sup>64</sup> “V° Seminario Italiano degli Scrittori e delle Scrittrici Migranti” (12).



*è rimasto il dovere dell'unità, soomaali baan ahay*" (12)<sup>65</sup> [I am the slashed skin, slashed while I was shepherding my animals, the one who slashed me is that man, but only one branding remained, the duty of unity remained, soomaali baan ahay (11)]. In fact, the prelude begins and ends with the phrase *Soomaali baan ahay* (I am Somali); however, the reader does not know until page 3 that its first appearance is related to the radio's audio. The following verses show how nuanced the coupling of text and audio can be (in this example, they relate to language): "Insegnare a scrivere la propria lingua, comunicare a distanza nella parola del padre e della madre, è ciò che permetterà di tenerci saldamente uniti, senza che scorra la lingua d'altri a separarci. Imparate l'alfabeto fratelli: BTJ" (4)<sup>66</sup> [Teaching our children to write their own language, communicating from afar using the words of the father and the mother, that is what will allow us to stay solidly united, without the flow of someone else's language separating us. Learn the Somali alphabet, brothers: BTJ (3-4)]. Ali Farah reveals the complexity of what seems to be a simple argument when the *lingua d'altri* (someone else's language) is her maternal language and the poem has been transformed into Italian.

Unlike Domenica Axad's prelude, Taageere's interlude contains only one key phrase in italics and it is unclear who/what is emitting its sound: *Xamar waa lagu xumeeyay* (Mogadiscio sei stata rovinata/Mogadishu, You Were Devastated). Axmed Naaji's song refrain, cited by Ali Farah in the glossary as from around 1991-92, begins Taageere's last three paragraphs. Here, the audio reaffirms Taageere's tragic telling of civil war violence and the loss of his best friend Xirsi when he was senselessly gunned down on a street in Mogadishu.

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<sup>65</sup> "Quell'uomo" is Siad Barre, yet he could also represent Mussolini.

<sup>66</sup> The first letters of the Somali alphabet are BTJ.

The audio imbedded in Barni’s epilogue is much more in keeping with the format of Domenica Axad’s prelude; however, as in Taageere’s interlude, the reader does not know by what means this audio is transmitted. Lengthier and varied verses from “Il poeta dall’anca bruciata” (the poet with the burnt hip, as Barni identifies him), alternate intermittently with Barni’s words and rotate around the question—“Cosa faremo dunque?” [What shall we do then? (225)]. Barni narrates the trip she, Domenica, and one-year old Taariikh embark on to visit their zio Foodcadde in the Netherlands and Domenica’s mother in Rome upon their return. This journey evokes a spirit of reunification and recuperation. She reflects: “È tempo di stringere nodi che sostengono senza strozzare. Dove sono tutti? Troviamo ogni singola stella, recuperiamo il filo del discorso. La storia è rimasta ingarbugliata negli scontri, ma il bandolo si ritroverà, ne sono certa” (261) [It’s time to establish ties that strengthen without suffocating. Where is everyone? We find each single star, we retrieve the thread of the story. The story is still entangled in the confrontations, but we shall find the way out, I don’t doubt it (224)]. Barni interacts with the poem interpreted in Italian and answers questions posed by the poet in order to construct more harmonious constellations of relationships. By interpreting and challenging gender roles and generational criticisms presented in the verses of poetry, she sees hope in finding unity in diaspora.<sup>67</sup> The social significance of poetry culminates in Barni’s epilogue and leaves a lasting impression as poetry constitutes the novel’s last lines: “*Cacciate via i malauguri, il bene non ha mai fatto male, la storia cammina, stamattina è buona la poesia, separa e correggi, l’anno in cui ci troviamo, gli anni che sono passati, ognuno trasmette le cose a modo suo, se non centro la verità, se le passo accanto, mi correggano gli uomini di cultura*” (267) [Chase away the bad omens, good has never hurt anyone, the story goes on, this morning the

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<sup>67</sup> The verses reference male violence, men abandoning their families, and the devastation of resources.

poem is good, you must separate and correct, the year we are in, the years that have gone by, everyone passes on things in his own way, if I do not hit upon the truth, if I simply pass it by let the men of culture correct me (230)]. As apparent in both Domenica Axad's prelude and Barni's epilogue, poetry plays an important part in their coming to terms with and reconciling socio-cultural and historical realities.

In the epilogue, Barni confronts questions of gender by interacting with a Somali male poet's words/voice. Gender and motherhood serve as connecting threads to the discussion:

C'è persino chi ha il coraggio di dire che queste creature disseminate nel mondo sono indisciplinate per colpa delle madri, senza considerare il padre che se ne lava le mani. La madre fa quello che può, che esempio può dare un uomo che non sa gestire la propria vita? Ci preoccupiamo ancora delle apparenze, additiamo l'orecchino al naso e la pancia scoperta; non vogliamo toccare la voragine, nessuno riesce a colmarla (265).

[There are even people who have the audacity to say that it's their mothers' fault if these children who are scattered throughout the world misbehave, without even taking into consideration their fathers who have washed their hands of them. The mother does what she can, what kind of an example is a man who cannot even run his own life? We still are overly concerned with appearances, we point fingers at the rings in noses, at the bare bellies; we don't want to get near the abyss, no one is able to fill it (228)].

Therefore, textual multimediality in *Madre piccola* gives precedence to the voice; however, it also depicts a complex network of relations (for example, regarding gender) that would

otherwise be conventionalized and depersonalized. Distance is another fundamental characteristic of exile, changing family structures, that multimediality acutely represents in the novel.

As seen in Domenica's and Barni's chapters, speaking and writing from a woman's perspective, *scrittura al femminile*, captures a cross section of the reticulated, complex network of diaspora. While Taageere's character reveals important aspects of this network, the women of the novel enter into spaces unseen or inaccessible to him alone. For Ali Farah, *scrittura al femminile* is inextricably tied to representing internal space and therefore deepens and expands the realities of her characters (both men and women): "Riflettendo sul motivo per cui privilegio sempre uno spaccato *interno*, sono arrivata alla conclusione che probabilmente la ragione è che la prospettiva femminile permette di raccontare la storia mostrandone i suoi effetti sui singoli, sulla vita d'ogni giorno, quella a cui ognuno di noi (questa volta, uomini e donne) è legato nel quotidiano" (Di Maio *Metamorphoses* 266)<sup>68</sup> [Reflecting on the reason why I always favor this kind of intimate, personalized perspective, I came to the conclusion that the feminine point of view allows me to narrate history by showing the affects it has on individual people, on everyday life, on the life that every one of us—both men and women—leads on a daily basis (255)]. Ali Farah captures the essence of the Somali diaspora through women's place in it. The author speaks of this centrality of women as hinging upon the needs of others: "Le mie protagoniste, come molte donne, sono abituate a doversi occupare di qualcuno, a interrelazionarsi, a modificare il proprio comportamento in base alle circostanze esterne. Il loro ruolo è spesso centrale, difficilmente in senso egoistico" (*Metamorphoses* 264) [My protagonists, like many women, are used to taking care of someone, used to inter-relating, used to modifying their own

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<sup>68</sup> Ali Farah also states that as a woman "tu entri nell'intimità della vita domestica" [you enter into the intimacy of domestic life] (Interview 168).

behavior according to their circumstances. Their role is often central, but rarely in an egotistical sense (253)]. This *interrelazionarsi* between internal spaces and with outward space also calls into question notions of domesticity, or rather, to what extent do the novel's protagonists feel at home in their surroundings.

Domesticity (in all its senses—domesticating cultures, ideas, etc.) in *Madre piccola* serves as a vehicle for solidarity (especially among women), yet it also risks isolationism. At one point, Axad reflects on domestic space in exile:

Sai di quegli anni? Quello che non riesco a fare è descrivere i luoghi. Era tutto un movimento interno da una casa all'altra. Essere, potevi essere ovunque. Per me, per noi tutti, era indifferente. Ti dovevi solo abituare alle insegne diverse, i prezzi diversi e ricostruire la mappa: mappa dei legami con gli altri e i luoghi-snodi dove incontrarsi, dove telefonare, dove comprare, come perennemente trasportati nella bolla d'aria e dentro la bolla il nostro suono, il nostro odore. Suoni e odori così pungenti da coprire tutti gli altri. Alienandoci, vivevamo (112).

[Do you know about those years? What I can't do is describe those places. It was a continuous internal movement from one apartment to the next. Exist, one could exist anywhere. For me, for all of us, it didn't matter where. You simply had to get used to a different set of store signs, different prices, and draw up a new map: a map of your links to the others, and of the junction places where we could meet, where we could call, where we could shop, as if we were constantly carried along in an air bubble, and inside that bubble was our sound, our smell. Sounds and

smells so strong that they masked all others. By alienating ourselves, we continued to live (100)].

Even in what seems to be an isolated and alienated existence, a virtual bubble, Ali Farah shows that there is a vast network of communications and that this *bolla* was not created without the repercussions of “outside” influences. Thus, in domestic space, intersectionality and historical complexities are prominent. Associating and disassociating domestic space around various experiences of family and parenthood in the novel, Ali Farah evinces the profound sociological and psychological effects of living in exile.

Motherhood plays an especially significant role in Ali Farah’s narratives and constructs the intricate framework of the author’s portrayal of the Somali diaspora. As Alessandra Di Maio pointed out during a talk at UCLA, even the number of chapters (nine) in *Madre piccola* corresponds to nine months of gestation. Ali Farah has stated that her own pregnancy, in the duration of writing the novel, had a great influence on the narrative. Mothers struggling to provide for their children, mothers separated from their children, mothers suffering the loss of a child, expectant mothers, childbirth, and community mothers all motivate and guide the multitude of connections and coinciding events told and experienced by the protagonists. Ali Farah explains the grounding influence motherhood has had in her own life in exile and the creative opportunities it has provided personally and artistically: “La ricostruzione è partita dall’unica cosa certa che sentivo di avere: quel ruolo di madre tutto da inventare”

(*Metamorphoses* 265) [The reconstruction of my life began with the only certainty that I felt I had: my role as a mother, which was something I had to invent]. She interprets motherhood as a guiding force, “una sorta di bussola [...]” (*Metamorphoses* 265) [a sort of compass (254)].

Rather than limiting the scope of her works, this guiding force opens up an interior world to the

external pressures of the Somali diaspora lived on a daily basis and closer to home than the average reader could have imagined. I asked Ali Farah about the strong presence of migrant mothers in her narratives and she responded by stressing how these mothers have greater socio-cultural accessibility in respect to their male counterparts: “Allora non è proprio il fatto del bambino, però proprio il fatto della relazione; cioè, che le donne fanno molto meno fatica in realtà a entrare in contatto nel posto in cui arrivano per tutta una serie di motivi.” [Therefore it’s not really the fact of having a child, but a matter of relationality; that is, in reality women struggle less to enter into contact with people in their new setting for a variety of reasons (168)]. Motherhood in the novel is also a mapping technique. Each mother-child relationship reveals another aspect of diaspora.

The motherhood that Ali Farah depicts corresponds to Cavarero’s thoughts about the voice’s relationality. Cavarero identifies gendered and familial divisions that dominate verbal and written communication. She outlines the differences between language associated with the father and speech associated with the mother: “the Law of the Father—if we want to call it that—concerns the semantic, universal, disciplining, rational side of language, not the communicative and relational side of speech” (179). Like Ali Farah, Cavarero locates a heightened form of relationality in motherhood where the relationship between mother and child (in the womb, during and after birth) involves a continuous vocal interplay between echo, resonance, and musicality:

La parola, nella sua essenzialità acustica, ha appunto, come il cuore, un’anima ritmica. Il che significa che fra voce e parola, fra la corporeità ritmata del vocalico e l’espressività del dire, c’è un legame intrinseco e sostanziale. La figura materna è legame cui, per così dire, in nome del padre reagisce il logocentrismo

metafisico. Ella è voce *e* parola, o, meglio, è il senso originario della voce in quanto destinato a farsi senso essenziale della parola (196).

[Speech, in its acoustic essence, has as its heart a rhythmic soul. This means that there is an intrinsic and substantial link between voice and speech, between the rhythmic embodiment of the voice and the expressivity of saying. The maternal figure is precisely the conduit that, in all of our lives, embodies this link—to which, as it were, metaphysics reacts in the name of the father. She is voice *and* speech; or, better, she is the originary sense of the voice insofar as the voice is destined to give speech its essential sense (180)].

Through her voice, the mother transmits her uniqueness to her child as well as establishes a relationship of reciprocity.

Ali Farah refers to motherhood as a way of mapping the movement and dimensionality of her characters, as a means to delve into a diverse range of relationships between both men and women: “credo che il tema della maternità sia un terreno molto fertile su cui si possono ben rappresentare dinamiche relazionali d’ogni tipo” (265) [I think that the theme of motherhood is rich with opportunities for representing a multiplicity of dynamic relationships (254)]. This fertile ground also sheds light on colonial relationships within which it was taboo for an East African woman to give birth to mixed children. These children were often separated from their mothers and extended families. Ali Farah uses the voice to valorize all mothers, thereby confronting colonial efforts to suppress them and (re)presenting alternative relationships of motherhood. Barni’s character establishes her unique motherhood (with Domenica and as a midwife) most importantly through her vocal abilities. As a little mother to Domenica she



valorizes her cousin's utterances during times of linguistic amnesia and as a midwife, besides bringing babies into the world, she allows her patients to tell their stories while also telling her own. Barni's closing words in the epilogue support a type of relationality based on vocality; that is, mothers who are allowed a voice:

La nostra casa la portiamo con noi, la nostra casa può viaggiare. Non sono le pareti rigide che fanno del luogo in cui viviamo una casa.

Dentro la nostra casa io, Domenica Axad e il piccolo Taariikh troviamo conforto e riparo, piantiamo le nostre fondamenta per avere la forza di combattere quotidianamente. Rimanere isolati non è più possibile, cerchiamo di adattarci e di ricostruire il nostro percorso. Convivendo, gran parte del dolore si compartisce. Una madre sola non basta ai propri figli, chi lo può sapere meglio di me e di Domenica Axad? Le nostre madri erano malate di troppe solitudini. Insieme ne verremo a capo, i figli si crescono in comunione. Solo così le molte assenze saranno irrilevanti, è assistendo alle nascite che ho sconfitto la morte (263-264).

[We carry our home with us, our home can travel. It's not fixed walls that make a home out of the place where we live.

In our home, Domenica Axad, little Taariikh, and I find comfort and protection; we lay down foundations in order to have the strength to fight every day. It's no longer possible to remain isolated; we seek to adapt and to rebuild our path. Through living together, we can share the greater part of our pain. A mother alone is no longer enough for her children, no one knows that better than Domenica Axad and me. Our mothers suffered too much loneliness. Together

we will make it, children should be raised together. Only by doing that, many absences will become irrelevant; it's by helping babies be born that I overcame death (226)].

Domestication and domesticity, for Barni and Domenica, undergo a transformation through mothering, creating multiple points of accessibility.

### 3. "Un sambuco attraversa il mare"

"My coffin will be a RowBoat back to you" —Morley (street artist)

Do what you want 'cause a pirate is free, you are a pirate!

Yar - har - fiddle-dee-dee, being a pirate is all right to be!

Do what you want 'cause a pirate is free, you are a pirate!

You are a pirate! (Yay!)

We got us a map (a map!) to lead us to a hidden box,

That's all locked up with locks (with locks!) and buried deep away.

We'll dig up the box (the box!), we know it's full of precious booty

Burst open the locks, and then we'll say 'HOORAY!'

—"You Are A Pirate," The Ethiopians (reggae band)

Sources of legends, leisure, tragedy, adventure, new beginnings, death and despair, bodies of water are telling if we lend our senses to them and to the people who live to tell the tales. Images of Somali people in the Italian media (yet not limited to it) typically oscillate between two extremes: limp, lifeless bodies (pulled from a watery grave and more recently

succumbed to famine) or freewheeling pirates terrorizing commercial merchants off of the East African coast. Ali Farah's latest publication, "Un sambuco attraversa il mare" ["A Dhow Is Crossing the Sea"], contrasts perceptions of Somali populations in relation to the ocean and the sea.<sup>69</sup> Whereas the media portray Somali men as ruthless pirates in Somalia, Ali Farah depicts and provides a historical context that shows a more intimate and humanizing relationship to bodies of water. In fact, the body in various forms, both metaphorically and materially, occupies a central role. Through women's connections to the sea/ocean, as well as those of fishermen and Seamen, the body's vulnerability and fragility bring to light conditions of colonial diasporas, destruction of the environment, industrial oversights, and civil war.

Divided into ten sections, "Un sambuco attraversa il mare" begins with the author's/first person narrator's grandmother appearing to her in a dream the same day of her grandmother's death in Eyl, Somalia, an area notorious today for pirate activity. The ocean and sea serve as connecting threads among the sections chronicling the gradual and sudden developments affecting the Somali land and seascape, leading to migration and ruin. The story works within a generational framework stemming from the grandmother's lifetime. Ali Farah recalls a time before pirates when fishing provided Eyl's livelihood and the only activity closest to piracy was the British Navy's recruitment of Seamen, Somali men enlisted to be merchant marines for the British Empire.

The body acts as a marker/indicator of violation both in terms of the environment and of human and cultural bonds. Tales in the story of children rumored to be born mouthless due to environmental contamination, feet punctured by refuse lining the beaches, natural coral barriers destroyed to make way for a new port, animals decapitated at the port's slaughter house, and

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<sup>69</sup> All English translations of this story are by Cristina Viti, as published side-by-side with the original in *Wasafiri*.

residents maimed or killed by sharks attracted to the slaughter house blood evidence a progression of manmade bodily mutilation in connection to the sea. Within the language of the narrative itself, Ali Farah uses the body's voice (the body as a voice) to express inequity, transformation, and distance. Expressions such as, "Il paese andava smembrandosi" (21) [The country was being dismembered (21)], make up a corporal language that contours/gives shape to the story and maintains its human element.

Thus, the ocean and the sea in association with danger become a focal point, chronicling the varying degrees of bodily harm and trauma. From the grandmother's aversion to the sea and all that is associated with it (she refuses to eat fish and anything vaguely resembling it) to the narrator's childhood view of an ocean full of demons and spiteful spirits, the story begins with a sense of nature as an overwhelming, uncontrollable entity. However, as the narrative progresses, the human role in inflicting harm and leading people to their death at sea becomes more apparent. The narrator's experience in Italy and the history of the sambuco record this reality and overturn any one-dimensional, isolated, singular view of so-called boat people.

Once in Italy, the narrator sees a stark contrast between Italians' approach to the sea and her own:

Le onde in Italia, mi dicevano, non si mangiano tutto. Il mare in Italia, non si ritira neppure. Bisogna attraversarlo per accedere alla roccaforte, bisogna attraversare il mare mediano, mar Mediterraneo, il mare bianco per gli arabi. In tanti affrontano il mare bianco. Ma dalle mie coste, sul corno d'Africa, prima del mare bianco qualcuno sfida l'oceano su un sambuco. Vuole capire se è proprio necessario arrivare tanto lontano (21).

[In Italy, they would say to me, waves don't swallow everything up. In Italy, the sea won't even recede. You have to travel across if you want to get to the stronghold, you have to cross the middle sea, the Mediterranean sea, the white sea as the Arabs call it. Many go out to face the white sea. But from my shores, on the horn of Africa, some challenge the ocean on a dhow before facing the white sea; they want to understand if it really is necessary to travel that far (21)].

The narrator and her son convey a sense of danger and heightened attention met by the beachgoers' amusement and consolatory advice: "Mio figlio, che non sapeva neppure parlare, davanti a quell'enormità, è pechiloloso, gridava, è pechiloloso, sbarrandomi la strada per l'acqua. C'era chi rideva perché pensavo che la marea si gonfiasse in poche ore. Non mettete il vostro telo vicino all'acqua, o il mare lo porterà via" (21) [At the sight of that vastness, my son, who could hardly speak at the time, kept shouting it's angelous, it's angelous, trying to stop me from reaching the water. Some laughed at me for thinking the tide would swell in a matter of hours. Don't put your towel near the water, or the sea will sweep it away (21)]. What may seem like exaggerated or silly behavior has a history of suffering and death behind it. Ali Farah juxtaposes danger with leisure in the narrative through the extremely effective medium of bodies of water. Through the grandmother's aversion to the sea, scenes of mutilation, and the narrator's initial fear of the Tyrrhenian Sea in Italy, there lies a different story, one that shows a clear division between the consciousness of social realities in Italy and in the Somali diaspora.

The *sambuco* crosses time and space accumulating new stories of tragedy and peril. No longer strictly a man's affair, the sambuco now boards women and children and instead of catching fish or transporting wares it now traffics humans. Ali Farah draws upon personal testimonies to capture the experience of migration and to highlight the sea/ocean as a font of

stories waiting to be told, unlike the ones sensationalized by newspaper headlines. Women, especially, represent an untapped resource and evince the familial repercussions of these aqueous journeys:

Se vai in riva al mare, molte donne vorranno raccontarti la loro storia. Alcune ci sono entrate nel mare e sono arrivate dall'altra parte. Alcune vorrebbero entrarci. Altre aspettano il figlio, partito da qualche giorno, o il fratello o lo stesso amato. Guardano l'orizzonte e indicano ai bagnanti le vele o i motoscafi di passaggio. Vogliono sapere quanto può essere grande, quanti ne conterranno, le stive e i ponti. Quanti ne conterranno dei loro figli, dei loro amati, dei loro fratelli (23).

[If you go down to the shore, many women will want to tell you their story. Many did enter the sea, and came out the other side. Some would like to enter. Others might be waiting for a son who only left a few days earlier, or a brother, or their love. They look out at the horizon and point at the passing sails or motorboats for beach-goers to see. They want to know how big they might be, how many will fit in the holds and on the decks. How many will fit, how many of their sons, of their loved ones, their brothers (23)].

In the story and testimonies, women's relationship to the sea and ocean show that women are not simply passive observers to the dangers of the sea; rather, they are equally vulnerable to experience its suffering. They are also storytellers who wish to make their voices heard.

Ali Farah writes about a collaborative project with Asinitas, a non-profit Italian school in Rome that serves migrant and refugee communities. The project involved a group of Somali refugees and aimed at defining Italian and Somali terms untranslatable into either language. One

of the terms that sparked an animated discussion was the Italian *avventura*, or adventure, which can also connote a romantic affair. Through nuances of this word members of the group conjured up definitions of Seamen, fishermen, and recalled their own journeys over land and across bodies of water to reach Italy. The group decided that an element of danger and risk constitutes communality among the various Somali terms and experiences falling under the category of *avventura*. *Avventura* comes to be understood in terms of migration and sea voyages lived through the body and as a result it is also body-changing. A female group member tells of a haunting pain still felt deep in the sole of her foot, a remnant from traveling with makeshift shoes to reach a point of embarkation.

References to self-preservation and bodily integrity sound like an alarm (and sound in alarm) throughout the narrative. The penultimate section takes an interesting twist by using sarcasm and humor to penetrate the real tragedy of the human experience of exile and migration. Dahabo, one of the female passengers on a vessel headed for the Italian coast, swims for her life because the boat has shipwrecked. After climbing atop a rock with another woman (to whom she will be bonded in friendship) the Italian coastguard arrives and promptly frees them from their drenched clothes. Realizing that she forgot to put on a bra that day, Dahabo freezes in horror and embarrassment and the section concludes: “Allora, dice ancora Dahabo con le mani sul seno, lo dice a tutte le donne, perché lei non entrerà mai più in mare, ma se qualcuna di loro deciderà, se attraverserà mai il mare, con un sambuco o altro, non deve dimenticare di mettersi il reggiseno” (24) [So, says Dahabo with her hands on her breasts, she says this to all the women, because she herself won’t ever again enter the sea, but if any of them should decide, if any one of them should ever journey across the sea, whether on a dhow or otherwise, she’d better remember to put on her bra (24)]. As in “Rapdipunt,” Ali Farah took inspiration for the speech of her

protagonist from actual testimonies and interviews. Here, the humorous line shows how narrative style impacts the way a story is received, what impact it makes, but also how the storyteller is able to survive the experience. In an October 13, 2011, conversation regarding this line the author asks, “Come raccontare la violenza? Come farla arrivare?” [How do you narrate violence? How do you make it resonate?].<sup>70</sup>

In “Un sambuco,” she illustrates a mastery of communicating the human side of violence by fusing the environment (land, city, and sea) with the body. Danger to the body resulting in death and dismemberment culminates in the tenth and final section with the imagery of the Stele of Aksum, which makes its migratory journey back to Ethiopia where it was pillaged by Mussolini’s troops. Dismembered and transported by sea, the Stele leaves an empty crater, or as Ali Farah says a “cicatrice” [scar], where it once stood in Rome. Portraying both Rome and the Stele corporally, Ali Farah personalizes their histories and illustrates a double mutilation—that experienced by Ethiopians and East Africans in general through Italian colonial violence and the mutilation of historical revisionism.

By pivoting her narrative on the ocean and the sea Ali Farah navigates through spatial, cultural, and historical perspectives to offer a more global, encompassing, yet intimate view of issues that the media often reduces to rhetoric of criminality (pirates and terrorists) and invasion (foreigners threatening Italian resources and culture). Women’s relationship to bodies of water, in particular, broadens the scope of the media’s narrow reportage. As manifested in *Madre piccola* (yet also occupying a central space in Scego’s work), shipwrecks stand as a catalyst for dialogue and interest in Somalia. Rather than wait for the next shipwreck, act of piracy, or

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<sup>70</sup> Ali Farah’s conversation was part of the University of Bologna’s seminar, which can be found here: “Frammentazione dell’identità fra rimozione storica e riemersione letteraria” [Fragmentation of identity between historical suppression and literary reemergence]. <<http://www.bartleby.info/content/laboratorio-di-autoformazione-lettere>>.



famine in order to rekindle dying interest in Somalia, Ali Farah illustrates a deeper and more extensive invested interest at stake. She incorporates the natural world—the sea and ocean—to reveal an unnatural history of human suffering and violence.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this chapter I analyzed three seminal narratives by Ali Farah—“Rapdipunt,” *Madre piccola*, and “Un sambuco attraverso il mare”—to evidence representations of the voice and the body in her works. Through multimodal narrations, Ali Farah shows the complex network of communications in the Somali diaspora. It is through a woman’s perspective that such complexity comes to light and embodies a voice. I explored the influence of the Somali diaspora on interpersonal communication, writing and recorded memory as expressed in Ali Farah’s novel *Madre piccola*, keeping in mind factors of spatiality (geographical distances, personal/private/communal space, etc.) and modes of communication (letters, radio, video, telephone, and face-to-face encounters). I considered the dynamic and static nature of these modes and the spaces in which voices are captured, contained, and projected in Ali Farah’s narratives. My analysis addressed the concept of orality, an integral part of these expressions, yet it also revealed the limits of orality when the qualities of vocality are not also considered. The body was another important factor considered, which communicated its own story as well as produced that of the voice.

**Chapter 2**  
**Igiaba Scego**  
**Mixed tapes and postcolonial mashups**

In Chapter 1, I examined three narratives (a novel and two short stories) by Ubax Cristina Ali Farah, with a particular focus on multimodal voices. In this chapter, we continue with that focus in the works of Ali Farah's contemporary, Igiaba Scego. This chapter focuses on two of Scego's works: "Identità" (2008), a short story, and *La mia casa è dove sono* (2010), an autobiographical novel. In the appendix, I have included my English translation of "Identità." I chose these narratives because they exemplify Scego's multimodal approach to representing the voice. I will draw upon Adriana Cavarero's theory of the voice as well as feminist studies of colonial imagery, notions of transmedial literature, the mashup and biosymbolic language.

When I asked Ali Farah about her literary style in relation to Igiaba Scego, she expressed, "Siamo molto diverse, quindi anche complementari" [Igiaba and I are very different, meaning that we are also complementary (170)]. This dissertation draws upon such a complementary nature, like two sides of the same coin; however, in this case the coin is more like a vinyl record, digitized and accompanied by a rich set of liner notes. Only one year Ali Farah's junior, Scego (born in 1974) is also a woman of Somali descent, a fellow resident of Rome and university graduate in literature there, bilingual in Italian and Somali, and a writer of postcolonial narratives. It could be said that Scego has a lot in common with Ali Farah—and she does. Both are integrally invested in raising awareness to Italy's ties with the Horn of Africa and consciously promoting and fostering human dignity within an increasingly hostile context of xenophobia, racism, economic disparity, and violence. However, the way in which Scego and Ali Farah write reveals the dual sides of the record—not in the sense that one is more successful

or poignant than the other; rather, one does not provide a complete/comprehensive postcolonial soundscape without the other.

Although both Scego and Ali Farah were born in Italy (Scego in Rome and Ali Farah in Verona), only Scego spent the majority of her childhood there (she lived in Mogadishu for a brief period of a year). As noted by Ali Farah in our interview, Scego is much more entrenched in her birth city and its culture. In 1974, she was born in Rome because her Somali parents immigrated there from Mogadishu, but her family's contact with Italy precedes this date by decades. Besides her father's time spent studying at university in Italy, Scego's grandfather was employed by the Italian colonial administration of Somalia when it was known as AOI (Africa Orientale Italiana).

Unlike Ali Farah, Scego experienced the outbreak of civil war in Somalia from Rome, where she went without news of her mother's whereabouts in the Horn of Africa for a period of two years. The two authors complement each other in terms of motherhood as well, since Ali Farah found herself in civil war from the new perspective of being a mother and Scego lived through that time from a daughter's perspective. Their literary portrayals of relationships between mothers and daughters shed light on different facets of these relationships, which explore the search for and establishment of home and family in transnational contexts.

Writing from female perspectives, both authors represent African women's experiences in diaspora and the Horn, confronting a long trajectory of racist and misogynist stereotypes that extends into contemporary Italian society and culture. Although Ali Farah and Scego use their characters' language (multilingualism, authorship) to break down such stereotypes, it is the voices, and therefore also the bodies, connected to such language that really imbue their words with the dynamism of the realities that they depict, and also hope to transform. In both of their

narratives, multimodal arrangements highlight the fundamental role of the voice in the process of social transformation.<sup>71</sup> Scego's multimodal storytelling reveals how embedded she is in Italian culture—her references to Italian cinema and media are as vast as they are profound—as well as attests that she is a citizen of the world, synthesizing global music and culture with her characters' very personal and local realities.

As we saw in Ali Farah's novel *Madre piccola*, multimodality (the telephone, videotapes, the radio, etc.) was integral to portraying the Somali diaspora and the trauma of civil war. Scego also depicts diaspora and trauma through multimodality; however, what is different about multimodality in Scego's works is that popular culture comprises a large part of it. In this way, she captures a different side of Italy that could be more clearly recognizable to many Italians.

Scego is a prolific writer both in print and online. She has written articles for major publications, including national newspapers such as *La Repubblica*, *Il Manifesto*, *L'Unità*, the weekly magazine *Internazionale*, and most recently *Pubblico*. Besides appearing in the online journals *Nigrizia*, *El Ghibli*, *Migra*, *Latinoamerica*, and *Carta*, her writing is also featured on *A.L.M.A. Blog* (Alza la mano adesso) [Raise up your hand now], a collective blog by writers and journalists in Italy dedicated to making migrant voices heard, as well as on her personal blog, *Ritorno a Oz* [Return to Oz].<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Similar to Ali Farah's *Madre piccola*, Scego's novels *Rhoda* and *Oltre Babilonia* feature protagonists' namesakes as alternating chapter titles. In these novels, personal language choice and the rhythm of language prominently distinguish characters' identities. The speech of Scego's characters is often multilingual. In addition to interspersing her narratives in Italian with Somali words, phrases, and cultural references, it is not uncommon to find English, Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese, and French in the mix.

<sup>72</sup> *A.L.M.A. Blog*. <http://collettivoalma.wordpress.com/>.  
*Ritorno a Oz*. Igiaba Scego. <<http://ritornoaoz.wordpress.com/>>.

The latest of her four novels, *La mia casa è dove sono* (2010), won the prestigious 2011 Premio Mondello.<sup>73</sup> Her other novels are: *La nomade che amava Alfred Hitchcock* (2003) [The Female Nomad who Loved Alfred Hitchcock], *Rhoda* (2004), and *Oltre Babilonia* (2008) [Beyond Babylon]. She began her career winning another important prize, Premio Eks&Tra (2003), the first of its kind in Italy created specifically to recognize works of migration literature. This prize was for her short story “Salsicce” [Sausages] included in *Pecore nere* (2005), a collection of short stories by Scego, along with two other migrant women authors, Gabriela Kuruvilla and Ingy Mubiayi. She has also edited anthologies of migrant literature and testimonies, including *Italiani per vocazione* (2005) and *Quando nasci è una roulette. Giovani figli di migranti si raccontano* (2007).

Scego is a committed social activist who aims her art at social change. She is a contributor to/creator of progressive organizations such as *WikiAfrica*, *fondazione lettera27*, and *Incontri di Civiltà*, and it would not be a rare sight to see her protesting in the streets or *piazze*.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Established in Sicily in 1975, the Premio Mondello is one of the most respected literary prizes in Italy and has included Nobel Prize-winning authors among its recipients.

<sup>74</sup> On its website, *Lettera27* defines itself as: “a nonprofit foundation, born in July 2006. Its mission is to support the right to literacy, education, and the access to knowledge and information. *Lettera27* is the 27th letter of the alphabet, the missing letter, the letter yet to be, the hybrid sign, the empty box, the link between oral and written words, the connection to the future, the intersection of analogic and digital.” *Lettera27*. <<http://www.lettera27.org/>>. *WikiAfrica*, whose mission is “to africanize Wikipedia through networks, research, projects, publications, and events,” receives support from *Lettera27*. *WikiAfrica*. <<http://www.wikiafrica.org/>>. *Incontri di Civiltà* is an organization founded in 2010 to promote “diverse culture del Mediterraneo con l’obiettivo di valorizzare il dialogo, gli scambi, i riflessi e le trasformazioni che nascono dall’incontro tra i Paesi che affacciano sul cosiddetto Mare Nostrum” [diverse cultures of the Mediterranean with the objective to valorize the dialogue, exchanges, reflections and transformations emergent out of the contact between countries that look onto the supposed Mare Nostrum]. It promotes and organizes events that combine social consciousness with current events, arts, and literature of the Mediterranean. *Incontri di Civiltà*. <<http://www.facebook.com/incontri.dicivilta>>.

She has also facilitated personal narratives among groups of Somali refugees at *Asinitas*, a nonprofit Italian school, cultural mediation, and production center for refugees and migrants in Rome. These collaborative endeavors are a testament to the expansiveness of her literary vision.

The fact that Scego writes through diverse media on the Internet, where it is possible to include photos, videos, music clips, and links to other pages, should not go unnoticed in her narratives printed on a more traditional medium (as we will further explore in this chapter). I mention these new modes of communication because I believe that they have a profound effect on how storytellers who use them narrate works. In addition, the readers of these authors' narratives may also utilize the Internet to connect more with a story's imagery, language, characters, and cultural references. As one of Scego's Facebook friends, I have the opportunity to catch a glimpse of her daily activities; I can see and listen to what she deems important and noteworthy, from images, literature, music, film, and television to commentary on the economy, immigration reform, sports, etc. Sites like YouTube have also changed a reader's access to the author since footage of the author responding to questions, reading her work, and presenting the work of others can be viewed with the click of a button.

It was through Scego's Facebook post on July 11, 2012, that I was introduced to the idea of transmedial literature. Scego cited Wu Ming 1's perspective on the future of multimediality in literature:<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Wu Ming is an offshoot of another collective pseudonym, Luther Blissett, created in 1994 by "centinaia di artisti, attivisti e burloni" [hundreds of artists, activists, and pranksters], according to the foundation's website. The idea was to unite under one pseudonym to create a new popular hero that would radicalize the literary industry in the face of censorship and repression. In 2000, the Luther Blissett Project was retired and the Wu Ming foundation came into being under the same kind of collective circumstances; however, its five members' names are divulged. They are: Roberto Bui, aka Wu Ming 1; Giovanni Cattabriga, aka Wu Ming 2; Luca Di Meo, aka Wu Ming 3; Federico Guglielmi, aka Wu Ming 4; and Riccardo Pedrini, aka Wu Ming 5. Since then, Wu Ming has collectively or individually published numerous novels and short stories; the

Forse va creato un circolo virtuoso tra il web e la strada: i libri vanno concepiti come opere ‘transmediali’ affiancando loro musica, illustrazioni, video ed esecuzioni dal vivo che non siano solo ‘promozione’ ma facciano a tutti gli effetti parte dell’opera. Sono cose che già facciamo. Si tratta di farlo di più meglio. Il libro resta importante, ma sarà solo uno degli aspetti della narrazione.

[Perhaps a virtuous circle between the Web and the street should be created: Books would be conceptualized as transmedial works accompanied by music, illustrations, video and live performances that would not only be promotional, but would be, for all intents and purposes, part of the work. These are things we already do. It is just about doing it better and more often. The book remains important, but it will only be one of narration’s many aspects].

Scego seamlessly makes such connections in her narratives where transmediality forms the cornerstone of her character representations. By writing through and across media, she breaks down barriers between literature and real life, the page and the streets. Such an aesthetic and approach, however, does not make her works any less literary. If anything, she brings more focus to the art of narration, whose manifestations outpour from a variety of sources. It is her focus on narration that brings the media to such prominence in her works. In representing the narrative power exercised by the media fueled by sensationalism, fear, xenophobia, deception, hyper-sexualization, racism, etc., Scego shows how this power can be counterbalanced and transformed through narration itself, and in particular through a change in language systems.

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majority of them are offered as free downloads online, yet they have also been sold in bookstores and printed by major publishers such as Einaudi.

*Wu Ming Foundation*. “Repubblica intervista Wu Ming 1 sull’Operazione Glastnost 2012.” <<http://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/?p=8880>>.

While analyzing Scego's short stories and novels, the framework of the mashup kept coming to mind (especially after I read her short story, "Identità," whose protagonist is a disc jockey). I perceive this narrative framework to be a source of transformation in Scego's works because it roots itself in multimodality and plurality.

The mashup is multimodal since it can exist in a variety of forms (digitally, textually, visually, musically, etc.), as well as plural because it requires at least two different components and often incorporates several of these forms and their hybrids into its narrative. The most common type of mashup started with musical recordings as outlined here by Eduardo Navas in *Mashup Cultures*; however, it has developed into a much more substantive framework:<sup>76</sup>

Mashups actually have roots in sampling principles that became apparent and popular in music around the seventies with the growing popularity of music remixes in disco and hip hop culture, and even though mashups are founded on principles initially explored in music they are not straight forward remixes if we think of remixes as allegories (157).

Many variations of the mashup have since developed, especially with the advancement of technology (video, digital, and web application mashups, to name a few). Navas goes further to identify two major types of mashups: regressive and reflexive. He considers music to be a regressive mashup, while other media, such as web applications, fall under the reflexive category. My analysis refers to the reflexive type, a form that many people encounter on a daily basis (think of the traffic feature on map applications) and that is increasingly prevalent as data becomes more accessible. The defining characteristic of this mashup is the mixing of different components to create a new composition, one that the elements may not have individually been

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<sup>76</sup> Eduardo Navas, "Regressive and Reflexive Mashups in Sampling Culture." *Mashup Cultures*. New York: Springer Wien, 2010: 151-177.



intended for, yet reveals new connections and purpose. Navas posits that “when mashups move beyond basic remix principles, a constructive rupture develops that shows possibilities for new forms of cultural production that question standard commercial practice” (157). Therefore, the mashup provides a framework for transformation that maximizes and spotlights intersectionality. Its ability to reposition and reformulate diverse and seemingly dissonant elements makes such transformation possible. Navas calls this a “Regenerative Remix” that “mirrors while it also redefines culture itself as a discourse of constant change” (159).

Another notable aspect to consider as part of this transformation is the mashup’s ability to collapse time, providing a space for the past and the present to coalesce. Jo Hedwig Teeuwisse’s project “The Ghosts of History” is a great example.<sup>77</sup> She created a visual mashup that combines photographs taken in Amsterdam during the World War II German occupation with photographs of the same places as they exist in present day. Thus as a temporal overlay, the mashup can be an instrument of memory that not only records the past but also relativizes memory in the present. In this sense, the mashup is quite effective in representing historical memory and trauma, such as Italian colonialism (as is the case in this dissertation). The mashup is basically the product of relating individual elements to form a collective whole, plurality.

Although it can deal with very solemn subjects, the mashup’s transformative aspect is not without a sense of humor. It pokes fun at language systems (their self-imposed limitations) and exercises a playful attitude to connect with its audiences. In short, it reminds us that we are human, and that adaptability and experimentation are fundamental aspects of our existence.

The elements of the mashup that I identify in Scego’s narratives are her references to people and places that do exist or did exist in real life, but which are layered in such a way that

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<sup>77</sup> *PRI’s The World*. “The Ghosts of History.” <<http://www.theworld.org/2012/12/the-ghosts-of-history/>>.

they change the reader's perspective and transcend their original context without erasing the memory of the original. In fact, sometimes Scego familiarizes the reader with the original context before she provides a new one (for example, in the case of Italian colonialism). The means by which her characters' stories are told (in the first or third person, on tape cassette, the phone, etc.) also enter into the mashup.

Scego exemplifies the reflexive mashup/Regenerative Remix in the sense that she uses multimodality to make connections that were, for the most part, previously unexplored or hindered by unimodal systems, or what Cavarero calls logocentrism. I perceive a strong connection between Cavarero's resistance to logocentrism and what I interpret as Scego's mashup; that is, I believe the mashup has the potential to circumvent the primacy of logocentric language systems (as outlined by Cavarero). Even in terms of audio, the mashup takes its unique yet recognizable shape through multiple connections with tempo, rhythm, tone, and resonance. Thus, vocality as Cavarero defines it, holds a prominent position in the process of signification in the mashup. As I mentioned in this dissertation's introduction, the body is intrinsically tied to vocality. In her writing, Scego reminds us that language systems are not separate from the body. She continually makes connections between the body and language; her narratives show how the body is affected by language and how it is traditionally bound by language. Ultimately, the mashup is a way to transcend such boundaries since by including them it can also dismantle them. One of the ways the mashup achieves such transcendence in her narratives is through its capacity to evidence contradictions, often times in the guise of the narrator's sense of humor. In fact, a sense of humor and the mashup often go hand-in-hand since both their narrations require a shift in perspective. In Scego's narratives, elements of dissonance and tension are overlaid with humor that often reveals unexpected common ground, a shared cultural consciousness.

For me, Scego's multimodal storytelling is about accessibility. She reveals that postcolonial Italy can be accessed through every aspect of Italian culture. The mashup not only creates multiple points of accessibility, it also represents the sum of all these points. By framing her characters within a mashup of cultures, Scego is able to contextualize them within a greater whole. She creates a type of dialogue that reaches beyond the oral and written realms, yet does not exclude them.

Imagery in Scego's narratives helps bring language closer to the resonance that Cavarero speaks of, capturing the uniqueness of the voice by producing alternative significations of language. Since it is also a visual medium, the mashup holds the potential to connect alternative images with language systems, thus reminding the reader that language is flexible and has the power to change realities while making way for new ones. Mediatic language often fuels Scego's mashups since it is a source for common ground as well as dissonance. The mashup is a framework to contend with the very impersonal language and images of the media, especially in confronting totalizing systems of racism on multiple fronts. Scego's mashup style ensures that her characters' bodies cannot be eliminated, standardized, or neutralized because of the multiple connections made between language and the senses.

Language in Scego's narratives establishes and maintains an explicit connection with the body (in the sense that language never exists independently from the body; it is not an anonymous or autonomous entity). In this vein, I posit that Scego's multimodal storytelling constructs a biosymbolic language, meaning that words affect one's body, psyche, mind, and environment. Clinical neuropsychologist Dr. Mario Martinez, author of *The Mind Body Code* (2009), explains: "As biosymbolic beings, our language and imagery have a bidirectional connection with our biology. In this mind-body coauthoring, our emotions and sensations

function as autogenic feedback for our intentions and actions” (1).<sup>78</sup> Martinez points out that biosymbols are culture-specific, meaning that the effects that certain words have on people in particular cultures do not necessarily have the same effect across all cultures. Scego is truly a master at driving these concepts home, especially where mediatic references are concerned. In her appeal to all the senses in her narratives (achieved through the mashup), Scego manages to create a consciousness of the symbiotic relationship inherent in words.

The mediatic elements in Scego’s writing, which form their own type of language, always have a direct effect on the body. Especially dangerous are the buzz words, coded language, and visual exploitation produced and disseminated by television news reports, newspaper and magazine titles and articles, photographs, film, and video. These media often speak in a veiled language in the narratives, or what Scego’s narrator in “Identità” calls “il detto non detto” (11) [the unsaid but said]. Here, Scego’s multimodality is especially effective in outing this masked racism, which has been commodified and homogenized/standardized in Italian society. She advocates the creation of an alternative language, one that is powerful enough to contend with the language of the media:

La lingua [...] può fare male e uccidere se usata in maniera pericolosa. Pensiamo a quante volte nei telegiornali sentiamo scambiare con troppa leggerezza i termini “rifugiato politico” con “clandestino”. Ecco, io credo che un maggior dialogo tra scrittori italiani e migranti sia indispensabile per contrastare questa pratica e favorire piuttosto contaminazioni che possono invece generare un linguaggio

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<sup>78</sup> Martinez, Mario E. “The Biocognition of Personal Ethics: Does the Immune System Have Morals?” <[http://www.rit.edu/cla/ethics/seac/Martinez\\_presentation.pdf](http://www.rit.edu/cla/ethics/seac/Martinez_presentation.pdf)>.

capace di raccontare la società italiana odierna per quello che realmente è.<sup>79</sup>

[Language [...] can do harm and kill if used in a dangerous way. Think of how many times we hear on the news the term “political refugee” interchanged with “clandestine.” Therefore, I believe greater dialogue between Italian writers and migrants is indispensable to contrast this practice and to favor, instead, contaminations that can generate a language capable of narrating everyday Italian society for what it really is].

Seeking to get to the root of racism (its biosymbolic language), she dismantles the media’s language in her narratives through contrasting realities—personal stories versus stereotypes and sensationalism—often by incorporating newspaper titles and even whole articles that, while they may be her own invention, are quite plausible as actual reportage in Italy. In a sense, the mainstream media’s language (formulaic, pseudoscientific, totalizing) is part of Scego finding her own language as she grapples with the logocentrism that Cavarero speaks of and seeks to infuse new meanings into language.

## 1. “Identità”

I chose Scego’s short story “Identità” to analyze and translate because it exemplifies her mastery of multimodal storytelling even in—or rather, especially in—the condensed space of a short story (29 pages). By navigating through Italian, Somali, globalized, and diasporic cultures, Scego depicts the relationalities that reveal her protagonists’ uniqueness while at the same time

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<sup>79</sup> *Il Paese Sera*. “Lingua madre o lingua matrigna. Il primo ‘Incontro di civiltà.’” <<http://www.paesesera.it/Cultura-e-spettacolo/Libri-fumetti/Lingua-madre-o-lingua-matrigna-II-primo-Incontro-di-civilta>>.

showing how such moments of resonance are disrupted and prevented by language. Furthermore, Scego implicates visual culture as an integral part of a language system's viability. In "Identità," Scego specifically confronts the language of racism and its subtle and not so subtle manifestations in the Italian collective consciousness. Contrasting the personal with the impersonal by means of popular culture in the story, she reveals that there are still stereotypes about mixed race couples that harken back to Italian colonial campaigns for East Africa. The story shows that despite Italians' historical amnesia, there are still clear manifestations of Italian colonialism's legacy in Italy in the most intimate and impersonal relationships. It illustrates persistent perceptions (misperceptions) of East African women advocated not only by the media, but also by traditional Italian and Somali society.

Although finding and representing one's identity is a common trope throughout Scego's narratives, "Identità" explicitly deals with the archetypal figure of the storyteller. This archetype appears in various forms (light and shadow) throughout the story. Thus, its varied manifestations lead the reader to ponder the role of the storyteller in society as a whole as well as on the most personal, individual level. If we think of identity as storytelling, then the title of the story acts almost as a question: "Identity? Whose identity, and authored by whom? Is this identity with a capital I, or is it only specific to one particular person?"

The archetypal storyteller reveals different types of identity creation, principally identity the storyteller creates for the interlocutor and the identity the storyteller creates for him/herself. The two are not mutually exclusive, however, and I believe Scego uses the mashup to explore the interchanges between the two, capturing the moments when at least two narratives contrast or

even clash (as in a sound clash) to reveal unexpected moments of resonance.<sup>80</sup> Keeping the framework of the mashup in mind (its contrastive, layered, transformative nature), we explore the story's plot and characters, and then proceed with a close reading of the archetypal figure of the storyteller and the language with which his/her stories are told.

“Identità” is told in the third person by an unnamed narrator who chronicles a day in the life of Fatou Ahmed Hirsi, a 33-year-old radio disc jockey. Fatou is of Somali origin, yet was born and raised in Rome, unlike her Italian husband Valerio, who was born to Italian parents in Mogadishu and later lived in Bamako, Mali, before settling in Rome as an adult. Once in Rome, Valerio married his first wife, with whom he has a daughter, later meeting Fatou at a Chagall exhibit in a museum in Barcelona. Fatou's estranged sister Nura, who lives in Manchester and has not seen her for ten years, is due to arrive at the airport. That very same day, a women's magazine article on mixed race couples in Italy hits newsstands; it is based on an interview with Fatou and Valerio that freelance Italian journalist Milena Morri conducted. The article paints Fatou in a negative light, repeating colonial and fascist stereotypes about mixed race couples and foreign women. Fatou and Valerio greet Nura at the airport and bring her back to their apartment in Rome. Nura doesn't approve of Valerio, who is a *gaal* (infidel); she wants Fatou to marry a Somali man and has come equipped with a photo album of eligible bachelors from which she wants Fatou to choose. Upon opening the apartment to the newly arrived Nura, Fatou is surprised to see a new addition to the living room wall—earlier that day, Valerio hung his

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<sup>80</sup> A sound clash is a competition between opposing djs who represent sound systems. They alternate musical sets at increasingly shorter intervals until one dj is selected as the winner. In a way, I see the various storytellers engaging in this dynamic in “Identità.” Milena Morri's article and Nura certainly stand in opposition to the narrator's point of view and they go head to head after the article's content is revealed. Fatou even plays songs in her head to face the challenges of the day. On this particular day, it is “I Will Survive.”

uncle's old colonial photo portrait of a semi-nude black woman from Brava, Somalia. Unnerved, Fatou says she is ill and retreats to the bedroom where she falls asleep while Valerio and Nura chat and eventually bond in the kitchen. After awakening from a dream a couple hours later, or rather a nightmare involving Milena Morri and the talking photograph, Fatou dismounts and tears the photo, Morri's article, and her sister's photographs of eligible Somali men to pieces, finally discarding them in the trash.

Since I mentioned the multimodal nature of the story's narration, many supporting roles accompany the four main protagonists. In terms of friends and acquaintances, minor characters include: Fatou's friend Lubna, "una italo-straniera come lei" (6) [an Italian foreigner like her] originally from Tunisia; Paolo, the friend who introduced the couple to Milena Morri; and Oscar and Pizzo, the gay couple from which Valerio and Fatou purchased their Roman apartment. Besides these fictional characters, Scego includes transcultural and mediatic elements that exist in "real" life. These elements further construct the complementary and contrasting language Scego contends with in her narrative. They range from pop celebrities, artists, and singers to activists, writers, a comic book character, songs, and photographs. Those mentioned by name are: Erykah Badu, Angélique "queen" Kidjo (singer-songwriter from Benin), P.J. Harvey, Malcolm X, Franz Fanon, Huey Freeman (character from *The Boondocks* comic), Ray Lema (Congolese musician), Chagall, Virginia Woolf, Oscar Wilde, Salif Keita (afropop singer from Mali), John Lennon, a trash cover of "I Will Survive" sung by Celia Cruz, and mixed race celebrity couples: Heidi Klum and Seal, Albert of Monaco and Nicole Coste (from Togo), Afef Jnifen (Italian-Tunisian model, television personality) and Marco Tronchetti Provera (Italian executive), and even the animated couple Shrek and Fiona.

Places, spaces, and place names are also important narrative elements. Evoked in a



variety of guises, Africa highlights the subtle and not-so-subtle differences between imagined and lived territories. The references range from the the fictional Africa that Milena Morri associates with Fatou in her article to the Somalia and Mali that Fatou imagines from afar in Rome (she has only stepped foot in one African city— Sharma Sheik<sup>81</sup>). Additionally, the experiences Valerio and Nura had growing up in Mogadishu, Somalia (and also in Bamako, Mali, in Valerio’s case), as well as the colonial image of Brava, Somalia, that Valerio hangs in the living room, are also significant in this context. Hospital names provide unexpected parallels between Valerio and Nura, who were born in the same Ospedale de Martino in Mogadishu. Fatou, on the other hand, was born in the Regina Margherita hospital in Rome. Other important focal points in Rome are places of transit, the Flaminio metro stop and Termini train station, where Fatou questions not her Italian identity, but her blackness. Even the United States appears on the scene in the narrator’s reference to New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina, which are symbols of social disparities and racial divides. Another city outside Italy, Barcelona, Spain, where Fatou and Valerio first met at a Chagall exhibit, defies stereotypical expectations of mixed race couples.<sup>82</sup>

Thus, one of the ways Scego overturns stereotypes in “Identità” is by naming territories and places. Not only does she name them, she often pairs them with unexpected subjects/people, essentially creating constellations of topographical points that shift and change shape according

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<sup>81</sup> The narrator takes issue with this tourist attraction: “Ma Sharma non era Africa, Sharma non era niente, era un incrocio bastardo della globalizzazione, dove il cibo era standard, gli amori pure e il mare era funzionale a tutta quella spazzatura preconfezionata” (23) [But Sharma wasn’t Africa, Sharma wasn’t anything, it was a bastard crossroads of globalization, where the food was generic, loves too and the sea served all that pre-packaged garbage].

<sup>82</sup> In Italy, migrant women and women of color are often associated with the domestic workplace and places associated with maintaining a household. See: Andall, Jacqueline. *Gender, Migration and Domestic Service: The Politics of Black Women in Italy*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000.

to the protagonists' perspectives. For example, an African-themed corner in Valerio and Fatou's home, "l'angolo africano," that Milena Morri attributes to Fatou in the article is later attributed to Valerio, who expresses, "Voglio sentirmi a casa" (22) [I want to feel at home]. Mentioning place names helps set up the contrastive/complementary nature of the story (in other words, the mashup). The story takes shape by means of a series of contrasts, unexpected and unconventional transnational parallels, as well as conventional nationalistic thought. Although Milena Morri and Nura espouse several traditional, conservative viewpoints that clash with Fatou and Valerio's lifestyle, Valerio's complementary character is called into question when he reveals the colonial photograph on the living room wall (a photograph he took into possession from a male family member, his father).

The multimodal aspects in the narrative provide depth and dimension to the story and the characters. They are especially effective regarding issues of race and colonialism. Since in Italy there is no collective consciousness of an Italian colonial past, these multimodal elements are the points of reference that have a high potential to resonate with Italians in understanding and learning about it. At the same time, Scego's multimodality makes connections to the African diaspora, thereby giving voice to different perceptions of blackness and racism that can then dialogue with the Italian modes. For example, the narrator's comparison of greeting cards in Italy with those in the United States (namely the African-American Mahogany collection) opens up a dialogue about the very limited visual representation of Italian identity. The imagery of the cards resonates even more so at the end of the story when the "Donna di Brava" portrait materializes (in a sense, Milena Morri painted this portrait earlier in her article)<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> During Italian colonialism, erotic and exotic cards of East African women were commonplace and highly circulated. Scego reveals the irony of the lack of visual representation of people of color on cards in contemporary Italy.

These modes represent pivotal points in the story's development as they offer insight into the complexities of national identity; they capture and convey the personal and emotional effect the media has on women of color and open up dialogue to issues of racism. Oftentimes, Scego uses the very means/modes by which racism is manifested in the Italian media and culture to disempower it.

Since the mashup allows for the reconfiguration of modes, it also has the ability to transform their original meaning. As mentioned previously, the mashup represents plurality (literally and symbolically), recognizes extralinguistic meaning, and collapses time (linearity is not always necessary). In this sense, I connect it with Cavarero's notion of resonance. Through the mashup, Scego effectively and systematically confronts colonial imagery and language, highlighting that they are still a contemporary phenomenon. Scego's mashup also reveals the contradictory language of Italian colonialism that both glorified and denigrated East African women. Within this framework, she highlights the creative energy behind different types of storytelling/identity creation. In other words, the purpose and the intention of narration are as important as the form itself.

Before mentioning any historical facts in this story, Scego utilizes artifacts of contemporary culture (mentioned above) to resonate with the reader. The reader becomes familiar with Fatou's character not through Milena Morri's prose, but through the poetry of sounds and images. In this sense, the narrator deals with the logocentrism discussed by Cavarero (represented by Milena Morri in the story) through extralinguistic means. The following passage, which refers to Fatou, illustrates my point:

Non c'era poesia senza gossip. Lo facevano gli studiosi di letteratura per Virginia Woolf o Oscar Wilde, perché non lei per John Lennon o Salif Keita? Cosa aveva

meno Salif Keita di Oscar Wilde? Quella mattina quindi quando la voce squillante di una morta le intimò di sopravvivere, Fatou capì che correva il rischio di finire come New Orleans spazzata via dall'uragano Katrina e dalla negligenza degli uomini (21).

[There was no poetry without gossip. Literary critics did it with Virginia Woolf or Oscar Wilde, why couldn't she do it with John Lennon or Salif Keita? What did Oscar Wilde have that Salif Keita doesn't? So when the piercing voice of a dead woman let her know to survive that morning, Fatou understood she was running the risk of ending up like New Orleans swept away by Hurricane Katrina and the negligence of men.]

Here, prose and poetry are put on the same plane, as song (Celia Cruz's rendition of "I Will Survive"), urban landscape (New Orleans), and the natural world (Hurricane Katrina) capture Fatou's internal state. As we will see, the mashup in "Identità" not only expresses the hurt caused by words/language by means of extralinguistic references, it also shows the imagery that these harmful words create. Moreover, the contrasting narratives spotlight the various roles and responsibilities of the storyteller.

In "Identità," the act of narration is particularly at the forefront since one of the protagonists, Milena Morri, is a writer/journalist and her full-text article is included in the story. Entitled "LA CALATA DELLE BARBARIE ... QUANDO IL MATRIMONIO SI FA STRANIERO" ["A DROP IN BARBARISM ... WHEN MARRIAGE GOES FOREIGN"], the article, denoted in italics, begins on the fourth page of the story, spans approximately four pages, and is the result of an interview Morri conducted with Fatou and Valerio in their home in Rome.

It is essentially a defensive article that advocates white Italian women's primacy to intimate relationships with Italian men. This narrative within a narrative sets the stage for an examination into authorship. Morri's article sets up a contrast between storytellers and inspires the narrator to examine the archetype of the storyteller—Morri, Valerio, Fatou, and the narrator are all versions of this archetype. Scego portrays the storyteller's light and shadow, with the light represented by Fatou (the lines between Fatou and the narrator are quite blurred, so we could include the story's narrator here) and the shadow represented by Morri. Valerio occupies a sort of middle ground. Besides the written and oral narratives from Morri and Valerio respectively, there are also vocal narratives provided by Fatou. Role reversals are certainly in effect, since Valerio tells Fatou his oral history of growing up in Africa—Fatou asks her husband, “‘Raccontami dell’ Africa’” (23) [“Tell me about Africa”], revealing that she is the one who is less familiar with the continent—and Fatou occupies the typically male role of the disc jockey. Morri's Eurocentric focus on Africa and its conflation with Fatou sharply contrasts with Fatou's own experience.

The question of identity, and therefore also the modes and motivation of the storyteller, center around Fatou. However, as the story unfolds it is the other three protagonists who have a questionable identity. While Morri imposes an identity on Fatou (Nura tries to impose an identity on Fatou as well; however, she has neither the power of the press nor the patriarchal authority to do so), Valerio asks Fatou to explain what her identity is:

‘Ora tocca a te amore. Dimmi chi sei?’

‘Sono quella che sai.’

‘E cosa so?’

La ragazza nera cominciò a scavare anche lei. Dentro il suo pancreas inaudito.

‘Chi sono io?’ Le ventuno corde della kora cominciarono a riempire quel vuoto di sostanza. ‘Chi sono?’, l’affermazione si fece angoscia (24).

[“Now it’s your turn love. Tell me, who are you?”

“I’m who you know”

“And what do I know?”

The black girl started to dig as well. Inside her unheard pancreas.

“Who am I?” The twenty-one cords of the kora started to fill that void with substance. “Who am I?”; the affirmation tormented her.]

‘Chi sono?’ pensò Fatou. La kora vibrava (25).

[“Who am I?” thought Fatou. The kora vibrated.]

Fatou’s reaction takes the form of music, in particular the kora of the *djeli*, or storyteller, that she mentions shortly before when she asked Valerio to be her *djeli*: “Puoi diventare il mio *djeli* amore?” (24). She goes on to define herself through labels, but this proves unsatisfactory:

‘Sono una tunni. Figlia di Tunni di Brava. Figlia di Geilani e Ruqia. Leonessa di stirpe. Alta di rango. La cartina geografica mi ha smarrito, ora sono qui con te, nel cuore mi porto un dolore, una terra sparita. La mia Somalia in guerra da tutta la sua vita. Chi sono amore? Non lo so. Non l’ho mai saputo veramente. Sono nata in terra straniera. Nonostante tutto so di non essere straniera a nessuno.’

‘Chi sei?’

‘Te l’ho detto. Sono una tunni. Sono romana. Sono straniera. Sono di qui. Sono tua.’

‘Chi sei?’

‘Sono Faduma e ti amo mio gaal’ (25).

[‘I’m a Tunni. Daughter of Tunni of Brava. Daughter of Geilani and Ruqia. Lioness by birth. High-ranking. The map lost me, now I’m here with you; I carry pain in my heart, a disappeared land. My Somalia at war for all her life. Who am I love? I don’t know. I’ve never really known. I was born in a foreign land. Yet I know I’m not a foreigner to anyone.”

“Who are you?”

“I told you. I’m a Tunni. I’m Roman. I’m a foreigner. I’m from here. I’m yours.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m Faduma and I love you my gaal.”]

Valerio cannot be the storyteller of Fatou’s identity. As readers, we are reminded of this by Fatou’s use of the Somali term *gaal*, or infidel, which she uses jokingly; however, it reveals a history of Italian violence and repression in Somalia. The extralinguistic element of the music and the poetry that the kora evokes will later become Fatou’s means of telling her story. It is not until her role as a disc jockey is given meaning in connection to the djeli that she is able to know

her identity.

The narrator of the story (it could be Fatou—it is difficult to tell where Fatou’s thoughts end and the narrator’s begins) presents the figure of the djeli as the weaver or mix master of identity, whose contemporary expression is the socially committed disc jockey. This disc jockey represents multiple gender roles (the djeli was traditionally male), and he or she (in this case, Fatou) contextualizes personal and communal histories by means of creating a set or a mixed tape—a mashup, if you will—of intersecting cultures. The archetypal figure of the djeli, from whom the disc jockey descends, navigates through and composes a cohesive narrative between past and present, colonial and postcolonial, local and global. The connection between the disc jockey and the djeli is the storyteller: “È come un dj il djeli. Racconta storie, la musica lo accompagna, costruisce itinerari. Commenta le nascite, le dinastie, le circoncisioni, i diplomi, i matrimoni, le guarigioni, le morti, i passaggi, i ritorni, i fantasmi. Juke-boxe, soffio vitale sei oh djeli. Ventuno corde incollate a una cucurbitacea. Suono di kora. Ugola della terra. Djeli” (24) [The djeli is like a disc jockey. He tells stories, music accompanies him, he constructs itineraries. He speaks about births, dynasties, circumcisions, graduations, marriages, recoveries, deaths, transits, returns, ghosts. Oh djeli, jukebox, you are a breath of life. Twenty-one cords fastened to a cucurbit. Sound of the kora. Voice of the earth. Djeli.]. The disc jockey/djeli exercises a progressive work ethic that contrasts sharply with Morri’s storytelling, which concerns itself purely with sensationalism, conservatism, and divisiveness.

The transmission of memory, an act that seems to be lost on mainstream media, embodies the djeli’s mixing mastery. The narrator explains, “In Africa il djeli è la memoria, è un documento, un’eco, una immagine, una prova, la storia che il bianco voleva far seppellire. Il djeli si agita” (23) [In Africa the djeli is memory, is a document, an echo, an image, a test, the



history that the white man would like to bury. The djeli stirs]. As we can see, this transmission of memory, of history, is multimodal in nature. The disc jockey, the contemporary embodiment of the djeli, accesses memory to transform realities. Interaction with an audience is also a fundamental aspect of the disc jockey/djeli since one of his/her key roles is to build upon and redirect the audience's energy. In this sense, the postcolonial author is a djeli who connects to the reader beyond language systems alone. This postcolonial mashup culminates in Fatou's dream sequence at the end of the story (which will be explored later).

In examining the language that seeks to bury the djeli's history, namely the language with which Morri writes her article, we keep in mind Cavarero's notion of logocentrism. Language and linguistic registers are one method that Scego uses to reveal the embedded nature of her narratives in Italian society and culture. Although Morri's article is fictional, its rhetoric is not, since it calls upon racist colonial stereotypes that have permeated Italian society since Unification.<sup>84</sup> Maria Pagliara and Giovanna Tomasello have identified some key, common yet also contradictory characteristics of colonial rhetoric in Italian literature.<sup>85</sup> Colonial rhetoric, such as depicting African and foreign women with language heavily infused with diminutives and animalistic references, shapes Morri's article (which could easily be an article published by today's media in Italy). This coded language aims to ignore the uniqueness of the voice; it is dehumanizing and therefore it lends itself to standardization and nationalistic thought.

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<sup>84</sup> See: Palumbo, Patrizia ed. *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.  
Andall, Jacqueline and Derek Duncan, eds. *National Belongings: Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures*. Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2010.  
---. *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005.

<sup>85</sup> Pagliara, Maria. *Il romanzo coloniale: tra imperialismo e rimorso*. Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2001.  
Tomasello, Giovanna. *L'Africa tra mito e realtà. Storia della letteratura coloniale italiana*. Palermo: Salerio, 1994.

The fact that the article is cited in its entirety seems to pose a challenge to the reader. Will the reader agree with its message? Will he/she recognize its mechanisms? Will the reader develop his/her own counter-argument? Is Morri's contradictory language about Fatou (or women like her, meaning not ethnically Italian) convincing? Is she really an animalistic, promiscuous, man-eater and home wrecker who is also accommodating, docile yet dominating?

In the article, Morri describes Fatou as “una cagnolina che aspetta” (9) [a waiting puppy] who has a “collo da giraffa e due occhi da cerbiatta indifesa che hanno molta presa sugli uomini made in Italy” (8) [giraffe-like neck and two helpless doe eyes that have quite a hold on men made in Italy]. She is painted as the embodiment of naïveté—“Vive della luce riflessa di lui. Lui concede, lui toglie. Lei lo sa e va bene così” (9) [She lives in his image. He giveth and he taketh away. She knows it and is alright with it]—who is docile in nature, a specimen of the “remissività delle straniere” (9)[submissiveness of foreign women]. Yet in the same stroke, Morri classifies Fatou as “furbetta” (10) [scheming], a predator with “unghie e denti che all'occorrenza possono fare molto male” (8) [nails and teeth that can inflict harm when necessary].

Another common thread of Italian colonial rhetoric, identified by feminist scholars such as Karen Pinkus, Cristina Lombardi Diop, Sandra Ponzanesi, and Ruth Iyob, is the association of drink and food with skin color and race.<sup>86</sup> Morri describes Fatou and Valerio's relationship as a “fritto misto” (9) [an assorted fried dish], a “matrimonio caffelatte” [a caffelatte marriage] that is sometimes “orzata” (9) [barley-based] in the case of lighter women's skin tones.

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<sup>86</sup> See also: Muzzarelli, Maria Giuseppina and Lucia Re, eds. *Il cibo e le donne nella cultura e nella storia: Prospettive interdisciplinari*. Bologna: CLUEB, 2005.

Morri perpetuates the stereotype that women of color and Italian men are incapable of truly loving each other. She cites the age difference between Fatou and Valerio (Valerio is older) as well as sexual permissiveness as evidence for this hypothesis: “le straniere ti fanno fare tutto. Valerio non lo dice, ma è tutto il corpo di Fatou a confermarlo” (9) [Foreign women allow you to do everything. Valerio doesn’t say it, but Fatou’s body says it all].<sup>87</sup> Morri strongly alludes to the notion that women of color are a threat to white Italian women finding love and happiness. It is no coincidence that she chose a Somali woman on which to base her argument. Karen Pinkus points out that Somali women, in particular, were deemed to be the ideal female beauty:

Within this encounter, the black female equals sex, quite clearly, but there is something more to be said about the specific fantasy of the smooth Negress. Of all the African women encountered by the Italians on their many misadventures ‘down there,’ it was almost universally agreed that the Somalis were the most desirable, in a sense because their beauty was *believed* to be only an exaggeration of whiteness, and not a ‘degenerate’ opposite of it (141-142).

The article feeds into and continues the legacy of this myth. The fear that whiteness equates deficiency and that the blurring of color lines will put “white” Italians into a precarious state of identity comes to the forefront. Operating out of this place of fear, Morri appeals to the “civilized” behavior of Italian women and contrasts it with the “backward” nature of Africa (a

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<sup>87</sup> Pinkus writes, “In adventurers’ prose descriptions, as in the advertising, the Somali stands as a figure for (illicit) sexuality, for submission, and if her iconographic counterpart, a white male, is missing from the representation in question, his presence is both presumed and necessary for constructing a full reading of the scene” (141).

place Fatou has never been): “Il femminismo da quelle parti non è arrivato” (11) [feminism never arrived in those parts]. The perception of women of African descent as a threat to both Italian men and women became even more prominent after the 1937 racial laws were established in the colonies.

The story’s narrator refers to the article’s language as the “detto non detto” [the said unsaid], the type of racism that is difficult to pin down because it occupies such a vast realm. The appeal to feminism and the fact that Morri is a woman also complicate the issue. She universalizes the typically male language of which Cavarero speaks, a subversion of female solidarity that is also reminiscent of colonial era, fascist Italy when women’s magazines published articles on the superiority of white women and songs such as “Faccetta bianca” denied any communality between East African and Italian women.<sup>88</sup> Morri essentially uses language to objectivize Fatou and not only fails to recognize Fatou’s voice, but silences her own. As we will discuss later, Valerio also objectivizes Fatou by hanging the nude colonial portrait; however, he does not pair this imagery with logocentrism as Morri does.

In order to give voice and meaning to the unsaid, the narrator takes a multimodal approach. In the true spirit of the djeli, he/she appeals to all the senses to turn its very mechanisms upside down. As a result, animalistic language, female opposition and objectification, sensuality, conservatism, and Eurocentrism all undergo a transformation. By applying these elements to different contexts and subjects in a mashup, the narrator brings even greater scrutiny to them. Therefore, in this mashup words take on new and multiple meaning and

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<sup>88</sup> Cristina Lombardi-Diop writes about how Italian women were sent to the colonies to prevent further miscegenation between East African women and Italian men. “Faccetta bianca” was composed in reaction to the popularity of the song “Faccetta nera” and in accordance to the 1937 racial laws.

embody more than one language; they are uttered by recognizably different subjects, thus, they resonate with greater, more extensive populations. Through constant interplay with the language and imagery of Morri's article, the narrator disempowers them. In the end, Fatou literally destroys the article along with its images and those supplied by Nura and Valerio.

Biosymbolic language is at the heart of all the storytellers' tales in "Identità." The difference between the djeli and the other storytellers is that the djeli is able to express the symbiotic relationship between words, the body, and the psyche. Moreover, the djeli is able to transform this relationship through extralinguistic means; that is, the utterances and the poetry to which Cavarero calls our attention. While the narrator gives us a unique glimpse into the profound, even bodily, effect Morri's article has on Fatou—"A Fatou venne da vomitare" (31) [Fatou felt like vomiting]—an aspect that is rarely ever given a voice in the Italian media, we also witness how multimodality becomes a source of introspection and strength for her: "Si sentiva troppo inceppata dal dolore, disgustata. Anche sporca, brutta e cattiva. Ogni parola di quell'articolo l'aveva ferita. Ogni singola parola, ogni singola virgola, ogni sospensione, ogni non detto un po' detto" (11) [She felt too flustered by the pain. Disgusted—even dirty, ugly and rotten. Every word in that article had hurt her. Every single word, every single comma, every single pause, every single unsaid, but implied word.].

Multilingualism is certainly a feature of this multimodality. Scego employs four languages in "Identità": English, Somali, Arabic, and Italian. Sometimes multiple versions of the same word—for example: sister (English), *abbayo* (Somali), *sorella* (Italian)—appear to emphasize the uniqueness of the voice, highlighting the way each speaker gives and receives these words differently. Other times the same word uttered by two different subjects, such as the word *gaal* [infidel] spoken by Fatou and Nura, reveals the light and shadow of the storyteller;

Fatou uses it to show just how intertwined her and Valerio's histories are, whereas Nura uses it to create divisiveness. Another word traditionally associated with Italian colonialism, *shermutta* [prostitute], initiates a role reversal when it is applied to Milena Morri. This term was historically used in reference to East African women who were involved in relationships with Italian men.

Multilingualism also dismantles sweeping categorizations of people in the story. Nura re-evaluates her classification of Valerio after she hears his Somali speaking skills. In another instance, while Fatou is passing through the Termini train station in Rome, two groups of young people are specifically identified as *abesha* [Ethiopian] and *geerer* [Somali] (12), terms that confront the dominant terms that Italian indiscriminately apply to people of color in Italy, such as *marocchino* [Moroccan], *extracomunitario* [non-member of the European Union], *nero* [black], *africano* [African], and *straniero* [foreigner]. In the narrative, multilingualism ultimately functions as a means to overcome limitations, which is clearly evident when the word for love is presented in both English and Arabic to show Morri that her words can only go so far. In other words, the recognition of sound—the textural quality of words—adds depth to the characters' interactions and to the reader's connection to them.

In this chapter's introduction, I mentioned the connection between humor and the mashup. By re-contextualizing racist and xenophobic rhetoric through humor in this story, Scego creates moments of resonance between characters and also with the reader. In the case of animalistic language, the mashup transforms the heaviness of Morri's racist undertones into the lightness of Fatou's sense of humor. Therefore, the animalistic depiction of Nura as “quell'essere pachidermico” (20) [that pachydermic creature] (because of her plumpness and the layers of ethnic and Western clothing she is wearing), evokes her idiosyncratic, human side, as

opposed to Morri's animalistic depiction of Fatou, which functions to dehumanize her. This humor also prepares the reader to stomach more serious discussions. For example, the funny depiction of the overly dressed Nura makes the shock and horror of seeing the nude body of the "Donna di Brava" on the living room wall resound all the more comical.

This colonial portrait photograph provides a glaring reminder that images, even in the absence of words, powerfully shape Italian cultural consciousness. The following passage penetrates to the heart of the matter; that is, it relates popular imagery to sexual violence:

Quella donna era venuta dal passato. Era una madama del colonialismo italiano, una donna somala che durante il fascismo era stata come tante l'amante ufficiale di un italiano. Una quasi moglie. La madama lavava i vestiti dell'italiano, poi li stirava, preparava il suo cibo, massaggiava i suoi piedi maleodoranti, poi la notte la madama si toglieva tutti i vestiti, si sdraiava accanto a lui e lo faceva entrare nella sua vagina. Ogni notte la vagina aspettava il pene dell'italiano. Non sempre l'italiano si preoccupava di essere carino con la madama. Entrava dentro senza pulirsi le scarpe dal fango, senza lavarsi le ascelle, senza curarsi del suo alito alcolico. La vagina voleva innamorarsi di quel pene, ma le risultava difficile. Allora perché ci stava? Non lo sapeva più la povera vagina. All'inizio le avevano detto altre vagine che era tutto molto bello. Che gli italiani colmavano le loro madame di regali. 'Diventi una signora, sei rispettata, hai tante stoffe.' Ma le vagine non raccontavano tutta la verità alle loro sorelle. La faccenda era tutta diversa. Tutta quanta! Le vagine avevano paura di essere compatite. Volevano essere invidiate loro, non compiante. Allora per sopravvivere si inventavano storie dove l'amore aveva la pelle bianca degli invasori (27-28).

[That woman had come from the past. She was a madam of Italian colonialism, a Somali woman who during Fascism had been, like many women, the official lover of an Italian man. A quasi wife. The madam would wash the Italian man's clothes, then iron them, cook his food, massage his stinky feet; then at night the madam would take off all her clothes, lay next to him and let him enter her vagina. Every night the vagina would wait for the Italian man's penis. The Italian man didn't always worry about being sweet to the madam. He entered her without cleaning mud off his shoes, without washing under his arms, without caring about his alcohol breath. The vagina wanted to fall in love with that penis, but it proved difficult for her. So why did she stay? The poor vagina didn't know why anymore. At first other vaginas had told her that it was all very nice, that the Italians showered their madams with gifts. "You become a lady, you're respected, you have tons of clothes." But the vaginas didn't tell their sisters all the truth—the affair was completely different. Entirely! The vaginas were afraid of being pitied. They wanted to be envied, not pitied. So in order to survive they invented stories where love wore the white skin of the invaders.]

Even though Valerio's words do not objectify Fatou as Morri's words do, he still falls under the trappings of Italy's colonial legacy with the photograph. However, Scego employs the mashup to transcend the binarism of the colonizer/colonized. The dream sequence at the end of the story composes the ultimate mashup in which Morri, a packed nightclub, death, two sheep (a black and a white one featured on the first page of Morri's article), a right-wing political campaign poster with three white sheep and one black sheep, Nura with her photo album of eligible Somali



bachelors, and the woman from the colonial portrait all converge together.

In the dream, Fatou brings down the house for uniformed crowds of young people to the point that she “arrivò fino al bordo della morte” (30) [reached the threshold of death]. After she tells death “ci rivedremo bella” (30) [we’ll see each other again beautiful], someone (Fatou, the narrator or both) questions the reality of the situation: “Fatou sei matta, ma da quando conversi con la morte?” (30) [Fatou you’re mad, since when do you converse with death?]. This question is ironic since she will momentarily have a conversation with the nameless woman in the photo portrait, the “Donna di Brava” who is most likely dead. Morri not only degrades Fatou with her words (she calls her a *puttana* [prostitute]), she also visually represents their violence with the sheep she leads on a leash—the white sheep is kicking the black sheep from behind, and as further reinforcement, she materializes the political campaign poster in which three white sheep are kicking a black sheep in the same way. If this were not enough, Morri also spits in Fatou’s face, which makes Fatou want to vomit. At this point, to the disappointment of the animated yet uniformly unconscious crowd, Fatou stops the music and sprints away in a jogging suit to be pursued by Nura, all her bulky fabric, and the photographs of Somali men (which she lists by name). Here, the “Donna di Brava” enters the scene and defends Fatou’s freedom of choice. Fatou then engages her in conversation:

Fatou nella sua tuta sembrò guardare il tuo riflesso.

‘Lui vede in te me’ disse piangendo Fatou.

‘Una cosa esotica diceva l’articolo.’

‘Sono stufa di essere esotica.’

‘Sono stufa di non esserlo.’

‘Allora sii te stessa’ le disse il ritratto.

Era consiglio da oroscopo domenicale. Però forse era la sua verità (32).

[In her jog suit Fatou seemed to be looking at her reflection.

“He sees me in you,” Fatou said crying.

“An exotic thing the article said.”

“I’m tired of being exotic.”

“I’m tired of not being exotic.”

“So be yourself,” the portrait told her.

It was advice of the Sunday horoscope type. However, maybe it was her truth.]

I cannot help but think of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s article “Can the Subaltern Speak?” when I read this passage. Upon first laying eyes on the portrait, Fatou intuits a bodily language, yet here the audible voice of “Donna di Brava” is what allows Fatou to break with an oppressive past and to change her current situation. Through the mashup, the subaltern is able to confront the constraints of colonial language; she speaks multiple languages whose mutable tones defy the logocentrism of which Cavarero speaks. Upon awakening from her dream, Fatou becomes conscious of the power of her storytelling. She is able to arrest an entire crowd in its tracks with her musicality, a quality that I also identify in Scego’s storytelling. The power of words comes into play when they are able to acknowledge this musicality (as suggested by Cavarero). Fatou illustrates this thought by writing on a Post-it in the end: “E poi non era vero che una dj doveva parlare male dei morti per forza. Fatou questo se lo voleva ricordare. Lo scrisse in un post-it giallo. Poi se lo mise in tasca” (33) [And then it wasn’t true that a dj had to talk badly about the dead out of necessity. Fatou wanted to remember this well. She wrote it on a yellow Post-it. Then she put it in her pocket]. Fatou carries the words on her body; they are light and can move

with her without constraining her. The Post-it represents a way to call on memory and can be layered over the top of another surface; however, it can be lifted to see what is underneath, repositioned and applied to another surface, and when it loses its stickiness its words can be transferred to another medium.

Scego's multimodal (meaning also multilingual) storytelling opens up histories to a global, transnational context while also taking into account the particularities of life in Italy. "Identità" especially stands out for its multitude of contrasts, which at the same time provide balance and resonance. In true mashup style, the layering of global celebrity pop culture, fashion, Italian colonial gender paradigms, world music, corporate media, progressive cultural icons, and conservative Somali and Italian culture constructs its own language. Scego's mashup recognizes the vocal, "extralinguistic" qualities that Cavarero deems so vital to humanity. Through such recognition, Scego is able to confront the elusive aspects of racism, particularly in Italy (yet also transnationally), which have traditionally taken cover behind logocentrism, the "*detto non detto*" in the story. However, Scego is also keen to incorporate this logocentrism to show the effect that it exercises on singular bodies. She reminds the reader that language is biosymbolic, and that words carry weight whose lightness or heaviness liberate or restrain individuals and populations if there are not alternate images and sounds to counter-balance them.

Both Scego and Ali Farah employ multimodal storytelling to portray the Somali diaspora and postcolonial Italy. Although they intersperse their narratives in Italian with Somali words and phrases, the language they produce is quite different yet also complementary. In Scego's works the mashup creates both humor and collective consciousness. Scego connects the reader to Italy's colonial past and postcolonial present by layering and remixing urban landscapes and popular culture. Ali Farah's multimodality reveals a complex network of communication in the

Somali diaspora. One of the ways in which she evidences Italy's colonial legacy is through the indelible mark that the Italian language has left on the Somali language. She constructs postcolonial Italy through the migrations that continue to put these two languages in contact.

Since this short story is so concentrated with powerful symbols, I have included my English translation in this dissertation's appendix to provide the non-Italian reader with a firsthand experience of what it is like to read one of Scego's narratives. At one point in the story, the narrator tells us that Fatou imagined Africa as "Un disco in vinile che girava su una macchina magica" (23) [A vinyl record that spun on a magical machine]. As a disc jockey/storyteller, Fatou could scratch the record's surface, stop it with her touch, adjust the speed and pitch, rewind, fast forward, skip and mix tracks, etc., until she felt that her story/identity had achieved resonance. In the next narrative that we will analyze, Scego's autobiographical novel *La mia casa è dove sono*, this *disco* becomes a map that also has its own moveable and adjustable parts.

## **2. *La mia casa è dove sono***

If you were to map your identity what would it look like? For Igiaba Scego the map is a city map, distinctly colorful, layered and adorned by Post-its, sketches, and newspaper clippings. The urban spaces of Mogadishu, *una città morta*, as Scego puts it—*morta* because the city she and her family have known has been devastated by civil war—and Rome, the living and breathing city of her everyday life, provide the cartographic terrain. In this analysis, I will continue to draw upon the mashup and Cavarero's *A più voci*. I will also refer to Krystyna von Hennenberg's essay, "Monuments, Public Space, and the Memory of Empire in Modern Italy."

First, let us examine the plot and structure of the novel.<sup>89</sup> Told in the first person by Scego (author/narrator/protagonist), the novel grapples with the reality of living as a black woman in Rome as well as with the complex network of familial relationships in the Somali diaspora. With relatives dispersed throughout Europe and across the globe, the novel's opening scene depicts a rare family gathering in Abdulcadir's (Scego's older brother) flat in Manchester, England. Family members possess a range of British, Finnish, and Italian citizenships. Mother Kadija, sister-in-law Nura, nephew Mohamed Deq (a little boy), cousin O, Abdul, and Scego herself congregate for a sumptuous meal prepared by Nura. As Abdul, O, Mohamed Deq and Igiaba remain in the kitchen to digest their meal, Igiaba sparks the beginning of what will be an intense and profound personal inquiry and scrutiny into her and the family's identity and memories. A simple question about where their grandmother, Auralla, is buried incites a passionate debate between Abdul and O. Half-serious, Abdul offers to draw out the evidence which, after much encouragement by both young Mohamed Deq and Igiaba, comes to fruition on a sheet of paper spanning the surface of the kitchen table. The group organizes and assigns sections of the city to each other, cataloguing and color-coding the map into hospitals, schools, restaurants, movie theaters, cemeteries, monuments, embassies, airports, etc. Memories abound throughout the process, especially from the unusually talkative cousin O and brother Abdul.

Two hours later, the family stands in awe and admiration of their map. However, a question posed several times by the child Mohamed Deq—"Esiste questa città?" (28-29) [Does this city exist?]-disorients and momentarily silences the family as their thoughts return to buildings/structures that no longer exist and the violence that has disfigured the city. In the end, Scego's mother confirms that the city in fact exists and is called Mogadishu. Another of Deq's

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<sup>89</sup> Unless otherwise noted, the English translations are my own.

questions again causes confusion, yet this time it is directed specifically at Igiaba: “È la tua città, zia Igiaba?” (29) [Is it your city, Aunt Igiaba?]. Without Igiaba having time to answer for herself, possibly with a simple “yes,” mother Kadija tells her daughter that this map is not substantial enough to represent her “real” city and comes to the conclusion: “Decisamente no. Quella sulla mappa non è la tua città. Non puoi mentire al bambino” (29). [Decidedly not. The city on that map is not yours. You cannot lie to the child]. Kadija clarifies: “Diciamo che lo è in un certo senso. Ma allo stesso tempo non lo è. Capisci, figlia?” (30) [Let’s say that it is in a certain sense. Yet at the same time it isn’t]. Although Scego recognizes there is no ill will in her mother’s words, they put her in a state of turmoil, she is at “un crocevia” (30) [a crossroads]. Her mother, Kadija, suggests how Scego can complete her map: “Devi completare la mappa. Manchi tu lì dentro” (30) [You have to complete the map. You are missing from it]. Thus, the framework for the novel is set; a personal map of Rome must be incorporated into the family’s collective map of Mogadishu in order to represent Igiaba’s “real” city.

The novel’s central chapters navigate through places and spaces in Rome, entitled as follows: 2. Teatro Sistina; 3. Piazza Santa Maria sopra Minerva; 4. La stele di Axum; 5. Stazione Termini; 6. Trastevere; and 7. Stadio Olimpico. The opening and concluding chapters—called 1. Il disegno ovvero la terra che non c’è and 8. Essere italiano per me—call attention to the act of an imaginary personal reconfiguring of urban and collective identity, or what Scego calls “rimappare la vita” [remapping life].

I interpret this “rimappare la vita” as Scego’s way of naming the mashup. Whereas “Identità” connected to the art of storytelling through the cultural icon of the disc jockey/djeli, *La mia casa è dove sono* features Scego as a cartographer of her identity. Both archetypes confront the pervasive effects of logocentrism through the mashup; they challenge the limits of language

systems and reinterpret a world of symbols in the Italian collective consciousness by assigning additional, alternative meanings, sounds, and images to language. Memory, of course, plays an important part in these reconstructions, for if we can recollect a moment, an experience of when reality was different, then we can also imagine a different present and future time. Conversely, if the act of remembering reveals the continuity of the present with the past, we can make a conscious decision to disrupt this continuity and change its course. Through memory, Scego shows that language is temporal, biosymbolic, and therefore mutable. I suggest that by collapsing—not eliminating, but rather cohabitating—time in the mashup, she subverts the mechanisms of logocentrism, meaning that Scego does not neatly periodize language into abstract, homogenizing terms. She uses language to personalize—to humanize the deceptively impersonal and ungendered systems of language outlined by Cavarero. In Cavarero’s terms, she evinces the vibrational (meaning physical, not abstract) qualities of language that cannot be separated from singular bodies and the uniqueness of the voice. The vibrations of the body, of the voice, inhabit space—and it is precisely the trope of space, namely postcolonial space, that Scego represents in *La mia casa*.

Since the majority of the Italian population does not know Italy’s colonial history, Scego finds the spaces and material traces (whether they be the body, buildings, photographs, etc.) of it with which this population is familiar. She then layers, i.e. narrates, elements of history throughout the contours of these spaces and outlines, which is an intimate act. As we saw in “Identità,” Scego’s focus on narration is biosymbolic. In *La mia casa*, she literally drives this point home by relating the stories of cityscapes, Rome and Mogadishu, with both the physicality and the sacredness of singular bodies, especially her own. It is through the recognition of these bodies that resonance occurs. As Cavarero points out, the human voice is inseparable from the

body, and therefore as Scego authors her story in *La mia casa* the movement of her body through the urban space of Rome provides a striking example/image.

This novel provides the most visual/spatial representation of Italian postcolonial identity as conceived by Scego. This visuality calls attention to spatial awareness (within the urban environment of the city) and its connection to memory (personal and historical). The autobiographical nature of *La mia casa è dove sono* focuses on the city of Rome while tracing the author's family history between Somalia, Italy, and throughout the Somali diaspora, which highlights the body aspect of the voice, what it means to inhabit physical space, and how this space carries memory.

The voice activates and accesses memory—for example, the family conversation that leads to the creation of the map. Mother Kadija's imperative regarding Igiaba's city following the map's introduction seems paradoxical at first. Many Italians do not perceive Igiaba as Roman, yet long-time residents of Mogadishu may not recognize or identify her as a *reer xamar*, or native of Mogadishu since she has spent little of her life there. Scego resolves this issue by creating a hybrid and composite postcolonial city map that circumvents any dichotomy of identities and shows two cities inseparable from each other as she states, “sono come gemelle siamesi separate alla nascita. L'una include l'altra e viceversa” (11) [they are like Siamese twins separated at birth. The one includes the other and vice versa].

The architecture of her memory encompasses all the senses and continuously reminds the reader of the corporal aspects of urban space; Scego binds vibrant colors to emotions, the drawn streets emanate various smells of death and perfume, and a youthful spirit transports the body to a time of heightened spatial awareness. The city exists as an organism with all its vital parts, susceptible to life and death, and intrinsically tied to the movement of bodies within them.



Scego and her family map a time when Mogadishu was the liveliest for them; that is, when they experienced the greatest freedom of movement and the fewest restrictions placed on their bodies in the city streets.

In *La mia casa è dove sono*, street names do more than mark points in space; they represent personal memories and cultural encounters. In short, they are historical testimonies. Street names indicate the mixing of city dwellers as well as isolation. Scego points out: “L’Italia stava dappertutto nei nomi delle vie, nei volti di meticci rifiutati. E l’Italia non ne sapeva niente, non sapeva delle nostre vie con i suoi nomi, dei nostri meticci con il suo sangue. In Italia alcune vie hanno i nomi dell’Africa. A Roma addirittura c’è il quartiere africano” (27) [Italy was everywhere: in the names of the streets, in the faces of the rejected mixed race children. And Italy didn’t know anything about it. It didn’t know about our streets with its names, about our mixed race children with its blood. In Italy, some of the streets have names from Africa]. Italian street names in Mogadishu recall colonial rule, apartheid, and violence, yet they also conjure up feelings of affection and nostalgia, or what Scego identifies as *saudade*. Not a colonial type of *mal d’Africa*, this *saudade* ties itself to familial integrity, a time after Italian colonialism and before civil war when, for Scego’s family, it was still possible to travel among and between cultures and neighborhoods in Mogadishu.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Cristina Lombardi-Diop defines *mal d’Africa* as colonial *malaise* that typically “compare nel momento in cui un ufficiale, un amministratore o un soldato coloniale viene rimandato a casa dopo una permanenza nell’Africa coloniale. Il reintegro del soggetto maschile nella sua cultura è spesso problematico, proprio a causa di questa malattia coloniale, vissuta come una conseguenza dell’intimità con l’Africa e gli africani acquisita dal protagonista attraverso una totale immersione nella cultura nativa” (*Fuori centro* 50) [emerges the moment an officer, administrator or colonial soldier is sent back home after a long-term stay in colonial Africa. The reintegration of the masculine subject in his culture is often problematic, precisely because of this colonial disease, experienced as a result of the intimate contact the protagonist had with Africa and Africans].

Scego builds her narrative upon the visual evidence of Italian colonialism and the plural identities associated with it. She draws attention to the undeniable, concrete evidence of this history through a visual trajectory in urban space, referencing street names, monuments and stadiums in her birth city, Rome. As Scego states in the novel, Italian students usually learn little, if anything, about Italy's colonial past. What little Italians do know is often a myth about Italy's colonial goodwill, a humanitarian mission that they think established an infrastructure of roads, schools, hospitals, and decent jobs; Italians also associate colonialism just with the ego and expansionist obsessions of the fascist dictator, Mussolini. Scego masterfully confronts such ignorance by opening up her readers' eyes (presumably Italian) to their own surroundings. She weaves her story from the fabric of urban space itself—a presence that is more than phantasmatic; most Italians can actually move about this space and see for themselves what Scego relays in her novel. She identifies and underscores common structures in the overlapping layers of her two capitals—Mogadishu and Rome—illustrated by buildings and structures, such as Italian schools, rationalist fascist architecture, and stolen and re-appropriated ancient monuments, such as the Stele of Axum.

The map charts the historical past, but it also outlines temporalities spanning almost half a century of the mapmakers' own lives. The map is both generational and intended to be passed down to future generations who will, like Scego, add to it. Their memories, fleeting and all too easily overlooked, prove to be the map's foundation and our key to its interpretation. Scego sees this memorial mapmaking as a difficult process, one requiring much effort and the need to inhabit former bodies in order to bring them back to light: "Mi dovevo sforzare per ricordare quelle strade, viste con gli occhi di bambina. Mi dovevo sforzare per quel figlio che un giorno sognavo di avere" (26-27) [I had to force myself to remember those streets, seen with child's

eyes. I had to force myself for the sake of the child I someday wished to have]. She needs to see from her point of view as a child, to call upon youth, but also have distinct points of reference shared and validated by other city dwellers of varying ages.

As the title of the novel suggests, Scego's mapping of her home city, "rimappare la vita," is anything but static. The map itself is a traveling one whose birth takes place on Barack Street in Manchester, England, and whose destination is a studio apartment in Rome, Italy. The title of the novel alludes to an architectural structure, the home city as a constructed space, yet it also challenges the idea of home as a fixed, private space. The city is a shared home and the novel illustrates the plural and collective nature of what home means to Scego—it is mobile, imaginary, and adaptable, yet not isolated from real history, but rather rooted in it.

Movement is an important component of Scego's map as she purposefully selects Post-its to allow for the reconfiguration of its personalized parts. She explains: "Non volevo un foglio di carta: volevo qualcosa di provvisorio e scomponibile. I Post-it mi sembrarono perfetti. Ne presi uno arancione. Un colore caldo, accogliente, di buon augurio. Ideale per cominciare un'avventura. Ci scrissi sopra in stampatello, molto grande: 'ROMA'" (34) [I didn't want a piece of paper. I wanted something temporary and interchangeable. The Post-its seemed perfect. I grabbed an orange one. A warm, welcoming color of good omen. Ideal for starting an adventure. I wrote on it in very big capital letters: ROME]. She then goes on to fill the map with more Post-its of the places the following chapters will occupy, but the mapmaking process does not stop there. She positions sketches, outlines, hand-written text, and newspaper clippings to radiate from the map's core:

Appiccicai tutto intorno alla mia Mogadiscio di carta. Poi, io che non so disegnare, tentai di disegnare i miei ricordi. Lavorai per ore. Tracciai linee,

sagome, ombre. Ritagliai giornali. Feci scritte. Ne uscì fuori il disegno di una bambina. Era buffo vedere quel risultato. Era impresentabile. Ma la mappa era finalmente completa. Ora mamma non avrebbe avuto niente da ridire (34).

[I stuck everything around my paper Mogadishu. Then, I, who does not know how to draw, attempted to draw my memories. I worked for hours. I traced lines, profiles, shadows. I cut up newspapers. I made writings. A child's drawing emerged. It was funny to see that result. It was unpresentable. However, the map was finally complete. Now mom wouldn't have to repeat her words].

“Rimappare,” therefore, stands not only as an act of imaginary recollection and reconfiguration, but also as one of creation, reminiscent of youthful imagination, yet bound to memory.

Scego's term “Mogadiscio di carta” [paper Mogadishu] calls attention not only to the contrast between present day Mogadishu and the family's memories of it, but it also makes a connection to literature and its social implications. Imagination, memory, and testimony converge together on paper to convey that this postcolonial reality does indeed exist in Italy and must be charted and recognized accordingly. What appears to be a fictional city stands as a plan for action and is Scego's way of re-appropriating Italian history and identity. She too inhabits the map of Mogadishu in her own way; she just accesses and reads it differently than the family members in Nura's kitchen because her personal map of Rome is part of it—it is as if there were two superimposed layers contouring and binding each other. She adamantly states, “Ma rivendicavo quella mappa con forza, come rivendicherò il mio ultimo giorno di vita. Era mia come loro, quella Mogadiscio perduta. Era mia, mia, mia” (34) [I reclaimed that map with vigor,

like I will reclaim my last day of life]. In order to show that the map of Mogadishu belongs to her as well, she must narrate her life in Italy.

The adjectives used to describe Mogadishu in *La mia casa è dove sono*—*morta, perduta, di carta* [dead, lost, of paper]—require that this city’s history be known, documented, and contextualized. How was the city in life? What/Who sent it missing? Can paper depict its dynamism? The media in Italy, here and internationally, fail miserably at responsibly answering such questions, and it has largely been through novels, short stories, and poetry that the complexity and human face of the Horn of Africa’s history has materialized. Scego’s cartographic novel provides the space to explore those questions. The corporal nature of her Mogadishu coupled with her own body navigating the streets of Rome humanize the capitals’ stone, brick, and concrete. The disfigurement of Mogadishu is also bodily mutilation and violence. Its main thoroughfare, described as “la colonna vertebrale” [the spinal cord], “un’arteria pulsante” [a pulsating artery], and “una fonte di vita” [a source of life], at one time represented a common lifeline for both Somalis and Italians. *La mia casa*’s map traces more than geopolitical boundaries; it defies cultural isolation through its superimposed and shifting spaces.

Memory is the key to movement within these spaces, and although Scego writes, “La memoria è uno scarabocchio” (159) [memory is a scribble], she appreciates it for just that—its fragmented and disorderly nature that makes reconfiguration and appropriation possible. Her city map, “uno specchio” (160) [a mirror] of changes in two postcolonial cities, roots itself in plurality and three-dimensional space where movement is both horizontal and vertical, while the center constantly turns into the margins, and vice-versa. This draws the reader in to pour over the map and read along with the author: “Non è una mappa coerente. È centro, ma anche periferia.

È Roma, ma anche Mogadiscio. È Igiaba, ma siete anche voi” (160) [It isn’t a coherent map. It is center, but also periphery. It is Rome, but also Mogadishu. It is Igiaba, but also you].

Krystyna von Hennenberg’s essay, “Monuments, Public Space, and the Memory of Empire in Modern Italy,” is important to my analysis because she addresses many of the issues that Scego brings to life in her novel; that is, what does postcolonial space look like in Italy? In reference to colonial monuments and public space in Italy, von Hennenberg asks and comments, “Just how useful are these sources for gauging attitudes toward empire? What can we learn from these sources that we cannot learn from others? The archival record on Italian colonialism is rich and far from exhausted. So too, there are many imperial sites of memory in Italy, from advertisements, to films, to flea markets” (40). As von Hennenberg points out, although there are many other sources that evidence Italian colonialism and imperialism, both she and Scego recognize the uniqueness of the urban landscape. Its meaning and even the shape of the space itself are ever-shifting and prone to transformation—colonial monuments have been relocated to different locations throughout the city and, in the case of the Ethiopian Stele of Axum, returned to their land of origin.

Von Hennenberg posits that the accessibility as well as the visibility of these public spaces and monuments create conditions for multiple interpretations by the people who encounter them:

Even more than buildings, monuments and public spaces are the least defensible and least easily concealed statements of official intent. They are open to reinterpretation by the literate and the illiterate, the custodian and the vandal. Ironically, even their destruction or removal is a public event. It is precisely this multiplicity of intentions and reactions that makes public spaces and monuments

an engaging source, offering clues that, when taken alone, many official or popular sources cannot (41).

These spaces and monuments emanate multiple temporalities and functions, both practical and symbolic, lending themselves to concrete and imaginative roles. In relation to them, the body possesses the ability to both reinforce and transgress the confines of their built environment. Von Hennenberg reminds us of the multiple perspectives to which these spaces and monuments are exposed: “As my own research has shown, the man who sleeps on a monument sees it differently than the one who photographs it. The war widow and the campaigning politician frequent the same cemetery for entirely different reasons” (41). I believe Scego recognizes the potential of such multiplicity, as well as the fact that many residents are familiar with the names but not with the history behind them; this allows her to focus more on her narrative in relation to those places because previous narratives of them are largely unknown or too ambiguous to interpret definitively. Scego’s autobiographical narrative can especially be informative to younger generations since, “For many younger Italians it is not clear how or why these names ‘belong’ to or in the new nation” (von Hennenberg 44). Scego acts as a guide to her personal, intimate histories within the city, and extends an invitation to the reader to engage in a similar act of consciousness as he/she navigates through an Italian city. This reader is most typically someone who Von Hennenberg describes as “the ordinary citizen on his or her way to work” who is “offered a clear, inexpensive, if often subconscious, lesson in the history of Italian nation- and empire-building, with the city map serving as a microcosm of the imperium” (43). She points out that while historical street names associated with the likes of Mussolini and Hitler or other controversial historical people and places have been changed, most colonial street names did not get renamed.

By narrating public, urban space, Scego simultaneously narrates the history of bodies, which are by no means disconnected from the violence of occupation. Her chapter on the Stele of Axum is but one example, yet it is a very significant one since this monument, stolen from Ethiopia in 1937, engaged Italians in a lively debate about its repatriation. Von Hennenberg explains how rare this debate was:

The Italian silence about street names and monuments reflected the more general official postwar reticence about empire in general. Indeed, recent debates over the fate of the Axum stela and its meaning for Italian, Ethiopian and colonial history constitute an absolute rarity. Even here, this discussion has been framed mainly in terms of urban aesthetics, rather than in terms of colonial wrongdoing (not surprisingly, the stela carries a different and far more openly political meaning for many Ethiopians and Eritreans) (49).

Scego uses her map to contextualize this debate beyond mere aesthetics. Her map transforms the stele into a woman who has been raped and imprisoned by her male captor, Benito Mussolini. Scego speaks to her and asks, “Oh stele, quante ne hai viste nella tua vita? Quante storie potresti raccontarci?” (74) [Oh stele, how many things have you seen in your lifetime? How many stories could you tell us?]. However, she also connects with the multiplicity of perspectives of monuments and public space that von Hennenberg identifies in her essay. In this chapter centered on the Stele of Axum, Scego employs different literary styles—the fairy tale, historical prose, and the biography—to resonate with her reader. The biographies of her grandfather and uncle are particularly poignant, as her grandfather worked for the fascist Italian government in East Africa and her uncle died for Somalia’s independence.

Through mapping, Scego is able to materialize the layers of the monument’s space that



were once invisible to passersby. These are layers of flesh as well, of all the people involved in its existence. Thereby, Scego overcomes some of the challenges to the aesthetics of the monuments outlined by von Hennenberg: “The challenge of representing loss, the challenge of representing imperial space and the challenge of representing Italians and African bodies, as both sexualized and racialized subjects” (54). In *La mia casa*, Scego deals with physical spaces whose reconciliation does not come about through destruction, but rather through their reconstruction and temporal layering. The Post-its represent both the concreteness of these layers and their mobility (they can be rearranged and layered in different order). They are a tangible manifestation of memory that is plural and collective, and also repossess space since they occupy it. In a sense, Scego’s words on the Post-its reconnect with the body because they overcome the limits of logocentrism. In other words, when they are affixed to different subjects and cartographic terrains, their meanings change—each voice, which pronounces their words, and each image under their surface are unique. Thus, mapping is another signifying modality that allows Scego to represent a plurality of voices.

The mapping of postcolonial Rome also takes place in Ali Farah’s works, particularly in “Rapdipunt” and *Madre piccola*. Both Scego and Ali Farah employ mapping as a form of reappropriation; however, mapping also shows the complexities of such reappropriation. Their mapping is not linear, it contains fragments and reveals contested territories. Constructing identity is an important part of this mapping. This mapped identity is also a plural identity.

## Conclusion

In this dissertation, I focused on the ways in which Ali Farah and Scego enact vocality in representations of postcolonial identity. By referencing Cavarero, I was able to explore the voice's interaction with language. Through multimodality, Ali Farah and Scego not only create a language that is capable of dealing with complex histories and identities, they offer a new way for their readers to experience them.

Ali Farah's and Scego's multimodal storytelling evinces not only the innovation of Italian postcolonial literature, it calls attention to a changing literary landscape. The notion of transmedial literature outlined by Wu Ming is a promising reality in which encounters with literature are as accessible as the advertisements that fill every aspect of modern life.<sup>91</sup> I believe Ali Farah and Scego recognize the importance of connecting their narratives to the daily lives of their readers. Through multimodal storytelling they seek to change the way their readers perceive their surroundings—the city and the stories each stone, each street sign could tell, the migrant bodies captured in newspaper articles and television reports, the call centers etc. If

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<sup>91</sup> The Wu Ming Foundation has brought to fruition a number of transmedial projects that support what it calls “un circolo virtuoso tra il web e la strada” where “i libri vanno concepiti come opere ‘transmediali’ affiancando loro musica, illustrazioni, video ed esecuzioni dal vivo che non siano solo ‘promozione’ ma facciano a tutti gli effetti parte dell’opera” [a virtuous circle between the web and the street where books are conceptualized as transmedial works accompanied by music, illustrations, videos and life performances that are not just for promotional reasons, but are an integral part of the work].

<<http://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/?p=8880>>.

One example is “Razza Partigiana,” which recounts the story of the Somali Italian WWII resistance fighter Giorgio Marincola. During the project, paintings, a video documentary, a compact disc of an audio reading accompanied by music and a full audio book were created to be a part of Wu Ming 2's book *Basta uno sparo* (2010)

<[http://www.razzapartigiana.it/?page\\_id=1336](http://www.razzapartigiana.it/?page_id=1336)>.

Wu Ming's *Manituana* (winner of the Premio Sergio Leone 2007 and Premio Emilio Salgari 2008) included readers in the process of transmedial narration through a series encounters over the web.

critics accuse them of being too literary (as I mentioned in the case of La Porta) or not literary enough (as is often the case made for women's writing) I take it that they have achieved some resonance with the reader. For they have been able to lead the reader to question the very premise of the act of reading.

Ali Farah's and Scego's works remind the reader that there is no body without a voice and no voice without a body. Within the context of Italy's historical legacy, such a statement is no small affair. It is ironic to me that Italy's rich vocal (not just oral) traditions somehow seem to be lost on analysts of its literature. Other authors of Italian postcolonial literature, such as Gabriella Ghermandi, are making it a point to reconnect with vocality. For example, in the presentation of her short stories and excerpts from her novel *Regina di fiori e di perle*<sup>92</sup> (whose French translation is forthcoming), Ghermandi begins with a song. She has even founded *Atse Tewodros Project* an endeavor which she describes as "un incontro tra Etiopia ed Italia attraverso un viaggio musicale che vede come protagonisti musicisti della tradizione etiope in dialogo con jazzisti italiani" [a joining together of Ethiopia and Italy by means of a musical journey whose protagonists, musicians of the Ethiopian tradition and Italian jazz players, dialogue with each other].<sup>93</sup> Ali Farah and Scego also engage with the musicality of the voice through a merging of traditions (Somali and Italian) that draws upon a certain type of improvisation as well (in the sense that they adjust the communication styles of their narrators/protagonists to maximize the level of engagement they have with each other and with the reader/audience).

Italian postcolonial literature reflects plurality through engagement with the voice. Consequently, it poses a challenge to logocentric language systems. Gabriele Proglia describes

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<sup>92</sup> Ghermandi, Gabriella. *Regina di fiori e di perle*. Roma: Donzelli, 2007.

<sup>93</sup> *Gabriella Ghermandi*. <<http://www.gabriella-ghermandi.it/>>.

it as “geo-grafia,” a type of migration that is able to cross linguistic borders (124).<sup>94</sup> According to Proglione, diaspora highlights the spatialization of words. That is, words are connected to space: “anche le lunghe telefonate dai *phone center*, che sono una costante in moltissimi immigrati, agiscono come spazializzazione con l’uso della parola. Sono esempi che non indicano una condizione psicologica di malinconia per la Somalia, ma per ‘quella Somalia’ che è stata lasciata [...]” (122) [even the long telephone calls made out of call centers are a constant for many immigrants. With words they signify space. They do not indicate a longing for just any Somalia; rather, they connect to ‘the Somalia’ that was left behind]. In their multimodal storytelling, Ali Farah and Scego not only connect words to the body’s space, they also tie them to specific histories. As Ali Farah’s character Domenica states in *Madre piccola*, “Sono il filo sottile, così sottile che si infila e si tende, prolungandosi. Così sottile che non si spezza. E il groviglio dei fili si allarga e mostra, chiari e ben stretti, i nodi, pur distanti l’uno dall’altro, che non si sciolgono” (1) [I am the fine thread, so fine that it slips through and stretches, getting longer. So fine that it does not snap. And the tangled mass of threads widens and reveals the knots, clear and tight, that, though far from each other, do not unravel (1)], the voice reveals the spaces, the connections between people. Furthermore, different modes of storytelling dimensionalize these spaces.

While plurality in the migration literature of the 1990s in Italy raised questions about authorship, now there is a different type of literature “a quattro mani” that has emerged. *Timira*, an Italian postcolonial novel authored by Wu Ming 2 and Antar Mohamed, synthesizes diary

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<sup>94</sup> Proglione, Gabriele. *Memorie oltre confine. La letteratura postcoloniale italiana in prospettiva storica*. Preface by Luisa Passerini. Verona: Ombre corte, 2011.

entries, oral testimonies, (auto)biographies, historical fiction and archival documents. The description on the back cover reads:

*Timira* è un ‘romanzo meticcio’ che mescola memoria, documenti di archivio e invenzione narrativa. Scritto da un cantastorie italiano dal nome cinese, insieme a un’attrice italosomala ottantacinquenne e a un esule somalo con quattro lauree e due cittadinanze. Per interrogare, attraverso l’epopea del passato, un tempo che ci vede naufraghi, sulla sponda di un approdo in fiamme. Questo tempo dove ci salveremo insieme, o non si salverà nessuno.

[*Timira* is a ‘mixed race novel’ that combines memory, archival documents and narrative imagination. Written by an Italian singer-storyteller who goes by a Chinese name, together with an eighty-five year old Italian Somali actress and a Somali in exile who holds four degrees and dual citizenship. Its goal is to examine, by means of an epic past, a time of shipwrecks, whose coastal mooring is up in flames. This is a time when we will either join together to save each other or else no one will be saved at all.]

The plurality and multimodal storytelling exemplified by this most recent work, as well as those by Ali Farah and Scego, make me very hopeful for the future of Italian literature, and for the possibility of reconciliation with a past that has touched the lives of so many people.

## **Interview with Ubx Cristina Ali Farah**

September 8, 2011

Feltrinelli Bookstore

Rome, Italy

**CL: I noticed that your characters often employ technology to tell their stories. For example, in your novel *Madre piccola*, the telephone is prominent and you also incorporate a video camera as well other audio sources, such as the radio, in the characters' first person narratives. You have also included a tape cassette in another story. Do these various modes have particular functions? For example, when would a character communicate via a tape cassette instead of by telephone or vice versa?**

UCAF: I think the tape cassette was in the story [*Madre piccola*]. The tape cassette, etc. ... certainly they have different functions. In the construction of the voices in *Madre piccola*, the element I often refer to, for example with the male voice, is that of the telephone. Because for many, many years, the telephone was a very powerful presence; it helped to maintain ties even with people whom I hadn't seen for quite a while. Therefore, for a bit of amusement—I told this to Alessandra [Di Maio] many times—I used to like to draw, [but] I don't do it anymore, when I was on the phone and fixed in one spot because I didn't have a cordless phone. So, I would continue to draw or write what was recounted to me. Because when I would be there, sometimes for several hours, it seemed to me that the stories I was hearing were very distinct stories, very important, and so to stay focused I would write them down. [The telephone] seemed to be very powerful in these relationships. When you don't hear from a person for a while, a girlfriend or a cousin maybe, what makes you feel closest isn't so much that I tell you, "You know, Claire,

today I took a test.” These things are important in life; they are stepping stones. But what makes you feel closest instead are the everyday activities. So if I tell you that I cooked a certain dish or that I went grocery shopping, surely you feel a closer connection, right? Well, what made us feel closer was precisely the telephone’s dimension of the everyday. So in Taageere’s voice there’s this dimension of relationships experienced through the telephone line, etc. Another element that was very formative for me was a one- to two-year period when I was working as a cultural mediator in an area on the outskirts of Rome called Torre Angela. It’s in the novel [*Madre piccola*]. Have you seen the mini-train around there? I don’t know if you’ve had the chance to go to this neighborhood in Rome. It’s far from here and very appealing because now the part closest to the Termini train station is becoming more populated by young people, so there are a lot of hangouts. It’s very charming. So, I was asked to work on a project to collect a certain number of oral testimonies by non-Italian women, that is, foreign women of various origins. I conducted a series of interviews and I would record each voice and then transcribe it. This was an incredible exercise for me because, you know, even the way in which you decide to transcribe a voice is poetic. And what interested me was [that for] someone who isn’t a native speaker of Italian—even if he or she speaks the language perfectly [and] always has—there’s always something that isn’t *wrong*, but that’s different from a native speaker: how the spoken language takes shape, its musicality, the way of constructing even the syntax of the sentences. And to me this seemed to have a very poetic value, and even I, who am bilingual, sometimes ... construct some sentences that might not exactly be considered “standard.” Therefore, for me this was also very important in the construction of these female voices, the very relational dimension of them: these voices that always speak to someone and that take shape, even in the recordings. So, for sure they [the tape cassette and the telephone] have two important functions, two possibly

different functions. And now I'll give you a heads up on a little something. You asked me about the tape cassette? This new novel that I'm now working on will solely be an adolescent male's voice. The novel starts during a time when he has undergone a physical trauma, so he's in the hospital and has trouble telling his story. As a result, he records—like in a diary—he records his voice because writing is too strenuous for him and he's confused. So he records a sort of memoir. Well, I often say that when one speaks about Africa and African writers, orality is mentioned a lot. It's referenced as if it were something archaic. However, I'm interested in orality in a contemporary context—like what you're saying about multimediality, via telephone. Consider also the fact that here in the Western world we're accustomed to memory being transmitted through writing instead of through multimediality. It will be more and more commonplace to transmit it through other forms.

**CL: Could you tell me more about the narrative voice in *Il comandante del fiume*?**

UCAF: It's a very young male voice, so he's a boy, a *Bildungsroman*. And it's all focused on the perception of the self, of good, of evil, and on one's relationship with the body, with violence. Since alternatively I'm very interested in the feminine, the female body, surely it will be evident that it's a woman's voice [that]'s writing—even if a male voice narrates the novel.

**CL: How does tape recording tie into representations of the Somali diaspora?**

UCAF: For example, the element of the audiocassette is something that has stayed on my mind because when I lived in Mogadishu, the telephone was a very costly thing, so practically no one had a home telephone. I think Gabriella Ghermandi wrote one of her first short stories also about the telephone, the neighborhood telephone. And so I remember, in Mogadishu, there was this post office where you went and bought a certain amount of conversation time. You might give a telephone number and say I'll speak for three minutes—and it cost so much—I'll speak three



minutes, maybe five, or maximum ten minutes, at the most. And then you'd pay and wait for them to call your name. Then you'd go into a phone booth and pick up the telephone and the operator tells you go ahead, someone's answering, and you'd talk for three minutes. I used to talk for three minutes this way. So with those three minutes you'd have to pack in everything—practically nothing. Therefore, the tape cassette was used as an alternative that, however, is a more static form because it isn't dialogic. In this way, it was something to be listened to: Someone would tell a story, or maybe, if living far away, record some music and what was taking place, someone else talking in the background, and the other voices of people present. It was a bit of a composition in the place of a letter. Moreover, in Somalia perhaps many people didn't know how to write or maybe it was more enjoyable for them to communicate in this way. Yes, there's certainly the fact that undoubtedly after the civil war and with the diaspora, the telephone was the major form of communication. Even though it was a gradual progression because at first it wasn't so affordable to make phone calls, maybe calling from the United States was more accessible than from Italy. From Italy, it was even more expensive. But the cassette was probably in some way more composed, more thought out. Yet even the phone calls were more thought out because it wasn't possible to talk all the time one wanted. It also involved a time investment because you'd wait—think of how it is different today. Today, if I want to make a call, I simply call you. Instead, back then I'd go, wait in line for hours, and talk to you for three minutes. All communication carries a certain weight—even the operator who hears what you're saying. At a certain point she cuts in and says, "Enough, the conversation is over." But it's a human voice, not a robotic one. It's different. When a calling card expires, we hear a voice, but it's not the voice of someone who's listening to us. And this human voice is the one

that decides to cut off the conversation. She can let it go on, but you only paid for three minutes and so she cuts you off. It's like this.

**CL: How is the tape recorder introduced in *Il comandante del fiume*?**

UCAF: It's a digital recorder that at a certain point the boy's aunt gives him. And at first he doesn't want it, but then he spends many hours alone and he decides to put it to use. Also because this aunt is practically a mother to him ... when he was small she used to—and this is something from my own personal experience—she used to tell him stories. You know how children always want to hear the same story a million times. I remember when I was little my mom would make up some of the stories she would tell me. Well, at a certain point she said, “That's enough, I'm tired of telling [the same story] to you.” Also because every time I would say, “That's not how the story goes.” So she said, “Fine, I'll record it for you. This way you can listen to it whenever you want.” [She recorded it] also because my mom is very sweet but she isn't a super imaginative person. So I did this too with Harun (Ali Farah's first born), but more for fun, because when I was little I used the tape recorder to invent stories, record them, and listen to them again. And so when the book's protagonist is very young, there's this experience of his aunt telling him stories and him listening to them over again. And so there's actually this fairy tale in the text that is the fairy tale of the river captain who supports the framework of the whole novel, which, when it comes down to it, is a fairy tale about good and evil. In a way, there's a parallelism between the fairy tale recorded when he was a child and the story he's re-elaborating and recording.

**CL: Many of the characters in your other narratives speak to an interlocutor. Does the boy in *Il comandante del fiume* speak to anyone in particular?**

UCAF: In this case he doesn't speak to anyone. He just speaks to the recorder. It's like a vocal diary. He speaks in the first person, but he doesn't have an interlocutor.

**CL: The oral nature of your characters' narrations seems like these narrations would lend themselves to be adapted as stage performances. Have you ever performed your own pieces or envisioned them to be stage performances?**

UCAF: It would be great, Claire. I would very much like to because actually it's been several years now, but at first I struggled to speak in public. I had real problems with my voice. It would freeze up. I was afraid precisely of the exhibition part of it because I'm also incredibly shy; although, now as I get older I'm less so. Not when it comes to the one-on-one—I don't struggle when I communicate one-on-one. But it was different when there was a lot of people; I didn't want to [speak] when there was more than one person. In classes, I absolutely was unable to speak. So this was my problem because I just couldn't—and it bothered me because I wanted to say some things. Well, I started to prepare some written texts to read instead, because that sort of thing came easily to me. This way, I was able to read. And eventually I was able to also think about the performance aspect, which in my opinion is very beautiful. However, see, performances can't be produced alone. You need direction, someone with whom you're able to work. And so far it hasn't happened—there has to be a spark of inspiration that works. It hasn't really happened. I hope this happens sooner or later. Or maybe the conditions were there when I went to a festival, as participants we tried, but there's a lot of distance, geographically, between us [festival colleagues] and eventually we stopped thinking of a collaborative project.

**CL: I read that your short story, "Rapdipunt," was performed by an Ethiopian-Italian actress. Could you tell me more about that experience?**

UCAF: Caterina Deregibus. [The performance] was really powerful because I actually wrote the story for her. The protagonist is a teenager; however, when I wrote the novel I was thirty years old when Yasmin (Ali Farah's daughter) was born, and Caterina was the same age. So I met Caterina and we started to talk. I had to write a story on Rome for an event. And I hadn't; I don't think I had written anything on Rome. Well, I started to talk to Caterina about it, then with a guy named Romano Beré. He was a guy, a friend, who started to tell me about Flaminio—he was a little younger than me, by about five or six years—about this Flaminio experience, and he had this way of speaking *romanaccio*. And he liked how I incorporated it in the text by also recording his voice. I spoke with my son, Harun, to find the youthfulness of the Roman inflections, because he was thirteen, fourteen years old at the time. And so, for me, it's a story that came to fruition collectively. Collectively because I was in a later stage of my pregnancy, accompanied by Caterina with her search for identity (like when the girl says “my African soul”), and collectively also in part by means of stereotypes—those assigned to you and the ones you make for yourself. And Caterina really experienced this questioning of identity on a personal level. She would ask herself what her identity was; she mythologized this identity a lot. And so no, it was [collective]—see in this case it worked well because many factors brought it about. And I cried the first time I saw it on the stage. It was very moving to hear her perform that.

**CL: How many times did Caterina perform “Rapdipunt”?**

UCAF: She performed it three times from what I know. Then she started to work on *Madre piccola*, but it was different because my friendship with Caterina also had a big influence on Domenica Axad's character in *Madre piccola*. She, and in a way this character, in my opinion, experienced much suffering that also has to do with Domenica's suffering, as well as this issue

of identity that's even on the skin. She has to write on her skin. That was really ... Isn't it true that we internalize some things that we later draw upon, to a certain extent, when we write?

**CL: On the back cover of the English translation *Little Mother*, the novel is categorized as “Fiction-Africa.” What do you think about the literary labels applied to your works?**

UCAF: What people always ask us, me and Igiaba, about here in Italy is this matter about literature, usually migration literature. For me, the answer I've come to—with the first things I started writing, given that Italian is my mother tongue—[is that] I could have easily entered into the sphere of Italian writers of my generation. But alternatively, when I first started writing in Italy, I would gather with groups of writers who were almost all older than me—not much older than me, but a generation older by ten, twenty years. I think, what I've thought, is that usually writing is talked about as one element, as a very solitary, individual activity. And this is true. When you write, you are alone. However, anyone who writes, writes in a context. Not only in the external context of the reader and of what's happening in the world, but also in a context of other people who are writers like yourself. So I think that, for sure, the fact that in the beginning I matured within this “movement” (migration literature) or at least within this context made it so that I wrote in a certain way, that I asked myself certain questions. And I probably wouldn't have written what I wrote in the way that I wrote it, if I hadn't started to write in this context. ... So often when I go to conferences abroad I'm always in the company of writers, perhaps Anglophone and Francophone Africans from different parts of Africa. And so one could pose the question, “Am I more similar to them?” And surely there are aspects that connect me more to, let's say, Anglophone authors who come from other parts of Africa than to an Italian context. Certainly it's a major form of transnationalism, right? The issue of language ... since you are not monolingual you continue to oscillate between languages. And the issue of identity ... in our

case it's much more emphasized, however it pertains to everyone; that is, in my opinion, this issue pertains to all writers. Yet in our case it really has to do with postcolonial issues, matters of action, and of language. Therefore the label of "African Literature" doesn't displease me at all. Of course, it's true that the main issue for a writer is language. You write in a language and the language you choose is in itself a stylistic, cultural, and political choice.

**CL: The English translation of *Madre piccola* just came out this year. Has *Madre piccola* been translated in other languages?**

UCAF: *Madre piccola* has been translated in Dutch. But I believe it was a much quicker job [than the English translation] because I never spoke with a translator. They told me the author and translator don't always communicate with each other, that it's not necessary. However, I'm not sure. In my opinion, it's necessary. Now there's the issue of famine in Somalia that has suddenly reawakened an interest in Somalia and the Horn of Africa. So a French translator should also work on the book. Of course I believe it's more difficult in English, since it's not a Romance language.

**CL: What do you think about translating the book into Somali?**

UCAF: In my opinion, it doesn't make sense, partly because it's a language that has existed in written form only since the 1970s. Therefore, there hasn't really been much time for Somalis to think of their language as a written one. And what's interesting is—well, the language was written in the 1970s, in 1972, and the civil war broke out in 1992. So the language in relation to the state, and to a centralized press, lasted—how long did it last?—only nineteen, not even twenty years. And then the diaspora happened. Therefore, there wasn't really much standardization. If you look on the Internet, Somali is written in all different ways; there are many borrowings of foreign words, of non-Somali words. And then since there is the Web—

what you were telling me about multimediality—Somalis are much more used to performance. So if you look up a poet, it's very difficult to find a written text instead of an oral one. Often there's only the voice. Sometimes there's also a transcription, but many times there isn't. You see? For these reasons, the explosive unrest in Somalia and the diaspora, there are a large number of sites and productions that are oral instead of written. Maybe it would make more sense to translate it orally—to tell the story in Somali rather than write it.

**CL: Have you conceptualized any multimedial projects?**

UCAF: Well Igiaba Scego and I have talked about it quite a bit because there was an experience we shared differently. There's an Italian school, called Asinitas, for refugees, that's in Rome on Via Ostiense. It's a school—you can look up the Web site—called Asinitas. And it does a lot of creative projects, also on Italian language acquisition, etc. And basically for a year, a couple of years, Igiaba and I were both involved in the school's activities because there a large number of Somali refugees there now and at that time there were quite a few. So at a certain point there was the experience of a storytelling circle in which I didn't participate directly. They met nine times. The students from the school were there, the Somali students, a cultural mediator named Zahra, who is a friend and cousin of Igiaba (Igiaba who is a writer), Alessandro Triulzi, historian and professor at the University of Naples, and Marco Carsetti, the school's lead teacher. So basically every meeting focused on a theme—the theme of home, or of departure, of mothers—very powerful themes, but also very general. They would bring materials and everyone had to say something regarding the theme. It was a very traumatic experience for everyone. Most of all for Igiaba. She says it was the most traumatic experience for her because these kids obviously experienced horrific violence, and so it was very exhausting for them. In a second phase, it was my job to work on the meetings' recordings. I didn't attend the meetings, and so I was to

transcribe them. And I felt so, so much [of] the tension and also the violence of certain moments during these encounters. You know, because you cause a lot of issues to come up. So with a musician friend of mine (he plays the trumpet but he's also a composer) we wanted—I talked about it a lot with Igiaba—to dramatize this storytelling circle. We thought of many things, we took notes. In this sense we wanted to try to create something that was multifunctional. In short, something in which there is the voice and then the text takes over, but also this element of tension; we were thinking of using masks. Because, you know, everyone within the circle self-represents who they are. You are never really yourself. In my opinion, this could have been a multimedial project that could have been really wonderful. Igiaba and I thought a bit about this idea, but it'd have to be a collective idea.

**CL: In *Madre piccola*, it seems as though—I'm mostly thinking of Domenica's character—that the body sometimes acts as a voice in itself. For example, at a certain point in the novel, Domenica decides not to speak with her audible voice; rather, she uses her body to communicate.**

UCAF: There are some things that shape you even physically into maturity. I experienced maternity, truly the physical experience of maternity, when I was very young—I was seventeen years old—during a time when my body was in danger. When you're a teenager, even if very shy, you perceive your body as if you don't have physical impairments, as invulnerable, as if nothing could ever happen to you, never, because anyhow you are young, you're strong. Well the experience of being pregnant, together with the civil war, meaning danger to my body, changed that previous perception. The fact that I had a baby made me feel extremely vulnerable. And even giving birth was a very intense experience for me because the wounded were arriving and what was happening to me, to my body, was something natural that didn't worry anyone.



So, you see, that moment of me giving birth was the least of anyone's problems. And I was very young. In my opinion, this experience really changed my perception of reality and of myself as an individual in respect to others—even my perception of fear, which I had never felt up until that moment. And then there was something very important: I wrote *Madre piccola* in the middle of two pregnancies. And therefore during a period when my self-perception, and of what was happening to me, were very strong. So maybe it was a little of this. I always say that what's said about Domenica, about self-mutilation—for me is not self-mutilation. She—it's as if she writes because she has difficulty speaking, she writes on her skin, she writes everywhere. She forgets her language when she goes away. It's something that used to happen to me too—to lose my speech when I would come here or go there. And writing is what has always helped me. And paradoxically, when the war erupted—I used to always write quite a lot, always; I didn't speak, but I always wrote—and when the war erupted and I brought this child into the world, I didn't write for many years. For about six, seven years—a very long time. The first thing I wrote was *Bocca di vento*, a little story about my father, and *Red*, a poem about my departure [from Mogadishu]. I kept remembering this cape, etc., etc., and from there I was able to write again. It was as if in some way the experience—like you say—of the body, of childbirth, had substituted, for a certain time, the necessity to tell stories. But it was also impossible for me to tell stories because I was so close to everything and it was so necessary to live and to forget that I didn't have time to sit down and expand upon them. See, I hadn't thought of these things before.

**CL: Several women, Barni, Domenica, and Sukri, in *Madre piccola* serve as interpreters, culturally and linguistically. Why is it that women, and often mothers, primarily occupy these roles in the novel and, more generally, what kind of access do your female characters have that your male characters do not?**

UCAF: I'll tell you ad nauseam it's about relationships. For me—despite the fact that everyone would tell me, and they have always told me, that being a mother at such a young age in a context of complete displacement, without having any other ties—for me it was very important to have a child because anyhow he was a sort of facilitator to the surrounding environment. ... I would [also] enter into relationships with so many people through him—at school, during everyday activities. When I was in Pècs, Hungary, I stayed home the whole time studying for my high school exam because I was in my last year of high school, but I couldn't attend classes. So I had the baby and I would stay there and study all the time. And then I would go out, go to the park or I would go, for a time, to a small nursery where I would bring him to be with other children and I spoke Hungarian through him; I established a ton of relationships thanks to him. This helped me so much because otherwise, you know, in such a different context I would have felt completely lost. Therefore, it's not really the fact of having a child, but a matter of relationality; that is, in reality women struggle less to enter into contact with people in their new setting for a variety of reasons—also because women are allowed to enter more easily into these contexts. If you think about all the migration even in Italy, all the women who come here, almost all of them work in households. And so in the end you enter into the intimacy of domestic life. In the end, it's much easier. The process of acclimating yourself is sped up. Whereas for men, who have a much more external identity, there are more steps; it's more difficult.

**CL: I'm also interested in the vocal qualities of your protagonists' speech. In *Madre piccola*, Domenica is described as having an Italian-Somali cadence.**

UCAF: The fact that basically emerges also in the novel [is] the fact that Italian is the language, in the area where I lived in Mogadishu, of people who have studied, of the elite. Almost

everyone who had studied knew how to speak Italian, so whoever spoke Italian would slip Italian words and neologisms into their Somali. It was something considered chic. And yet at the same time, for example, my father, who speaks Italian perfectly, has a particular cadence, a way of speaking that distinguishes him and all Somali intellectuals who speak Italian. A bit, I don't know how to put it—the subtle cadence that isn't of a native Italian speaker. And this exists. And then there's also something very interesting—in Somalia I attended an Italian school that was primarily attended by Italian Somalis, so we were all bilingual. However, the Italian that we used within the school walls was not conditioned by the newspapers, the media, because it was very isolated. It was a microcosm in which language was shaped a bit differently and also without regional accents. There weren't any strong regional influences. Perhaps I had my mom's accent from the Veneto—she's from Northern Italy. But now it's gone away some since I've lived in Rome this long. And then it's funny because, for example, I would use a lot, a lot of words in Italian that I had read in books that, however, my peers didn't. When I came to Italy many people would tell me “What word are you using? It's outdated.” [I did this] because I might have read it in a book and I didn't realize how much it wasn't used in spoken language. There are so many things regarding Italian and Somali that unite us.

**CL: In *Madre piccola*, Barni's character expresses that she doesn't trust the press. Since you've worked as a journalist, I'm curious to know what your relationship with the press is like.**

UCAF: I really struggle being a journalist. Igiaba doesn't though. For Igiaba it's really something, in my opinion, that she needs to do. I struggle. I really struggle with that type of language. I hate everything I write in the newspapers. Then I re-read them and they make me sick; I don't like them.

Although I say I hate newspapers, I've actually had a lot to do with them., mostly when I first started because when I first started I worked for an agency, called *Migranews*, that specialized in the sphere of migration in Italy seen from the immigrants' point of view. And so I remember one of the first things I had written, maybe not one of the first, but one of the first that I enjoyed writing, was about the funeral Barni talks about, the funeral here at the Campidoglio, of the deceased. Why had they sent me on this assignment? And this really made an impression on me, and the impact the press has—there were a ton of people; Somalia was being talked about—the press' very impact on the perception of an event that happens because the press records it. It's a bit like what's happening with the famine now in Somalia: Everyone's talking about the famine, so Somalia automatically becomes interesting again. So in part there's this mechanism of the press, and also how it changes the perception of reality. In fact, the character in the novel is controversial. Eventually she becomes more trusting; however, at first she's very argumentative with the woman journalist. She isn't trusting, you know. And then also because it happens to me many, many times that people call me up whenever something happens in Somalia [asking], "So what do you think?" I actually don't know all the details. But I'm supposed to be informed and have my opinion. I'm always scared of how the things I say get twisted, and whenever I get interviewed for the newspapers they always ... flip everything that I say. So, as both an author and a reader, I have a bit of a difficult relationship with the press.

**CL: You mentioned that you and Igiaba Scego experienced being journalists differently. I also noticed that she incorporates the press and the media into her narratives a lot more.**

**Why do you think that is?**

UCAF: It should be noted that, for example I'm thinking more of Igiaba than of me, that when we meet at gatherings, Igiaba and I are very different, meaning that we are also complementary.

... She, in my opinion, has a different perception of Italy because she grew up here. Therefore, she has a more polemical, more internal perception, even in regard to Rome. She grew up here, so even her choice of language is in some way much more of a blend because she also uses elements of Somali culture. Yet she is more—you feel that she is more rooted to this specific city and to this world's manner of speaking. Even controversially, of course, however, she knows how to use it and deconstruct it. Something that instead for me is very arduous. My language is completely different from the one she uses. And also for me, you know, it's a lot easier to write poetry. At first I wrote poetry out of shyness, out of employing few words to communicate a message.

**CL: Do you see a big difference between your and Igiaba's experience of living in Rome?**

UCAF: Anyhow, when you are a black woman here in Italy no one tells you anything, but they don't think that you're Italian. It doesn't matter to me because I have another identity anyways. However, for example for Igiaba, I understand that it's different. And also for Harun, because they grew up here; they were born here and they have a way of speaking that is very Roman. It's really apparent that they're from here and so I understand that it's more frustrating for them, whereas I can tell another story. I was born over there, I was born in Somalia, yes, [so] I speak Somali perfectly. It's not like that for them. So I understand how this can be painful and conflictual.

**CL: How do you go about publishing your works?**

UCAF: This is a timely question because you can basically choose various paths. You can have a literary project to pitch to the publishing houses before your work is finished. And naturally, at that point, the editor has a lot of influence on what you do because he or she gives you a timetable and probably has certain expectations of you. So in a way the editor steers what

direction you're going in a bit. Or else you can do like what I did these last few years—which, however, is very demanding—and choose your interlocutor among the people you trust (for example, Alessandra [Di Maio]), who read your work and who are your sounding board. But this is very time consuming. However, in my opinion, it's more organic to the process of creating a novel. I started writing this novel three years ago and I still continue to change. And I change according to my life experiences, external events, things I learn, and also what I read. If I had published it a year or two years ago, it wouldn't be what it will be when it does get published. And so I'm not sure—it's very, very controversial. We live in a very fast-paced society that consumes a lot very quickly. It produces and consumes itself very rapidly. I believe we all have our own natural rhythms. Therefore, not having a literary interlocutor is also difficult because you have to hold your ground anyway, to believe in what you are doing. Yet, at the same time you have a lot of freedom, right? And, instead, now is the time when I have to find an interlocutor. I just finished, finished writing this novel. So I have to act to get it published. It's something I really don't like because I feel beat down. As long as I'm with Alessandra, and with other people I trust, I'm okay, but with the publishing houses, which are much more connected to the market, I feel more exposed; it's more of a reality check. Yet, I'll get in touch with them right away.

**CL: Do you already have a particular publisher in mind?**

UCAF: There's Frassinelli, but my agent and I aren't sure. My agent is like me, so from the very beginning she told me, "I want this novel to be solid. You have a very important project here and you shouldn't sell it out, you absolutely must not sell yourself out. And when you feel it is complete, I'll snap into action." She says that with *Madre piccola* Frassinelli didn't support me enough. But Frassinelli is one of the most important publishing houses in Italy. It has a large

distribution. I was very close with the editor, the editor of *Madre piccola*. I even mentioned her in the acknowledgements. It depends on whether they're interested and what offer they make me. I'm not sure—fingers crossed.

**CL: What are the advantages of choosing a small versus a large publishing house or vice versa in Italy?**

UCAF: It's a double-edged sword. Frassinelli isn't small; it's medium-sized because it's part of the Mondadori group, so they even have distribution through the newspapers [and] they have agreements with major publishers. However, at first I was misguided because they publish Nuruddin Farah and Toni Morrison. In fact, before the novel came out, there was a symposium with Toni Morrison and she told me, "Ah, Frassinelli is publishing you. That's fantastic!" I was so thrilled. I was at a loss for words and so shy. On the other hand, the smaller publishers protect you more. Instead, Frassinelli doesn't do that. They neither protected nor promoted me. Therefore, at this point, in my opinion, it helps to be with a powerful publisher that is well distributed, but then you also have to have the personal stamina to deal with the press on your own. Have you seen how many things are published these days? Look—it's crazy. Also, when *Madre piccola* came out it was awarded a literary prize. There was this prize and then a grand prize awarded by the public, so when I went to the awards ceremony there were three novels by the same writer that were nominated. Since coming out with one book, he had also published two others. So you see how it is. Even the editors tell you to write and write some more and I don't agree with this because it isn't a question of talent, but of time, and also psychologically speaking. Because if I had written something right after *Madre piccola*, it would have been almost identical to it; that is, I would have just repeated myself. Instead, you need to take a step

back and continue to grow, and in my opinion, write other stories. And doing that takes more time.

**CL: You were one of the founding members of the online journal *El Ghibli*, a site where many migrant authors have published their work in Italian. What significance has it had for you?**

UCAF: *El Ghibli* was a very important experience for me, for everyone involved. Everything runs its natural course. In the beginning there was a lot of enthusiasm, then it waned a bit. Like all organisms, it started out with a burst of energy and then over time some people broke away; everyone experienced it differently and made their own ways. That's why it's still around today. It was a space that was very important, culturally, and politically, but maybe now it has outrun some of its original purpose.

**CL: Are there any upcoming events or gatherings for which you are preparing?**

UCAF: There's one in Ferrara, L'Internazionale. Well it's a project called *La Compagnia delle Poete*—an idea, a project of Mia Lecomte. In order to get a bit out of the individualism of poetry, etc., she thought of this configuration, this *Compagnia* that on a rotating basis incorporates various women poets. And now in Ferrara we are doing a performance entitled “Madrigne,” whose theme—it's crazy—is an incredible challenge. Because there are ten, eleven, maybe more like twelve of us poets on stage as well as some musicians. Then there's an artist who made a video and she also asked each of us poets to videotape a moment of our everyday life we'd like to share. And so I—there were two things I included in that moment—I videotaped the eyes of everyone in my family at home. I focused on the eye because Harun, my son, had something serious happen to his eye, to his sight, last year. So everyone's eye ... and then of Yasmin, my youngest child. I run along the river, the Tiber. I always go running, but



I'm not really a great runner; I don't run so fast. Yasmin, on the other hand, runs very fast. It's like she's flying, and so I filmed her running and looking like she's flying. That moment was very powerful because my new novel is all based on the river; it's entitled *Il comandante del fiume*, and it's all based on the Tiber, on the river. The project is quite stunning because the artist edited all our videos together. Almost everyone filmed themselves during certain times of the day. Instead, I didn't want to. In fact, they told me, "Why aren't you in it?" Because I was too shy. And then we read our own poems out loud. It's wonderful and all mixed together. The video is projected during the performance. I'll tell you how it comes out because we've never done it in such an important setting, so I'm very excited—we'll see. This will be in Ferrara and I'm also excited about an event there in the morning because I have to present a project done by two Swiss men. One's a photographer and the other is a writer ... [both] were in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya—you know that's where all the Somali refugees arrive. And so I'll present someone else's project about a place I've never been to. These are my next two events.

## “Identity”

Igiaba Scego is looking for answers. Hers is an almost natural destiny. It’s written both in her DNA and in her name. In fact, in Arabic Igiaba has the same root as the word answer. She discovered this a couple years ago in Tunis, in an Arabic school. “Now I understand it all!” she told herself. “Elementary, my dear Watson,” she added, even though Watson wasn’t in the neighborhood. The answers she is looking for almost always take the form of writing and research. Besides being a writer, she is currently on the home stretch to earning a doctorate in Pedagogy/Education at Roma Tre University.

When people ask her to define herself, Igiaba has some difficulty. Therefore, she turns to the words of a Chicana scholar whom she adores, Gloria Anzaldúa: “To survive the Borderlands you have to live *sin fronteras* be a crossroads.” Igiaba has been a crossroads all her life. Her Somali parents escape from Siad Barre’s ill-omened 1969 coup in Somalia led to her Roman birth, a graduate degree in Spanish Literature, an insane passion for Brazilian music (and for Caetano Veloso), and an addiction to spiced Lebanese cuisine. In short, the world is her home. Because, indeed, the world is within her.

This last year, she decided to change her look and let her rebellious locks grow. Now she looks like a cross between Erykah Badu and Angela Davis. When she touches her natural locks she feels Africa returning to her. However, she hasn’t been back to Somalia—still tormented by a civil war that continues to eat the hope and hearts of its people—since she was little. Before she dies her dream is to see the sea at Brava, her father’s city. She is hoping for it and is accepting bets from those who believe the contrary.

She has yet to find the love of her life, although she got very close once. She is convinced that he will have at least five CDs, hopefulness and Frantz Fanon’s writings in

common with her. Among her books are: *La nomade che amava Alfred Hitchcock* [The Nomad Woman Who Loved Alfred Hitchcock] and *Rhoda* (Sinnos, 2003 and 2004), two short stories in the anthology *Pecore nere* [Black sheep] (Laterza, 2005), *Quando nasci è una roulette* [It's a gamble to be born] (Terre di Mezzo, 2007, edited with Ingy Mubiayi). She collaborates with “il manifesto,” “la Repubblica,” “Nigrizia,” “World Music.”

*Being born in Italy  
wasn't a big deal for me.  
And for you love?*

I.S.

The purse was new. It was only the third time Fatou was going out with it. The impact of their coupling was fantastic, but the girl noticed right away that there was something about that relationship that didn't fully convince her. With purses she had an immediate connection, almost carnal. She had never chosen the wrong one! Never! But she struggled to get used to that strange trapezoidal case. It was something that was starting to bother her, very much so: “Why isn't it right, damn it to hell!” she asked herself. The blame was placed on the assortment of pockets. All those front and back pockets were literally driving her crazy. Fatou didn't navigate so well, amid that fake leather and those scratchy zippers. Every so often the thought of having made a bad bargain flashed in her head, but she would never have admitted it to any living soul. So, instead of whining, she searched for solutions compatible with her reality as a modern woman. Her hand rummaged uncertain through the unfamiliar folds.

It was when her cell phone started to irrupt in the sound of a chirping sparrow that the uncertain rummaging became pure panic. Fatou hated her ringtone, but in that cheap deal of a cell phone she wasn't able to find anything better. The sparrow's chirping, anyhow, was much more acceptable than the Bavarian polka's wailing tones. But that penetrating sound, even if *nu-ecologist*, found a way to put her in a foul mood. She didn't like having a cell phone, she didn't understand why she couldn't do without it.

She read in an article on the Internet that in Italy there were about 14 million people without cell phones. An entire region. Fatou envied them. They were free, she was a slave to the system. The chirping ringtone increasingly flooded her ears, her hand wasn't able to silence it. Her hand couldn't find that device in all those new folds.

“Where did I put it fucking hell...” the increasingly hysteric girl grumbled.

In the meantime the sparrows, undeterred, continued to keep time with their awful score.

In the end her hand found the birds and it took a moment to wring their neck.

“Hello”—Fatou never said “*Pronto*, who is it?”

“I'm calling from the office sister.” It was the ever-elated voice of her friend Lubna.

Lubna, an Italo-foreigner like her. The foreign part of her came from Tunisia, while Fatou sunk her foreign roots in that Horn of Africa devastated by wars and toxic waste.

“Run to the newsstand, hurry, the piece on you and Valerio came out. You are magnificent sister, a photo to die for. I haven't read it yet though...it's long...my goodness!—you're famous sister. I'm proud of you. Muah.” And Lubna hung up chirping like the swallows that had announced her. Fatou felt a frigid breath of curdled fear run down her throat. She had to run to the newsstand, run swiftly, be transported by wings of curiosity; instead her legs remained stuck, immobile like two pillars. Her body was completely paralyzed.

She looked around circumspect. To her, people seemed, as usual, immersed in themselves. No one seemed to notice her internal turmoil. She felt all flushed in the face. A little sweaty in the underarms, too. With a heart beating a million miles a second from an anxiousness she wasn't expecting that early in the morning. The square was all covered with a layer of yellow dirt, dirt that had fallen on it with the rain from the night sky. The air was humid and the few trees that surrounded that crooked oval seemed united in a final embrace. Everyone in their own world. Except for her who was also living in a parallel world of printed paper that day. But how did it happen that she and Valerio, so low key, ended up in the glamorous crosshairs of a women's magazine.

It was Paolo's doing.

"I have a lady friend..." Paolo had started to say. "Lady friend" was his favorite word. Every two months he had a new lady friend. He chose them thin, but not too thin, tall but not too tall, intelligent, but not too intelligent. This lady friend was a journalist. "She's young," Paolo began. "She has ideas," he continued; and finished with a persuasive, "Let's help her." The help consisted of having themselves interviewed by this young fiery journalist. "She needs a mixed race couple. You guys are perfect. You can't get more mixed than you two."

Our friend Paolo's affirmation deeply affected us, although for different reasons. But it was hard to say no to Paolo.

The interview was set for the end of the month. The meeting with the ambitious young *freelancer* was naturally a disaster, that's why Fatou was afraid to buy the magazine.

She already knew she wouldn't like the content.

She went to the newsstand like someone condemned to the gallows.

## A DROP IN BARBARISM...

### WHEN MARRIAGE GOES FOREIGN

Mixed race couples are on the rise in our peninsula. A journey through the countless contradictions of mixed unions.

*“Italian women no longer know how to seduce their men; it’s logical that they choose us.” To confirm it there is Fatou, a young, extremely tall black girl. She has a neck like a giraffe and two defenseless doe eyes that have quite an effect on men made in Italy, but Fatou (and she knows this very well!) is not a little defenseless creature, she has nails and teeth that, when duty calls, can do a lot of damage. Especially if someone comes between her and her Italian love: Valerio. The two have been together for two years, they have a mortgage, a cat, several books and an excessive amount of cds. “They’re for my job” the girl practically justifies, to make a living she works as a dj for a well-known radio station in Rome. Their house is furnished in a somber style, profoundly leaning toward an ancestral primitivism. Fatou wanted to impart her style on Valerio, he shrugs his shoulders “She’s the boss of my abode and of my heart. So she does it all.” Fatou and Valerio are a mixed race couple, one of the many who populate our country. He is a bearded forty-year old Roman and she a Somali who is all curls. These unions are on the rise, not only in big cities like Milan, Rome, Naples, Turin, but also in small towns where the number of souls is infinitely less.*

*According to a survey of by the City of Milan, interracial marriages have peaked to an increase of 25%, this taking place in a Milan where there’s a 32% decrease in the “I do”’s between Italians. But just what leads our men (of all ages, from teenagers obsessed with padlocks*

*declaring their love, to seventy-year olds with caregivers' syndrome) to prefer other races? Of course a fascination with the exotic has a strong part, to immerse oneself in different facial features, to hear oneself say "love" in the language belonging to another. All this heightens curiosity and a certain attraction. After all, Valerio himself confirms it. "My colleagues"—he is a lecturer in History—"envy me to a certain extent. They always say that Fatou is very sweet to me." Sweetness or Cunningness? The doubt also comes up because when consulted, many men, and also Valerio implicitly, refer to foreign women's submissiveness as the motive. Italian women are hysterical, Italian women are too involved in pursuing careers, Italian women are lesser women...foreign women, instead, know how to do everything for you. Valerio does not say it, but Fatou's entire body confirms it. A puppy who simply waits for her owner to act/make a move/say the word. Fatou pants. She lives in his spotlight. He concedes, he takes away. She knows this well and is fine with it. "Valerio loves me" she says "it's only right that I do something for him. And it's not as if he prevents me from doing my job. But you know, without love work is nothing." A caffelatte marriage, or should we also say malted, given that Italian women's greatest danger now comes from Eastern Europe, and it's also chic among the VIPs. Just think of the beautiful Tunisian Afef Jnifen. The curly haired paramour entrapped oh so well the industrialist Marco Tronchetti Provera and will not let go of him easily according to our reliable sources. And Tronchetti Provera is not the only man in Italy and in the world to give himself over to a fritto misto. Just think of how even the self-controlled Albert of Monaco went through a black phase.*

*Flaming hot nights with the beautiful hostess Nicole Coste whose son he eventually recognized as his own in a later phase. Love and sex are the two elements that keep these unions afloat. But personal gain still makes a difference. Foreign women marry Italian men to achieve a*

*certain social status, a certain economic prosperity and, why not, Italian citizenship. The gap in age difference between the man and woman is still quite wide. “Yes it’s true Valerio is ten years older than me, but he looks good for his age, doesn’t he?”. The ten-year difference between Fatou and Valerio may even become twenty in the case of ex-caregivers and their former employers. These unions are also unbalanced, where the man provides everything for her in every way. The woman in question does not have many friends and his friends automatically become her world. This is not the case with Fatou, who has a certain exposure thanks to the radio, but even she does not hide certain relationship problems she has faced with her Valerio. “He says I cook too ethnically,” the girl complains. He laughs and says, “She always sneaks that damn cinnamon in everything.” Gastronomic problems aside, mixed race couples have to deal with bigger dilemmas. For example, childrearing. Your culture or mine? A wedding in my tradition or yours? Christmas at your parents or Ramadan at mine? In the event of divorce and crisis, mixed race couples have more problems, because the cultural ties that were hidden so well by the courtship and limitless sex immediately come to the surface later. Fatou is not worried about it: “I have a good relationship with Valerio’s daughter.” In fact, before entering in her graces, Fatou (and this is the norm) had to de-throw a fifty-year-old Milanese woman, with whom Valerio was married for a good eleven years. “Their love died out,” she slyly says “I didn’t do anything to wreck it, it was already in a pretty bad state.” Therefore, the beautiful foreign women are often second partners, younger, beautiful and abiding.*

*Feminism has not yet reached those parts. One combats with other weapons, seduction and submissiveness...like in ancient times. A Croatian woman by the name of Melena understood the drama that Italian women are living and decided to open a school of seduction in the heart of Turin: “I teach how to land a man and keep him for yourself” Melena Mladic candidly states.*



*The school has been assailed by desperate older Torinese women. A foreign woman who instead of ensnaring men, ensnares women for profit! And speaking of women, even with them the trend is changing. Italian women (tired of being considered lesser women) are also increasingly diving into the exotic pool: the champion of this trend is certainly Heidi Klum who back in the day let herself be snatched up by Seal, to find out for herself if a certain saying about a certain length in size could actually be confirmed. However, this will be a topic for our next issue. Stay tuned...*

The girl closed the magazine and started to walk. At a slow pace, almost deliberately. Her pace followed the neurotic movement of her paralyzed gray matter. She then suddenly decided to take one of the many buses that go to the Termini train station. She felt too flustered by the pain. Disgusted—even dirty, ugly and rotten. Every word in that article had hurt her. Every single word, every single comma, every single pause, every single unsaid, but implied word. She felt a bit like Shrek before Fiona fell in love with him. Fiona and Shrek, Fatou asked herself if they were also a mixed race couple. “But then she is the same as him. They can’t be mixed. And am I the same as Valerio? Are we mixed like people say?”

She had dressed somber that day, yet always with style. A long black skirt, black ankle boots, a tailcoat, black naturally, and a red beret that exuded subversion from every pore.

She wasn’t used to skirts, she wasn’t the skirt type, she would have preferred any of her numerous pairs of body-hugging jeans. She needed to feel, that day more than any other, the consistency of a mass of fabric above her dark buttocks. Instead, that skirt was letting her go adrift. She felt all her moving flesh (very little) lost in an alien world. Fatou stepped off the bus at the end of the line, in that Roman belly button that was Termini Station. There she would take

Metro line A to Ottaviano. Along with her, the bus spit out students, commuters, crazies, housekeepers, tourists in shorts. Many continued the pilgrimage with her even in the subway. Termini Station had changed. Before, much earlier, it was only an open-air muckheap. Pigeons and humans used it as a toilet. Excrement and the smell of piss for miles. Of course some corners were still smelling of stale piss, but in general, since someone gave it a facelift bringing in lights and stores, it had even become a charming place. She liked the people's faces at the station, even the faces of the disreputable types. Indeed, especially those. She went passed the unsavory smelling area of the McDonald's, flashed a quick glance at the record store. Then her gaze locked onto a group of kids by the escalator. Beautiful, they were beautiful; young, they were young. The girls had multicolor hair extensions and the guys had their pants sagging like hardcore American rappers. Their gesturing was also something manufactured. They gave each other high-fives, they were hanging out, they gave a nod of approval to the world and they laughed in an almost abstained way. They were all kids, black like her. Partly Africans, partly negroes, partly of color as Huey Freeman of *The Boondocks* would have said. An assortment of different shades of black.

The *abesha* and the *geerer*, the springy curls and the fiery frizz, Watusi bones and Pygmy frame. Fatou calculated that between her and that group there probably was an age difference by ten to thirteen years. She was now an ambitious 33-year-old, she was the same age as Christ, a career, a man, a mortgage, a cat...paraphrasing the dreadful article she had just read. She envied those kids: "What I would have given at their age to be among blacks." Fatou always regretted never having friends of color in her adolescence. It would all have been so much easier. Maybe even in love. But sometimes she was afraid of not being able to make her way among all the colors of the city...among all the colors of her house.

The arrivals sign showed a three-minute wait. Fatou looked at it distracted. She didn't have faith in the Roman metro's arrivals signs. Three minutes sometimes became five; it wasn't worth trusting. She passed through the narrow corridor paying attention to stick real close to the wall. She had heard some strange stories, of people who ended up, God only knows, on the tracks. Usually foreign people or at least apparently speaking. She really didn't want to end up under the metro tracks that day, not that she wanted to other days, but absolutely not that day. Everyone would have said the suicide motive was that ridiculous fashion magazine article on mixed race couples. It was a good reason to kill oneself, wasn't it? She didn't want to make a bad impression *post mortem*. Fatou still struggled to believe every word written by that Milena Morri. She seemed nice at first sight, Milena Morri. Instead, she was a scoundrel, also a bit *shermutta*. It's not as if she were born yesterday. She noticed the fervent glances *Ms. Milena* cast at her Valerio, those words pronounced in a sexier semitone, that hand of hers that strangely freefell on his knees and never on Fatou's. Fatou was aware of every one of Milena Morri's strategic maneuvers, but she didn't give them much weight at the time.

She generally was not jealous. Types like Milena Morri in a miniskirt, skimpy little top, and designer handbag, were not the kind to bother her much. Too over the top! Besides, Ms. Milena had horrendous fuchsia lipstick past her lip line that aged her by at least a hundred years. Fuchsia lipstick made Valerio break out in hives. Fuchsia always distressed him a bit. But given the subsequent events, that is the article, Fatou felt like an idiot to not have understood the signs earlier. A rejected woman is also a dangerous woman. Apparently Valerio's eyes passing unshakenly over the shock journalist's body had created an emotional short-circuit in that woman. A short-circuit that found, to immolate as the sacrificial victim, her: Fatou Ahmed Hirsi.

The metro wasn't full. Fatou planted herself in one of the cars at the end of the train. She opened the magazine again. Every so often she lifted her gaze to see if the other passengers were also aware of her drama. The other passengers were each immersed in their own miseries. A girl chewing gum was letting out a strange sound from her nostrils, a guy next to her with a metal earring was doing sudoku, an elderly man had decided to revisit a past season by wearing bell-bottoms, others were reading the paper, someone was planning a mugging, a woman was forcing back a tear of desperation in her eye. Yes, everyone had much better things to do than to think about her drama, of a black woman paired up with a white, freckly man. The metro reached Flaminio. She was almost there. In just a moment she would land in her man's arms and together they would head toward Ciampino airport. Her sister was supposed to arrive from Manchester that day. Along with the article, that was the biggest trouble of the day.

She received a phone call two weeks prior. It was her—the notorious sister. Since living under Queen Elizabeth II, her sister picked up all the habits of the English. She started talking about time a little too much and then never stopped about how many ailments the Manchester humidity was causing her. “May God save the subsidy that, like a good Somali woman, I steal from the queen,” she had exclaimed, “but her humidity is not anything for our bones. I feel all stiff.” Fatou had a lot to do that day. Her new music program would start in three hours. She wanted to eat a quick bite, get to the studio with time to spare and talk with the crew. She would find the trusty Alberto at the controls. They knew each other so well she and Alberto, there wasn't any need to tell him anything in particular. But she was born like this, a perfectionist. She was very attached to that late night program. She wanted to hear all of Rome's heartbeats, including her own, in her headphones. “I don't have time sister, I have to work...”

“You never have time for me *abbayo*.”

How to respond?

She allowed a convenient pause of silence, because it was kind of true. She never had time for that estranged sister. She always felt uneasy with her. She was always argumentative, always a meddler, always something she wasn't supposed to be. It was a bit tiring keeping up with her. Exhausting!!! What did she know about her anyway? What did she know besides the fact that they were sisters? That her name is Nura for sure, that they have the same father but not the same mother, that there is a fifteen year age difference between them, that they never shared the same outlook on life: Fatou was secular, Nura was fanatic; Fatou was thin, Nura pachydermal; Fatou had a white partner, Nura was widowed by a black man; Fatou was Italian, Nura Somali.

"I'm coming to your place," she said, "and I'm staying for ten days."

Ten days. To Fatou it seemed longer than all eternity.

What would they do, she, Nura and Valerio for ten days?

"Are you still with the *gaal*?" she asked.

She didn't like it when Nura called her man a *gaal*, harshly emphasizing that first letter "g." When Nura would say *gaal*, infidel that is, Fatou's vein in her left temple would throb. She sensed disapproval, preconception, a lot of ignorance in that word.

"His name is Valerio."

"It's a *gaal* name. Why don't you leave him? Here in Manchester there are a lot of guys from the Cabilia I could introduce you to. Men here are hungry for women, for Somali women, and you are a good catch for our men. Maybe you should fatten up a bit and leave that stupid music alone...but it doesn't matter much...they would snatch you up even as you are, all bones

and with those absurd tunes in your ears. Our father still has a name for himself among our people.”

With every phone call Nura would “advise” her to leave the love of her life. The pounding in Fatou’s temple beat harder.

“But sister you know how long it took me to find him? You know, right?”

She didn’t say this out loud, she was thinking it.

She would have wanted to scream it at that oh so thickheaded sister of hers.

She would have wanted to tell her that Valerio saved her life, that Valerio had reconstructed her soul.

“You know that I was a disposal woman before, right?”

Even this she thought to herself. There was no dialogue with that oh so thickheaded sister of hers. There were no secrets, there was no collusion.

She thought of when Valerio asked her out at a Chagall exhibit. Their first date. They weren’t even in Italy. They were both in Barcelona. He was there for a conference, she to not think. In the painting, there was a woman flying. The two of them looked at the flying woman and her pink gown. A man in the painting, Chagall, was wearing a black jacket. Eyes wide open on a benevolent world. In the distance there was an all pink house like the woman’s dress. He held her by the hand from the earth. Although, for him, the temptation to fly was great. His hand was keeping the woman in place in the sky that would soon welcome the stars. That painting was famous. Fatou had seen it in several art history books. On many Internet sites. On many Valentine’s Day cards. *La promenade, The Promenade*. It seemed to be a very banal scene on the cards. Love and flight have always been connected. It wasn’t anything new in the slightest! And those *naïf* lines on the cards made her itch under her arms. They irritated like

crazy her central nervous system. She saw those cards at the supermarket or at the stationary shop or in those little hole-in-the-walls where alongside an olive or an open-faced sandwich they would also sell you some interesting tome. She browsed through the cards, she even longed for them, but at the same time she hated them. She would have liked so much to buy one of those rose-colored banalities. Yet she would never have told a living soul. She was tough. She was Lady Fatou, the hardest core dj of the suburban airways. She surely couldn't lose herself in mushiness. Damn it to hell she was Lady Fatou! She was someone to compete with the likes of the Ghanaian-Milanese Cleopatra. That is, someone who was able to tear up the system with the sounds of Erykah Badu and Angélique "queen" Kidjo and then pass to the milky white sounds of a PJ Harvey without even blinking. She was someone who wore her afro with pride. Who quoted Malcolm, who quoted Fanon, who quoted Huey Freeman, who sweetened her bitterness with the rhythmical paradoxes of Ray Lema.

However, despite all her *nigger* grit, she wanted to lose herself in that prefabricated sea of pink. She was ashamed of that syrupy thought. She also felt very sad. She didn't know who to send them to. She didn't know who to love. She wanted the hearts, the kisses, the mushy things. Sometimes she grieved that no one put people like her on Valentine's Day cards. Italy wasn't like America where there was a Mahogany collection that specialized in afro greeting cards. The Mahogany collection thought about her people. Who thought about her in Italy? About her birthdays? About her chocolate or caffelatte St. Valentine's. About her graduation? Sometimes Fatou felt invisible.

Instead, in person the Chagall painting appeared as a divine enchantment to her. Nothing to do with the reproductions on the front of greeting cards. Even Valerio—she'd only find out his name later—was a divine enchantment. He had a scraggly beard that solemnly covered his

face. He wasn't real tall, but not short either. Maybe a centimeter taller than her. A kefia around his neck like the Occupy kids, a watch with a brown band. His gaze was the same as Chagall's. A wide-open gaze. But like Chagall there was a veil of melancholy that partly covered his anxious pupils. She wanted to say something to him. But that manly gaze subtracted any courage she had. When love captures you like lightning it's like having a stroke: it paralyzes you. She felt love and fear, all jumbled together. Chagall's eyes commanded that she act, because life is to be seized, to be lived. The man was listening to the audio guide. Fatou wondered in which language. She followed him for a while. Side-by-side, they saw a lot of paintings. They saw goats dancing on roofs, green violinists with partially opened legs, women's profiles, bridal comets, cylindrical hair, Hebrew script.

She opened up her guide to make sense of what colored world she had happened upon. The explanations were not satisfactory, lacking in poetry. She closed the book. The paintings were almost done. Fatou got upset with Chagall for not having painted more. She got upset with the museum's architects for not having made the hallways longer, she was upset with herself for not finding the courage to not lose him/it. However, at the last painting he was the one to speak and remove her from her dilemma.

“You're Somali, right?” he said in Italian.

“Oh, how do you know I speak Italian?”

At the museum café he explained to her that he was born in Mogadishu, de Martino Hospital. Fatou thought about how her sister Nura was also born at de Martino. And several of her cousins. Instead, she was delivered at the Regina Margherita, between San Lorenzo and Normentana. That same night Fatou confessed to him that she was raped as a child and wasn't like other women. That at times her body didn't answer to her heart.



Nura couldn't even imagine the closeness there was between her and Valerio.

"Men are women hungry in Manchester," she continued to repeat like an annoying broken record.

Valerio had listened to her in Barcelona after Chagall, after the dancing goats and crazy violinists. That night they slept together like two children. No sex, just sleep. After years Fatou felt like Chagall's comets, stars that become spouses.

Sex came much later. And it was beautiful.

In the meantime, Nura continued to predicate like a lunatic in her desert. "The men in Manchester are hungry," she would say. Fatou thought of how she wasn't food for men. The men in Manchester sunk into oblivion. Fatou wouldn't have exchanged her *gaal* for any one of them.

"There she is," Valerio said.

Fatou hadn't recognized her. She was even more pachydermal than she had remembered. She hadn't seen that sister, there, for over eight years. She was always sunk into some sofa or laid out on some mat in the photos she sent her.

"How did you ever recognize her?" Fatou asked a bit struck by her man's visual prowess.

"I have my secrets," he smiled.

Maybe it wasn't so difficult to recognize her. Maybe it was only Fatou who strained to not recognize that she and that fat woman waddling over with a trolley in tow were very similar. They were two centimeters from each other. What should she do? Should she kiss her? Shake her hand? Or do as one traditionally does between Somali women, kiss her on the hand? He did the right thing. He took her suitcase, being careful to not brush against her body.

“I’m Valerio. *Assalamu-Aleikum*. I don’t know if I can give you my hand, I’m not sure if you already did your ablutions for afternoon prayer.”

Nura smiled in broken spurts. She was like an obstructed geyser. Gushing at half capacity.

“You trained him well, I see,” she said in Somali.

Fatou still hadn’t moved an inch. That spiteful sentence took away any desire she had to kiss that pachydermal creature.

She should have known since waking up that this day wouldn’t have been one of the easiest of days. Fatou had a theory about waking up. Everyone got out of bed with a sound or an entire melody playing in their head and that’s what would indicate how the day would go.

Fatou didn’t always manage to grasp the song of the day, the melody, the instrument.

Sometimes she flung open her eyes and saw the sound escaping from her eardrum like a thief.

She gave her all not to arrest the sound, but on certain days she was too bogged down with sleep to have any type of reaction. But that morning it was all too clear to her: *I Will Survive*, trash cover sung by Celia Cruz. And she didn’t like Celia Cruz. She found her to be burdensome. Celia Cruz died with all her burden. Fatou no, no, no one speaks badly about the dead! But she was a disc jockey, a record mixer, it was her job to speak badly about the dead, to gossip about them, to say why a song came about, how much bitterness it took to make it, how many genital juices were mixed to arrive at that result. She was a radio gossip queen; she talked about loves, betrayals, passions, illegitimate children, censorship, inspiration, poetry. There was no poetry without gossip. Literary critics did it with Virginia Woolf or Oscar Wilde, why couldn’t she do it with John Lennon or Salif Keita? What did Oscar Wilde have that Salif Keita doesn’t? So when the piercing voice of a dead woman let her know to survive that morning,

Fatou understood she was running the risk of ending up like New Orleans swept away by Hurricane Katrina and the negligence of men.

Valerio, on the other hand, was calm.

He always was.

He only got upset about extremely important things.

“I spent 1826 days in hell. I don’t want this to happen now with you.”

His 1,826 days with Laura. His ex-wife, his hell. Married in a deconsecrated church in Caracalla. He wore sandals on his feet and an oversized jacket. She, a floral print dress and a bulging belly—inside her belly was Teresa. Already the three of them, already a family, good chances of being happy. Instead, 1,826 unsound days.

“She wasn’t all there. I was depressed. Teresa was tossed around between us, she suffered. It’s that each person wanted to possess the other and that didn’t work.”

Fatou didn’t want to possess Valerio. She possibly wanted to live alongside him. To repeat in their daily lives that purity of sleep like the first time. He sleeps next to her, resting on the same pillow.

Already home. The freeway was fast, from Ciampino it took only a moment to cross the paved streets and arrive at their neighborhood den.

It was the three of them. Extremely high probability of impending disasters. A woman, a man, the fat sister-in-law.

There was a lot of light in that home.

Quite a lot. That’s why they had chosen it. Light brings joy. Fatou zeroed in on the furnishings. When they offered that spiced tea to Milena Morri, they had her sit in the very

center of their home, in their little African corner. They didn't call it a "living room"; that was too conventional. African corner, it was Valerio who had invented it.

"I want to feel at home," he said.

He already had many items. Laura didn't want to keep them in her house in Monteverde; "They bring up bad memories," she had told him. He was offended. Even though they had left each other, some memories were still good for him. Because in part his life was good. He took everything, without saying a word. He gathered everything together in the African corner. Other objects were added over time and from trips. Masai statues, sun calendars, ritual masks, head rests, decorated Suras from the Quran, rosaries, coins, Buraq, percussion instruments. Ms. Milena had written in the article that *Fatou wanted to impose her style on Valerio*. Instead, it was the opposite. It was he, Valerio, who was born in Africa.

She had never been to Africa, besides four days in Sharma el Sheik with radio colleagues. But Sharma wasn't Africa, Sharma wasn't anything, it was a bastard crossroads of globalization, where the food was generic, loves too and the sea served all that pre-packaged garbage.

Instead, he was born in Mogadishu. He even grew up there. His parents worked for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Then Bamako came into his life.

"Bamako, a chaos. The people never stand still."

"Tell me about Africa," Fatou begged him on pounding rainy nights.

"It's impossible. It can't be told. It's all different. No corner is equal to the other. I'm not good with words like you."

She had imagined Africa to be like a materialized record. A vinyl record that spun on a magical machine. Luminescence radiated out from the Sahel toward the entire continent. Here, in a handful of territories, from Mali to Conakry Guinea, from Gambia to Senegal, from Sierra

Leone to that strange black colony called Liberia, interwoven stories of unmitigated lives radiated out.

And here the *djeli* appear from afar. Minstrels of the desert that the French had readily re-baptized as *griot*. Here are the *djeli* with their lithe tongues. They sit and a crowd gathers around. They open their mouths and shadows, ferocious animals, landscapes come out. The *djeli* recount our death and our life. In Africa the *djeli* is memory, is a document, an echo, an image, a test, the history that the white man would like to bury. The *djeli* stirs. Like how television mimes events, but he's not a television, he is not dead, it's his blood that's jumpy, that makes him create images.

The *djeli* is not static electricity that could disappear. The *djeli* is like a disc jockey. He tells stories, music accompanies him, he constructs itineraries. He speaks about births, dynasties, circumcisions, graduations, marriages, recoveries, deaths, transits, returns, ghosts. Oh *djeli*, juke box, you are a breath of life. Twenty-one cords fastened to a cucurbit. Sound of the *kora*. Voice of the earth. *Djeli*.

“Can you become my *djeli* love?”

“But...” hesitated the white boyfriend.

“But what love? You don't want to tell me stories? You don't want to tell me about Bamako?”

So the white boyfriend improvised for his black girlfriend. He reconstructed stories lost in his pancreas. Boyhood memories. He described Mogadishu, how it was beautiful in the hour just a little before sunset. How the statue of Howa Taqo shown when the eye of God fell upon her and her pained chests struck by a fatal arrow. And he told her about his first love. A little

girl who went to the French school in Bamako. “She was crippled. The street kids would throw rocks at her. I would defend her. She never smiled at me. She never talked to me.”

Fatou heard echoes of gourds from afar. The instruments in that illuminated Africa from the Sahel there were all cucurbits of various sizes, of various reverberations.

“Now it’s your turn love. Tell me, who are you?”

“I’m who you know.”

“And what do I know?”

The black girl started to dig as well. Inside her unheard pancreas.

“Who am I?” The twenty-one cords of the kora started to fill that void with substance.

“Who am I?”—the affirmation tormented her.

Fatou looked at her sister. She was wrapped in coarse fabric and her coat made her look like some kind of packaged pig’s foot. A Sunni Muslim who resembled a Christmas sow. The thought seemed blasphemous to her. Why all that useless fabric *abbayo*? She asked herself. Why not have the reigning grace of Harun al Rashid’s court in IX century Bagdad? Her sister’s course fabric asphyxiated Fatou.

“Don’t get upset love” he told her, “it’s the fear of not being recognized that makes your sister cushion/layer herself in fabric.”

“There was a time when I first saw her that she didn’t dress like this. She was covered, but properly. A *hijaab* that flattered her oval face. Instead, now she drags all those pieces of crude fabric on the ground.

He did the right thing. He didn’t brush against that sister. He had taken her suitcases and went to the car waiting in the parking lot.

“Who am I?” thought Fatou. The kora vibrated.

“Who are you?”

“I’m a Tunni. Daughter of Tunni of Brava. Daughter of Geilani and Ruqia. Lioness by birth. High ranking. The map lost me, now I’m here with you, I carry pain in my heart, a disappeared land. My Somalia at war for all her life. Who am I love? I don’t know. I’ve never really known. I was born in a foreign land. Yet I know I’m not a foreigner to anyone.”

“Who are you?”

“I told you. I’m a Tunni. I’m Roman. I’m a foreigner. I’m from here. I’m yours.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m Faduma and I love you my *gaal*.”

The house was different that day. It was emptier. Fatou had sent into exile all the compromising, or presumed to be, materials into the closet. All that could disturb that estranged sister. Paintings had disappeared, little statues, some books, all the alcohol, the marijuana. The broom of the purge that had swept away every trace loaded with consequences was also in the closet. No short dresses, nothing low-cut. She didn’t want to awaken/rouse negative comments. Only long skirts, loose pants and every foulard on view. She busied herself for three days straight to change the look of the house.

Valerio laughed. “Help me instead to not laugh,” she would say giving him a playful punch in the chest. He would laugh and didn’t lift a finger. It was a disapproving laugh.

“Why trouble yourself? Do you even know her?” It wasn’t necessary to utter these words, it was in the air, in her will to change her self-scenario for ten days. Fatou puffed like a bison, she sweat, she fretted. She was afraid. What are you afraid of girl? Fatou didn’t know how to respond. She only knew that she wanted the approval of that fleshy butterball of a woman. Sister by way of spermatozoa.

“But will she know that previously there was a gay couple in this house?”

“And if she did?” he countered all the while laughing.

“It would be a disaster.”

Fatou actually adored Oscar, that nutty queer who had sold her the apartment. It was a real turnover that apartment. She and Valerio had bought the house with all the furniture inside. With the tables, the pipes, the fully fitted kitchen and even the wooden bed. Oscar worked on it for several months alongside with his boyfriend. The attention to detail was almost obsessive. The Dadaist-esque waterfall that flowed from the tap, the blue as night lights that relaxed you after a stressful day, the space-saving rooms, the custom-fit bathtub.

The kitchen had even won an award; Fatou didn't remember which one. Oscar and Pizzo were quite proud of that award. However at the end of all that work or maybe because of all that work, Oscar and Pizzo broke up. Pizzo became infatuated with a Norwegian he met at Capocotta and Oscar could do nothing else but cry, despair and place an ad in “Porta Portese”—an ad that Valerio and Fatou had come across almost by chance. They were both impressed by the bathtub. “We'll be happy with it,” they thought. It only took a second to draw up the deed and sleep under those blue lights on the hottest nights.

The house was different that day. Not only for the extra space though. Something had been added. Fatou discovered it only when she crossed the threshold with her sister, with her baggage and with her man into their suburban manner. There was an intruder in the house. An intruder of the female sex. A pastel woman within a jagged frame. She was hung above the main sofa. She scrutinized the world with angry eyes.

“Surprise!” said Valerio.

A surprise it was. A part of Fatou's heart stopped.



She was a beautiful woman. Black like her, curly-haired like her, furious like only she thought to be at times. Her skin was exposed to the world. A *futa* barely covered the backside of her body. The area was dominated by her two prominent breasts. Nude.

“I found it at my father’s house, you remember how the other day...”

“Yes, you were helping him to organize some of his old documents, how could I forget?”

That woman had come from the past. She was a madam of Italian colonialism, a Somali woman who during Fascism had been, like many women, the official lover of an Italian man.

A quasi wife. The madam would wash the Italian man’s clothes, then iron them, cook his food, massage his stinky feet, then at night the madam would take off all her clothes, lay next to him and let him enter her vagina. Every night the vagina would wait for the Italian man’s penis. The Italian man didn’t always worry about being sweet to the madam. He entered her without cleaning mud off his shoes, without washing under his arms, without caring about his alcohol breath. The vagina wanted to fall in love with that penis, but it proved difficult for her. So why did she stay? The poor vagina didn’t know why anymore. At first other vaginas had told her that it was all very nice. That the Italians showered their madams with gifts. “You become a lady, you’re respected, you have tons of clothes.” But the vaginas didn’t tell their sisters all the truth. The affair was completely different. Entirely! The vaginas were afraid of being pitied. They wanted to be envied, not pitied. So in order to survive they invented stories where love wore the white skin of the invaders.

“Look at the description,” Valerio said all excited.

“Woman of Brava,” Fatou read with a broken voice.

Brava, her mother's city, her father's city. How does the sand in Brava smell? Fatou asked herself, she didn't like having missed out on all the perfumes of her Africa. Who knows if her blood still smelled of Africa.

"Is this how your *gaal* sees you?" the pachydermal sister remarked. "He sees you like this? Like an easy whore? So why are you with him, Fatou? Men are women hungry in Manchester."

Zip it sister! Zip it! But she didn't say it out loud.

Then Nura pulled out a pile of photos. "They are all men who want to marry you. Choose one of them and I swear, sister, you'll have made the right choice. They're women hungry, don't you see?"

*Zip it sister! Zip it!* But she only thought it the second time too.

She only said: "I'm going to the bathroom real quick, I don't feel well."

Then she found an excuse and went to bed: "I'll just lay down for an hour."

In bed she found Milena Morri, the journalist, atop the pillow.

Fatou knew she was in a dream—hers. She had fallen asleep with all her clothes on just five minutes earlier. She had fallen asleep wearing all her accessories, including her belt. Every now and again the belt dug into her stomach.

"You think you deserve the pain, right?" Milena told her.

"Why do you say this?"

"Because," Milena smiled disdainfully, "you didn't take off your belt."

Fatou already knew her follow-up line. "Why don't you leave Valerio?" she would have said. And how would she, Fatou Ahmed Hirsi, have responded to the tabloid journalist?

Fatou preferred not to hear the question. She rose from the bed leaving Milena Morri laid out with her mouth half-open. Maybe she was about to ask the very question that she didn't even want to hear formulated.

She got up and found herself in a nightclub. How did she get there at such high speed? She remembered only getting out of bed and taking three steps. One, two, three. Three steps didn't even lead to the bathtub. Actually, three steps didn't get her anywhere. Only after did Fatou remember she was in a dream. A dream with bright lights, with perfumed people.

The club was overtaken by the arrival of crazy youths dressed in leggings. Fatou was curious. The centipedal movement of men donning dark glasses and microphones amused her. They looked like ants. Ants always amused her. When she was little she liked watching how laborious and senseless they were. Exactly like the men in dark suits. Some of them pushed back the crowd with the power of a gesture. The forward stretching hands of these men in ties created fear. The crowd swayed in Armani suits. An electric tsunami. In her dream Fatou wondered for whom all those mistakes of humanity were waiting. It was the dj, the guru who had to make them go out of their minds.

Fatou found herself wearing a body-hugging jog suit and a purple foulard wrapped around her thighs. A headband, two arm-length earrings and heavy eye make-up. Her warrior femininity put itself above a sonorous pulpit. The people were frenetically clapping their hands. She thought about how she was tired of that dream, how she didn't feel like working even during her down time. She thought of how in that dream there should be Valerio, only Valerio. Instead, like a surgeon on an emergency call she only had instruments before her. She had the turntables, the mixer, the computer, the headphones. She adjusted the pitch a little, scratched on the vinyl,

listened to the music's beat, fusion, acceleration, she arrived on death's edge, looked at her enraptured and then took her leave.

“See you later, beautiful,” she promised her. Fatou you're mad, since when do you converse with death? In the meantime the people, unaware, moved their heads, ears, necks, eyebrows. The people felt their knees, scapulas, glutes vibrate. They shook with desperation in syncopated movements. Then Fatou saw two sheep. The people made space without ceasing to move their heads, ears, necks, eyebrows. The sheep were tethered and led together by Milena Morri.

The white sheep was kicking the black sheep. Milena Morri looked Fatou right in the eye: “It's like in Switzerland. The white sheep will always kick the black sheep in the ass.”

Fatou instantly remembered that in the article on mixed race couples, on her and Valerio, she had seen a wedding cake with two sheep kissing each other, one black and one white. “It's love,” she cried out to Milena Morri. “The English call it love, the Arabs *hubb*.”

Milena then told her: “You don't know what love is.” It seemed like a title of a 1950s song to Fatou. She didn't deem it believable. Milena then showed her a poster. Three white sheep were kicking a black sheep in the ass. It was an electoral poster for the UDC, the Swiss nationalist right-wing party.

“Whore, leave our men alone. You're not up to their level” And then Milena Morri spit in her face.

Fatou felt like vomiting. She stopped the music. The people started to protest. But before anyone could make a move she jumped off her pedestal and started to run fast. During the run the air hit her sweaty face. The synthetic jog suit gave her more momentum, more speed. She almost felt free. If it wasn't for the swishing of fabric piled on a stubby body in pursuit. It

was her sister Nura. Despite her bulk, Nura ran fast, agile, she practically soared from the pelvis up.

“I have some photos to show you,” Nura yelled huffing and puffing. “They are all your suitors. People who want to marry you.” She started to whip out the photographs in mid-flight, one-by-one. “This is Said Hagi’s son, his name is Muqtar and he’s studying to be a doctor; this one instead is Omar Lojee, he slits roosters’ throats at the Islamic slaughterhouse in Birmingham, he earns well; and that one with the super short hair is Nur Geele, you know, the one who’s a merchant in Arab countries...”

“I don’t want them!!!”

“What? How could you not want them? They’re your people. They’re hungry for Somali women. You can’t deny it forever.”

“Yes she can,” a woman answered for her. The woman had beautiful hair, a proud gaze, muscles, and two breasts nude, exposed. It was the woman in the portrait.

In her jog suit Fatou seemed to be looking at her reflection.

“He sees me in you,” Fatou said crying.

“An exotic thing the article said.”

“I’m tired of being exotic.”

“I’m tired of not being exotic.”

“So be yourself,” the portrait told her.

It was advice of the Sunday horoscope type. However, maybe it was her truth.

She awoke from that afternoon dream and finally understood what she needed to do.

She picked up a pair of scissors. She pulled down the painting of the Somali woman. She started to snip it up in infinitesimal pieces. Then she picked up the photographs of the suitors and also cut them into tiny pieces.

Then she picked up the article by Milena Morri and snipped that too. She didn't even spare the black and white sheep kissing each other out of true love. Then she collected it all in a big ball and went to the kitchen to throw it all in the garbage can.

Valerio and Nura were seated in the kitchen in front of two steaming cups of spiced tea.

"Welcome back, sleepy head."

"You slept three hours," her sister chastised her. "He had to cook everything," she added, scandalized.

Fatou only nodded her head. She couldn't interrupt her ritual. She didn't want to utter even a word until all those tiny pieces of her torment were locked inside the trash's safe. With a push of the foot she opened that evil contraption bought at Ikea. The maneuver went well, the lid snapped open at attention. Solemnly, just as she had broken them up, she sent all her torturers to their death. Her torments were finally over. Her face smoothed out, her lips were left in peace by her anxious teeth ready to bite. Her almost ecstatic gaze went to her sister and her man.

"Hi," is all she said.

She felt light. No longer exotic, no longer an infidel. No longer anything. Just she, her words, her stomach.

"Why didn't you tell me Valerio speaks Somali?" asked her sister Nura.

"You never asked me, sister."

Fatou thought of how she would make it through that day and maybe even the ones after. After all, her sister was harmless. And then Valerio had won her over with his Benadir Somali.

Valerio...Valerio... Of course he would be upset about the cut-up, discarded picture, but this didn't worry her much. Better to have a seasonal fight than a terminated love. Her thoughts then ran in Celia Cruz's direction. That Cuban mastodon had been right about that morning. She, Fatou Ahmed Hirsi, would really survive. That Cuban woman wasn't so cumbersome like she had seemed. And then it wasn't true that a dj had to talk badly about the dead out of necessity. Fatou wanted to remember this well. She wrote it on a yellow Post-it. Then she put it in her pocket.

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