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Editorial

This issue of *From the European South* places language, literature, and the humanities at the centre of contemporary affairs and intervenes in the debate about how to produce new forms of understanding, conviviality and citizenship in a world ravaged by poverty, discrimination, racism, the (re)emergence of populism, and environmental dead ends.

It opens with three contributions devoted to the question of migration and refugees, all discussing ways in which European political and cultural institutions react to the predicament of migrants, and ways in which the lenses of the humanities may contribute to reading reality differently, in search of spaces of understanding and survival.

Homi K. Bhabha's offers a reflection on the right to move and the need to open horizons of hope in the context of the Mediterranean refugee crisis. He evokes conceptual and theoretical problems linked to the anguish and despair of migration, found in places such as the rubbish dumps of Zarsis in Tunisia. Bhabha focuses on examples of tropic language used to represent the loss of human rights and status of the Zarsis refugees: figures of speech that turn statelessness from a legal, political condition into an existential and ethical imperative. He argues that the language of tropes plays a heuristic role in diagnosing "black holes" or "blind spots" in political and legal discourses concerning the rights of migrants and, through his analysis, he highlights how a humanistic philology and phenomenology of the migration crisis may help us tackle loss, fear, risk, and vulnerability. Some of these inputs are debated also in Bhabha's conversation with MA and PhD students of the University of Padua, reported in the interview section.

From within the same scenario, Roger Bromley shifts the attention onto immigration and refugees as the main target in the contemporary Euro-American Far Right political narrative about the ethnic 'invasion' threatening Europe, which is gaining currency in populist politics. In attempting to locate the sources of this discourse in the concept of racialisation, Bromley develops an inspired decolonial analysis, supported by an exploration of two texts (literary and cinematic), which have contributed to a Global South counter-narrative from the perspective of people on the move, blocked at the southern borders of Europe.

Connected to this, from a trasnational and translational perspective, the third article deals with the potential of translation practice and theory, and reports the interesting experience of a literary seminar held at the University of Turin. Pietro Deandrea and his students examined and translated six poems centred on the question of refugees. This work offered them a chance

to reflect on issues such as the reversing of one's perspectives and the adoption of the Other's vision; the spatial constraints of diasporas and migration policies; the questioning of stereotypical dichotomies between different cultures. At the same time, a series of theoretical reflections around translation emphasised the privileged role of literature for an ethical approach to alterity.

FES 3 then goes on to include a number of critical essays about literary texts dealing with local and global contexts. Four contributions centre around the Italian language, literature, and art from a postcolonial and 'southern' viewpoint. In her reading of Sardinian writer Grazia Deledda's novels, Maria Valeria Dominioni reviews the history of the Italian South, in both its meanings of the South of Italy and Italy as European South. She discusses how Deledda, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1926, tried to emancipate her writing first from the Italian colonial narrative and then from the patriarchal one. The novel *Canne al vento* (1913), presenting the recomposition of a Sardinian matriarchal community after the invasion of a stranger, seems to speak of a redemption from 'double colonization', while warning against the violent and sacrificial nature of any emancipation. This reading responds proactively to the *postcolonialitalia* project from which *FES* stems, and dialogues well with Roberto Derobertis' insightful review of *Riscrivere la nazione. La letteratura italiana postcoloniale* (2018). In the book, Caterina Romeo sees postcolonial Italian literature as a reviving event in the country's contemporary culture, both as a site where non-white and foreign-origin or second-generation Italians can make their voices heard, and as a tool of desirable transformation at the heart of Italian identity and citizenship, which still excludes people who were born to foreign parents on Italian soil. Postcolonial Italian literature of the last thirty years must be considered, Romeo maintains, as a resistant counternarrative to mainstream 'Italianness'. It should be noticed, however, that reading Italian literature backwards, as in the case of Deledda, will also contribute to a revision of the national archives of the 20th century.

Fiction and the Italian language are the focus of Marco Medugno's analysis of Somali writer Nuruddin Farah's *Past Imperfect* trilogy (2005-2011). In particular, Medugno proposes a new assessment of the role and use of Italian in the novel *Links*, questioning the dichotomy between colonial and local language, and challenging the concepts of transnational and diasporic. Farah's use of Italian is clearly related to the development of the themes of his fiction, as they have shifted and broadened in scope from the early portrayal of the decolonising period to the latest representation of a more global and neocolonial environment.

The Horn of Africa, in this case Ethiopia, and its (post)colonial legacy return in a conversation between Gianpaolo Chiriacò and Gabriella Ghermandi, the Ethiopian-born storyteller, novelist and vocalist based in Bologna, during a visit to the 2015 'postcolonial' Venice Biennale, curated by Okwui Enwezor. Their day-long exchange formed a creative space/time during which they juggled several issues: Ethiopian history and its connection with Italy; the functions and values of traditional art and music; the business of world music;

Ethiopian diaspora and Italian cultural identities; stereotypical representations of Africa; the role and the image of women in contemporary Africa. What emerges is an engaging reflection on the reasons, limits and motivations of singing and music-making, where the works of art symbolically represent the backdrop of an investigation into the practices and the life of a diasporic performer. On a similar but more academic note, Maria Festa's interview with Caryl Phillips – one of the most thought-provoking creative voices of contemporary Anglophone literature – was originally conceived as a conversation on the novel *The Nature of Blood* (1997), but unexpectedly broadened to take on wider issues such as the author's stance on intertextuality, character formation, and his perception of critical work.

In-depth readings of Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) and of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) widen further the 'global' perspective of this issue, to include an Indian and a Nigerian/diasporic position. In Roy's novel, argues Angelo Monaco, tropes of vulnerability affect individuals and environments alike, promoting not only a poetics of loss but also a radical critique of such social questions as anti-globalisation, environmentalism, anti-nuclear campaigns and land rights in Kashmir. Monaco explores the juxtaposition of Bharati fantasy and historical realism in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, and investigates how a hybrid narrative format manages to convey a complex plot of contemporary India, where gender questions, caste discriminations, wounded landscapes and religious conflicts animate a tale of decay and hope.

As a postcolonial coming-of-age story, Adichie's *Americanah* rewrites the stereotypical plots of western romance and Bildungsroman from the perspective of two Nigerian characters, simultaneously deconstructing the Eurocentric patriarchal literary canon. Through the tension of adaptation and resistance to white norms and white privilege, racism, sexism, and classism in British and American societies, Adichie explores her young protagonists' strategies to overcome suffering. Isabella Villanova adopts approaches to gender, decolonization, globalization, and Afropolitanism to analyse their stories, with a special focus on the importance of Nigeria for the writer and her characters, within the global South/global North entanglement.

"About race and visuality", the review essay by Lisa Marchi that closes this issue, connects to many of the reflections of the preceding contributions through an analysis of *A fior di pelle. Bianchezza, nerezza, visualità* (2017), edited by Elisa Bordin and Stefano Bosco. The collection explores the intersection between critical race studies and visual studies, by following an interdisciplinary and g/local approach. It investigates the symbolic import of Black icons such as Barack Obama, Django Freeman, and Saartjie Baartman; it considers the historical construction of Blackness and its appropriation through performance by, among others, contemporary rappers; and it interrogates the construction of whiteness in Italy during the post-war period with a specific focus on TV advertisements and movies.

All of the articles, interviews, and reviews collected here testify to the active commitment

of the humanities in the face of widening social, political, economic instability and also (though less frequently, as Amitav Ghosh argues in *The Great Derangement*) environmental catastrophes, and promote a culture of debate and dissension against emerging paradigms centred on intolerance, injustice, and violence. Back in the 1960s, in his essays on "language, literature and the inhuman", George Steiner called for the urgent birth of a "humane literacy" (*Language and Silence*, 1967): *FES 3* is proof that what we may call "humane humanities" are alive and well. A.O.

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Migration, rights, and survival: the importance of the humanities today[1]

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ABSTRACT

The article offers a reflection on the right to move and the need to create horizons of hope, in the context of the Mediterranean refugee crisis. It evokes conceptual and theoretical problems linked to the anguish and despair of migration, found in geopolitical scenarios such as the rubbish dumps of Zarsis, a coastal town on the Southeastern coast of Tunisia, which has become a beachhead for refugees from Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Bhabha focuses on examples of tropic language used to represent the loss of human rights and status of the Zarsis refugees: figures of speech that turn statelessness from a legal, political condition into an existential and ethical imperative. He argues that the language of tropes plays a heuristic role in diagnosing "black holes" or "blind spots" in political and legal discourses concerning the rights of migrants. Tropic language reveals a structure of disavowal that afflicts many traditions of policy-thinking that resort to physical barriers, like building walls and sealing borders, when what needs to be dealt with are existential, intersubjective dilemmas that emerge from the affective realm of ethical choice, psychic trauma, cultural subjectivity, the powers of tropic expression, and the paradoxes of personhood. The text is written in the interest of a humanistic philology and phenomenology of the migration crisis when the very act of survival suffers a close encounter with figures of death – loss, fear, risk, vulnerability, negation. The side-by-side proximity of death-life marks the everyday emergencies of our present history and severely tests humanistic critical thinking. At their best, the humanities work to restore the humanity of migrant men, women and children without rights; but the proximity of daily repetitions of death continues to put the method and courage of critical thinking to the test.

Keywords

migration, refugee crisis, human rights, survival, death-life, risk, alterity, affect, tropic language, humanities

The conceptual framework of the humanities is particularly relevant to understanding the cultural and political lifeworlds of the migrant experience. Built around pedagogies of representation and interpretation, the humanities engage with the 'deep' history of shifting relations between cultural expression, historical transition, and political transformation: they play a mediating role in this three-way process. Humanistic disciplines articulate the changing relationships between cultural meaning and social value as they shape civic 'agents' who participate in the creation of public opinion and the definition of public interest.

The ethics of citizenship, in our time, are defined as much by migration and resettlement as by indigenous belonging, as much by inter-national governance as by national sovereignty. Any curricular inquiry must confront the ethical reality that there is no 'outside' to the global system, as Hannah Arendt suggests. Whatever alienates global interdependency, or anni-

hilates cosmopolitan values, must be seen to be an effect of the internal dialectic of the global condition itself. “Deadly danger to any [global] civilization is no longer likely to come from without,” Arendt writes.

“The danger is that a global universally interrelated civilization may produce barbarians from its own midst by forcing millions of people into conditions which, despite all appearances, are the conditions of savages” (1958, 302). As barbarism stirs in the midst of our own inter-connected civilization, the barbarians are no longer at the gates. Today, the barbarians police the gates and the victims are migrants and refugees who, in Arendt’s poignant description, are “the oppressed history-suffering groups” (271).

This text focuses on the discrimination and dishonor mobilized by contemporary forms of ‘barbaric’ nationalism to denigrate and humiliate minority populations, and is written in the interest of a humanistic philology and phenomenology of the migration crisis when the very act of survival suffers a close encounter with figures of death – loss, fear, risk, vulnerability, negation. The side-by-side proximity of death-life repeats in the everyday emergencies of our present history and severely tests the method and mettle of our critical thinking.

The rubbish dumps of Zarsis

Zarzis, a coastal town on the Southeastern coast of Tunisia, is known for its thriving fishing industry and it prodigious olive production. Zarzis has, in the last decade, become a beach-head for beleaguered refugees from Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Syrians, Eritreans, Libyans, Ethiopians, Bangladeshis and Afghanis head for Zarsis in their attempts to reach Tunisia’s long Mediterranean Coast. Refugees, like migrants more generally, soon lose their singular identities to the sovereign denomination of legal status and political designation. They are ironically named after the very nations that have driven them into the wilderness and rendered them rightless: *Syrian* refugees, *Eritrean* refugees, *Bangladeshi* refugees. Names, lost in life, are anonymous in death.

The stench of decaying bodies hangs heavy in the air, and the citizens of Zarsis create a *cordon sanitaire* around the polluting presence of refugees, dead and alive. Fisherfolk refuse to cast their nets in waters they believe to be polluted. The people of Zarsis refuse to admit foreign corpses into local morgues because their very existence defiles the sanctity of the deaths of local families. Underfunded municipal authorities, unqualified for the task, dump the bodies on waste ground outside the town-limits.

Mohamed Trabelsi, of the Tunisian Red Crescent, believes that the harsh sentence of statelessness delivered to the migrant dead by national neglect cannot be allowed to have the last word. Outraged by the *rigor mortis* relegated to the dumps of Zarsis – death as a kind of detritus – Trabelsi provocatively speaks of the dead as though they are still alive, deserving not only of proper burial rites, but the dignity of human rights:

> For me, these corpses are people who have human rights. They should be treated with respect. After all, we never know how our lives can change […] and we can become those people. (Reidy 2015)

The counterfactual claim made in the declarative present tense raises an awkward, even impossible, question: in what sense are corpses people who have the rights to have rights? Does the image-laden, affective language of tropes deepen our historical understanding? Trabelsi's figure of speech turns statelessness from a legal, political condition into an existential and ethical imperative. The trope of bare survival – corpses as denizens of rights-claims – has become a leitmotif of the migration crisis in both fact and fiction.

Refugees and distressed migrants from a host of African countries dwell in a melancholic state of anomie and apathy in Jenny Erpenbeck's migration masterwork, *Go Went Gone* (2017). In silent protest, they camp outside Berlin's Town Hall marking their presence with a written sign, *We become visible*. Their lives suspended in transit, they are victims of the Dublin Agreement that "treats asylum seekers as objects, not subjects," observes Guy Goodwin-Gill, the leading legal authority on the Refugee convention and on distress migration. "Disentitled from any right to express a preference, [… the asylum seeker] is seen as someone, something, therefore, to be 'taken back' or 'taken in charge'" (2016, 284). Of such lives, where the saved continue to live out the burden of the drowned, their own lives silent and still, Erpenbeck writes:

> These days the difference between the refugees who drown somewhere between Africa and Europe and those who don't is just a matter of happenstance. In this sense, every one of the African refugees here […] is simultaneously alive and dead. (2017, 167)

Such a matter of happenstance is an ontological condition with a jurisdictional history. Once migrants fall into the "legal black holes" of the migration crisis, argues the legal scholar Itimar Mann, "[they] are beyond every state's jurisdiction" (15): "killing typically occurs while all involved actors express their dismay, their shame, and indeed their horror – but can avoid extending their help" (29).

The trope of the "living dead" has developed an ontological authority across diverse discourses, but its ubiquity must not be allowed to totalize political trajectories or sentimentalize personal tragedies. Death-life is as much a condition of the agency of survival, as it is a resistant agency of risk, choice, desperation. In each of these invocations of death-life there sounds a common *cri-de-coeur.* "How little they know, those now complicit in the loss of life," writes Goodwin-Gill in a rebuke to the 'rational choice' policy-thinking on "deterrence" and the inadequate provisions for refugee and migrant protection (2016, 284). The language of tropes plays a heuristic role in diagnosing these legal "black holes" or "blind spots." Tropic language reveals a structure of disavowal that afflicts many traditions of policy-thinking that resort to physical barriers, like building walls and sealing borders, when what needs to be dealt with are existential, intersubjective dilemmas that emerge from the affective and anxious realm of ethical choice, psychic trauma, cultural subjectivity, the powers of tropic expression, and the

paradoxes of personhood. Goodwin Gill gets to the heart of the matter in his *Mediterranean Papers*:

> Whether we are thinking about sealing borders or of the many current 'lesser' policies and practices favoured by governments today, what we see time and again is how they fail entirely to understand what it is that drives people *knowingly and rationally* to risk their own and their families' lives.
>
> […] *How little they know, those now complicit in the loss of life*.
>
> Only when knowledge and understanding of the despair of others, of their need to survive, and of their persistent optimism, only when these factors are integrated into serious, long-term policy thinking, will we begin to see programmes with a chance of making a positive impact – of providing, proactively, not reactively, humanitarian alternatives to the present crisis on the doorstep of Europe. (284, my emphasis)

There are technical, legal, and administrative forms of knowledge that Goodwin-Gill sees as being essential to a new European policy, which impose on states a special duty of care in which the obligation not to harm is effectively translated into a positive obligation to protect (2016, 282).

"How little they know, those now complicit in the loss of life," Goodwin-Gill remarks of the policy-establishment, and suddenly the problem of knowledge and understanding enters a different moral register. The problem of migration-knowledge articulated in relation to 'otherness' is neither information, nor *savoir faire*, nor even good practice. To seek knowledge of what it is that drives people knowingly and rationally to risk their own and their families' lives, is to demand a radical shift, in the very structure of the ethical and political identification with the 'other'. It is no longer a matter of new data, fresh information, or benevolent intent. It is here that symbolic language of affect and metaphor, whether it informs literature or law, or raw experience, provides an unsurpassable insight into the desperate phenomenology of survival. The tropic imagination is shot through with contradiction, irony, ambivalence, even agonism. To understand what drives people to such degrees of risk one has to start with the paradoxes of a desperate optimism, the resilience of risk, the determination of despair, and the driving force of doubt.

The 'despair of others' is a complex, contradictory thing. In order to enhance the "positive obligation to protect" (282) and to achieve a new ethic of care, Goodwin-Gill explicitly rejects the agenda of (what he calls) "rational choice" (284). In contrast, we need to understand what we may call the "rationality of risk": risk, not simply as the "last act" of desperation, but as a kind of "disappointed hope," to recall Adorno's phrase.[2] In challenging policy-thinking to understand the despair of others in order to diminish the risk of physical and social death (criminalization of irregular migrants), Goodwin-Gill paradoxically makes a 'positive virtue' of the phenomenology and ethics of 'risk'.

Putting migrants at risk undoubtedly reveals a major "rights and rule of law deficit" (283); but it is only by positivizing our knowledge of risk, locating the *starting point* of policy discourse from within the enunciative and existential space of the 'other' – simultaneously dead and alive

– that we will be in a position to reform and reverse what Goodwin-Gill describes as the "blatant disregard of those values on which the EU is based, and of those principles at the heart of any representative democracy" (283).

Taking a risk, in this sense, can amount to an act of moral agency. And it is James Baldwin who makes, by far, the best case for it: we achieve our nation and our citizenship, he writes, when we fully realize that "the price of this transformation is […] social and psychic risk, no matter what" (*The Fire Next Time*, 108). Understanding the despair of others is not merely an act of empathy; it is a risky business. It requires a mode of self-identification with 'alterity', in the process of reversing the perspective of migration policy. This would require policy to begin other-wise, from another place and by way of another 'subject'.

Alterity is the contradictory and perverse sense in which the 'risk' we want to protect against – the despair of migration – becomes itself the risky ground, and vital hermeneutic, that is proactive in protecting against the practices of 'rational-choice' thinking. This odd coupling of risk-as-protection and risk-as-death, or risk-as-happenstance and risk-as-hermeneutic, reminds me of Hannah Arendt's definition of alterity as "the two-in-one" that is constitutive of consciousness and moral considerations.

I read Goodwin-Gill's identification with 'the other' as 'actualizing this difference' in order to 'rehumanise' the asylum system by acknowledging not only the rights but also the agency of the refugee or the distressed migrant. The appeal to alterity, as a policy of care and hospitality, protects proactively against the "disregard of individual interests, in an almost dehumanizing approach to the asylum seeker as object, not subject, as therefore disentitled from any right to express a preference, let alone choose his or her destination; as someone, something, therefore, to be 'taken back' or 'taken in charge'" (2016, 284). It is indeed this very dehumanizing approach that endlessly talks of "saving lives" while participating in the black-hole jurisdictional infamy of "letting die."

Notes

[1] This is the title of a lecture Homi Bhabha gave at the University of Padua on June 6, 2018. The text that follows is an excerpt from the author's much longer speech, and we wish to thank him for generously allowing us to publish it in our journal. The video of the event is available here. [editor's note]

[2] Adorno and Horkheimer argued that "only the conscious horror of destruction creates the correct relationship with the dead: [...] we, like them, are victims of the same condition and the same disappointed hope" (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972, 215).

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Homi K. Bhabha is a literary and cultural critic, influential theorist of postcolonial culture, and en-gaged advocate for the humanities. He is the Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of English, American Literature and Language, and the Director of the Humanities Centre at Harvard University. A profoundly original voice in the study of colonial, postcolonial, and globalized cultures, he has explored ideas and terms such as hybridity, ambivalence, and mimicry, which have become central to postcolonial theory, but have also inspired work in management studies, art theory, architecture, human rights, development studies, theology, and many other fields. His work is an essential reference for anyone interested in the hybrid cultural perspectives associated with colonialism and globalization. His published work includes, among others, *The Location of Culture* (1994) and *Nation and Narration* (1990).

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The politics of displacement: the Far Right narrative of Europe and its 'others'

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ABSTRACT

Arguably, the most urgent narratives in the contemporary world are political in the widest sense of the term. It seems to me, certainly from a European perspective, that there are two major conflicting political narratives at the moment: a European one from a White Nationalist, Identitarian perspective, seeing itself in danger of being displaced by migrants, challenged by a narrative from the Global South, itself constructed by those in flight from war, poverty, and exploitation. Both, in a profound sense, are linked by displacement, one metaphorical/symbolic, and the other emergent and actual. In this article, I want to concentrate upon this particular European (or, more precisely perhaps, Euro-American) Far Right narrative which, if not exactly dominant, is certainly gaining currency and is manifested in populist politics. The principal target of this narrative is immigration, specifically refugees; its main adversary is the 'lickspittle mentality' of Liberalism which has, it is claimed, nurtured the ethnic invasion threatening Europe. In attempting to locate the sources of this discourse in the concept of racialisation, an analysis derived from decolonial thinking will be presented. In the second part of the article, I will look briefly at two texts (literary and cinematic) which have contributed to a counter-narrative about forced migration and actual physical, and psychological, displacement, rather than the metaphorical displacement of European 'nativism'. This counter-narrative, it will be argued, is primarily imagined from the perspective of migrants/refugees on the borders of Europe in many senses.

Keywords

narrative, decolonial, Far Right, white, nationalist, displacement, immigration, refugees

In this article I shall outline the main themes and tropes of Far, or extreme, Right narratives in Europe today, and then will attempt to locate the origins of these narratives in colonial discourses. My argument will be that ideology is most effective when structured like a narrative, a convincing story. A number of these Far Right 'stories' will be outlined. Finally, I shall look briefly at two texts which seek to place the migrant/refugee at the symbolic centre of the contemporary world in order to produce an alternative form of cultural resistance, the potential for a counter-narrative.

In February 2018, Viktor Orban, Prime Minister of Hungary, called for a global alliance against migration as he began campaigning for the April election: "Christianity is Europe's last hope." He went on to add that with mass immigration especially from Africa, "our worst nightmares can come true. The West falls as it fails to see Europe being overrun" (see Pasha-Robinson, *The Independent*, 21 February 2018). This speech summarises one dominant

strand of what I am calling the Far Right narrative in Europe. This narrative takes almost as many forms as the Far Right itself, which is composed, broadly, of the following constituents: the electoral or parliamentary approach, the intellectual and conceptual, and the street with its varying levels of violence. These narratives are often contradictory. The New Right (Nouvelle Droite) in France, for example, especially its leading intellectual, Alain De Benoist, opposes Christianity and the Judaeo-Christian tradition and favours a 5,000-year, Indo-European, pagan legacy (see de Benoist 2016).

In the conflict of interpretation over the current crisis in Europe, which are the narratives that dominate and how can they be countered? Who is setting the agenda and claiming ownership of particular issues? How do we go about developing new constitutive stories, alternative narratives? How can we find a narrative space beyond the increasingly dominant Right frame? Edward Said, in his book *Covering Islam*, refers to the ways in which Islam is framed by representations in which "a handful of reckless generalizations and repeatedly deployed clichés" (1997, ii) come to constitute a public discourse of negativity. A repertoire of similar, recurring images makes up this fairly recent European narrative, shaped after 9/11 and sharpened since 2015, against which the 'Other' has to seek permission to narrate, in Said's phrase. In *Time and the Other*, the anthropologist Johannes Fabian calls this "the denial of coevals": "a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse – the 'otherer'" (1983, 31). Islam is, in other words, seen as out of time, unchanging, fixed and backward, pre-Modern, othered.

White genocide

In Europe there is a war on immigration, mainly, but not only, articulated by, and shared by most of, the Right. However the opposition to migrants/refugees is formulated or coded, it is primarily a white nationalist, or nativist, narrative, and something shared with similar groups in the USA, although there are different inflections and referents. Also shared is the idea that Europe/the USA are being overrun by migrants, specifically Muslims, and the Islamification of Europe or the threat of Eurabia is often invoked: Guillaume Faye (2016) speaks of "a massive colonisation settlement of the West by peoples from the Global South" (Publisher's Blurb). Another enemy of the Right is multiculturalism and de Benoist advocates the 'right to difference', by which he means the establishment of separate civilisations and cultures, what he calls 'ethnopluralism', in which organic, ethnic cultures/communities live independently of each other in an 'empire of the regions'. Richard Spencer, the USA alt-right leader, speaks of 'operation Homeland', the establishment of separate homelands dominated by those of white, European descent. The term 'homelands' is also commonly used by the Identitarian movement in Europe and the USA. *Génération Identitaire* was formed in France as the youth wing of the Bloc Identitaire and has spread across Europe. Identitarianism is a pan-European movement,

primarily a cultural narrative – 'our way of life'. Identitarian activists set up a "Defend Europe" campaign in 2017 and chartered a ship in order to prevent migrants coming by sea from Libya, and to disrupt NGO rescue vessels. Since that time, the new populist Italian government coalition seems to be following a similar course of action to exclude migrants.

For all their differences, what is also common to all shades of Far Right opinion is opposition to cultural homogenisation, the product, it is claimed, of elite global capitalism. In addition to this, the most frequently reiterated targets are liberalism, consumerism, Islam, the Left, feminism, political correctness and so-called cultural Marxism. The intellectuals of the Right see themselves as engaged in metapolitics – a cultural and ideological 'war of position', the winning of hearts and minds, the idea that cultural change needs to precede political change. This is a concept borrowed from the Italian Marxist intellectual and activist Antonio Gramsci. de Benoist speaks of 'Right Gramscianism'. This is part of resistance to what is perceived as the conquest of Europe by migrants, a reverse colonisation. The Right sees itself as engaged in a reconquest (*Reconquista* was the term used in fifteenth-century Spain about the Christian defeat of Islam), the defence of Europe against the diminishing of ethnic purity, its demographic and cultural decline, betrayed by Left-liberalism and globalisation. *Reconquista Germania* is an extreme-right channel on the gaming app Discord; 'Make Europe Great Again' is the official motto of the German AfD Far Right party. There is an existential fear that the political and demographic character of the West will be altered forever by the influx ('flood' is often used) of migrants.

The essence of this Liberal modernity, it is claimed, is the idea of conquest formulated in a phrase, and the title of a 2012 book by Renaud Camus, called 'The Great Replacement' (*Le Grand Emplacement*), which is probably the most important narrative theme of the Right in recent times. This theme is also called *The Grand Coup* by Guillaume Faye, another founding, New Right intellectual who broke with the group in the 1980s. Another book of his was called *The Colonisation of Europe.* Together these three phrases – replacement, coup, colonisation – constitute the core ideological precepts of the nativist, Far Right narrative. In this scenario, the dispossessed majority in Europe faces the possibility of extinction – 'white genocide' in US Right discourse – and will be substituted by immigrant hordes: 'global substitutionism' (*remplacisme global*) is the phrase used by Renaud Camus. This paranoid narrative, the idea of the sacred nation, brings to mind the mystical and mythical 'blood and soil', at the root of much white nationalist ideology. I say 'paranoid' because it is predicted that by 2030, the Muslim population of Europe will only comprise 7% of the continent. It is currently 4%. It is hard not to see the Muslim stereotype as a pretext, a symptom of a much deeper anxiety and uncertainty. The title of a book by Thilo Sarrazin to be published in August 2018 is *Hostile Takeover: How Islam Hampers Progress and Threatens Society*, which sums up one particular, and increasingly dominant, feature of the Far Right.

In Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017, the 'Unite the Right', white nationalist, neo-

fascist rally chanted “you will not replace us” and “the Jews will not replace us,” echoing the ‘Great Replacement’ claim, with a sharper anti-Semitic edge than is currently deployed publicly in Europe. The fightback against this ‘replacement’ has its violent street manifestations, but is also articulated in Right intellectual circles through publications such as *Manifesto for a European Renaissance* (de Benoist and Champetier), *A New European Renaissance* (Faye), and *The Real Right Returns: A Handbook for the True Opposition* (Friberg), all published by ARKTOS, the publishing house of the Far Right, set up to circulate “those ideas and values which were taken for granted in Europe prior to the advent of Liberalism” (Friberg 2015, ix). Ideas, one might argue, which have leaked into mainstream discourse since the recession of 2008, as well as gaining considerable exposure in social media. An American Far Right website, the *Daily Stormer*, speaks of weaponising internet culture, of coordinating media disruption strategies.

There is a website called ‘European Civil War’ which articulates how this supposed conflict is seen; a conflict which many on the Far Right see as being resolved by what is called ‘EuroSiberia’ (the reunification of all peoples of European origin), or ‘EurAsia’, which is a formulation produced by looking to Putin and Russia for leadership, a federation of white ethnostates. The overall framing narrative consists of a belief in order and structure, hierarchy, leadership and authoritarianism. It is anti-egalitarian. In its street manifestations it revolves around a Vitalist ethic of the body, of Nordic masculinity. Generation Identity attacks the 68ers (the 1968 generation) for taking the ‘manliness out of man’. Richard Spencer urges his followers to ‘become who you are’. So, we can add ‘masculinism’ to the Right narrative I am trying to develop, a response to what they term the emasculation and enfeeblement of the ‘white race’. Most of the groups emphasise the importance of collective narratives, rituals and symbolic repertoires, and stress the aesthetic and the affective in what is a rhetoric of belonging and the anxiety of unbelonging: the overarching narrative of displacement which comes to occupy a xenophobic polemical space:

> Most importantly, right-wing populism does not only relate to the *form* of rhetoric, but to its specific contents: such parties […] construct fear and – related to various real or imagined dangers – propose scapegoats that are blamed for threatening or actually damaging *our* societies, in Europe and beyond. (Wodak 2015, 2; my italics)

The Far Right narrative is derived from ideologies of nation and concepts of national sovereignty:

> The doctrine of nationalism which crystallized in 1848 gives a geographic imperative to the concept of culture itself: habit, faith, pleasure, and ritual – all depend upon enactment in a particular territory. More, the place which nourishes rituals is a place composed of people like oneself, people with whom one can share without explaining. Territory thus becomes synonymous with identity. (Sennett 2011, 58)

At a time when the ‘European’ narrative is ceasing to make sense, cohere, motivate, or hold

people together at the economic, social, or political level, mainly because of neoliberalism and globalisation, it is being re-assembled symbolically/discursively on a negative construction of immigration. This is true for a number of countries in Europe, where Far Right parties are gaining prominence on the basis of opposition to immigration. The explicitly neo-Nazi, ethno-nationalist party in Greece, Golden Dawn, is violently opposed to immigration and, what its statutes call, the 'demographic alteration'; the party gained 18 seats in the June 2012 Greek elections. The immigrant is mapped against an already existing, fixed, and (so the story goes) socially cohesive national culture – the symbols, stories and legends of the deeper normative notions and images that underlie the 'social imaginary', those once-common understandings and a widely-shared sense of legitimacy produced by the conversion and transformation processes brought about by nineteenth- and twentieth-century hegemony – a partly conscious, partly unconscious repertoire. The Golden Dawn predicate their statutes upon the assumption that what they call the 'People' is not just an arithmetic total of individuals but the *qualitative* composition of humans with the same biological and cultural heritage. This 'tribal' definition would most probably find echoes in the majority of Far Right parties in Europe.

A struggle for recognition is taking place which is deep, complex and partly at the level of the unconscious. Claims of Britishness, Frenchness, or Danishness (the three countries where Right parties led the EU elections in 2014) form the basis on which refugee and migrant issues are used as organising principles for the social critique of other political issues:

> The originality and richness of the human heritages of this world are nourished by their differences and their deviations, which surprise and fascinate as soon as one passes from the culture of one people to another. These originalities can find protection, in turn, only in the homogeneous ethno-cultural space that is proper to them. (Krebs 1997, 8)

The title of Krebs's book is *Fighting for the Essence: Western Ethnosuicide or European Renaissance*, and the word 'essence' is crucial here – that same biological and cultural heritage just referred to.

Krebs is one of the intellectuals of the 'New Right' and exercises considerable influence on theories of ethno-nationalism. For example, the Danish People's Party states: "Denmark belongs to the Danes. […] A multi-ethnic Denmark would mean the breaking down of our stable homogeneous society by anti-development and reactionary cultures" (Danish People's Party Work Programme, 2007).

The post-Cold War period has seen the "dismantling of ideological, political, social and identification reference points" (Laïdi 1998, 2), readily available dyadic symbolic forms and, as a consequence, the nation has come up against the limits of its being and meaningfulness, its representational currencies; what in psychoanalysis would be called its 'narcissistic self-enclosure', hence the preoccupation with borders and security. There is a crisis at the boundary of articulation. As de Benoist puts it: "once upon a time borders played a significant role: they guaranteed the continuation of collective identities" (2004, 37). Beppe Grillo, of The Five

Star Movement (in Italy), said at one point: "The borders of the Fatherland used to be sacred, politicians desacred [*sic*] them" (Grillo 2007). The use of the word "Fatherland" here has sinister echoes, and blaming politicians (in Italian, *la casta*) is a core feature of Right populism. A coming ethnic civil war is predicted as Europe is overwhelmed through its porous borders, so the rhetoric goes.

Colonial roots of racialisation

At this point I shall try to trace those aspects of colonial discourse and Modernity that have produced the mindset which has led to European ways of seeing migrants/refugees with hostility. This section is influenced by the research project M/C (modernity/coloniality).[1] A good place to start is Sylvia Wynter's "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, its Overrepresentation" (2007). To speak of Eurocentrism is something of a cliché now, but in order to understand European attitudes to refugees at the level of the State and in popular terms, I think it is still necessary to produce an explanatory account by going back, and thinking about, what Wynter calls the Western bourgeois conception of the human, Man, which *overrepresents* itself as if it were the human itself. The idea of the Western European as over-representing itself as human is of value because it helps to see why refugees are seen as disposable/expendable en masse, regarded as less than human. Once the idea of dehumanisation takes hold, it is accompanied by impunity and indifference at the level of the State and in terms of the popular imaginary. How, otherwise, do we make sense of negative responses to the deaths of thousands of refugees at sea, and elsewhere, in recent years, and policies of exclusion which consist of building walls and fences to keep out would-be asylum seekers? Refugees are the modern version of Fanon's 'wretched of the earth', as much of what he had to say about 'les damnés' also applies to refugees.

Any attempt to unsettle this overrepresentation necessitates an understanding of what a number of Latin American theorists have called 'the coloniality of power'. In writing about displacement, generally, we need to ask ourselves why, and how, we (Europeans) distance ourselves from refugees, what set of values enables us to do so? One part of the answer is *racialisation*, one of the primary legacies of colonialism, with the idea of race "the most efficient instrument of social domination invented in the last 500 years" (Mignolo 2007, 46). Race as a master code, or narrative *mentalité*, has entered so deeply into common sense and daily discourse as part of the construct of the white Euro-American that the 'epistemological disregard' of the other informs all other forms of 'disregard'. Global inequality is one of the root effects and premises of this racialisation and a reason why degradation, immiseration, and the violent deaths of refugees are met with indifference. They are, in Judith Butler's words, 'the ungrievable':

> lives […] regarded as disposable or […] so stripped of value that when they are imperilled, injured, or

lost, they assume a social ontology that is partially constituted by that regard […] their potential loss is no occasion to mourn. Someone who has never existed has been nullified, so nothing has happened. (2014, 35)

Systematically representing refugees as figures of lack, without worth or value, lives not worthy of living, derives from ideas about racial difference that originated with slavery and over time came to apply to all other colonised subjects.

As an imperialising force, Western Europe not only practised slavery and extensive forms of exclusion and genocide but also developed an accompanying ideology structured like a narrative related to this which persists today. Nationalism, the corollary of imperialism, is one way in Europe in which history is still present in all we think and do: "Right-wing populism endorses a nativist notion of belonging, linked to a chauvinist and racialized concept of 'the people' and 'the nation'" (Wodak 2015, 47). As Mbembe says, when it comes to imagining the inhumanity of foreign peoples, "race has been the ever-present shadow in Western thought and practice" (Mbembe 2003, 4).

Until recent years, the description 'wretched of the earth' would comfortably have been applied to those outside the West; but neo-liberalism, austerity, and growing inequality mean that this term also now resonates within the West, with many commentators speaking of 'the left behind', 'people feeling abandoned' and lacking a narrative now that they can no longer identify with the dominant one of difference from the excluded 'other', the West's ethnocultural field of the human. Today, the jobless, the homeless, the poor, the systemically excluded and criminalised are left by themselves, relatively unaided by the State. As a result, the abandoned in Europe are now made to occupy spaces originally prescribed for the 'wretched other'. Disposability has come home and, as a consequence, Far Right populism is gaining ground.

Refugees are seen as waste to be excluded, refuse to be discarded, unproductive lives but, at a deeper level, they symbolise a precariousness, a liminality, which serves as an unsettling, unwelcome reminder of how many lives in the privileged West are now also remaindered. Refugees occupy the borderland between abandonment and value now shared by many, hence the need to keep them at a distance. A generalised anxiety has taken hold, such that any version of worldly belonging is seen through the lens of crisis and anxiety.

Any attempt to unsettle common sense thinking about migrants and refugees confronts ideological forms of nationalism, coloniality, and the state. In order to resist seeing the refugee as a knowing subject, with autonomy and agency, we (the pronoun use is important) essentialize the other, reduce them to a set of invariable and negative characteristics and stereotypes. How we deal with this indifference, this disengagement and emotional disidentification is a critical question of politics and representation. To dehumanize others is a form of displacement, to remove them from any identity other than as refugee.

How we render the refugee 'knowable' is another challenge: the challenge of representation at a time when, even if numbers are falling in Europe, thousands are still dying in vulner-

ability. Of course, the vulnerable have to be protected, but to see all refugees as victims, or vulnerable people, needs to be critically examined for its reductiveness and refusal of agency. Rather, it needs the development of other lenses for perception, a greater aesthetic-political reflexivity and sensitivity, a search for new, and radical, rhetorical strategies, linguistic and stylistic resources which unsettle, defamiliarize, and disrupt expectations and preconceptions. So, the forms of representation are crucial and the central point of political art is to highlight precarity and to insist that *intervention* in the world is possible. Intervention, that is, in the form of counter-narratives which subvert the presumption of 'knowing the refugee'.

How can refugees be represented other than as vulnerable or pitiable? One way is through *recognition* enabling them to become, in terms already referred to, 'grievable subjects'. With more than a thousand people having drowned crossing the Mediterranean in the first six months of 2018, despite the number of refugees seeking entry to Europe having fallen sharply since 2015-16, *The Guardian* newspaper decided on World Refugee Day (20 June 2018) to make available a list of the 34,361 migrants and refugees *known* to have died in the attempt to reach the borders of Europe. The key word in that sentence is 'known', that is, reported deaths, as there well may be countless others. The list was compiled by United for Intercultural Action, a European network of 550 anti-racist organisations drawn from 48 countries. Banu Cennetoglu, an artist working in Istanbul, has incorporated the list in her work for the past 16 years. She had an exhibition at the Chisenhale Gallery, London, from June to August 2018, and the current edition of the list was commissioned and produced by the Gallery; it also featured as part of the Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art. The name of the refugee, country of origin, year, cause and source of death constituted the data base of the list (*The Guardian*, 20 June 2018).

In itself, the list as a compilation of data cannot make the particular individual 'grievable' but its existence and its distribution in a range of public places, rather like other public forms of commemoration, has an anamnesic effect – bringing to mind, to visibility and to memorability, those who might otherwise be disregarded. By disseminating the list at bus stops, on billboards, in advertising columns in major European cities, on a wall in Los Angeles, and a public screen on top of Istanbul's Marmara Pera hotel, the artist is creating a form of public declaration, metaphorically restoring to a visual reckoning those who do not count, an attempt to interpellate, bind, 'those whose lives matter' (as a result of colonial and racialized computations) with those who have been, and continue to be, erased by means of what Butler calls 'norms of recognition' (2009, 5). I have dwelt upon this list at length because it seems to me to offer a framework for potential recognition and reciprocity, a revaluation of those subject to the 'failure of regard' (Butler 2009, 25). It is never easy to measure the effects of a work of public art (which the *distribution* of the list effectively becomes) or of literature, but I wish to conclude this argument by briefly examining two cultural products – a film and a novel – which attempt to place migrants and refugees as 'grievable subjects' at the centre of their own narratives

because, as Daniel Trilling has said, “often they are given no story at all, reduced to a shadow that occasionally flits across European vision” (2018, 9). A decolonial narrative is one which corresponds with John Berger’s words: “There isn’t one way of telling a story. Never again will a single story be told as though it’s the only one” (1972, epigraph).

The southern gaze

Reference was made earlier to Guillaume Faye’s comment about “a massive colonisation settlement of the West by peoples from the Global South,” and in this final section I shall examine two texts from the Global South: the film *Those who Jump* (2016) and the novel *The Gurugu Pledge* (2017), drawing upon de-colonial thinking. On the African continent the “coloniality of power” can be seen as “a crucial structuring process in the modern colonial/world-system” (Grosfoguel 2007, 219-220). Notionally independent and decolonised, most African countries experience, at a range of levels – epistemological and structural – continuities from the colonial past in the form of neo-colonialism.

Both texts are based on Mount Gurugu in Morocco, the site of an informal refugee camp inhabited by between 500 and 1,000 people, mainly young men, from West Africa. To screen its squalor, the men ironically name it ‘the residence’. The camp is situated two kilometres from the Spanish autonomous, and anomalous, enclave of Melilla, which is on the African continent yet marks Europe’s border with the Global South. It is structurally liminal but actively signified as ‘European’, with “Europe as a master signifier in discourses of exclusion and deportation zones” (Soto-Bermant 2017, 138). Melilla, with its 11-kilometre long, six-metre high, three-tiered, razor-wired fence represents in microcosm the conflict of which I have been speaking, that narrative encounter between entitlement and disposability. This representation of the border, marked by Melilla, is symbolic, physical, and historical. It was captured by Spain from the Moors in 1497 and established as a military outpost. Its CETI (Centre for the Temporary Stay of Migrants) holds hundreds of migrants/refugees: the enemy *almost* within. The EU gives Spain and Morocco millions of euros each year to maintain this border. As Mignolo has said, “Decolonial projects dwell in the border” (2010, 17) and Laurie has argued that decolonial approaches attempt “to politicise epistemology from the experiences of those on the border” (2012, 13). Hence, Melilla and Gurugu are appropriate sites for texts which take apart the logic of coloniality and seek to imagine the possibilities of de-colonial societies.

The title *Those who Jump* syntactically enacts the subjectivity and agency of the refugees, with its active verb. The idea for the film arose from a decision by two young film-makers to hand over a camera to Abou, a university graduate living in the camp, in the hope that he could produce an insider’s view of the daily experience of those living there. In the course of filming Abou, in a sense, becomes the camera: “I feel that I exist when I film.” It is this presence of an active existence which moves the representation of the refugee away from the object of pity, the hapless victim. He, like all the others, *is* a victim, of repressive regimes,

of hunger, poverty and unemployment, but the film reverses the European gaze and presents the active point of view of those held in time by the proximity of the fence and the desire to jump it. The temporariness, and the improvised quality, of their lives feature throughout the film. We see men cooking food over an open fire, clothes hanging out to dry on trees, with plastic and cardboard sheets the only bedding. Men scavenging for food and water in the nearby city of Nador hover between hope and despair, death and life. One voicemail message left by Abou is to the mother of a friend who died in the camp: Mustafa. The unstable, hand-held camera at times embodies the endangered lives of the men, particularly in a sequence showing the men being pursued by helicopter and armed police.

There are long-distance shots of Melilla which represent the tantalising, frustrated perceptions of the camp dwellers and an image of a plane coming in to land mocks the immobility of the watching men. One of the figures interviewed says: “every day I see my future in front of me but I cannot reach it.” Abou has been eighteen months on Gurugu and attempted to climb the fence countless times. His journey began with 40 euros and his dream is to join his brother who reached Europe in 2015. The film underscores the fact that lives are at risk from a number of perspectives, from the police who raid the camp and burn all the meagre possessions of the inhabitants, and also attack them, as well as the clandestine journey to the fence, apart from the obvious hazards of the attempt to scale the fence. The shared strategy of the men is to approach the fence en masse, so as to outnumber the police. The sense of collective solidarity is shown, without sentimentality or romanticization, as also filmed is the ‘trial’ of someone who leaked information to the police. The scale of the danger involved is revealed by night-time, black and white editorial inserts of border surveillance images showing the vast numbers of men approaching the fence in ordered, single file.

The film indicates the makeshift nature of the camp, its rocky terrain, and focuses on the everyday: the first aid applied with care and precision to those injured by police, the numerous dogs roaming the camp, and a passionately engaged football match between Mali and the Ivory Coast. Humour is also evident throughout – the match is played at the Maracana stadium (in Rio de Janeiro) one man mockingly comments. ‘Makeshift’, maybe, but also evident is the way in which the different nationalities organise their own administration and regulations, and plan the fence jumps and camp organisation. Rule One for all, it is stressed, is ‘we will all enter Europe’, so their whole existence is predicated on this, to become an African in Europe. Although each nationality has its space and structure set out, there is also a commonality in which versatility is a key aspect, with roles from the past – doctor, lawyer – changed by the exigencies of their condition. Resourcefulness and improvisation are also manifested by the construction of devices designed to aid the climb in the darkness. Frequent shots of the bright lights of the city below are a contrasting provocation to the watchers above. There is very little in the way of polemic or back story, but the hellish journey through the desert is remarked upon as is the fact that, with their countries having been exploited for years, Europeans cannot

expect to take everything away from African people and expect to keep them outside. The men are aware of the hazardous nature of their lives and pray that they will never become anonymous corpses. This touches upon a key aspect of the film – the men are rescued from anonymity, given identities, and positions to speak from: subjects who act in unison, knowing that behind the fence lies the future. It is also recognised that this future may not be all that is hoped for, so they may dream but they are not illusioned.

In the final sequences of the film, fog shrouds the mountain as the men are shown approaching the fence and the film ends in a blaze of colour and on a collective note of song and dance as a number of men are shown celebrating in Melilla, having successfully surmounted the fence and evaded the police. Abou, the filmmaker, is one of them and he is now living in Germany with temporary leave to remain, having survived living on the borders but still subject to time waiting.

Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel's *The Gurugu Pledge* occupies a similar terrain to the film and also shows Fanon's 'wretched of the earth' as subjects. The novel gives fictional form to what Ndlovu-Gatsheni has described as "a dominant Western power backed up by Euro-American epistemologies which resulted […] in the colonisation of African imagination and displacement of African knowledges" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013, 11). The fact that everyone in the 'residence' is displaced from the heart of Africa and had a past, but also spoke in French or English and are in thrall to Europe (a phone call or a letter from a European address would be a major event) articulates this hegemonic colonial legacy. The narrator comments ironically on "the brilliant future that awaited them in Europe" (Ávila Laurel 2017, 25). All of the people on Mount Gurugu have a life and a story which Europe cannot ignore. The novel begins with a first person narrator who then hands over to the stories of a range of other men. Although each story is different, there is a narrative convergence, in the sense that they share a metaphorical neighbourhood of displacement and deprivation, the racialisation of the Black 'other', and the cronyism, violence and corruption of African dictatorships, with Idi Amin singled out as the representative, neo-colonised figure. Added to this is the more recent build-up of armaments, the desertification of Africa, the destruction of biodiversity, and reduction of African agricultural knowledge and expertise to the service of corporate capitalism. The narrator's role is to make sure the stories will cross the sea and be told on the other shore.

The inhabitants are divided into language groups: "eat or *manger* according to whichever History the whites chose for you" (Ávila Laurel 2017, 65). The passivity of the syntax emphasises that, literally and metaphorically, these are 'disregarded, discarded subjects'; in the words of one man, "They told me I no longer have a country, that's what they said at the border: you've no country any more, now you're just black" (Ávila Laurel 2017, 75). This epitomises the racialized abjection, the precarity and lack of value I have been speaking of throughout. At the borders of Europe, all those seeking to enter from Africa are indiscriminately regarded as "just black."

The story often uses humour for serious purposes, as in the sequence when two young men are sent on a shopping/begging expedition with sanitary towels, one of the items needed but which they are too embarrassed to ask for. Apart from anything else, this shows the patriarchal nature of the settlement. Another instance of the humour is the lengthy sequence on football. Some of the men fantasise that if they owned Mount Gurugu they could cultivate it, grow food, and become self-sufficient; in other words, produce an Africa, in miniature, which they wouldn't have to leave. The republic created would be called the Republic of Samuel Eto'o (the world-famous Cameroon player) as football is the one preoccupation which distracts them from their wretchedness. The exodus of African footballers to Europe is held up as a model of their own ambition and names are reeled off like sacred icons. What the footballers have is, what is known as, exit capacity, the mobility denied to those stuck on the mountain. As we shall see shortly, the narrative is critical of these models of aspiration as the only value they represent is that of the market and a focus on the exceptional. Football is a sustaining, if illusory, fantasy, with men keeping fit until signed by a European club.

Like *Those who Jump*, the novel does not sentimentalise the figures in the camp, as blackmail and corruption are shown, and women are used and sexually abused. Some of the stories told are like moral parables, they synthesise qualities or faults which are generic. For example, the illness of one of the two women featured in the text, and her subsequent miscarriage, encapsulates the shared narrative of hope, renewal and despair. What is also shared is the humiliations and terrors faced, the common perilous journey across hundreds of miles of inhospitable terrain: "the rule of thumb was that the closer you get to the gates of Europe, the more you disposed of linking you to a concrete African country" (Ávila Laurel 2017, 90). Tactically, this makes sense, but it also marks the emptying out of identity as well as the emptying out of a continent in order to go to another one. As one other person comments, "the closer we get to the finishing line, none of us is from anywhere" (Ávila Laurel 2017, 121), their anonymity complete. What the novel shows critically is the existence of dependent voices: "Until we show them any different, what's written in books will be what's read out on the radio, day and night" (Ávila Laurel 2017, 120). This is an argument for alternative voices, independent counter-narratives, no longer hooked on Europe. There are interludes in the text of fairly explicit analysis of the reasons for the flight from Africa, the displacement and dispossession of resources: "there will be whites here, brother, but not on this mountain" (Ávila Laurel 2017, 122).

The Gurugu pledge itself was a collective action, an act of unified solidarity, a mass stamping on the ground prior to an attempted scaling of the fence, during which they spoke of the history of Africa. Like the film, the novel concludes with this scaling but with a very different outcome. The Melilla Africans, the Africans in Spain came to the fence to hail those in the act of climbing but these failed, their failure synopsised by the shape of two figures, out of the hundreds, stuck with one leg either side of the fence. In an act of self-sacrifice and altruism those who failed the climb, took the two sick women to the top of the fence in the hope that

they would be rescued and given medical help. This act of solidarity undercut the patriarchy and misogyny shown earlier in the text, a form of overcoming in itself.

The final chapter – 'The Beginning and the End' – departs radically from the film and many similar narratives, in that the first person narrator steps forward to tell his own story, with its tortuous path, and the failure of others to understand the reasons why he left his country. The ill-treatment of a fellow teacher, an albino, the irrationality of followers of the occult who had damaged the man, caused the narrator to set out on 'the long road to nowhere'. On the mountain, he had decided to withhold his story because it would cause pain to the others; he also decided not to join in the attempt to scale the fence and abandoned his quest to reach Europe. Images of Africans dead on a Spanish beach, shown by journalists visiting Gurugu, confirmed him in his decision. He reflects on the impunity with which Africans are killed in Europe and on the lack of respect for their lives: "They didn't kill you for not having papers, that was just the excuse they used" (Ávila Laurel 2017, 180). Symbolically, he makes his way to the mountain's southern face, to the sides where the lights of Europe do not reach, and his story becomes a narrative of decolonial thinking: "I chose the southern face, that my gaze was turned towards the River Zambezi" (Ávila Laurel 2017, 185).

Notes

[1] The M/C (Modernity/Coloniality) project is a loose collective of intellectuals from Latin America, some based in the USA, which has developed the critical concept of a decolonial perspective. Such concept takes its starting point from the conquest of America in 1492 and argues that racialisation was the basis of a capitalist economic system of power which, as the core of European Modernity, also installed an epistemological hegemony which decoloniality is designed to subvert.

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Journeys in translation: refugee poems

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ABSTRACT

This article reports the experience of a literary translation seminar at the University of Torino, developed as part of the international translation project *Journeys in Translation*. The seminar examined and translated six poems centred on the question of refugees. The discussions brought to the fore the inextricable relations between linguistic/figurative knots and issues related to refugees migrating to contemporary Europe, in all their human and humane facets. More specifically, the six translated poems offered the participants a chance to reflect on issues such as the reversing of one's ingrained perspectives and the adoption of the Other's vision; the language of war; the spatial constraints of diasporas and migration policies; the questioning of stereotypical dichotomies between different cultures; and the genre of journalistic poetry with its potential to enrich media reports. A series of theoretical reflections and practical activities around translation emphasised the privileged role of literature for an ethical approach towards otherness.

Keywords

asylum seekers, refugees, migration policies, poetry, postcolonial translation, translation theory

In the spring of the academic year 2016-2017, I taught an MA course in English Literature and Translation, with a special focus on translating postcolonial texts. The course had already started when I came across a collection of poems on refugees by various authors, *Over Land, Over Sea: Poems for Those Seeking Refuge* (Five Leaves Publications, 2015). The book had been conceived as a collective response to the so-called refugee crisis, which struck the British public opinion in the summer of 2015.[1]

In the light of my current studies on new forms of slavery in today's Britain, I found the collection of great interest. And I was even more pleased to discover the existence of an international translation project attached to the book, *Journeys in Translation*, an open call to translate 13 poems (or some of them) selected from the collection into any language. Ambrose Musiyiwa (one of the poets and inspirers of *Over Land*) launched this initiative to encourage people to reflect, through working between languages, on our attitude towards those seeking refuge (with a final event to be held in Leicester on 30th September 2017, International Translation Day).

I found this a unique opportunity to help my students engage in practical work on this urgent postcolonial issue. Musiyiwa declared that the collection aimed at showing that those

"who are seeking refuge are people and not numbers, insects or environmental phenomena" (Bradshaw 2016). This is where the role of art indeed comes into play. Gabriele Del Grande, the Italian film director and social activist who was recently jailed by Turkish authorities for his work with Syrian refugees, once noticed that all the media over-exposure on refugees, in the end, "does not move the debate one bit. On the contrary, it risks distorting the story. […] Instead, we increasingly need more lengthy stories and more time to process the encounter with the human side of the story […] we need to dare to imagine a common future. And only art can help us in so visionary a task" (Korzhenevich 2016, 109).

In a world scarred by barriers and fences, translation cannot but be seen as part and parcel of this artistic endeavour. I thought my students would have an opportunity to contribute to this effort in giving voice, in going beyond the "short-lived, strategic sentimentalism" fostered by mainstream media on contemporary refugees (Bromley 2016). Working on the raw material of the poetic line would allow them a deeper encounter with the issues at stake: this belief of mine is rooted in a vision of literature as a privileged way to have access to otherness, thanks to its ability to express complex and diverse realities and to develop an ethical approach towards them (Santerini 2008, 11-15, 30).[2]

Even though the seminar was not compulsory for students attending the course, 23 of them attended it, plus two students working on their MA thesis in literary translation (all their names are listed below). Before starting the seminar, I optimistically imagined that in four classes (eight hours altogether) we would translate all 13 poems. Thanks to the quality of the students' participation, and the long discussions in which we often engaged, we barely managed to translate six of them.

Rod Duncan's *but one country*

our home
is but one country
truly, the whole earth
is there for them to settle
tell us if you can, where else
shall we go when they have come?
they do not belong in our homeland
you should blush when you say to us
we must turn our vision up-side down

we must turn our vision up-side down
you should blush when you say to us
they do not belong in our homeland
shall we go when they have come?
tell us if you can, where else
is there for them to settle
truly, the whole earth
is but one country
our home

A picture-text poem: there could not have been a harder start. Or a more instructive one, as far as translating poetry is concerned. As a sort of warm-up, I said something about concrete poetry, and how the very shape of a poem can already be meaningful. With regard to this specific poem, students offered several options: a mirror, an egg, a planet, a seed, to mention but a few. These reflections made evident one restriction we would face in our translation: the length of each line.

Then a closer reading revealed another, even stricter restriction. The poem is indeed a mirror, the second section being exactly specular to the first. Therefore, the same sequence of lines, if turned upside down, should be just as fluently readable. This mirror structure is a key message-carrier: we are given a xenophobic worldview first, and then one based on solidarity, and these two are linguistically presented as the two sides of the same coin, as made of the same ideas – a reference to how easy it can be to jump the fence to the other side, because it is only a question of perspective?

The most symbolic lines here are those included in the turning point between the two visions, ll. 9 and 10 ("we must turn our vision up-side down"), which embody what the poem skillfully (and literally) does. Turning a point of view, and a worldview, upside down, is a recurrent strategy in postcolonial literatures. To establish a link with the Italian context, I mentioned the example of Wu Ming's short story *Momodou* (2008), where the killing of a Senegalese immigrant by two policemen, first narrated through a newspaper article, is narrated by going backwards in time in order to show a completely different perspective on the accident.

It was quite a lengthy prelude to our collective translation work, but I was glad that we could face a practical example of something we had come across in the translation theory examined during the course: the need to interpret the nuances of a text before translating it, the awareness that critical studies and translation studies are closely intertwined (Cavagnoli 2012, 75; Tchernichova 2010, 199). This is even more appropriate for a postcolonial translation, given the established identification of the figure of the migrant with the practice of translation in its widest sense – linguistic, cultural, and geographical (Albertazzi 2013, 135-141).

Following Paola Faini (2014, 100-101), during the course I kept repeating that a translator's aim should not be directed at a mnemonic knowledge of a foreign language – a sort of mission impossible. As students of translation, their main objective should be the cultivation of their sensitivity to literary language, learning to notice its features and to ask themselves what an equivalent in Italian might be. So here is the translation produced during the seminar:

	but one country	*un unico paese*
	our home	casa nostra
	is but one country	è un unico paese
	truly, the whole earth	davvero, la terra intera
	is there for them to settle	può essere un posto per loro
5	tell us if you can, where else	diteci, se voi potete, dove altro
	shall we go when they have come?	dovremmo andarcene se arrivano?
	they do not belong in our homeland	loro non appartengono alla nostra terra
	you should blush when you say to us	dovreste vergognarvi quando ci dite che
	we must turn our vision up-side down	dobbiamo capovolgere il nostro punto di vista
10	we must turn our vision up-side down	dobbiamo capovolgere il nostro punto di vista
	you should blush when you say to us	dovreste vergognarvi quando ci dite che
	they do not belong in our homeland	loro non appartengono alla nostra terra
	shall we go when they have come?	dovremmo andarcene se arrivano?
	tell us if you can, where else	Diteci, se voi potete, dove altro
15	is there for them to settle	può essere un posto per loro
	truly, the whole earth	davvero, la terra intera
	is but one country	è un unico paese
	our home	casa nostra

Among the many realizations that emerged during the collective work, the one that most struck me was how the implications of the simple possessive "our" (l. 1) acquires a completely different, more inclusive and humane, aspect in l. 18 at the end of the poem. Isn't the message of the whole poem, after all, incarnated in the meaning of "our"?

After translating the first xenophobic half quickly, we began to work on the second part. Predictably, on countless occasions we found a good translation for a line, then we went back and realised that it would not work if read *à rebours*. Translating this poem, in other words, implied a repeated exercise in shifting from one perspective to its opposite – again, the main message of the poem itself, that effort to put ourselves in someone else's shoes which constitutes the foundation of humanity.

There were also countless times when we found a good-sounding solution for some line, only to realise that its length would mar the shape of the whole poem. Later, one student offered to change ll. 4 and 15 into "possono tranquillamente abitare" ("they may simply live in"): an ingenious solution in itself, but slightly too long, unfortunately. It is a sad truth for any translator of Anglophone literature into Italian that the monosyllabic, compressed nature of the source text is hardly reproducible in our markedly polysyllabic language – an obstacle particularly evident when tackling poetry.

The translation above is the result we came to. At the end of it, when we had all reached a deeper grasp of the poem, I again asked students what its shape reminded them of. Their answers were curious: the two halves of an iceberg, a subterranean world akin to Dante's Inferno, a mountain or a boat reflected on the surface of a lake, two faces looking at each other, a reptile's or feline eye, the equator line dividing two hemispheres.

Malka Al-Haddad's *Children of War*

Children of War

Every child in my land suffers torment of wars.

Every child in my land suckles milk mixed with fear.

I ache, ache from the gun at my side:
your gift, Father, the day before they killed you.

You told me your gun would be my best friend.
It has been with me each day and each night. And still

Every child in my land suffers torrents of wars.

Every child in my land suckles milk mixed with fear.

Figli della Guerra

Ogni figlio della mia terra soffre i tormenti della guerra.

Ogni figlio della mia terra succhia latte misto a paura.

Fa male, fa male la pistola al mio fianco:
il tuo regalo, Padre, il giorno prima che ti ammazzassero.

Mi hai detto che la tua pistola sarebbe stata la mia migliore amica.
È rimasta con me ogni giorno e ogni notte. E ancora

Ogni figlio della mia terra soffre torrenti di guerra.

Ogni figlio della mia terra succhia latte misto a paura.

The first problem that we had to face was in the title. A simple word like "children" poses a doubt for the Italian translator: "figli" (literally, "sons") was preferred to "bambini" (closer to "kids") by a great majority of the students at the seminar: first, because it carries what seems to be the central idea of the poem, that this childhood is tragically the product of war and of a corrupting adult generation; secondly, it echoes with other keywords of our Italian version containing the F sound, such as "soffre" ("suffers") and "fa male" ("I ache"). On the other hand, the loss of the connotation with the contemporary tragedy of "bambini soldato" ("child soldiers") is to be regretted – probably one of the many losses which are inevitable in poetry translation.

The reverse rhyme (alliteration + assonance between "milk" and "mixed") in line 2 is lost, too, but compensated by the internal rhyme in line 1 ("terra" and "guerra"). Compensatory strategies, too, was another issue we came across quite often during the course (see Morini 2002, 38). The same goes for ll. 3 and 4, where the loss of the significant alliteration between "gun" and "gift" is compensated by another alliteration between "pistola" and "Padre".

It was decided to translate "It has been" (l. 6) with "È rimasta" (closer to "It stayed") in order to emphasise the unrelentingly oppressive presence of the gun; besides, "È stata" would

have produced an unpleasant repetition with line 5 that is not present in the English version.

Luckily, "torment" and "torrents" are similar words in Italian, too, so that the wordgame (and its ensuing sense of painful repetition and circularity which is paralleled by the poem's anaphoras) was easily maintained.

Lydia Towsey's *Come In*

Come In
For the migrants and refugees arriving in Europe

We are sorry for our neighbours,
those of them that do not know
the way to show a welcome;
they have read the book of doors
but forgotten how they open.

We are sorry for the landlord,
he's always been a problem
and the agents in his office,
need we say they do not act –

to be clear:
they do their nothing
not on our behalf.

Sorry for the state in which you find us,
it isn't like we didn't know you would be coming
and for the pains we know you've suffered;

please be easy, slip your shoes off,
take this blanket
it's the least we can do.

I am sorry for our manners,
when we visited you last
the mess we left,
the reason you have had to call today.

Entrate
Per i migranti e i rifugiati che arrivano in Europa

Ci dispiace per i nostri vicini,
per quelli che non sanno
come dare il benvenuto;
hanno letto il libro delle porte
ma dimenticato come si aprono.

Ci dispiace per il padrone di casa,
è sempre stato un problema
e i dipendenti nel suo ufficio
non agiscono, inutile dirlo –

parliamoci chiaro:
il nulla che fanno loro
non è a nome nostro.

Dispiace per lo stato in cui ci trovate,
non è che non sapessimo del vostro arrivo,
e per le pene che sappiamo avete sofferto;

accomodatevi prego, toglietevi le scarpe,
prendete questa coperta
è il minimo che possiamo fare.

Mi dispiace per i nostri modi,
l'ultima volta che vi abbiamo fatto visita
il disordine che abbiamo lasciato,
il motivo che vi ha costretti a passare a
- trovarci oggi.

The first general observation that I proposed after reading the poem had to do with its colloquial, everyday linguistic register. That was connected to another golden rule for translating poetry: not every poem is 'lyrical'. Therefore, one should refrain from 'lyricalising' and elevating a poem written in plain, straightforward English, lest one miss the equivalence between the source and the target text. Though apparently easy, the task of translating this kind of poetry sets traps for the translator, who must pay the most scrupulous attention to those few significant elements which make the poem interesting (Morini 2002, 43).

In this case a translator should not miss any of the elements of the extended metaphor which constitutes the backbone of the poem: the welcoming of foreigners described as the welcoming of strangers into one's home.

The whole issue of refugees in contemporary British culture, after all, is pervaded by similar spatial metaphors, not only because of the many barriers, fences, and boundaries limiting their right to free movement. Once they have arrived in England, asylum-seekers are often detained or limited in their movements by the so-called dispersal policy: they cannot work, they live on vouchers which are exclusively for food, they have no right to change their address or to use public transport: "fixed in a given location," states David Herd (2016, 136), they have a "deeply compromised relation to public space." This is why Jerome Phelps, member of the NGO Detention Action, once declared (2016) that "necropower is to a large extent organised spatially" since people are designated outside of the political community both outside and within UK borders.

Towsey's poem confers flesh and blood on this idea that, in David Farrier's words (2012, 58), citizens occupy the same geographical space as refugees while living in a "fundamentally different" state. And it tries to overcome this situation from its very title, developing the house/home metaphor throughout. Other literary, refugee-related projects similarly worked on a creative reformulation of spaces. The collection of stories *Refugee Tales*, for instance, developed from an itinerant project along Chaucer's Pilgrims' Way between London and Canterbury, as an explicit attempt to re-envision a deeply-charged national space in a more "ethically sustainable" way (Herd 2016, 140).

Personally I had, at the back of my mind, Franca Cavagnoli's reflections (2012, 137) on the translation of Joyce's story "Eveline," whose text is founded on the recurrent image of the home/house. Our first intention, then, was not to miss any nuance of Towsey's extended metaphor in order not to weaken its force: culture identified as the "book of doors"; the British government and its agents as the problematic landlord and his uncooperative employees; the unprepared state of England at the arrival of refugees as the house's untidiness; the British colonial and postcolonial aggressiveness depicted as their devastating first visit to the home of these refugees.

"Sorry for" presented the first problem: is it also meant as a way of apologising, or simply as a general expression of regret? "Ci dispiace," we thought, maintains this Janus-like significance. Citizens having read "the book of doors," but having forgotten how to open them, might be seen as a hint at the fact that being educated is not always an antidote against intolerance: contemporary kinds of racism are sometimes not centred on biology but on culture, grounded on ideas of supposedly exclusive (if not superior) cultural values (Hardt and Negri 2000, 192). Apart from the extended home/house metaphor, this is the only image in the poem that is not directly denotative, so we decided to keep it as abstract as it is; any over-explanation would risk weakening its suggestiveness.

Other elements were deemed worth maintaining. The double negation in line 14, which a striving for clarity might tempt to erase, actually conveys the typical circumlocutory tone of a flimsy, embarrassed excuse. Finally, the last stanza (basically saying 'you are now here be-

cause of the mess we made in your house') points to a historical awareness about the colonial roots of globalisation: if racist theories present themselves as natural, the study of history can be helpful in unveiling their constructedness (Hall 1980, 7-10). But here the subject of being sorry turns from "we" to "I" – a sign that this awareness is unfortunately grasped by an even more restricted number of people?

Marylin Ricci's *Framed*

Framed

Mum always covered her head
before leaving the house;
and, of course, in our place of worship.

Cotton, sometimes chiffon or printed:
A Present from Skegness, framed high
cheek bones, flattened bouncy curls.

Her mum wore a hat, even at tea,
her grandmother, a long woollen shawl
gathered with a pin beneath her chin.

Today, a daughter-in-law in the village shop,
Hijab framing big brown eyes.

Cornici

La mamma si copriva sempre la testa
prima di uscire di casa;
e, ovviamente, nel nostro luogo di culto.

Cotone, a volte chiffon o stampato:
Saluti da Skegness, incorniciava zigomi
pronunciati, appiattiva riccioli ribelli.

Sua mamma portava un cappello, persino
- per il tè,
sua nonna, un lungo scialle di lana
raccolto da una spilla sotto il mento.

Oggi, una nuora nel negozio di paese,
l'Hijab a incorniciare grandi occhi castani.

As in the previous poem, history plays a fundamental role here. The poem is constructed along a series of images, photos of women from different generations. Behind it we can find an idea of historical and geographical continuity that erases the differences between cultures, and works against the supposed irreconcilability of some hotly-debated non-European cultural traits – namely, Muslim head covers for women. European women, the poem shows, have also covered their heads for centuries.

This can be conceived as a way to escape the flatness of contemporary media's portrayal of refugee issues. As one editor of the collection said, "There was an agreement that the focus would not be just on poems about the current situation but would create parallels with past experiences of refugees and exile" (Bradshaw 2016). In creating a sense of historical depth, this specific poem goes even beyond the boundaries of refugee experiences.

Part of the poem's cleverness lies in its misleading start: being included in a collection about refugees, one would immediately assume that the woman in l. 1 belonged to a non-European culture. It is only from the reference to Skegness in l. 5 that we start sensing that these lines are about British women. It was deemed important, then, to avoid over-explaining and rationalising the poem's elliptical language, lest the surprise effect be spoilt. Following the same principle, "hijab" was not translated, in order to avoid falling into the "power differentials" between Western and non-western translations (Robinson 1997, 31). Postcolonial translation

theory holds that rationalising, making explicit and embellishing have operated in Western translations as assimilative tendencies which deformed cultural otherness (Tchernichova 2010, 203).[3]

Line 9 contains an internal rhyme which could not be maintained, but that was compensated by a half-rhyme between "scialle" ("shawl," l. 8) and "spilla" ("pin," l. 9). The title was probably the hardest part to translate. We did not like, not least for phonetic reasons, the literal translation "Incorniciate." "Foto di famiglia" ("Family Photos") or "Ritratti di famiglia" ("Family Pictures") were proposed, too. In the end, the choice of "Cornici" ("Frames") prevailed, because it was considered important to maintain a continuity between the title and the expressions "incorniciava" (l. 5) and "incorniciare" (l. 11) – continuity, after all, is one of the key ideas behind this poem. It must be said, on the other hand, that even "Cornici" was not completely satisfactory, if only because in Italian it does not carry the same journalistic connotation as "Framed" (another immediate expectation, on refugees and media, that the poem overturned).

Emma Lee's *Stories from 'The Jungle'*

Stories from 'The Jungle'

Everything Abdel sees is smeared, despite his glasses.
With the sleeve of a dusty shirt, he pushes grime
from the middle to the edges of his lenses.
They've witnessed family fall victim to war crimes.
He could shower for a fortnight and never feel clean.
English is an official language in Sudan.
At sixteen he wants to join relatives already in England.

To dodge military conscription, Sayid, 20, fled from Syria.
Inspired by the story of one of his heroes, William Gibson,
Sayid got to Egypt, then packed on a small boat to Lampedusa,
through Italy to France, from where he can only move on.
On a borrowed laptop he listens to Syrian pop music.
He'd love to cook. He still has to pay a trafficker
weekly for the right to chase lorries to his brother in England.

With a bandaged hand Abdul, 21, tells of imprisonment
and gestures to describe the electric shocks he received
after his arrest by the Sudanese government.
His tribe also harassed by rebel militia. He feels deceived
by traffickers. Despite his razor-wire injury,
he'll try again. Sudan was an English colony.
He wants to stop looking over his shoulder.

When a tiger stalks, play dead. But it's hard not to run.
When his friends were arrested in Eritrea, Hayat fled
and moved from Ethiopia to Libya and across the Mediterranean.
He became tiger, his prey an England-bound train. His hunt failed.
His broken arm cast, he hunkers in a makeshift, tented cave.
A tiger fails nine of ten hunts. He's five down, four more to brave.
English is the only European language he speaks.

At Baath University in Homs, his English Literature studies
were interrupted by conscription. Firas drew and followed an isopleth.
Three family members were killed by Syrian government forces,
he couldn't bear to see or be responsible for any more death.
Skin torn by razor-wire, he still dreams of Oxford spires.
Relatives live in several English towns, all with universities.
He wants to use the language he's immersed himself in.

Ziad was a respected lawyer in Daara. Now he fidgets,
grubby and injured from climbing fences, dodging
security and avoiding dogs. The pack of cigarettes
crinkles as he weaves it in his fingers, emptying
a last curl of tobacco. He didn't smoke them but can't finish
with the packet. He translates legal arguments into English.
He wants to join relatives and practice law again.

Storie dalla 'Giungla'

Tutto quello che Abdel vede è sporco, nonostante gli occhiali.
Con la manica di una camicia polverosa, sposta il sudicio
dal centro ai bordi delle lenti.
Hanno visto la famiglia cadere vittima di crimini di guerra.
Potrebbe lavarsi per settimane e non sentirsi mai pulito.
L'inglese è una lingua ufficiale in Sudan.
A sedici anni vuole raggiungere i parenti già in Inghilterra.

Per evitare la leva obbligatoria, Sayid, di anni 20, è scappato dalla Siria.
Ispirato dalla storia di uno dei suoi eroi, William Gibson,
Sayid è andato in Egitto, poi si è stipato in un barcone verso Lampedusa,
attraverso l'Italia fino in Francia, da dove può solo andare avanti.
Da un portatile preso in prestito ascolta musica pop siriana.
Vorrebbe fare il cuoco. Deve ancora pagare un trafficante ogni settimana
per il diritto di inseguire camion verso il fratello in Inghilterra.

Con una mano bendata Abdul, di anni 21, racconta della prigione
e descrive a gesti le scosse elettriche che ha subìto
dopo l'arresto da parte del governo sudanese.
La sua tribù presa di mira anche dalla milizia ribelle. Si sente ingannato
dai trafficanti. Nonostante la sua ferita da filo spinato,
ci proverà di nuovo. Il Sudan era una colonia inglese.
Vuole smetterla di guardarsi alle spalle.

Quando una tigre ti insegue, fingiti morto. Ma è difficile non correre.
Quando i suoi amici sono stati arrestati in Eritrea, Hayat è fuggito
e ha viaggiato dall'Etiopia alla Libia e attraverso il Mediterraneo.
Si è fatto tigre, la preda un treno per l'Inghilterra. La sua caccia è fallita.
Il braccio ingessato, si rannicchia in una tana di tende improvvisata.
La tigre fallisce nove cacce su dieci. Ne ha fatte cinque, ancora quattro da affrontare.
L'inglese è l'unica lingua europea che parla.

Alla Baath University di Homs, i suoi studi di Letteratura Inglese
sono stati interrotti dalla leva. Firas ha tracciato e seguito un'isopleta.
Con tre famigliari uccisi dalle forze governative siriane,
non sopportava di vedere altre morti o di esserne responsabile.
Con la pelle lacerata dal filo spinato, continua a sognare le guglie di Oxford.

I parenti in Inghilterra vivono in diverse città, tutte universitarie.
Vuole usare la lingua nella quale si è immerso.

Ziad era un rispettabile avvocato di Daara. Ora si agita senza sosta,
sudicio e ferito per le recinzioni scavalcate, per le guardie e i cani
che ha schivato. Il pacchetto di sigarette
crepita mentre se lo passa fra le dita, svuotandolo
del suo ultimo ciuffo di tabacco. Le sigarette non le ha fumate, ma non riesce
a liberarsi del pacchetto. Traduce argomentazioni giuridiche in inglese.
Vuole raggiungere i parenti e tornare a esercitare.

The final footnote to the poem says: "These stories are based on newspaper reports. Names have been changed". This is a quite clear acknowledgement of its sources, just as it was quite evident to us that the language of this poem is close to journalism: many prose-like sentences stating plain facts, arranged in long lines with a good number of run-on-lines. As in the case of Towsey's *Come In*, it was necessary to maintain this tone without falling into the temptation of making the text more lyrical than it actually is. It was believed, for instance, that the factual reference to these migrants' age (such as "Sayid, 20") would find a satisfactory equivalent in "Sayid, di anni 20," which is just as newspaper-like.

At the same time, *Stories from 'The Jungle'* is not a simple shift of newspaper reports into a poetical-line structure. Occasionally, images acquire a metaphorical or symbolic valence, and phonetic patterns amplify the message. In line 2, we thought that the ethical connotation of "sudicio" for "grime" might better convey the tragedy of Abdel's ordeal, besides chiming with surrounding key-words such as "sporco" (l. 1) and "centro" (l. 3). The rhyme between "grime" (l. 2) and "crimes" (l. 4) was lost, but compensated with "guerra" (l. 4) and "Inghilterra" (l. 7). Luckily for our translation, this could help emphasise the link between what these migrants run away from and where they dream of finally landing. England is mentioned at the end of most stanzas, with succinct explanations of the reasons why it became their goal – a particularly trenchant feature of this poem, given the topicality of the Calais Jungle in the British media's debate about refugees. The same compensation was continued in the following stanza, where "weekly" (l. 14) was moved to the end of the previous line so that "settimana" could rhyme with "siriana."

Still in the second stanza, we were faced with the bizarre choice of translating the diminutive "small boat" (l. 10) not with its literal equivalents "barchina" or "barchetta" (which would also sound almost like a form of endearment and therefore totally out of place), but with the augmentative "barcone" (literally, "large boat"), which is nowadays widely used for the run-down boats carrying migrants across the Mediterranean and has thus acquired a markedly derogatory connotation. Another significant detail is "looking over his shoulder" (l. 21). In Italian, it can be translated as "guardarsi le spalle" or "guardarsi alle spalle," but the former risks being read too literally ("looking *at* one's shoulders"), and not metaphorically as the original text requires.

Stanza no. 4 is constructed on an extended metaphor associating migrant and tiger. The one noticeable translation choice here is in l. 26, where "cave" was translated with the not-so-literal "tana" ("den") in order to continue the animal imagery. Stanza no. 5 has an internal rhyme in l. 33 ("wire" and "spires") which was lost in translation, and only partially compensated with an alliteration ("con," "continua") which might lay emphasis on the persistence of Firas's dream of studying in England. In the closing stanza there is an alliteration on D between "dodging" (l. 37) and "dogs" (l. 38), which was re-shaped into "scavalcate" and "schivato" (for "climbing" and "avoiding").

We found a sentence in the last stanza ("He didn't smoke them but can't finish / with the packet") not so clear, and discussed its possible meaning at length, in the hope of getting it right; as Morini (2016, 111) writes, even the most obscure poems by Dylan Thomas have their logic, and therefore this must be grasped before starting the translation process.

Finally, in the last line a correct translation of "practise law" could have been "fare il legale." However, this revealed itself as a clear example of how a theoretically correct translation can jar with its specific context. "Fare il legale" can also suggest "to be a legal migrant", as the opposite of the insidiously pejorative "illegal" that is widely used today. That would have implied the insertion of a double meaning that is not present in the source text, so we opted for a less intrusive (and more professional) "esercitare" ("operate"). Both "small boat" and "practice law," then, represent two examples of Umberto Eco's distinction between linguistic and cultural faithfulness (2002, 123), when abandoning the former may lead to reinforce the latter.

Siobhan Logan's *The Humans Are Coming*

The Humans Are Coming

She wants to be an astronaut
crossing black holes and spiralled galaxies to find
extraterrestrial life.

Her big sister pushes the wheelchair
rattling over a chalky path, kicking up pebbles
white as the Milky Way.

And now an Alien kneels in a field
arm extended to furry probe, communing
with the space-buggy girl.

She tells the story of her burnt-out planet
its skeletal, grey rubble, her scattered
iPhone archived family.

Yet Life is an adventure, she believes
that starts in a rubber dinghy, waves rolling
high in the turbulent cosmos.

While her strong-armed sister is Ship's engineer

this teenager in spectacles, toothy-grinned
sits always at the helm.

Determined to be in the landing-party
she greets every New-World city, every stranger
with a message of peace.

Despite missing her mother, she's bold
as a first-generation Martian who re-configures
the ancient notion of 'home'.

Now the night-sky has Two Sisters, sparks
in a drifting constellation, their camp-fires
pin-pricking our universe.

Arrivano gli umani

Lei vuole fare l'astronauta
per attraversare buchi neri e galassie a spirale alla ricerca
di vita extraterrestre.

Sua sorella maggiore spinge la sedia a rotelle
che sferraglia su un sentiero di gesso e fa schizzare ciottoli
bianchi come la Via Lattea.

E adesso un Alieno si inginocchia in un campo,
il braccio teso come una sonda impellicciata, stabilendo un contatto
con la ragazza sulla carrozzina spaziale.

Lei racconta la storia del suo pianeta in cenere,
le macerie scheletriche e grigie, la famiglia
dispersa nell'archivio dell'iPhone.

Ma la vita è un'avventura, lei crede
che abbia inizio su un gommone, le onde
che si gonfiano alte nel cosmo tumultuoso.

Mentre la sorella dalle forti braccia è la Motorista di Bordo
questa adolescente occhialuta, il sorriso a 32 denti,
siede sempre al timone.

Decisa a far parte della squadra di sbarco
saluta ogni città del Nuovo Mondo, ogni sconosciuto
con un messaggio di pace.

Anche se le manca la madre, è coraggiosa
come un marziano di prima generazione che riconfigura
l'antica nozione di 'casa'.

Ora il cielo notturno ha Due Sorelle, scintille
di una costellazione alla deriva, con fuochi da campo
a pungolare il nostro universo.

Like Lydia Towsey's *Come In*, this poem is based on an extended metaphor pervading it from beginning to end. More precisely, we are faced with an inversion of a well-established pattern that describes foreigners as "aliens," based on the bureaucratic term "alien" which does not have a similar outer-space-oriented equivalent in Italian. Through yet another exercise in upturning one's perspective, the two girls are the human astronauts visiting alien worlds – that

is, European countries. One student rightly noticed that this may recall Fredric Brown's classic sci-fi story "Sentry" (1954), where the narrator who kills an alien enemy is finally revealed to be an alien killing a human. The choice of this image is curious: astronauts have long been considered the hero-models of our age, while recent writers and commentators have used a similar definition for those migrants who cross continents and face fatal dangers in search of a better life (Gatti 2007, 117).

In the title, the choice was to shift the verb to initial position (in Italian, word order is less strict than in English) and thus to confer some end-emphasis to the word "humans" (I had in mind the 1966 Cold War send-up movie *The Russians Are Coming*, translated as *Arrivano i russi*).

In the translation, careful attention was paid to the reproduction of the space-life details composing the dominant metaphor, so that among the usual options we tended to go for specific astronomical (or space-related) terms equivalent to the original, such as "galassie a spirale" (l. 2) or "stabilendo un contatto" (l. 8). The alien approaching the girls in stanza no. 3 was not easy to make sense of, at first; then we realised it may be a journalist with a long furred microphone, but any over-explaining translation was avoided: isn't the perspective, here, supposed to be the girls'? Shouldn't we reproduce their unawareness about some details concerning these 'alien worlds'? In line 10 "burnt-out" was translated with "in cenere" ("in ashes"), conveying the image of both an exhausted planet and a war-ravaged country.

In order to confer a sort of epic tone to her enterprise, "starts" (l. 14) became "abbia inizio," higher in register than the simpler "inizi" or "cominci"; the same goes for "ancient notion" (l. 24): "antica nozione" sounds appropriately archaic, besides being nearly equivalent to the English expression. It is worth noticing how this simile ("as a first-generation Martian who re-configures / the ancient notion of 'home'"), which once more reverses the dominant metaphor, employs a terminology that postcolonial studies are widely familiar with.

In stanza no. 4, the dense expression "scattered iPhone archived family" was translated as if it were "family scattered in the iPhone archive," to emphasise this technological presence as the girl's only 'family' for the moment. Unfortunately, the double meaning of "landing-party" (l. 19), expressing both the girl's space-crew and her joyous attitude, could not be maintained in Italian.

The closing stanza has a lyrical suggestiveness, the poetry of outer space and its immensity. The translation tries to reproduce it through the echo between "sorelle" and "scintille" ("Sisters" and "sparks"). Furthermore, there is a double implication in "pin-pricking," which implies "studding" and "goading" (European conscience): in Italian, "pungolano" might suggest both.

However, it must be said that our collective translation had to stop, after stanza no. 3, because of time constraints, not least because of the long spells of discussion which were held over many details. This is the main reason why I would like to thank, for their stimulating

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Notes

[1] For further information on this collection, see Bradshaw 2016.
[2] Santerini makes reference to works by Martha Nussbaum, Paul Ricoeur and Richard Rorty.
[3] Tchernichova makes reference to works by Antoine Berman.

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L'*altra* Italia. Per una lettura subalterna del Meridione di Grazia Deledda

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ABSTRACT

The *Other* Italy. For a subaltern reading of Grazia Deledda's South

Postcolonial interpretations of Gramsci's thought may be fruitfully employed to analyse the history of the Italian South, in both its meanings: the South of Italy and Italy as European South. Subaltern Studies are also useful in order to understand the particular semi-peripheral position of Italy and to recognize the same duplicity in the condition of Southern Italy. It is believed that the Subaltern Studies critical approach, focusing on textuality and its identity role, provides valuable keys for interpreting the Italian case. Italian literature contributed to the construction of national identity, during and after the Risorgimento, by means of 'orientalist' representations of the South. Even southern authors, influenced by folklorists and criminologists, described the South as a primitive and exotic land. This article investigates works written by Grazia Deledda (Nuoro 1871 - Roma 1936), that, at first, mirror the centralistic project, but later reveal her attempt to emancipate her narrative firstly from colonial subjection and secondly from the patriarchal one. For this purpose, it is necessary to read her work diachronically and to decipher the gradual transfiguration into symbols of her polemic against power. *Canne al vento*, presenting the recomposition of a Sardinian matriarchal community after the invasion of a stranger, seems to speak of a redemption from 'double colonization', yet warning against the violent and sacrificial nature of any emancipation.

Keywords

questione meridionale, subalternità, orientalismo, doppia colonizzazione, Grazia Deledda

Il Sud italiano alla prova degli studi postcoloniali

Se a partire dagli anni Settanta si è assistito a una riscoperta del pensiero di Antonio Gramsci a livello internazionale, o, come scrive Iain Chambers, a un'"estensione planetaria" della Questione meridionale gramsciana (Chambers 2006, 9), in anni più recenti si è iniziato a osservare anche il movimento inverso. La riflessione gramsciana, arricchita dalle sue ramificazioni e riletture sorte nell'ambito del Sud globale, è tornata a interessare il Meridione nostrano: il Sud d'Italia, ma anche l'Italia come margine inferiore d'Europa e del mondo. *From the European South,* in questo senso, si pone al passaggio, al giro di boa di questa inversione di rotta di cui è insieme scossa propulsiva e sismografo. Quale sede più appropriata, dunque, per testare la tenuta di categorie analitiche postcoloniali nel contesto nazionale? E ci riferiamo in particolare alla proposta critica elaborata dal collettivo dei Subaltern Studies, che col tempo va dando prova di sempre maggiore versatilità ed estensione applicativa; un richiamo non casuale se si

pensa che gli stessi concetti gramsciani che fondano la metodologia subalterna sono strettamente connessi all'Italia e alla sua peculiare frattura interna. È Spivak a sottolineare come il termine 'subalterno', che originariamente per Gramsci indicava il 'proletariato', muta il suo significato proprio in relazione alla Questione meridionale:

> One also knows that the word changed in its use when Gramsci presciently began to be able to see what we today call north-south problems, sitting in prison in Italy, because he was talking on southern Italy, just class-formation questions were not going to solve anything. And so then the word 'subaltern' became packed with meaning. (1992, 45)

D'altra parte, tornare ad interrogarsi sull'Unità italiana, sulla questione meridionale e sul Sud Italia in una prospettiva postcoloniale non significa necessariamente sposare le tesi revisioniste del colonialismo interno, per quanto sia lo stesso Gramsci, in un certo senso, ad autorizzarle, assimilando il Meridione d'Italia e le isole a "colonie di sfruttamento" (Gramsci 1987, 377). Rileggere l'unificazione con lenti postcoloniali o subalterne significa riconoscere l'asimmetria che l'ha caratterizzata, analizzare la dialettica identitaria e culturale messa in campo nel processo di fondazione nazionale, indagare la pressione discorsiva esercitata dalla nascente nazione sui suoi confini, la 'violenza epistemica' perpetrata dal centro sulla periferia nello sforzo di autodeterminarsi e autoconservarsi.

Come scrive infatti Said in *Orientalismo*, "lo sviluppo e la conservazione di ogni cultura richiedono l'esistenza di un alter ego diverso e in competizione" (2006, 329), richiedono la creazione di un'alterità con la quale l''io' possa confrontarsi. La 'cultura altra' – osserva Juri Lotman in *Semiosfera*, decodificando il medesimo processo – si costruisce come rovesciamento della cultura, oppure come sua totale assenza: "La cultura data identifica la sua struttura semiotica con la semiotica come tale e quindi l'antistruttura è pensata come qualcosa che si trova fuori dai confini del mondo dei segni e dei rapporti segnici" (1985, 139). Il semiologo russo sottolinea come anche la geografia partecipi a questa dialettica: "ogni cultura si crea il suo tipo di 'barbaro' e il fatto che questo ruolo presupponga il trovarsi fuori favorisce spesso un'interpretazione spaziale" (Lotman 1985, 139). La cultura proietta la diversità "sui mondi culturali che si trovano fuori di lei" e, quando ciò non le riesce, la colloca nel suo territorio, dislocandola però al confine, ai margini, in periferia.

L'Italia in questo senso partecipa di due 'geografie semiotiche'. Come osserva Oboe (2016, 13) facendo proprie le osservazioni wallersteiniane di Boaventura de Sousa Santos a proposito del Portogallo (2008),[1] il nostro Paese occupa una posizione ambigua e ambivalente: da una parte periferia dell'Europa, dall'altra centro dell'impero, non solo rispetto alle colonie d'oltremare ma anche, come si è visto, rispetto al Sud. In una situazione simile, il riferimento alla metodologia subalterna torna a farsi precipuo e funzionale. I Subaltern Studies, infatti, hanno per primi posto l'attenzione sul rischio di egemonia del subalterno, mettendo in evidenza come la condizione coloniale non escluda la perpetrazione di processi subordinanti ai danni di altri/e: il loro impiego permette quindi non solo di considerare attentamente lo *status* semipe-

riferico dell'Italia, il suo essere Prospero e Calibano a un tempo come dice Santos, ma anche di valutare criticamente una possibile ereditarietà della colpa, una riattivazione della violenza da parte del Sud Italia subalterno. Inoltre, specialmente sotto l'influenza di Spivak, il collettivo indiano si è distinto per aver battuto con forza la via culturalista, eleggendo lo studio della testualità (tanto storiografica quanto letteraria) a suo strumento privilegiato di azione sulla realtà. L'interpretazione dei testi culturali e letterari è fondamentale per comprendere la portata egemonica della dialettica identitaria implicata nella nostra unificazione. Essi possono infatti portare in superficie le tracce sommerse della pressione discorsiva dispiegata dalla propaganda pre- e post-risorgimentale, aggiornare se non reimpostare lo studio di autori ormai criticamente solidi, rileggere e riscrivere il canone letterario, andando a scovare quali metri di giudizio ne hanno guidato la composizione e le scelte. Si tratta dunque di "[r]iaprire l'archivio storico e risistemarlo su una mappa più estesa e dinamica" (Chambers 2014), ma anche parlare al presente. Per quanto la prospettiva e le categorie adottate siano infatti situate nella contemporaneità, esse non debbono limitarsi a proiettare la loro ombra sul passato, in un arido e grottesco ventriloquio, ma valorizzarne al contrario i messaggi trascurati, dischiudere percorsi di senso 'inattuali' e innovativi. Come sostiene Alberto Mario Cirese – la cui opera andrebbe riscoperta e rivalutata come anticipatrice della 'ripresa' subalterna di Gramsci – i "dislivelli interni di cultura" si distinguono dai "dislivelli esterni" (quelli delle civiltà al tempo "dette primitive") per essere "altri e contemporaneamente nostri" (1972, 42). Ripercorrere le tracce dell'asimmetria interna italiana può dunque fornirci gli strumenti per leggere il presente iperconnesso e non meno diviso, caratterizzato dall'internità di tutte le alterità. Un terreno postcoloniale ambiguo come quello italiano è forse in grado di orientare il mondo contemporaneo dove il colonialismo è celato, subdolo e insinuante, e di smantellare la posticcia facciata egualitaria di istituzioni sovranazionali del presente, che, come quelle sovraregionali del passato, sono attraversate da profonde fratture e iniquità.

Grazia Deledda e la 'doppia colonizzazione'

Queste coordinate teorico-critiche informano l'analisi qui proposta dell'opera della scrittrice sarda Grazia Deledda (Nuoro 1871- Roma 1936) la quale, presentando buona parte delle caratteristiche finora delineate, può essere indicata come caso paradigmatico.

Come osserva Stuart Hall commentando i natali di Gramsci (dieci anni più giovane della scrittrice), "Sardinia stood in a 'colonial' relationship to the Italian mainland" (1986, 9). Tuttavia, sarebbe lecito obiettare che l'isola nuragica, essendo già parte dei possedimenti piemontesi e ancor prima di quelli spagnoli, avesse già conosciuto, ben prima dell'Unità, una soggezione coloniale, o "semicoloniale" (Wagner 2008), e non condividesse pertanto il medesimo destino delle altre regioni meridionali. Ciò è vero solo in parte. Infatti, come si è già in precedenza accennato, è l'unificazione nazionale ad aver messo in moto un pervasivo processo alterizzante, una subordinazione discorsiva egemonica e omologante, rivolta all'intero Sud. Tale co-

lonizzazione dell'immaginario meridionale viene definita da un filone di studi il cui capofila può identificarsi in Nelson Moe, come "auto-orientalismo." Secondo quanto sostiene Moe, l'Italia ha rappresentato il Mezzogiorno alla stregua di un paese orientale al fine di autoassolversi dai pregiudizi allora diffusi sulla sua meridionalità, e legittimare così la sua appartenenza al consorzio delle nazioni europee, avanzate e moderne (Moe 2004). L'auto-orientalizzazione italiana sarebbe quindi consistita in uno slittamento di stereotipi subordinanti sulla nuova periferia, ad opera dell'antica periferia, in funzione di una sua emancipazione a centro. In tale contesto, giungendo a maturazione in parallelo con il processo di unificazione il trionfo della borghesia, anche le figure socialmente marginali e non borghesi, secondo Moe, sarebbero state geograficamente marginalizzate e idealmente dislocate nel premoderno Sud. Infarcito di pregiudizi e di 'edificanti' confronti con il Settentrione, l'argomento della diversità del Meridione avrebbe nutrito una fitta rete testuale che spazia dalle riviste illustrate alle ricerche dei folkloristi, ai progetti dell'editoria milanese, fino alle indagini pseudo-scientifiche della criminologia positiva e al programma di risanamento dei meridionalisti.

Tuttavia, l'esperienza di Deledda risulta particolarmente significativa anche per un'altra ragione: la scrittrice nuorese è infatti due volte marginale. Come direbbe Spivak con terminologia lacaniana, la sua voce è "forclusa" sia come sarda sia come donna (1999, 4). Il suo percorso letterario riflette una difficile negoziazione tra l'una e l'altra subalternità, la progressiva emancipazione da una doppia colonizzazione. La sommatoria di questi due aspetti rende più complessa la sua opera, che si presta perciò anche a un tipo di lettura "intersezionale" (Crenshaw 1997). L'approccio intersezionale, solo in tempi relativamente recenti trasmigrato dalle scienze sociali allo studio della letteratura, e recentissimamente applicato alla letteratura della migrazione in lingua italiana (Camilotti e Crivelli 2017), sarebbe quindi fruttuosamente praticabile già a quest'altezza cronologica. In effetti, la narrativa italiana di fine Ottocento, sotto l'influsso del naturalismo francese, investiga le disparità sociali, soprattutto le differenze di classe, ma si addentra anche, con acuita sensibilità e rinnovato senso critico, nell'analisi degli altri tipi di diversità – di genere, di razza, di età – e delle loro intersezioni.

Contesti: la Sardegna di Deledda

Gli anni di formazione di Grazia Deledda sono caratterizzati da una particolare temperie politica e culturale. Manifestazioni di malcontento popolare attraversano la Sardegna postunitaria, e nello specifico la regione barbaricina. I provvedimenti dello Stato centrale, totalmente incuranti delle esigenze periferiche, provocano in Sardegna, come nel resto del Sud, un impoverimento dell'economia locale, che è anche alla base dell'inasprimento del fenomeno del brigantaggio, identificato da Giacobbe con le prime insorgenze italiane del "banditismo sociale" (Giacobbe 1974, 100; Hobsbawm 2002). Risale al 1899 il tentativo delle forze militari statali di debellarlo con un'efferata repressione armata, significativamente definita 'caccia grossa'.

Sul finire dell'Ottocento il banditismo è anche oggetto degli studi della cosiddetta 'scuola

positiva di diritto penale', propugnatrice del razzismo scientifico e dell'eugenetica, i cui massimi esponenti sono Lombroso, Ferri e, per quanto riguarda il caso sardo, Orano e Niceforo. Secondo questi ultimi, l''atavismo' e l'inferiorità dei meridionali teorizzati da Lombroso sono particolarmente visibili in Sardegna, aggravati dall'abbandono e dall'isolamento geografico. Dalla popolazione sarda, invece, gli stessi presunti "comportamenti degeneri" – soprattutto nel caso di fenomeni minori come quello dell'abigeato – sono sentiti come una dimostrazione di *balentìa* maschile, principio fondante della cultura barbaricina. Tale difformità di giudizio è esemplificativa per comprendere come, in questo momento storico, si consumi una profonda frattura culturale (oltre che economica e sociale) tra l'ordinamento dello Stato e un codice regionale non scritto che non si riconosce nei suoi valori e nelle sue leggi.

Alle richieste della popolazione sarda di tornare alle antiche tradizioni isolane si sommano poi le sollecitazioni della letteratura e della pubblicistica socialista provenienti dal continente, dando luogo alla fondazione di un vero e proprio "automodello autonomista" (Tanda 1990, 119). È in questi anni che viene pronunciata per la prima volta la parola 'sardismo'. Tale fermento sociale è inoltre accompagnato da una rinascita culturale, condotta però all'insegna di valori tradizionali e in parte regressivi e patriarcali. I rapsodi sardi "dalla chiara voce" (Satta 2003), per lo più attivi sul fronte della poesia dialettale, mutuano i loro temi dalla tradizione agonistica orale, integrandola con motivi prettamente politici, umanitari e "sardisti."

Se è questa fervida temperie culturale, quindi, a favorire la nascita del genio letterario della nostra autrice, bisogna altresì rilevare come quest'ultima, unica donna scrittrice nella Nuoro del tempo, resti tagliata fuori dalla cerchia intellettuale locale. Oltre a scontrarsi con l'ostacolo della famiglia e dell'opinione pubblica, Deledda non viene ammessa a partecipare direttamente al cenacolo poetico nuorese. Così, affacciandosi alla letteratura da una posizione 'naturalmente periferica' in quanto donna, e aspirando, d'altra parte, a raggiungere un pubblico il più vasto possibile, l'autrice sarda non assorbe, almeno in un primo momento, quello che è il nuovo (ma antico) modello autoctono, e ricerca per sé una nuova via.

"Una letteratura completamente sarda"?

Deledda inizia giovanissima a comporre racconti e a pubblicarli su testate sarde e continentali. Scrive in italiano, nonostante la sua lingua madre sia il sardo, ed è quindi costretta ad autotradursi con l'aiuto del vocabolario. In una lettera del 1890 indirizzata al direttore della *Nuova Antologia* scrive: "il mio scopo radioso […] è quello di creare da me sola una letteratura completamente sarda" (cfr. Giacobbe 1974, 70). Eppure una letteratura sarda già esisteva, ed era anzi in quel momento assai fiorente. Bisognerà allora interpretare queste parole come l'espressione, da parte dell'autrice, del desiderio di creare una letteratura sarda in lingua italiana, ossia una letteratura di argomento sardo ma rivolta primariamente al continente. E ne troviamo riscontro prendendo in esame la sua produzione giovanile, che ruota tutta attorno al progetto demologico lanciato da De Gubernatis per la rivista delle *Tradizioni popolari italiane*. Tra il

1893 e il 1895 l'autrice pubblica undici articoli, più tardi riuniti in volume col titolo *Tradizioni popolari di Nuoro in Sardegna*. Tali studi registrano gli usi e i costumi dei sardi della zona del Nuorese: dall'arredamento, al cibo, alle pratiche religiose e superstiziose, ai canti sacri e profani. Da tale catalogazione deriva anche la precisione etnografica che caratterizza i racconti deleddiani di questo periodo, che hanno l'aspetto di pretesti documentari o di piccole enciclopedie di un mondo esotico e remoto.

Particolarmente interessante per la nostra argomentazione è uno scritto, intitolato "La donna in Sardegna" (1893), che l'autrice pubblica in *Natura e Arte*, rivista diretta sempre da De Gubernatis. In queste poche pagine, Deledda spiega come le donne sarde abbiano una "fisionomia materiale e spirituale diversa da quelle delle altre donne italiane" (2011, 251) e si identifichino con uno specifico prototipo femminile, che tuttavia nel corso dell'articolo appare sempre più artefatto e contraddittorio. Secondo quanto scrive l'autrice, la donna sarda sarebbe devotamente religiosa e per lo più confinata all'interno delle pareti domestiche, ma ciò non le impedirebbe di essere anche aperta e allegra, di manifestare col canto i suoi moti di gioia e di dolore. Il modello deleddiano è infatti rispondente alle teorie antropologiche a lei contemporanee, che considerano il forte legame della popolazione sarda con il canto e con il ballo tra le massime espressioni della sua ancestralità, segno evidente dell''atavismo' isolano. Per Orano il "ballo in tondo," tipico della tradizione sarda, avvicina gli isolani a quei popoli che egli considera meno civili, cioè gli orientali, i popoli primitivi e i meridionali (1896, 118). L'autrice illustra inoltre come le donne sarde siano in genere di pelle scura, caratteristica che contraddistingue le razze istintive, passionali e violente. Ma la razzializzazione dei sardi, la percezione della loro inferiorità legata al colore della pelle e l'invidia per la 'bianchezza' continentale, sono presenti e diventano tematiche strutturali anche all'interno di alcuni scritti coevi (per esempio nella novella *Il padre*).

Nelle opere giovanili l'autrice sembra assorbire tutti gli stereotipi razziali e misogini, avendo però cura di attribuirli solo al popolo: "In generale la donna sarda, parlo sempre della popolana, è ignorante e relativamente poco intelligente" (Deledda 2011, 251). E non potrebbe fare altrimenti, a meno di ammettere la propria stessa ignoranza. Come si è detto, la focalizzazione su un Sud anche socialmente subalterno è parte del progetto borghese e centralista post-unitario, in nome del quale sembra sanarsi qualsiasi incongruenza. Nella "logica del mito" orientalista (Said 2006, 309) tutte le contraddizioni convivono infatti armoniosamente. La prima produzione di Deledda può ascriversi quindi a quello che con Said potremmo definire 'orientalismo dell'orientale'.

Già Cirese sembra accorgersene quando, analizzando la "rappresentatività isolana" di Deledda, la introduce nel più vasto problema storico-politico postunitario e parla del rapporto Italia-Sardegna come di un rapporto nazione-colonia (1972, 33-46). Di qui, basandosi sulle sole formulazioni di Gramsci, senza conoscere quale interpretazione ne avrebbero dato i Subaltern Studies, sembra giungere a enunciare quello che Spivak avrebbe posto all'attenzione

come il problema della rappresentabilità del subalterno. Cirese afferma che, nel caso della produzione di Deledda, non vi è reale distanza tra "cultura osservante" e "cultura osservata"; tuttavia si interpongono, fra le due culture, dei quadri concettuali che filtrano l'osservazione e manomettono la rappresentazione. Tali diaframmi, nel caso delle *Tradizioni di Nuoro*, sono costituiti dal progetto di De Gubernatis: "La mediazione della Sardegna reale in una immagine accettabile nel quadro della concordia centralistica e interclassista si pone quindi come la condizione stessa del lavoro di rilevazione etnografica della Deledda" (Cirese 1972, 40), e come la sola e unica fonte di legittimazione della sua voce.

Come sostiene Said, chi contrasta la rappresentazione orientalista non può che venirne screditato, "mentre chi ribadisce il concetto accresce di altrettanto la propria autorità, il proprio merito per avere messo in luce tale fatto" (2006, 77). Ciononostante, l'orientalismo della nostra scrittrice non è totalmente acritico: Deledda vede bene come la letteratura abbia mistificato l'immagine dell'isola e tenta perciò di minimizzare, di edulcorare quelle che nel suo epistolario chiama "calunnie d'oltremare." Attraverso le sue rappresentazioni Deledda media la visione, converte il disvalore "in valore, senza però – avverte Cirese – che la realtà delle condizioni realmente assunte come oggetto di riflessione diventi indagine sulle cause reali e dunque reale strumento di denuncia e di lotta" (1972, 41).

D'altra parte, il demologo nota anche come l'autrice, per fare ciò, assuma "la prospettiva dell'eternità immutabile" (Cirese 1972, 41). E ad essere presi in considerazione, in questo caso, non sono solo gli scritti etnografici, ma anche le novelle e i romanzi successivi. La conservazione di tale "immutabilità" è, secondo Cirese, da ricondursi "a livello oggettivo" alla reale arretratezza della vita agro-pastorale sarda, "a livello soggettivo ad una più forte carica di rivalsa contro una storia altrui soltanto subita, o partecipata in condizioni più duramente subalterne e più decisamente periferiche. Un modo dunque di autoidentificazione di cui la storia dell'isola spiega l'insorgenza e la persistenza" (1972, 44). Altro 'filtro ottico' impiegato da Deledda, oltre al progetto degubernatisiano, sarebbe dunque la rivalsa identitaria sarda: nella *Darstellung* (rappresentazione) si insinuerebbe la *Vertretung* (rappresentanza) (Spivak 1988, 278) del soggetto subalterno. Secondo Cirese, attraverso l'eternizzazione, Deledda conferisce una voce a "l'ideologia inconsapevole di chi vive la tradizione totalmente dal suo interno" (1972, 44), all'ideologia dei subalterni e alla loro incosciente identità di popolo. Ciononostante, conclude lo studioso, avendo per scopo l'integrazione della Sardegna alla nazione unita, la rappresentatività deleddiana finisce per essere consentanea e conciliante, identitaria solo laddove ciò non collida con l'identità nazionale. La diagnosi ciresiana di una rinuncia da parte di Deledda a qualsivoglia istanza polemica, generalizzata all'intera produzione narrativa, riscuote vasto consenso nel campo della critica deleddiana fino a una sua estremizzazione in Sotgiu, che, in un'ottica marxista, accusa Deledda di aver "giovato al blocco agrario della Sardegna di quel periodo" (1974, 96).

Cambio di prospettiva: la svolta nelle novelle

La condiscendenza di Deledda al disegno centralistico risulta però smentita se si osserva la sua opera in diacronia. Secondo Tanda si possono distinguere due fasi della produzione sarda di Deledda e dunque della sua rappresentazione dell'isola: "il suo atteggiamento è dapprima di adesione alla cultura positivista, in seguito di progressivo distacco. Il distacco avviene fuori dalla Sardegna" (1990, 120). Il critico spiega come, una volta a Roma, Deledda subisca l'influenza dei nuovi studi sull'isola e venga a contatto con il progetto educativo antimoderno degli intellettuali gravitanti intorno alla casa Cena-Aleramo. Tali notazioni appaiono fondamentali per comprendere come evolva la rappresentatività sarda di Deledda e come il suo percorso sia tutt'altro che inscrivibile nel solco del progetto centralistico delle *Tradizioni popolari italiane*. A nostro avviso, però, l'allontanamento del positivismo avviene già prima del trasferimento oltremare, almeno nei termini di un rifiuto dell'immagine eteronoma dell'isola, di una riappropriazione delle radici sarde e, con esse, delle spinte regionalistiche. Da un'adesione al progetto continentale che le era necessario per poter prendere la voce nel contesto nazionale, Deledda passa a una sua riscrittura dell'immagine della Sardegna con un'attenzione alle sue problematiche storico-sociali in precedenza tralasciate. Tale attenzione non emerge chiaramente nei romanzi perché, come nota giustamente la critica, essi si propongono come trasfigurazioni simboliche, come metafore all'apparenza universali e trascendenti; essa è tuttavia riscontrabile nelle novelle.

Nel 1899 e nel 1902 Deledda dà alle stampe alcune raccolte di novelle in cui sono presenti espliciti richiami all'espropriazione delle terre ("Zia Jacobba" da *Le tentazioni*) e al divieto di legnatico ("Le due giustizie" da *La regina delle tenebre*, cfr. Deledda 1996), provvedimenti legislativi attuati ormai da tempo e largamente contestati dalla popolazione attraverso moti ribellistici come quello famoso del *Su connotu* (1868). L'intento delle novelle, reso manifesto anche dal venir meno dell'atmosfera esotica e pittoresca, è quello di una denuncia sociale e di una critica rivolta allo stato italiano.

Ancora più significativi, in questo senso, sono due racconti contenuti in *Chiaroscuro* (1912), raccolta che precede solo di un anno l'uscita di *Canne al vento*. Il primo, intitolato "Al servizio del re" (perifrasi per indicare la prigione), racconta la carcerazione di tanti uomini innocenti, presunti complici dei banditi durante la 'caccia grossa'. Qui l'autrice, per voce di un personaggio, si prende gioco delle rilevazioni fisiognomiche della criminologia positiva, le stesse che aveva contribuito ad avvalorare con i suoi scritti giovanili. La seconda novella, invece, intitolata "Il Cinghialetto," si distingue per la sua forte valenza simbolica. All'apparenza estranea al quadro che stiamo tracciando, poiché tutta incentrata sulla storia d'amicizia tra un bambino e un cinghiale, la novella presenta in realtà dei significati nascosti, il primo dei quali, come rileva Bolognesi (2010), è meno celato degli altri, ma sostanzialmente ignorato dalla critica.

Una stessa immagine apre e chiude il racconto: il tricolore italiano. “Appena aperti gli occhi alla luce del giorno, il cinghialetto vide i tre più bei colori del mondo: il verde, il bianco, il rosso, sullo sfondo azzurro del cielo, del mare e dei monti lontani” (Deledda 2004, 825). Nel prosieguo della storia il cinghialetto selvatico viene catturato da un bambino, il cui padre è in prigione. Pascaleddu, questo il nome del bimbo sardo, lo porta in casa sua e gioca con lui fino a quando un altro bambino, ricco e biondo, figlio di un giudice, non lo chiede con prepotenza e non lo ottiene, promettendogli in cambio la scarcerazione del padre. Il bimbo povero, pur consapevole del suo tradimento, è costretto dalla madre a consegnare l’animale nelle mani del bimbo ricco, ricevendo da quest’ultimo, a mo’ di consolazione, un album illustrato “pieno di figure strane: erano donne e uomini coperti di pellicce, di teste di volpe, di code di faina; erano pelli d’orso, di leopardo, di cinghiale: si vedeva bene che il fanciullo dai capelli d’oro amava le bestie feroci” (Deledda 2004, 830). La novella si conclude con una festa, durante la quale il ragazzino ricco spara e uccide l’animale: “Una nube violetta lo avvolse: stramazzò, chiuse gli occhi; ma dopo un momento sollevò le corte palpebre rossicce e per l’ultima volta vide i più bei colori del mondo: il verde della quercia, il bianco della casina, il rosso del suo sangue” (Deledda 2004, 832-833).

Andiamo a considerare il valore simbolico della novella e il significato del sacrificio del cinghialetto. In un’altra opera di Deledda, *Cenere*, un bandito viene ricercato dalla polizia “come il cacciatore ricerca il cinghiale” (Deledda 1999, 26), ma anche in un racconto della stessa raccolta *Chiaroscuro* si legge: “in terra di Sardegna cinghialetti a due zampe, ohiò! ce n’erano ancora: ma di questi banditi qualcuno io lo conoscevo di vista” (Deledda 1996, 23). Il cinghiale deve allora interpretarsi come l’animale simbolo del bandito, mentre il suo tradimento da parte del bimbo sardo a vantaggio del bimbo ricco (identificabile con l’italiano) volto alla scarcerazione del padre, deve leggersi come il sacrificio dei banditi per la salvezza della Sardegna.

Per quanto riguarda la figura del brigante, secondo Bolognesi l’autrice contribuisce a costruire un luogo letterario altrettanto presente nella poesia isolana: l’“archetipo del *bandito-sardo*” (Bolognesi 2010). La scelta di questo tema pare implicare e sottintendere un ritorno alla tradizione letteraria sarda, in un primo tempo accantonata dalla nostra. Secondo il critico, il *banditosardo* diventa nei suoi romanzi contemporaneamente eroe sacrificale ed eroe fondatore. La sua morte sancisce il compromesso tra la borghesia coloniale sarda e lo Stato italiano, la nascita effettiva della colonia isolana, che nelle novelle dell’autrice sembra tradursi in un lieto fine venato di amarezza. Altro indizio in questo senso è la presenza, ne *Il cinghialetto,* dell’album illustrato, metafora forse della poesia epica sui banditi, o della letteratura scientifica della scuola criminologica, o addirittura delle ricerche etnografiche centralistiche dell’autrice: ad ogni modo spia di una costruzione discorsiva prima ad uso e consumo del continentale, poi fonte di consolazione per la Sardegna traditrice.

Se nelle prime novelle e nelle raccolte etnografiche siamo in presenza di una forclusione

quasi totale della realtà subalterna, nei racconti successivi essa viene recuperata. La scrittrice accoglie le istanze isolane, fornisce una polemica limpida ed esplicita nei confronti della legge italiana, degli eventi che hanno preceduto e seguito la repressione del 1899, e, con *Il cinghialetto,* affronta direttamente i problemi dell'Unità, del brigantaggio e della sua repressione. In tal senso, la focalizzazione postcoloniale su queste tematiche apre la strada a un ripensamento dell'opera di Deledda e invita a un approfondimento dei messaggi nascosti sotto la superficie della sua narrativa.

Canne al vento: contro-società, sacrificio, espiazione

A *Canne al vento* (1913), romanzo capolavoro di Deledda che le valse il Premio Nobel, in questo saggio non possiamo che dedicare qualche breve accenno. Nelle pagine precedenti si è parlato di una doppia colonizzazione e di una doppia emancipazione, tematizzate dall'autrice nella sua narrativa. Ebbene, *Canne al vento* presenta l'incontro tra l'isola coloniale, una Sardegna mitica e matriarcale simboleggiata dalla nobile casa Pintor che si erige al centro del villaggio di Galte, e lo straniero continentale. A raccontare l'antefatto delle vicende è il servo Efix, antico amante dell'ultimogenita dei Pintor e personaggio 'focale' dell'intera narrazione. È grazie all'intermediazione del suo punto di vista che Deledda – con una sorta di 'regressione' verghiana – può operare una commistione linguistica (fra sardo e italiano) molto simile, secondo Lavinio, a quella riscontrabile nel creolo (1992, 74). La scrittrice 'irrora' l'italiano con la propria lingua madre, come ibrida lo stile alto con quello del canto popolare, da una parte donando dignità letteraria al sistema di pensiero che risiede nelle strutture profonde della sintassi isolana, dall'altra operando una riscrittura, o meglio una "deterritorializzazione," per dirla con Deleuze e Guattari (1996, 27), della lingua nazionale.

All'inizio della storia, Lia, la più giovane delle dame Pintor, con l'aiuto di Efix fugge dall'isola e raggiunge il continente, lasciando le sorelle in balìa della violenta reazione del padre, il terribile don Zame. Quest'ultimo, dopo aver segregato in casa le figlie ed essersi inimicato l'intero villaggio, perde la vita in una colluttazione fisica con Efix. Già in parte dilapidata, la ricchezza della casata si estingue completamente con l'arrivo di Giacinto, il figlio di Lia, concepito in Italia con un uomo italiano. Giunto presso le zie dopo la morte della madre, lo 'straniero' continentale viene in un primo tempo accolto benevolmente dalla comunità di Galte, per poi esserne allontanato quando si rivela un truffatore. Il giovane viene presentato dallo sguardo isolano come il 'diverso': pigro, vizioso, scialacquatore, fonte di sventura. Allo stesso modo, l'Italia, esperita solo per tramite delle sue parole, è descritta come un mondo alieno, pericoloso, lontano. Se per la cultura italiana l''altro meridionale' si configura come il rovesciamento della struttura semiotica o come sua totale assenza – e tracce di questa 'deformazione' restano conservate nel romanzo, basti pensare all''eternizzazione' invocata da Cirese, negazione o ribaltamento di un tempo lineare e progressivo – in *Canne al vento*, con un'inversione dello specchio deformante, è Giacinto a incarnare le caratteristiche del barbaro lotmaniano e

a essere dipinto come l'orientale (degli orientali). Egli sarà quindi riammesso nel paese delle zie solo alla fine del romanzo, a seguito di un percorso di maturazione che procederà in parallelo con quello della comunità indigena e sarà coronato dal suo matrimonio con l'umile Grixenda e da quello dalla zia Noemi con il cugino don Predu.

In tale prospettiva, la matriarcale comunità di Galte può essere interpretata come un'immagine genderizzata della Sardegna, una rappresentazione alterizzata e femminilizzata della comunità periferica secondo le dinamiche tipiche della subordinazione imperialista, poi assorbita e ribaltata dal soggetto coloniale. Prendendo a prestito il lessico dell'imagologia, si potrebbe parlare di un'*eteroimage* che si fa *autoimage* e viene riscritta dall'interno dalla voce subalterna.

Non a caso, la decadenza della comunità inizia con la morte di donna Maria Cristina – la madre delle dame, descritta come una "Barona" corteggiata dalle sue vassalle – per essere poi aggravata dalla fuga di Lia che, "rott[a] la sua catena" (Deledda 2004, 178), stringe più saldamente quella delle sorelle, segregate in casa dal padre patriarca. Ci sembra possibile associare questo elemento della trama alla chiusura postunitaria che riporta la società sarda alla tradizione barbaricina. Stando a Spivak, infatti, il subalterno si rivale dell'egemonia subita dall'esterno esercitando a sua volta il proprio dominio sulla subalterna. La figura femminile periferica inoltre biasima, con il suo risentimento, la ricerca di libertà del femminismo metropolitano, in quanto quest'ultimo, disegnando un'unica via, per lei irraggiungibile, verso l'emancipazione, la ricaccia in fondo al baratro del silenzio. Più delle altre sorelle è Noemi a non aver perdonato Lia. Noemi, che, come rivela la veggente Pottoi, ha il cuore di donna Maria Cristina e che quindi, secondo la nostra lettura, simboleggia l'antica Sardegna. Non è forse un caso che Deledda, in questi anni in contatto con Aleramo, usi, riferendosi a Lia, proprio l'espressione "rompere la catena," espressione similmente impiegata dall'autrice di *Una donna* (Aleramo 1977, 182) per indicare il principio del suo cammino di emancipazione. Il confronto tra la liberazione femminile sarda e quella italiana sarebbe in questo senso confermato dalla stessa scrittrice. Ma nel prosieguo della storia anche Noemi riuscirà a liberarsi dalla sua subalternità. Tale emancipazione sarà significativamente simboleggiata da una danza, quella stessa danza in tondo che per Orano era indizio sicuro della barbarie sarda. Noemi, dunque, non è con la fuga dalla sua terra che ricerca la liberazione e spezza la sua catena, bensì con l'entrata a far parte di un'altra "catena," quella delle "donne danzanti" sarde (Deledda 2004, 276).

A un primo esame dell'opera, le doppie nozze finali sembrerebbero assicurare la ricomposizione dell'ordine e confermare una pacificante e consentanea visione dell'incontro con l''altro continentale'. Tuttavia, come nel caso de *Il cinghialetto,* il lieto fine sembra attraversato da un'ombra. Il romanzo, prossimo alla conclusione, presenta infatti la medesima immagine d'apertura, quasi a voler suggerire un ritorno alle origini: Efix si trova al poderetto, dall'alto del quale scorge tutto il villaggio. Ma se all'inizio del primo capitolo egli era impegnato a rinsaldare un argine, nell'ultimo quello stesso argine si è trasformato in un muricciuolo, oltre il quale il

servo sogna di cadere precipitando nella valle della morte.[2] La barriera di sicurezza della comunità, dopo aver rasentato il tracollo, è quindi ricostruita. Ma a quale prezzo? Nell'ultimo capitolo Efix, in fin di vita, ripara nella casa delle Pintor dove, proprio nel giorno dello sposalizio in cui la comunità risorge a nuova vita, muore, solo e abbandonato.

Efix, il servo, la voce narrante, "l'eroe fondatore" della Sardegna coloniale, è il capro espiatorio, la vittima sacrificale della ricomposta armonia. Come rileva Kristeva, riflettendo sulla contro-società femminista, ogni società si fonda e si conserva alle spese di un capro espiatorio, e la società subalterna non fa eccezione. Richiamandosi al meccanismo vittimario nella sua accezione girardiana, la filosofa afferma: "Come tutte le società, la contro-società si fonda sull'espulsione di un escluso. Il capro espiatorio caricato del male ne depura così la comunità costituita che non viene più messa in questione" (Kristeva 1998, 224). In *Canne al vento,* Deledda, narrando dal punto di vista interno del sacrificando, conferisce alla Storia la voce del popolo, e in tal modo riscrive l'immagine orientalista dell'isola. Un'immagine subalterna, che nel romanzo sfida l'egemonia esercitata dal potere patriarcale e da quello coloniale, ma nondimeno denuncia il persistere della violenza.

Note

[1] "Nonostante i due paesi siano il frutto di storie molto diverse, l'Italia figura accanto al Portogallo come semi-periferia nel sistema-mondo di Wallerstein: in quanto periferia meridionale dell'Europa (allo stesso tempo Europa e non-Europa) potremmo (ri)vedere il nostro posizionamento, e l'immagine che abbiamo di noi stessi, come il risultato di una complessa dialettica interna ed esterna fra l'egemonia di Prospero e la subalternità di Calibano, secondo quanto suggerisce l'uso attualizzante del rapporto colonizzatore-colonizzato nella *Tempesta* di Shakespeare proposta nel saggio di de Sousa Santos" (Oboe 2016, 13).
[2] Sul confine quale elemento materiale e simbolico significativo in altri romanzi dell'autrice nuorese è intervenuta Heyer-Caput in una recente comunicazione dal titolo "Grazia Deledda e la scrittura pensante 'al confine'," presentata al congresso AATI 2018 (Cagliari, 20-25 giugno).

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Fantasy and history in postcolonial India: the case of Arundhati Roy's anti-global novel

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ABSTRACT

Even if Roy employs some magic realist elements drawn from her Booker-winning debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997), in her second novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), the use of fantasy and realism is less concerned with an aesthetic function than with an anti-global one. In the novel, tropes of vulnerability affect individuals and environments alike, promoting not only a poetics of loss but also a radical critique of such social questions as anti-globalisation, environmentalism, anti-nuclear campaigns and land rights in Kashmir. This article explores the juxtaposition of Bharati fantasy and historical realism in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, and investigates the ways in which a hybrid narrative format manages to convey a complex and rich plot of contemporary India, where gender questions, caste discriminations, wounded landscapes and religious conflicts animate a tale of decay and hope. By resorting to Hindu epics, on the one hand, and to the intellectual activism typical of her non-fiction works on the other, Roy issues both a warning and an invitation to take into account the contradictions of present-day postcolonial India.

Keywords

Arundhati Roy, anti-globalisation, postcolonialism, Bharati fantasy, historical realism

A complex novel for a paradoxical country

It took Arundhati Roy two decades to complete her second and last novel. Between the Booker Prize-winning debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997) – which, drawing on Roy's political concerns, testifies the interconnectedness between colonialism and globalisation – and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), the Indian writer published several volumes of non-fiction, addressing such socio-political questions as anti-globalisation, environmentalism, anti-nuclear campaigns, and land rights in Kashmir. Like *The God of Small Things*, Roy's last novel explores the legacies of Partition but, unlike her first novel, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* lacks the sense of unity epitomised by the family saga in southern India of her previous work. In its twelve chapters, which intersperse chronological linearity with flashbacks, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* combines an omniscient narrative voice and multiple subjective perspectives that take turns to contribute to a kaleidoscopic storytelling. The multi-layered plot features two protagonists, Anjum and Tilo, and a wide range of secondary characters that make the narrative longer and looser. The omniscient narrative viewpoint is often replaced by a shifting focalization on other characters that recount their stories without inhibition, while, at times, letters, diaries, text-messages and poems are employed to make the events more genuine and

authentic. Even so, Roy combines storytelling skills with intellectual activism, shaping a complex and rich plot of contemporary India. The narrative thus thematises the contradictions of a postcolonial nation, specifically the matter of the *hijra* communities (male-to-female transgenders), the rise of Hindu nationalism, the struggle for Kashmiri independence, the plight of caste discrimination, the impact of rapid industrialisation on the environment and the effects of globalisation on society. Fragile ecologies and social outcasts are the central motifs that animate a tale that juxtaposes social and magical realism, envisaging an attention to precariousness that makes an early appearance in the prologue, where Roy describes the mysterious death of vultures "died of diclofenac poisoning" (Roy 2017, Prologue). Environmental degradation and chemical pollution do not provide a propitious *incipit* for what happens later in the novel. The text exposes environments and mankind to high degrees of vulnerability and exhibits a radical social critique by recourse to a wide range of literary devices: the various traits of traumatic realism, like fragmentation, spectrality and chronological disarray (Rothberg 2000), merge with more ferocious tones, typical of her non-fictional works.

Albeit central to the text, the ethical issues touch the narrative also on a formal level. The anti-global sentiments that constantly emerge in the novel show how globalisation is a continuation of British imperialism and neoliberal policies. Roy pays attention to the global, infusing the historical reconstruction of the storyline with narrative techniques that resist the logic of globalisation and hegemony. She grounds her critique of globalisation in the use of the poetic language of epics and natural decay, showing a tendency towards self-reflexivity. The use of analepsis and the complex merging of dreams, hallucinations, myths and fantasy is a self-reflexive device, which allows for the ontological exploration of the self. In addition, the presence of the author, through alter-egos (like Tilo), critical voices (like Biplab) and intra-textual links to her non-fiction works, functions as a self-reflexive device. In consonance with the view of postmodern fiction as "self-reflexive" or "self-informing" (Hutcheon 1980, 1),[1] the intrusion of the author into the fictional world valorises the concept of hybridity insomuch as it contributes to a sense of care of the powerless, inviting readers to meditate on the fictionality of the story while also encouraging them to fit the various pieces into a coherent whole. Hybridity, therefore, resonates with Roy's insistence on the disempowered and the wounded, crafting a complex narrative where chronological fragmentation, multiple narrative perspectives, reworking of ancient myths, liminal identities and the language of ecological vulnerability are used to bring aesthetics into ethics, framing a poetic style that embraces hybridity to challenge the globalising forces of contemporary time.

This article tries to read Roy's last novel in line with her intellectual commitment to anti-globalisation. To do so, I address the juxtaposition of fictional fantasy and historical realism, thus illustrating how *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* can be read as a fictional meditation on globalisation, understood as an unstable and unequal dehumanising economic process. In the following pages, I tentatively distinguish between two layers embedded in the text: Bharati

fantasy and historical realism. It seems that the form Roy employs – with its amalgam of mythological elements, drawn from Hindu epic narratives, and historical reconstructions – makes *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* a good example of a postcolonial novel where surreal and grotesque effects are intertwined with a fictional realist mode. By giving voice to those who dwell on the margins, Roy's hybrid textual format poses questions on the historical mechanisms that entrap nations and individuals, conveying a postcolonial critique of globalisation through a planetary vision of care and solidarity that opens up to hope and redemption, in an echo of Édouard Glissant's poetics of relation.

Challenging identities: *hijras* between Bharati fantasy and Hindu epics

The novel opens in the wake of Partition, when a Muslim Delhi housewife, Jahanara Begum, finally begets a son, Aftab, after three daughters. The jubilation, however, is only a few days long since the woman discovers "nestling underneath his boy-parts, a small unformed girl-part. […] Her child is a hermaphrodite" (Roy 2017, 7). The woman's reaction is one of surprise and disbelief:

> In Urdu, the only language she knew, *all* things, not just living things but all things – carpets, clothes, books, pens, musical instruments – had a gender. Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Everything except her baby. Yes of course she knew there was a word for those like him – *Hijra*. Two words actually, *Hijra* and *Kinnar*. But two words do not make a language. Was it possible to live outside language? Naturally this question did not address itself to her in words, or as a single lucid sentence. It addressed itself to her as a soundless, embryonic howl. (8)

Interestingly, the extract examines the meaning of gender in both life and language, stretching the linguistic power of designating identity to its limits. As Jahanara Begum ponders, her child seems to dwell on the threshold of language, a conundrum also epitomised by the two words the woman can only think of. *Hijra* and *Kinnar*, however, are not synonyms: while the first means "both man and woman" (Nanda 2014, 29), thus describing eunuchs and hermaphrodites, the latter strikes its roots in Hindu mythology. According to legends, *Kinnars* were celestial singers belonging to the realm of the Gods, ethereal creatures symbolically embodied in the very etymology of the name Aftab, "sunlight." A sense of spiritual transcendence permeates Roy's novel, specifically in Aftab's storyline. Years later, when he becomes a transgender, Aftab will learn that *hijras* are "chosen people, beloved of the Almighty" and that the word *hijra* means "a Body in which a Holy Soul lives" (Roy 2017, 27). The parable of Aftab, as I will explain, metaphorically breaks open myths, connecting mankind and the divine with a display of linguistic acrobatics that blends fiction, fantasy and politics.

As Aftab grows, he tends to behave like a girl: "[h]e could sing Chaiti and Thumri with the accomplishment and poise of a Lucknow courtesan" (12). He is teased by the other children at school and, one day, upon seeing a fascinating woman wearing bright lipstick and a green kameez, he follows her to a mysterious house with a blue doorway. Bombay Silk, the weird

woman, is a *hijra* who shares the place, called House of Dreams (*Khwabgah*), with other seven transgender people, Bulbul, Razia, Heera, Baby, Nimmo, Gudiya, and Mary. Although they were born male, all of them wanted to be women and some have had surgery on their male genitals. They earn their living as prostitutes or by blessing childbirths, weddings and other auspicious occasions. Aftab is attracted to the idea of being part of the community in the House of Dreams and, after a series of errands for the *hijras*, he joins the group when he turns fifteen, changing his name into Anjum, and eventually has surgery.

While her father stops talking to her, Jahanara sends her a hot meal every day and they occasionally meet at the local shrine of Hazrat Sarmand Shaheed. The holy place, located in the heart of Old Delhi, is a symbol of the controversial connection between gender and religious traditions: according to the legend, Safi Sarmand was a rich "Jewish Armenian merchant who had travelled to Delhi from Persia in pursuit of the love of his life" (9). Upon moving to India, he fell in love with a Hindu boy and finally became a *fakir*. He started to roam Delhi streets naked and his mystic lifestyle attracted flock of men, among whom the heir to the throne, Dara Shukoh. When Shukoh's brother came to power, Sarmand was arrested and brutally murdered. The story of his martyrdom, hence, establishes a clear parallel with Aftab's experience and it provides a further example of Roy's fusion of history and folklore: if history has strict rules, legends can be rich and fluid and, as the narrator informs us, Sarmand's spirit "permitted to those who came to him to take his story and turn it into whatever they needed it to be" (10), thus becoming a symbol for Indian *hijras*.

Roy's narrative is constructed of images of history and myth that make the present a complex amalgamation of past moments. The disordering of time is not simply a postmodern self-reflexive aesthetic solution, it also provides a vivid portrait of the hybrid identity of the *hijras*. Throughout the story the reader encounters digressions about these liminal subjects, depicted as vulnerable and abused individuals, above all by the English colonisers. In this novel, memory brings the reader back to a nostalgic mythical time, when *hijras* were respected. Transgender people, by contrast, are still being molested and marginalised in contemporary India and one could then argue that the fragmented temporality of the novel highlights the sense of trauma and vulnerability, working as a metafictional tool that rewrites history and denounces the effects of globalisation and neo-colonisation, as the story of the *hijras* can show.

Hijras are believed to possess magic powers in India, to bring luck and to provide fertility. Their songs, curses and dances are considered potent, operating through an occult language. According to Serena Nanda, "[t]he faith in the powers of the *hijras* rests on the Hindu belief in *Shakti* – the potency of the dynamic female forces of creation that the *hijras*, as vehicles of the Mother Goddess, represent" (1990, 5). When an infant is born a hermaphrodite, they insist that the child is given to them in order to raise the baby as one of them. *Hijras* have been part of the Indian subcontinent for about as long as the Hindu civilization has existed, a millennial past recorded in the words of the *Ustad* (master) of the *hijras* living in the House of Dreams: "[t]his

house, this household, has an unbroken history that is as old as this broken city" (Roy 2017, 50), she declares. Their history in India is intertwined with religious devotion, social integration, mythological recognition and scepticism. They have been mentioned in Hindu epic texts dating back to the 4th century B.C. and one of Shiva's avatar, the main Hindu divinity, is called Ardhanari, an androgynous creature born of the fusion between Shiva himself and his wife Parvati. While in the Mughul era, between the 16th and 19th century, they played a crucial role in public positions "as political advisors, administrators, generals as well as guardians of the harems" (Michelraj 2015, 18), under the British colonial rule *hijra* communities came to be discriminated and criminalised through various laws,[2] a marginalisation that still affects *hijras* in contemporary times. Today, it is estimated that about 6 million transgender people live in India and their socio-political persecution has partially come to an end in 2014 when the India Supreme Court recognised them as "third gender," a decision which has triggered a wide range of legal measures "to prevent human rights violations of the transgender community and institutional mechanisms to address specific concerns of transgender people" (19). Roy, who prefers the word *hijra* to the more politically-correct term 'transgender', negotiates the dynamics between nostalgic recollections of a lost world and present-day struggles for civil rights, and employs the *hijra* community as a symbol of vulnerability and sacrifice, a metonymic signifier for India itself.

And yet, the *hijra* community in the novel functions as both a poetic strategy and a political choice that contributes to the mixture of fantasy and intellectual activism. Roy features *hijras* as vulnerable subjects who seem to be endowed with a paradoxical power of adaptation that makes them the perfect emblem of a contradictory country. In line with the Hindu epic tradition, in particular in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*,[3] Roy depicts the community in the House of Dreams as an alternative magic world dwelling in a surreal location, a poetic narrative solution that evokes the genre of Bharati Fantasy. I am using the term 'Barahati Fantasy' as illustrated by D. Varughese (2017) to describe a mode of fictional writing that "anchors its narratives or at least takes considerable inspiration from various Hindu scriptures and epic texts through retellings, interpretation and inspired versions of the ideas and characters present in the 'original' material" (32). In Varughese's definition, the term includes a body of post-millennial fiction in English by Indian writers combining the myth of Mother India (*Bharat Mata*), with its rich set of stories, traditions and legends, and a Western readership that, because of a limited knowledge of the world portrayed in these novels, will interpret the narratives as 'unreal'. The core of Varughese's discourse relies on the way a sense of Indian-ness is communicated to the readers, in light of a growing *corpus* of Indian fiction in English and of the proliferation of a readership market in the West. Unlike western mythology, that for Varughese "uses 'narrative' to convey certain truths" (30), myths in India correspond to "that which was believed to have happened in the past" (30), providing a framework for fictions based on "a shared history and a set of attitudes for living" (35). The factual content of Bharati

Fantasy, therefore, promotes an idea of literature as a means to connect history and imagination. Such non-realist representation of India, especially to Western readers, becomes a way of recording a postcolonial critique of the social inequalities of marginalised people and of the horrid injustices of present-day India, contributing to the hybrid narrative frame that integrates history and myth.

In the *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the community of the *hijras* conveys a sense of weird otherness, specifically for a Western audience. Hindu mythology, Nanda comments, "contains numerous examples of androgynies, impersonators of the opposite sex, and individuals who undergo sex changes, both among deities and humans" (1990, 20), an ambiguous and liminal position that explains the ability of *hijras* of maintaining an important position in Indian culture. In the *Ramayana*, for instance, when the legendary hero Rama is exiled, he inhibits his subjects, both men and women, from following him into the forest. When he returns home, after fourteen years, he finds out that *hijras*, being neither men nor women, have not moved from the place where he gave his speech, showing a great devotion to their prince. For this reason, Rama granted *hijras* the power to bless childbirths and marriages, a perfomative role that Roy shares in the novel. As the *Ustad* of the House of Dreams remarks, *hijras* "were members of the staff of the Royal Palace" (Roy 2017, 51) during the reign of Emperor Mohammed Shah Rangeela, in the first half of the eighteenth century. The old guru of the community lays claim to the legendary first eunuchs living at court and, as she states, "[w]hat mattered was that it *existed*. To be present in history, even as nothing more than a chuckle, was a universe away from being absent from it, from being written out of it altogether" (51). History hence flows everywhere, even in the House of Dreams, where it blends with individual stories and fantasy: when one of the *hijras* retrieves the mythological story of prince Rama that has made them known as "the forgotten ones" (51) – because the prince had addressed only men and women – the *Ustad* replies that the household was called *Khwabgah* (heaven), because "it was where special people, blessed people, came with their dreams that could not be realized in the Duniya" (53).[4] Thus, the novel seems to suggest that history cannot keep an account for all and that the essence of mankind, in all its various manifestations, might be disclosed through a combination of official events and ancient myths or fairy tales. In a similar vein, *hijras* are regarded as personifications of respect and devotion in the *Mahabharata*. Here, Iravan, a minor character, expresses his desire to get a wife before a decisive battle, but women refuse to marry a man doomed to die. So, Krishna takes the form of a woman, Mohini, and decides to marry Iravan.[5] Roy's Anjum, hence, symbolically echoes the mythological Hindu heroine. In line with the classic iconography that portrays Mohini as a celestial enchantress, Anjum means 'star', a linguistic choice that entails political reflections on the question of gender in the contemporary Indian context.

Despite the style mixing fantasy and elegy which attracts the readers' attention, the novel takes a clear political stand: stories of victimhood and pain, revolving around such postcolonial

conflicts as the Gujurat riots, the Kashmir's genocide, the Iraqi war in the aftermath of the 9/11 terror, just to name a few, gravitate into one another, revealing a complex global scenario where minorities and neglected communities experience and witness to devastating violence. In line with the dedication of the book, "to the unconsoled," Roy's novel exhibits an engagement with outcasts, wounded characters, fragile environments and historical frictions, revealing a double-edge pattern of gain and loss floating around a narrative of trauma and suffering. Though Roy's distillation of mythological episodes in a historical background reflects Varughese's view that Barahati Fantasy authors "narrate stories grounded in shared historical knowledge" (2017, 41), a sense of weirdness percolates through the novel: despite the real-world background against which the story is set, a choice that subverts the ancient temporalities typical of the fantasy genre, the weird fictional account creates "an atmosphere of dread from unknown forces or beings" (28), thus challenging fixed ideas of historical objectivity.

Postcolonial contradictions: wounded ecology, *Dalits* and religious minorities

Whereas the first part of the novel revolves around Anjum, pivoting on her personal story and its various mythological echoes, the other strand of the narrative focuses on the barbarities of history, filtered through the experiences of a young woman, Tilo, and her three lovers. Tilo's relationship with all of them shifts the focus of the novel from fantasy to politics, delving into the Kashmir conflict. All the characters involved in this section have known each other since university times, in the mid-1980s, and what readers learn about the woman is distilled through the perspective of the three men: Musa, a Kashmiri freedom fighter; Naga, a left-wing corrupt journalist, whom Tilo eventually marries; and Biplap, a senior officer in the Indian Intelligence Bureau, who discloses most of the mysteries about Tilo. In the 1990s, during the pro-Independence Kashmir crisis, their paths cross again, like puzzle pieces that, despite the chronological disarray, link this strand of the novel with Anjum's story, finally fitting into the whole narrative.

Anjum's life seems to be exclusively related to the House of Dreams, but eventually the external world, the *duniya* as *hijras* call it, makes its way into the *Khwabgah* with its atrocities. After adopting a baby daughter, Zainab, Anjum is caught in the 2002 Gujarat pogrom,[6] where she witnesses the tragic murder of one of her friends and is herself brutally treated and imprisoned. Anjum's traumatic experience has an impact on her already fragile condition, nurturing her feelings of alienation from the places and the people around her. She then moves from New Delhi's centre to the suburbs, building her new home in the graveyard where her ancestors are buried. Here, Anjum creates a new community, Jannat Guest House, which becomes a home, or paradise,[7] to an unusual assortment of outcasts. On the threshold of a secular sanctuary, Anjum lives "like a tree" (Roy 2017, 3), part of a fragile natural word, a deep ecological perspective that constantly informs the novel. Against the backdrop of 'India Shining',[8] where the construction of a vast dam system, the so-called Narmada Valley Development Project, is damaging the environment, pushing the country into a debt to the World

Bank, and "[s]kyscrapers and steel factories sprang up where forests used to be, rivers were sold and bottled in supermarkets, fish were tinned, mountains mined and turned into shining missiles" (98), Anjum's resilience is like a spectral presence that works as an antidote to the poison of the globalising economic boom. Anjum, who "conferred with the ghosts of vultures that loomed in her high branches" (3), transforms the graveyard, a place of death, into one of recovery: her experience seems to suggest that shared humanity, not economic growth, is essential for humankind. And yet, before getting to such a point of hope, readers have to go through other traumas.

Roy alternates between elegiac scenes – like the above-mentioned one in the graveyard, where the victims of degradation and displacement are given voice – and ecological investigations, philosophical meditations on modernity and globalisation, and historical reconstructions. Embracing the form of a report, the second part of the novel refuses to step into the melancholic form of repetitions and temporal suspense, typical of trauma fiction, and it moves towards the polemic tones of Roy's non-fiction works, such as *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*, a biting denunciation of the capitalist logic that is consuming India, especially through the plundering of the natural resources. The portrait of the nation is a searing one, where various ghosts, such as dispossessed farmers who have killed themselves, and poisoned rivers, haunt this anti-global pamphlet. Roy claims that "[c]apitalism is destroying the planet. The two old tricks that dug it out of past crises – War and Shopping – simply will not work" (2014, 558). Likewise, the novel also touches upon the legacy of the 1984 Union Carbide Bhopal disaster,[9] an ecological catastrophe that highlights the political tone of the story. By narrating the visionary dream of Gulabiya Vechania, a traumatised survivor of the incident, Roy ironically invokes environmental justice, a central tenet of the postcolonial ecocritical agenda:

> In Gulabiya's dream his river was still flowing, still alive. Naked children still sat on rocks, playing the flute, diving into the water to swim among the buffaloes when the sun grew too hot. There were leopard and sambar and sloth bear in the Sal forest that clothed the hill above the village where during festivals his people would gather with their drums to drink and dance for days. (Roy 2017, 113)

Postcolonial ecocritics associate the historical processes of colonisation to the exploitation of the natural resources and, as Huggan and Tiffin contend, they warn that there is "no social justice without environmental justice" (2010, 29). Ecological care takes on important socio-political implications. From the cows intoxicated with chemicals "to ease pain and increase the production of milk" (Roy 2017, np) to the vultures that die because they eat poisoned cows' carcasses, the novel investigates current environmental problems, in line with the tenets of postcolonial ecocriticism. Roy expresses anxiety and fears for the abuse of the ecological equilibrium, denouncing the evil of natural violation. As the narrator observes, "the air was chemical and the water poisonous" (100) and the construction of the dam causes the most vulnerable people to be displaced, since "villages were being emptied, cities too, millions of

people were being moved, but nobody knew where to" (98). Significantly, Roy integrates human and non-human wounds, by blending ecological hazards that expose nature as "a contested space where different spatial fantasies and histories are accumulated, and the land is revealed both as a speaking subject and as disputed object of discursive management and material control" (Huggan and Tiffin 2015, 20). Moreover, Roy's ecocritical stance seems to echo Glissant's "aesthetics of the earth" (1997, 149): the Martinican poet and writer sees the earth, specifically the topos of the plantation, as a form of resistance to the colonial process of global markets that eliminate localisms and, at the same time, as a rhizomatic network that connects the local to the global. Drawing on Heidegger's understanding of the earth as a potential resource for ontological exploration, Glissant advocates for an "aesthetics of rupture and connection" (151) that neither celebrates nor excludes unicity, but "in which each is changed by and changes the other" (155). Roy's commitment to ecology is similarly manifested through images of land predation and, though traumatic, such apocalyptic portrait suggests a glimmer of hope, a "temporary solace" (Roy 2017, 400) for the sense of grief.

Thus, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is interspersed with harsh tones that connect imagination and reality. The author consistently writes about people living in precarious conditions, such as religious minorities, and engages with the violence emerging from ongoing tensions. The Gujurat agitation, for instance, had already been discussed in *Field Notes on Democracy*, which collects a number of essays and articles written between 2002 and 2008. Here, Roy argues that the future of India is threatened by an authoritarian power that takes the form of "a flawed democracy laced with religious fascism" (2009, 31). The author attacks Indian national politicians by blaming them for the discrimination of Muslim minorities and she claims that the local government in Gujarat, led by conservative Chief Minister Narendra Modi, was responsible for a carefully planned genocide against Muslims, in the wake of the widespread Islamophobia generated all over the world by the 9/11 terrorist hijackings. According to Roy, Indian politicians have exploited globalisation to dispossess people of lands and rights, "[a]nd now corporate globalisation is being relentlessly and arbitrarily imposed on an essentially feudal society, tearing through its complex, tiered, social fabric, ripping it apart culturally and economically" (46).

Roy addresses the plight of the most vulnerable citizens of contemporary India, such as the *Dalits* who dwell at the bottom of the Hindu caste system, a commitment that can be equally traced in the tragic character of Velutha in *The God of Small Things*. Set against the backdrop of the Naxal insurgencies of the 1960s,[10] the novel depicts Velutha as an "untouchable" who supports the Maoist credo and is finally massacred, a position that Roy subverts in her second novel. Here, the author features a young *Dalit* man who has taken the name of Saddam Hussein. Whereas Velutha is punished for his affiliation to Naxalism, Saddam, whose father had been lynched by Hindu fanatics terrorizing people in the name of a cow-protection campaign, joins the community in Jannat Guest House, awaiting the day when he can avenge

his father's assassination. Through this chameleonic character, Roy strongly criticises the tyranny of Hindu nationalism by showing how lower castes can suffer from fanaticism and violence: Saddam is a Hindu pretending to be a Muslim in order to escape his past. The *Dalit* character in Roy's second novel possesses the incendiary combination of low caste and religious tension running through him, a complicated juxtaposition reflected in the name he chooses. He renames himself after seeing the video of the execution of the Iraqi ex-president, admiring the dignity of his stoic resistance and yet knowing nothing about his tyrannical power. Roy's Saddam, thus, is a symbol of fragility and rancour that intra-textually introduces the political tones in the novel. A victim of Indian nationalism, he is displaced by Hindu sectarianism and communal violence but, by saving Tilo and a baby foundling from a riot, he also links the two heroines of the novel.

Historical frictions: the question of Kashmir

In chapters 7 and 11, both entitled "The Landlord," Roy presents the perspective of Biplab, shifting to the first-person narration in order to provide readers with insights on the Kashmir troubles. Biplab, nicknamed by Tilo "Garson Hobart" (the name of a character in a play they had rehearsed at university[11]), is Tilo's landlord in Delhi and his narrative perspective sounds like Roy's critics of her positions on the Kashmir plight. Biplab and Tilo first met in 1984, when the Prime Minister Indira Ghandi had been killed by her two Sikh bodyguards and Delhi Sikhs were assassinated in revenge. In a country where normality is "like a boiled egg: its humdrum surface conceals at its heart a yolk of egregious violence" (Roy 2017, 150), Biplab seems to epitomise the typical Hindu nationalist who feels anger at "those grumbling intellectuals and professional dissenters who constantly carp about this great country" (147), claiming a great pride in being a servant of the Indian State. Initially, Biplab's cynic reflections deal with the struggle between India and Kashmir, a war where "[a]ll the protagonists on all sides of the conflict, especially us, exploited these fault line mercilessly […] a war that can never be won or lost, a war without end" (181).

Being a member of the Indian Intelligence, Biplab unveils the atrocities that India has committed. The tensions between the Indian government and the northern region of the subcontinent date back to 1947 when, in the aftermath of Partition and the end of the British colonial rule, the region was contended by Pakistan and India, with a growing demand for separatism by local people. As Biplap remarks, in this more than quarter-century-long conflict "Kashmiris mourned, wept, shouted their slogans, but in the end they always went back home" (181). In the name of geopolitical borders, local people raise their voices for *Azadi*, freedom, a chant that generates endless violence and pain. Through the ironic voice of an Indian governmental official, Roy denounces the wicked abuses of human rights in the valley, a stance that she has taken in several essays. In "Azadi: The Only Thing Kahmiris Want", for instance, Roy attacks the Indian state that she holds responsible for having contributed to "subvert, suppress,

represent, misrepresent, discredit, interpret, intimidate, purchase, and simply snuff out the voice of the Kashmiri people" (Roy 2011, 58). Though ironic, Bipbal's words thus illustrate the vehemence of Roy's support to Kashmir independence and they reverberate with the traumatic images that the novel records: "[d]eath was everywhere. Death was everything. Career. Desire. Dream. Poetry. Love. Youth itself. Dying became just another way of living" (Roy 2017, 314).

The military tensions wreak havoc in the region, causing journalists and tourists to escape, while its ecosystem is seriously threatened. Whereas autumn in the valley is associated to "immodest abundance […] orchards heavy with fruit, Chinar threes on fire" (347), another scent permeates the valley, "the smell of dread" (347). Despite his political commitment, Biplab, who is addicted to alcohol and suffers from mental breakdown, since he is a witness to the barbarities of the military missions in the area, has glimpses of the beauty of the place and of the futility of the war: he observes the natural landscape that, at the threshold of autumn, changes colours, with meadows turning "coppery gold" (167), while leopards, bears and deer run in the forests. As he comments, "[i]t made one feel that Kashmir really belonged to those creatures. That none of us who were fighting over it […] none of us, neither saint nor soldier, had the right to claim the truly heavenly beauty of that place for ourselves" (167-168). The insistence on the decay of natural beauty in poor and exploited areas is a *leitmotif* in Roy's anti-global and postcolonial aesthetics, a position she has clearly taken in the eponymous essay in *The End of Imagination* where she writes that "[t]here is beauty yet in this brutal, damaged world of ours. Hidden, fierce, immense. Beauty that is uniquely ours and beauty that we have received with race from others, enhanced, reinvented, and made our own" (Roy 2016, 63). Though responsible for the atrocities, Bipbal seems also a victim of one of the many contradictions that India has faced since the end of the colonial occupation, embodying the idea of the monstrosity of human nature that Roy has expressed in her views over the Kashmir troubles: "[t]he Indian military occupation of Kashmir," Roy claims, "makes monsters of us all" (2011, 71). And yet, Bipbal's cynicism makes space for suffering when Roy shifts again the focus of the novel from the political to the personal.

The narrative abruptly plunges into the life of Tilo and Musa. The woman leaves her husband Naga, who takes an opportunistic move from left-wing political ideas to right-wing propaganda, disguised under the fake career of a journalist. Tilo then travels to Kashmir to find her old lover, Musa, whose wife Arefa and daughter Miss Jebeen have been killed in a riot. Musa is a Kashmiri freedom fighter who aims at overthrowing the Indian rule and his revolutionary political ideas lead the novel towards its conclusion. The reunion of the two lovers allows for scenes of love and passion, where "for a fleeting moment they were able to repudiate the world they lived in and call forth another one, just as real" (Roy 2017, 362), in an echo of the love scene between Ammu and Velutha in *The God of Small Things*. Thus, Roy balances scenes of loss and decay with glimpses of irony, giddiness and hope and it is a new birth that

eventually connects Tilo to Anjum.

The tales of the two heroines intersect at Jannat Guest House where Tilo finds refuge and adopts a baby whom she names Udaya Jebeen II, in memory of Naga's slaughtered daughter. The baby is a foundling recovered from a Delhi protest earlier in the novel, a reminiscence of the brutality of mankind. Again, Roy hinges on the allegorical meaning of names: true to the etymology of her name, Udaya meaning 'sun rising' and Jebeen 'forehead', the baby is a symbol of future hope and consolation. Though the novel begins and ends in a graveyard, such a liminal space seems the emblem of India itself, suspended precariously between life and death, decay and regeneration. Despite the bleak situation, Jannat Guest House ends with images of relation and birth: the vegetable garden was blooming, "the soil of the graveyard being as it was a compost pit of ancient provenance" (399). The aesthetics of the earth yields "brinjals, beans, chillies, tomatoes and several kinds of gourds, all of which, despite the smoke and fumes from the heavy traffic on the roads that abutted the graveyard, attracted several varieties of butterflies" (399), a compensative scene that echoes again Glissant's poetics of relation as a correlative of an exploration of the self that never gives up hoping for community and relationality.

Conclusion

With all its literary sources and cultural echoes, Shakespeare, Neruda, Leonard Cohen, Nazim Hikmet and Urdu poems, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* reverberates with a postcolonial stance in that it portrays a national allegory in the aftermath of the independence from British colonialism. In a blend of fantasy and historical fiction, the novel depicts the ontological and environmental degradation of a world where the evils of globalisation appear more harmful than those of the previous colonisation. In this sense, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* may be seen as a postcolonial novel that registers the atrocities and wounds of a recent-born country with its mythological past and an uncertain future. The hybrid narrative format, with the voices of the various characters, the juxtaposition of narrative modes and perspectives, the incorporation of songs and poems, the references to Hindu *Itihasa*, and the language of ecology, posits a productive model of amalgamation and contestation, an ethical position that aligns Roy with Édouard Glissant's planetary vision of the postcolonial world in the increasingly globalised reality. In my view, Roy's complex fusion of epic story-telling and historiographical reconstruction recalls Glissant's poetics of relation, a point beautifully illustrated in a poem written by Tilo towards the end of the novel: "How to tell a shattered story? By slowly becoming everybody. No. By slowly becoming everything" (436). The lines are a kind of metanarrative coda that alerts readers to the hybrid format of the novel: while characters and nature seem to be engulfed by events, writing stands as a way to embrace and encompass everything. The figural language of the novel transmits a 'poetics of relation' that, in Glissant's terms, opens to "the fluctuating complexity of the world" (1997, 32), a critical and ethical method aimed at

safeguarding the particular against the tyranny of globalising forces.

By concluding the story in this way, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* displays the ambitious scope of Roy's narrative. Albeit fragmented and apparently disconnected pieces until one reaches the conclusion, the story entails the possibility of a coexistence, edging towards a sense of hope that "things would turn out alright in the end" (Roy 2017, 438). Roy's tale of warning and metamorphosis thus inhabits a liminal space. As suggested, we might consider the novel as a sort of passionate anti-global critique, imbued with such intellectual activism where dissenting "becomes an ethical responsibility for those who have access to information and the ability to express that information" (Jeffers 2009, 160). And yet, though overtly political, the novel's infusion of history and myth, fact and fiction, reveals how storytelling remains a powerful weapon to convey great truths about a fragmented world.

Notes

[1] In *Narcissistic Narratives: The Metafictional Paradox*, Linda Hutcheon calls postmodern fiction "self-reflexive," pointing to the fact that these narratives draw the reader's attention to how stories are told. Hutcheon argues that there are two levels of self-reflexivity. While overt self-reflexivity occurs with "allegorization" and "thematization," covert forms, on the other hand, are "structuralized, internalized and actualized" (1980, 30). Covert forms, for instance, employ the narrative format of the detective story or of fantasy, where interpretation and imagination engage readers with sharing the creative process of writing.

[2] As Michelraj argues, *hjiras* were vigoursly repulsed by the Anglo-Indian administration and the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act punished *hjiras* castrating children or wearing women's clothes with a large fine and two years in prison. See Michelraj 2015.

[3] The *Ramayana*, as the title suggests, narrates the life of Rama, a divine prince who fights against the demon king Ravana in order to rescue his wife. The poem, which contains about 24,000 verses, is considered the oldest Hindu epic text, dating back to the 6th century B.C. Together with the *Mahabharata*, 4th century B.C., it forms the core of the so-called *Itihasa*, the two major epic works of Hinduism written in Sanskrit. The *Mahabharata*, made of nearly 200,000 verses, has a very complex plot that joins wars, adventures, and philosophical meditations.

[4] The word *Duniya* designates the world outside the House of Dreams.

[5] The episode illustrates the reason why *hjiras* claim that Iravan is their progenitor and call themselves "aravanis."

[6] In February 2002, a train coach was mysteriously burnt and fifty-eight Hindu pilgrims, returning from Ayodhya, were burned alive. The riot was a three-day moment of inter-communal violence in West India between Hindu and Muslims that caused the death of more than 1,000 people.

[7] In Islamic belief, the word *Jannat* indicates the heavenly place where the righteous will dwell after their life on earth.

[8] During the 2004 electoral campaign, 'India Shining' was the theme slogan by the then-ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The propaganda formula aimed at promoting the sense of economic optimism in a country full of contradictions.

[9] In December 1984 a gas leak from the Union Cardibe pesticides plant in Bhopal, central India, caused the death of thousands of people. Roy's allusion to such an environmental catastrophe, with images of "deformed babies, misshapen aborted foetuses in bottles of formaldehyde bottles and the thousands who had been killed, mimed and blinded" (Roy 2017, 111), highlights her postcolonial critique against the major corporations that have spoiled the ecological beauty of the Indian subcontinent.

[10] The Naxalite riots erupted in the village of Naxalbari, West Bengal, in 1967. Here, the leaders of the local Communist Indian Party (belonging to the Maoist faction) started to support the revolts by agricultural laborers against local landlords, an upheaval that gradually expanded to other Indian areas where a rural feudal system, based on farming and agriculture, still prevailed. The expansion of the riots was firmly opposed by the West Bengal communist cabinet, while on the streets of the main cities and in college campuses demonstrations broke out in defense of peasants and against the violent slaughter of insurgents by the governmental police.

[11] The character of Garson Hobart appears in *Norman, is That You?* (1970), a romantic comedy, dealing with the question of homosexuality, by the American playwrights Ron Clark and Sam Bobrick.

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The distinctive use of the Italian language in Nuruddin Farah's late production

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the use of the Italian language in Nuruddin Farah's later works, i.e. in the so-called *Past Imperfect* trilogy (2005-2011), in comparison to his earlier texts. Academic studies about the presence of the Italian language in his production are quite the exception. This article proposes a new assessment of the role and use of Italian in one novel in particular, *Links*, by comparing it to Farah's previous output. I question the dichotomy between colonial and local language and challenge the concepts of transnational and diasporic. I argue that Farah's use of Italian should be studied according to the development of the themes of his fiction, as they have shifted and broadened in scope from the early portrayal of the decolonising period to the latest representation of a more global and neocolonial environment.

Keywords

Nuruddin Farah, colonial language, Italian colonialism, diaspora, transnationalism, postcolonialism, neocolonialism

This article offers a critical reading of Farah's late work and suggests an updated perspective on the role of the Italian language by focusing on the novel *Links* (2005). To this end, I propose the novel *Sardines* (1981) as the main counterexample to highlight the shift concerning the role of Italian from the early to the late novels.

I argue that the aforesaid linguistic shift has occurred following a thematic development from the first trilogy, *Variations on the Theme of an African Dictatorship* – made up by *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979), *Sardines* (1981) and *Close Sesame* (1983) – through the second, *Blood in the Sun – Maps* (1986), *Gifts* (1992) and *Secrets* (1998) – to the last, *Past Imperfect – Links* (2005), *Knots* (2007) and *Crossbones* (2001). To be more precise, Farah has shifted the focus of his novels from "the problematics of decolonisation and nationalism to […] those of self-rule," to a more "cosmopolitan, global and transnational" perspective (Gikandi 2002, 455; Weinberg 2013, 26; Ngaboh-Smart 2004, 15).

In order to analyse how Italian has changed accordingly, I have structured this article in two parts: first, I explain the idea of language in Farah's terms and the concept of 'intellectual debate'; second, I focus my analysis on the novel *Links* (2005) with a comparative look at *Sardines* (1981), in order to highlight the shift in Farah's literary career, marked "not by sharp

breaks but by shifting emphases" (Alden and Tremaine 1999, 43). The novel *Links* will be analysed with reference to the concepts of transnationalism and diaspora, both fundamental to an understanding of the constantly changing relationship between the protagonist's identity, belonging and language.

Nuruddin Farah and his multi-lingual background

In over four decades, Farah's literary production has distinguished itself for being free from any narrow cultural, national, geographical and literary classification. Its polyphony, the variety of characters, the broad transnational cultural references and the distinctive insight into women's experience have challenged any theoretical inclusion in a single literary category (Okonkwo 1985). Several academic studies have dealt with Farah's rich corpus of writings by analysing the issues of identity, belonging, nationalism, gender, colonialism, patriarchy and clannism in relation to the Somali nation-building process after independence (Wright 1992, 1997, 2002; Hitchcock 2010; Masterson 2013; Moolla 2014). For this reason, Farah has been labelled as a "postcolonial, postmodern, anglophone, diasporic, exilic writer of the 'Third World'" (Hitchcock 2010, 91). Indeed, he has engaged with a variety of fictional forms, different modes of writing and polyglot and polyphonic styles, wielding English, Somali and Italian as his linguistic tools.

However, even though it may be challenging to label Farah according to the multifaceted theoretical perspective with which he engages, the concept of language has remained unchanged over time in his writings, as he himself remarked in several interviews from the 1980s to the 2010s (Farah 1988; Jusswalla and Dasenbrock 1992; Alden and Tremaine 1999; Appiah 2004; Niemi 2012; Wainaina 2016). So, in Farah's terms, language can be understood as the writer's tool for the exploration of the characters' beliefs, thoughts and ideas, rather than a carrier of culture (Samatar 2011, 93). Moreover, language has the power of shaping and negotiating identities and relations, as scholars Patricia Alden and Louis Tremaine have suggested in their pivotal work on Farah (1999).

In this regard, in the long-lasting dispute about English vs. African languages, which started at the Conference of African Writers of English Expression held in Makerere in 1962, Farah did not take sides explicitly (Niemi 2012, 330). Since then, Nigerian author Chinua Achebe and Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o have been regarded as the two emblems of the opposite positions raised from the dispute: the former supported the use of the English language as a literary medium, while the latter suggested employing indigenous languages instead of the colonial ones (Achebe 1975; Ngũgĩ 1981).

However, even if claiming non-involvement in this linguistic debate, Farah implicitly agrees with Achebe, in his incidental suggestion that any language could be used for the aim of representation. To a question about Ngũgĩ's idea of language, Farah laconically answered that the content was most important and not the language in which it is expressed (Jussawalla

and Dasenbrock 1992). This suggests that Farah challenges the idea of uniqueness and authenticity of language, supporting instead the concept of 'function'. The latter, introduced by Achebe, explains the ability of a language to adapt to the content according to the writer's creative use (Achebe 1975, 61-62). Farah's attention to content rather than authenticity or form is confirmed also by the dominant mode of his fiction, which has been labelled 'intellectual debate'. Since his characters can be distinguished by the "concepts of identity and relationship that they serve to articulate," they often stand back from any psychological portrayal, authenticity, or verisimilitude (Alden and Tremaine 1999, 162).

However, these theories about language understood as a tool to express the characters' thoughts, inform mainly the English linguistic perspective, thus shadowing the more composite role of Italian and Somali in Farah's novels. Indeed, the existing academic studies about the use of language in his *oeuvre* are based predominantly on the analysis of English as Farah's preferred fictional medium. Until now, only a few academic articles have studied the use of Italian (Gorlier 1998; Vivan 1998; Weinberg 2013; Ahad and Gerrard 2004; Fotheringham 2018).

In fact, the Italian language plays a more nuanced and multi-layered role than expressing the character's thoughts and supporting the intellectual debate, as exemplified by the protagonist of *Links*, Jeebleh, compared to Medina, the main character of *Sardines*. In this regard, I wish to show how Italian informs a more realistic and mimetic perspective, so as to highlight Somalia's historical background and how it loses, in *Links*, the colonial power of establishing hierarchical relationships among the characters ascribed to it in such works as *Sardines*. Indeed, in *Links*, the English language endorses this latter function, as the analysis will show.

The Italian language in *Links*: a transnational and diasporic perspective

The *Variations* trilogy suggests that the Italian language in Somalia in the 1970s was a remnant of colonialism and of the AFIS period (the Trust Territory of Somaliland under Italian administration which ruled from 1950 to 1960). In this context, the Italian language is exposed to an ambivalent relationship due to the recent memory of the colonial era (Gorlier 1998; Vivan 1998; Weinberg 2013). In *Sweet and Sour Milk*, Farah draws a parallel between Mussolini (called *il Duce*) and Barre, to underline the continuity in Somali politics from the first dictator to the current one, dubbed *Generalissimo* (Vivan 1998).

Scholar Claudio Gorlier, who surveyed the Italian words regularly used by Farah, underlines the degree of inventiveness given by misspelling the words due to typographical reasons but, more probably, because of a deliberate choice in the sense of abrogation (Gorlier 1998). Farah indeed seems to reject the correct use of standard Italian so to adapt it to the Somali oral use and local linguistic practices.

In the *Blood in the Sun* trilogy, Italian was still present in his fiction to mark the legacy of colonial power and to question the issue of cultural identity, nation and belonging at the end of

Siad Barre's regime. In *Gifts*, the characters Bosaaso, Abshir and Duniya emphasise the continuity between the colonial and the post-independent period by saying that Somalis "weren't allowed to go anywhere near Croce del Sud in the 1950s, when the Italians were the master race here" (Farah 1993, 235). Indeed, the hotel called *Croce del Sud* (Southern Cross), designed by architect Carlo Enrico Rava in 1934, achieved great renown in Mogadishu and became the emblem of the colonial aesthetics of the Fascist period (Ali and Cross 2014). The Italian language survived in Somalia until the outbreak of the civil war, as the language of toponymy, bureaucracy and of speech, used by Somali people who had studied abroad in the 1950s and the 1960s, as in the case of Medina, the protagonist of *Sardines* (Weinberg 2013). This means that, soon after independence, the Italian presence was still dominant and, as architect Rashid Ali explained, "the café culture, cuisine (*pasta* become a staple Somali diet) and the unhurried Mediterranean tradition of evening strolling" were embraced by Somalis in their everyday life, at least in Mogadishu (Ali and Cross 2014, 13). Ali's statement highlights also that the influence of the architectural form cannot be confined to the formal level, but is strictly linked to cultural, linguistic and social practices. As Gorlier notices, these traces underline the legacy of the Italian language between the colonial and the post-independence period, as well as the complex role that Italians played in the making of Somali identity (1998).

While previous studies of Farah's use of the Italian language, such as the recent works by Grazia S. Weinberg, Ali Mumin Ahad and Vivian Gerrard, and Christopher Fotheringham, have been fundamental to our critical understanding of Farah's *oeuvre* as a whole, they have also remained in the minority of the academic output on the author. Hence, an update which considers the *Past Imperfect* trilogy from the linguistic perspective is necessary, because, both in *Links* and *Crossbones*, Italian still plays a role that should not be underestimated.

As I wish to show, this linguistic presence is exceptional if compared to Farah's early production, primarily because of the time setting and the deeply disparate historical backgrounds of the novels. Somalia went from Barre's dictatorship, the main backdrop of the *Variations* trilogy, to the tumultuous twilight years of his regime and the Ethiopian-Somali conflict, central to the *Blood in the Sun* series, to the civil war portrayed in the *Past Imperfect* trilogy. In particular, *Links* records the turbulent time of Somalia after the 1993 US-led military initiative known as "Operation Restore Hope." Written from the viewpoint of a limited third-person narrator, the novel tells the story of Jeebleh, a Somali living in New York, and his return to his native country after years of exile. As a Dante scholar who attended the University of Padua and Rome in his youth, during his stay in Mogadishu Jeebleh draws several parallels between Dante's *Inferno* and the present-day Mogadishu. Ruled by two main warlords and their brutal militia-men, constantly dazed because of the chewable narcotic *qaat*, the city lies divided physically by a line that separates the Southern and the Northern area, as well as socially, as clan loyalties and blood affiliation organise the community of Somalis who still live in the city.

In this context, the Italian language plays a consistent role and, even though less

quantitatively present, it underscores the thematic shift in Farah's production. While in *Variations* the setting is the post-independence period after the AFIS, the period fictionalised in *Past Imperfect* is decades later, the 1990s. Farah's novels have definitely achieved a global and transnational perspective, moving on from the decolonisation process of the early production, and the use of the Italian language has shifted accordingly.

Italian informs *Links* in two ways: firstly, Farah places the *Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri as the main paratext. Dante represents the central reference of Jeebleh's cultural horizon and, at the same time, the *Divine Comedy* is the literary antecedent from which *Links* is drawn, as the numerous quotations from *Inferno* in the epigraphs illustrate. According to scholar Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo, because of the several intertextual references to themes and structure, Farah's novel can be considered "an allegorical rewriting of […] and a commentary on Dante's *Inferno*" (2016, 71). The *Divine Comedy* could, therefore, be understood as the literary bond between the *Inferno* and Mogadishu and as the connection of the protagonist with two different cultural influences (Moolla 2014, 158-160; Brioni 2015, 116). However, the *Divine Comedy* also builds a link between the condition of exile, experienced by Dante, and the expatriate condition of the protagonist Jeebleh, who struggles to reassess his idea of home and his identity in the new Somalia.

Secondly, Farah uses unglossed Italian words and expressions in the text. I will provide a survey of the words present in *Links*, which can be divided into three main groups: the first one is made up of single words and short expressions usually emphasised in italics and never translated; the second includes most of all proper names; the third involves sentences that refer generally to Italy or Italian culture. I decided not to focus on singular words only, but rather to widen the inclusion and embrace any references to the Italian background, to better understand the multidirectional relationship between the language, the main characters, and their cultural *milieu*. For practical reasons, it may be helpful to list them, in the form of a catalogue, and then draw some conclusions (numbers of pages and translations are provided in parentheses).

In the first group, made up of single words/phrases, we find: *spaghetti all'amatriciana* (44, 138), *momenti della verità* ("moments of truth," 169), *liceo classico* ("high school," 202), "*Che maledizione!*" ("What bad luck!," 210), *carbonara* (330), *arrivederci* ("goodbye," 334).

In the second group, made up of proper names, we find: Mogadiscio (with the Italian spelling in all Farah's novels), Padua (14, 56, 84, 181, 183, 185, 189, 191), *Inferno* (Dante's poem, 23, 57, 193), Fiat Cinquecento (64, 150), Pisa (71), "Parmesan cheese" (116, 330), Fellini's *8½* (316), Geronimo Verroneo (318).

The third group, made up of sentences, consists of: "a large sign, handwritten in […] Italian" (37), "the words for fate and place of birth, sex […] were written in Italian, and spelled incorrectly" (40), "For some years they had lived together in an apartment in Padua, in Italy" (56), "I remember Seamus and the three of us in Italy" (86), "Was it because Bile had quietly

spun Jeebleh's Italian nostalgia back to Mogadiscio?" (86), "in a vulgar Italian gesture of a fig" (88), "school text in Italian" (116), "An attached note advised him, in Italian, of the numbers" (125), "receiving awards from an Italian monsignor" (155), "the opportunity to go to Italy on scholarship" (170), "an Italian-made affair" (179), "It reminded him of their days in Padua" (181), "in the apartment in Padua" (183), "Mira's father […] was a diplomat based in Rome" (183), "When they met last, in Padua, they used Italian" (185), "In Padua, Seamus used to describe himself as 'a colonial'! […] he was at a loss to find an equivalent word in Italian" (189), "Jeebleh would have to run a fever of nerves before reintroducing the see-sawing games of their younger days in Italy" (191), "I recited a verse from Dante's *Inferno*" (193), "He […] saw a slim book in Italian written by Shirin Ramzanali Fazel" (226), "A wine of bottle of excellent Italian vintage, bought in Rome" (258), "Jeebleh remembered Italian youths making on their motorcycles through the streets of Padua" (294), "We communicate only in pidgin Italian, which he could barely use to order a meal at an eatery in Turin" (318).

If we compare this with the survey made by scholar Claudio Gorlier of Farah's first work, we see that the Italian words recur less often. This decrease was already noted by Gorlier, who explained that the use of Italian would ultimately decline, as well as "Somalia's linguistic links" with the Italian language (Gorlier 1988, 785). Indeed, in *Links*, the Italian words are limited to the bureaucratic use in hotel papers, as written reminders of the past occupation.

In the context of civil-war Somalia, therefore, the presence of Italian references mostly serves to underline a gap between the present-day generation of Somalis, unaware of or uninfluenced by the colonial rule directly, and the previous one, that of Jeebleh and his lifelong friends, Seamus and Bile, grown "following a custom which has seen many Somalis […] furthering their studies in Italian institutions" (Weinberg 2013, 31). Farah himself informs the reader that all of them attended university in Padua and Rome, as well as Hagarr, Bile's mother (Farah 2005, 170). However, Italian words do not only mark a generational gap and a transformed historical scenario, they also underline the shift in the building of characters' identities. Indeed, if in the previous trilogies Italy shows its influence as the former colonial presence, in the *Past Imperfect* novels the United States rises as the latest emblem of the neocolonial global dynamics. This shift does not mean that the two periods are divided by a clear line, but rather that they are still interconnected, simultaneous and indivisible, as the adjective 'imperfect' of the title's trilogy suggests. Italy has become one of the superpowers in an economically dominant position, along with the US, the UK, and China, but it has lost his role of cultural role model, as it was for the older generations. The main references for young Somalis are definitively global and are represented by American movies, Bollywood and YouTube videos (Farah 2005, 274, 294; Farah 2011, 8, 9, 21, 127).

Therefore, in *Links*, Jeebleh struggles to locate his identity in the new (dis)order of things (Masterson 2013): he recalls the lost Italian period of youth, possibilities and promising future for him and Somali people with a feeling of bittersweet nostalgia. Because of the ill-fated turn

of events in his own country, Jeebleh's life in Italy is depicted as bohemian, and recalled nostalgically using cheerful anecdotes and references to his university years (Farah 2011, 82). An overall tone of wistfulness is implied when the reminiscences of Jeebleh, Seamus and Bile are connected with Italy (Farah 2005, 80-87, 191). Farah places the references to Italian culture, previously surveyed, when the memories surface, so as to better describe Jeebleh's melancholic feelings towards his youth. A true enthusiast of *spaghetti all'amatriciana*, Jeebleh's personal link with the Italian language seems to be marked neither by the engagement with nor by the burden of colonialism. In *Links*, the latter remains implicit and it is not experienced by the protagonist in the same critical contradiction as in *Sardines* (Farah 1981, 23, 206-208). Italy and the Italian language represent the common ground where his friendship with Bile and Seamus is sustained, having been the crucible in which their relationships were forged. Jeebleh describes their friendship as "a country – spacious, giving, and generous" and it could be argued that the prominent language spoken in this imagined country was Italian (Farah 2005, 57, 185). The latter is also one of the links between Somali people across the globe, as suggested in a particular episode in the novel, when Jeebleh talks about the book by Shirin Ramzanali Fazel who, while in exile in Italy, wrote her autobiography *Lontano da Mogadiscio* (Farah 2005, 226).

The shift between the early and the latest works becomes clear if we compare the experiences of the two protagonists of *Sardines*, Jeebleh and Medina. Both have pursued their academic career in Italy and have returned to Somalia after their studies abroad. However, while Medina inhabits the so-called 'third space' theorised by Homi Bhabha (1992), namely the displacement induced by the feeling of being both a native and an outsider due to the knowledge of the former colonial language and culture, Jeebleh does not feel the same identity-related uncertainty because of his Italian influences. Medina's condition of in-betweenness in relation to Italian and Somali culture differs, I would argue, from Jeebleh's position, which is the result of neocolonial dynamics where the main role is played by the US. Indeed, the novel *Links* questions and fictionalises the influence that a dominant culture has, in particular the American one, in shaping the representation of a less powerful country such as Somalia, in terms of producing, controlling and sharing information, representations and images. In *Links*, Farah directly engages with the "Operation Restore Hope" and challenges the representation of the military intervention made mainly by the American media. From that moment, Somali people have been depicted as savages and Mogadishu as "the world-capital of things gone to hell" (Fogarassy 1999; Bowden 1999, 7; Draper 2009; Myers 2011, 138). Through the status of Jeebleh – a native Somali and an American citizen – Farah aims "to represent and examine the US military intervention from Somali eyes," in direct conversation with the Academy Award-winning film *Black Hawk Down* and the non-fiction book of the same name (Myers 2011, 138-139).

This difficult process of identification and belonging to two different national groups is

played out on the field of language. In the case of *Links*, however, Italian does not represent the point of contention. Rather than his knowledge of Italian, it is Jeebleh's Somali passport and the American citizenship which cause him identity-related troubles and exclusion from clan-based Somali practises (Farah 2005, 9, 32-36). If Medina finds herself split between her Somali heritage and her acquired Italian belonging, Jeebleh instead struggles with his American nationality, rather than with his cultural connection with Italy.

At this point, the terms 'transnational' and 'diasporic' may be helpful to better understand Jeebleh's position as portrayed in *Links*. According to the definitions suggested by scholars Cristina Bradatan, Adrian Popan and Rachel Melton, 'transnational' and 'diasporic' should not be used as synonyms; indeed, "while transnational [subjects] are firmly rooted in the host country and are involved in the social life of the community," diasporic people "have little or no mixing with their country of adoption" (Bradatan *et al.* 2010, 176-177). In the case of Jeebleh, he constantly asks himself how to express his feelings about the US, reaching the conclusion that he cannot say he loves his host country, being only "engaged with America" (Farah 2005 42). Even though he considers New York as his home, he doubts he "would use the word 'happy' to describe [his] state of mind there" (Farah 2005, 266). Accordingly, in the novel there are no references to his life in the US and almost nothing is related about his family, job, house or anything else linked to his everyday life. In this sense, Jeebleh may be considered diasporic, since his emotional life seems to be more connected with his home country than with his host land (Bradatan *et al.* 2010). However, his relationship with Italy may be understood as closer to the idea of transnationality, even though at the time of the story it is linked to his memories. Indeed, as the presence of the words in Italian suggests, Farah gives the reader more information about the period spent by Jeebleh in Padua and Rome, decades earlier, than his current life in New York, which surfaces rarely and only in relation to his wife and daughter, who are largely absent from the novel. In this regard, it should be noted that Jeebleh, at the end of the text, draws a parallelism between Dante's analysis of his ruinous time of infights and the present-day situation of Somalia (Farah 2005, 331).

If we consider his Somali origin and his American citizenship, the issue of identity becomes problematic, and all the more challenging in light of his having studied in the former colonial country. Jeebleh himself experiences, as the whole third chapter of *Links* shows, the excruciating situation of being constantly questioned about his belonging, both by Somalis in Mogadishu, and by the American people in New York, who always assume that he has arrived recently as a refugee. As Jeebleh states, his relationship with the adopted country is far from serene: "I was fed up being asked by Americans whether I belonged to this or that clan" and, similarly, he remarks that it is "irritating to be asked by people at the supermarket which clan I belong to" (Farah 2005, 36). According to the analysis by scholar Dodgson-Katiyo, "characters who return to Somalia from the West do not necessarily move from 'the comfort zone' into 'a chaotic situation', since 'they have problems in the comfort zone'" too (2016, 72). Again,

Jeebleh has troubles with his identity at the airport, at the very beginning of the novel, when his Somali passport is not recognised by the police officer at the documents check (Farah 2005, 9-10). Likewise, language poses its own problems of belonging, and incites his feelings of displacement and misunderstanding, as emphasised by the experiences of both Jeebleh and Bile. Indeed, the latter states: "In Somalia the civil war then was *language*, […] only I didn't speak the new language," addressing his exclusion from the new order imposed by the civil war (Farah 2005, 119). Jeebleh, too, often finds himself in the condition of being misunderstood or misinterpreted. For example, he has difficulties in translating expressions into English, as in the case of *dagaalka sokeeye*, 'civil war' (Farah 2005, 137-138); he struggles with the use of Somali pronouns, trapped in the uncertainty between "we" and "they," to mean Somalis in general or the clans, respectively (Farah 2005, 12, 41, 219); he immediately recognises that the civil war has created its own vocabulary and shaped the language accordingly (Farah 2005, 4). All the linguistic barriers that Jeebleh experiences are not caused by the Italian language; English and Af-Soomaali, instead, function as a means of exclusion and inclusion (Carbonieri 2013). They mark Jeebleh as an outsider who cannot identify either with his American nationality or with his Somali origin. *Links* seems to portray this challenging development of one's own identity, in which both "language and gesture need to adapt to a different context" (Bradatan *et al.* 2010, 176). To be identified as transnational, Jeebleh has to practice his Somaliness and understand that the new context requires the proper set of actions and behaviours according to the social actors involved (Bradatan *et al.* 2010, 177). *Links* seems to encompass all the nuanced identity-related possibilities of someone who, like Jeebleh, identifies with different nationalities or national groups, instead of being alienated or displaced (Niemi 2012, 336).

The feeling of displacement as experienced by Medina in *Sardines* thus presents a crucial difference from the liminal position of Jeebleh: on one hand, Medina's in-between situation is brought on by the dichotomy of having acquired the culture of the colonisers and being a colonised subject while simultaneously being neither of those things. The Italian language, in Medina's case, represents the emblem of her cultural hybridity. On the other hand, Jeebleh's uprootedness does not result from his experience in the former colonial country. In his case, Italian "functions […] as an identity-grounding home under a condition of displacement" (Bammer 1994, 15).

Conclusion

The use of Italian as a fictional language has changed in Farah's novels from the early to the late production. In the latter, Farah does not burden Italian with its colonial relationship, instead using it as a tool to depict a transnational and diasporic character and also to dramatise the situation experienced by Somali people in the diaspora, with multiple belongings and identities. In *Links*, Farah pays attention to the diastratic levels of the language, namely the variations

which depend upon social, cultural or educational factors. Language, then, is in this way linked to individual and particular events or specific experiences of the characters, and Farah seeks to investigate the indistinct line between such categories as 'colonialism', 'diaspora' and 'trans-nationality'.

However, Farah does not completely absolve Italy for its intrusive and damaging role in Somali society, economy, culture, and politics. The Italian colonial power, in his own words, has changed the internal social order of Somali people and ruled with oppression, humiliation and exploitation for decades (Farah 2011; Weinberg 2013). The ambiguous and self-serving Italian attitude towards Somalia has been clearly highlighted throughout his whole literary production: in the first trilogy, Farah makes no secret of the link between the dictatorship of Siad Barre and that of Benito Mussolini, the latter being a political model for the former in the ways he embodies patriarchy, despotism and the cult of personality; in the second trilogy, the Italian "gift giving acts may be perceived as a structure of delayed colonialism" (Woods 2017, 207). Accordingly, in the later works, Italy rises as one of the countries that illegally exploit, harvest and dump toxic waste in the sea of Somalia, as well documented in *Crossbones*, the last novel of the *Past Imperfect* trilogy. Farah does not refrain from passing judgement on the negative role played by Italy from the post-independence period to the early 2000s. Even though the relationship with the Italian language seems to be unbound from colonial identity-related issues, Farah does not hesitate to underscore Italy as a neocolonial power and emphasises its involvement in illegal activities.

However, the exploitations carried out in Somalia by Italian governments over several decades have not prevented Jeebleh and Bile from developing a sense of affection for the Italian language. In contrast with *Sardines*, in *Links* Italian is mainly evoked by the characters rather than spoken. It is used to connect rather than to communicate (Vivan 1998) and to link Jeebleh and his friends Bile and Seamus to a lost period of their lives. Jeebleh's knowledge of the Italian language rarely surfaces, if not idiomatically, in the spoken practice; Italian then appears to be the language of memory (Vivan 1998). Therefore, Jeebleh occupies an ambiguous area which puzzles "a series of rigid binaries and moral absolutes" (Masterson 2013, 262). This ambiguity results in a composite and nuanced approach to language that, in the case of Italian, appears to be released from the mere logic imposed by the colonial power on colonised subjects. In Farah's novels, different positions coexist under a multilingual framework whose layers should be dealt with singularly, as in the case of English and Italian. Each character develops a personal and complex relationship with language, which cannot be distilled down to generalised categories. As it has been shown, quoting Farah's interviews, this practice seems in agreement with his idea of language as a creative tool in the hands of the writer, rather than as a passive bearer of a whole culture.

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Deconstructing the 'single story': Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

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ABSTRACT

Stories in literature and in mythology carry a unique ability to teach, admonish, and denounce while representing a way to fight against conventional images and ideas. This article analyses Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) as a postcolonial coming-of-age story, which rewrites the stereotypical plot of romance and the male-female double Bildungsroman, from the perspective of two marginalized characters, simultaneously deconstructing the Eurocentric patriarchal literary canon. Winner of the National Book Critics Circle Fiction award, the novel describes the formative processes of a heroine and a hero who meet and fall in love in Nigeria, migrate to the West, and ultimately reunite in their home country fifteen years later. Through the tension of adaptation and resistance to white norms and white privilege, racism, sexism, and classism of British and American societies, Adichie attempts to define the hybrid identity of the two protagonists and explore their strategies of resistance to overcome suffering. Approaches to gender, decolonization, globalization and Afropolitanism have been purposely adopted to clarify and deepen the analysis of their stories, with a special focus on the importance of Nigeria for the writer and her characters in the interconnection between Africa and the West, the 'global South' and 'global North'.

Keywords

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*, coming-of-age story, postcolonial, Western canon, patriarchy, resistance

Adichie's approach to storytelling

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a prominent, award-winning Nigerian novelist and an engaging storyteller. In her inspirational TED Talk "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009), she narrates personal anecdotes with wit and humour, in order to highlight the common mistake of reducing an event, a person, a country, or a continent to a single narrative: in the case of Africa, a place of poor, voiceless, and starving people, fighting senseless bloody wars and constantly succumbing to deadly diseases like AIDS. Drawing attention to the *power* and the *danger* embodied by stories, she points out that power – represented by the principle of *nkali*, "to be greater than another" in the Igbo language – is "the ability not to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person" (Adichie 2009). As a result, the story turns into a *single story*, which minimizes, misrepresents and, consequently, creates stereotypes. But the power of a story can also be positive and healing; it is not by chance that stories can be considered double-edged weapons, since "[they] have been used to dispossess and to malign.

But [they] can also be used to empower and to humanize. [They] can break the dignity of a people. But [they] can also repair that broken dignity."[1]

Africa has an ancient tradition in the art of telling powerful, healing stories, which, often chanted or sung, are vital tools in supporting education, promoting language development, and building racial equality and religious respect. Ever since she was young, Adichie has written poems and short stories prolifically. She has been nominated for multiple literary awards, has published in journals and anthologies, and has been the recipient of several prestigious prizes. In her fictional narratives as in her lectures, she employs anecdotes to voice her convictions about complex and sensitive topics such as racism, immigration, gender biases, and cultural diversity. Her words often become inspirational quotes, tweeted or popularized by social and mainstream media, as she confronts pressing social issues.[2] Written narrative, which has its roots in her native oral tradition, represents for her "an essential repository of ideas"; it is about "memory, history, reconciliation and identity" (Adichie 2010, 96). People who read, study, and write literature are "more likely to be intellectually curious, progressive, humanist and open-minded" (96). In other words, people who believe that multiple and various narratives make a person, an event, a country, or a continent, and who, by rejecting the *single story*, a one-dimensional perspective, challenge conventional ideas or images and move closer to the idea of a common humanity.

Adichie's idea of *re-telling the single story* is also indebted to postcolonial writers' approach to the Western canon: appropriation and rewriting of European genres through parody, *pastiche,* or personal ideology (Albertazzi 2004, 57-60) in order to conform to or revise current cultural and social mores. Part of the Western canon are the romance tradition and the male-female double Bildungsroman genre. While the first one portrays adventures of imaginary and heroic characters, involved in a series of conflictual events, remote in time or place, and "leading up to a *quest*," often represented by "the dragon-killing" (Frye 1957, 186-187, 206), the second one, which has been studied by American scholar Charlotte M. Goodman, describes the development of a male and a female protagonist, with the purpose to excoriate patriarchy and the rigidly defined gender roles assigned to women and men alike (1983, 31). By considering as prototype Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Goodman outlines a structure in three major stages. The first one portrays the shared childhood experience of the two characters who stand as equals, living in the same place which recalls the "prelapsarian," "Edenic" world (1983, 30, 42). The second stage foregrounds their separation in adolescence or young adulthood, where "culture replaces nature and sexual differentiation occurs" (42), as the male hero begins a journey to seek his fortune, while the female figure is forced to remain close to home in a restricted environment. During the third and final stage, the male character returns home to meet his female counterpart. Their reunion, which could symbolize "a reaffirmation of the egalitarian childhood world in which [they] were undivided" (30-31), actually emphasizes the difference between their educational paths, hence the strong dichotomy

between them due to narrowly defined gender roles to which they have been forced to conform during their development. Even though the romance is essentially mythical, while the Bildungsroman is fundamentally realistic, they present some similarities, especially with regard to love between the hero and heroine and to adventure, which are major themes in *Americanah*.

Adichie's novel presents a tripartite structure and some of the hallmarks of the Western novel of development, which may partly be connected to the tradition of romance. But, by narrating a story focused on the perspectives of two black Nigerian migrants, marginalized characters in Western texts, the author rewrites the *single story,* the canonical mainstream and myopic plot of the aforementioned literary genres, and ultimately deconstructs it through her feminist perspective.

While the first part of the present analysis introduces central themes discussed in the novel, foregrounding the effects of the migration experiences of the two characters, as well as the issue of Afropolitanism related to the female protagonist, the second part dwells on the characters' formative processes and on their autobiographical inclination. Through the formative journey of the female character (Ifemelu), which can be said to follow the stages of Okuyade's Nigerian female coming-of-age story (2010, 2011), gender issues and strategies of resistance and empowerment, as outlined by Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos will be discussed. By contrast, in the growth process of the male character (Obinze), which partly follows the Bildung stages sketched out by Moretti (1999), Buckley (1974) and Austen (2015), the painful effects of migration to the UK and a critique of wealthy, corrupt and patriarchal Nigeria will be provided. The final part of this analysis focuses on the reunion of the two characters, when Adichie's feminist voice fully emerges, by emphasizing her characters' strategy of resistance to Nigerian and Western patriarchal norms.

As Jean and John Comaroff note, "the line of demarcation between 'North' and 'South', between zones of prosperity and power and zones of 'development of underdevelopment,' is not stable, but 'porous, broken, often illegible'" (2012, 127). By using the sophisticated technique of mixing English with Igbo, Adichie's native language, and by exploring in depth the burning social issues her characters face abroad (in the United States and England) and in their home country (Nigeria) as well as the protagonists' e-mail exchanges when they are separated, the writer stresses the power relations between homeland and hostland, the 'North' and the 'South', not as two fixed spaces, but as two worlds in constant communication.

Americanah: a postcolonial coming-of-age story

Set in the globalized world of the early 21st century, *Americanah* describes, through a realist perspective, the formative processes of Ifemelu and Obinze, exploring themes such as migration, diaspora, displacement, borderlessness, racism, hair as a metaphor of race, the interconnectedness between race and gender, the search for identity and national belonging. These topics specifically identify the so-called 'third generation' of Nigerian writers: young

emerging voices especially living and working abroad, in a late modern global reality, unavoidably linked to "nomadism, exile, displacement and deracination" (Adesanmi and Dunton 2015, 16), and whose life experiences are close to those of their characters.

Ifemelu is the central protagonist of the novel and the one who has received the most critical attention, since two-thirds of the book are devoted to her and, in particular, to her American experience. By contrast, Obinze Maduewesi is a supporting character, whose complex backstory is in relation to Ifemelu's. Nevertheless, several chapters of the novel are written from his perspective and, as his female counterpart, he undergoes psychological and emotional development. As in the tradition of the mythical romance, after meeting and falling in love as teenagers,[3] they undergo a perilous educational journey in the West, full of minor adventures and struggles "leading up to a *quest*" (Frye 1957, 187), here represented by their coming into voice, their own maturity that they will reach when finally reunited in their homeland fifteen years later. The writer portrays their adolescent love in an idealized, nostalgic way, with classic teenage politics and drama, which recalls the Edenic mythical world of childhood where the male and the female characters stand as equals (Goodman 1983, 30; 42). Sexuality is part of their emancipated relationship and, like food, enriches the story, by emphasizing the humanness constantly present in Adichie's novels.[4]

Because of the Abacha regime (1993-1998), the University of Nsukka and other universities around the country go on strike. Professors' protests for better salaries paralyse education, forcing many students to emigrate to America or Great Britain. Having been awarded a fellowship at the University of Princeton, Ifemelu moves to the United States. According to Okuyade, her departure corresponds to "the moment of the awakening" in which "[she] becomes aware that her condition of life [spatially and psychologically] limits her aspirations for the future." In reality, her decision to leave Nigeria depends on spatial constraints only, rather than on limitations imposed by her family or friends. Indeed, university strikes – "the discontent for her geography" (Okuyade 2010, 10) – constitute the real impediment to the continuation of her educational career. Therefore, the female figure, and not the male one as usual, begins her journey to the New World. Subverting the Bildungsroman trope, the male protagonist, Obinze, hopes to reach her in Maryland, but when he is denied a visa after 9/11, he moves to Great Britain for three years with the help of his mother.

Ifemelu is therefore an "Afropolitan," a portmanteau of 'African' and 'cosmopolitan', who "must form an identity" but also defend it on three levels: "national, racial and cultural" (Selasi 2005): hence a person who simultaneously belongs to an African community and other worlds, having different cultures, languages, and habits. Ifemelu goes back to her homeland as a "serious Americanah," who looks at things "with American eyes" (Adichie 2013, 385), her affectation and clothing style influenced by years spent in the West. Unlike Ifemelu, however, Adichie does not want to be called "Afropolitan": "I'm not an Afropolitan. I'm African, happily so… I'm comfortable in the world, and it's not that unusual. Many Africans are happily African

and don't think they need a new term" (Barber 2013). Even Obinze cannot be called "Afropolitan," since "his cosmopolitan Africanness is deeply embedded in the criminality and corruption that Afropolitanism means to reverse" (Guarracino 2014, 18). Indeed, he attains economic success and a high social status with the help of a corrupted man called 'Chief'. Nevertheless, society does not consider him a shady person, and he feels strongly oppressed by his wealthy life and traditional-minded wife whom he does not love. Even without being an "Afropolitan," like Ifemelu, he is a diasporic and hybrid character. They are exposed to Western culture and, as a consequence, struggle in order to fit into their adopted society, to break through cultural barriers and to negotiate "the many identities they have to wear as Nigerians and as migrants in the US and in Britain" (Guarracino 2014, 8). Involved in the process of hybridization, their identity is hence not pure, fixed and single, but "composed from variable sources, different materials, many locations" (McLeod 2010, 253).

Obinze, as an undocumented immigrant in the UK, and Ifemelu, as a victim of racism and sexism in the USA, with their constant struggle against the discrimination that result from colonialism and patriarchy (Santos 2016, 21) − represent the "global South":

> a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism on the global level, as well as for the resistance to overcoming or minimizing such suffering. […] a South that also exists in the geographic North (Europe and North America), in the form of excluded, silenced and marginalized populations, such as undocumented immigrants, the unemployed, ethnic or religious minorities, and victims of sexism, homophobia, racism, and islamophobia. (Santos 2016, 18-19)

The 'North' and 'South' are two spaces at the crossroads of class, gender, identity, ethnic belonging and race, pressing issues the two characters face during their development. In the continuous interconnection between Africa and the West, Nigeria remains significant. As Adichie has declared in many interviews, *Americanah* is "a book about longing for home and what home means" and, although her American life has shaped how she looks at the world, her eyes "are still very Nigerian" (Barber 2013). For Ifemelu, Nigeria is the place "where she was supposed to be, [where] she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil" (Adichie 2013, 6). Obinze is the main reason why she decides to return to Nigeria after thirteen years spent in America; he represents "home" and embodies Adichie's and Ifemelu's national belonging. Their home country is, therefore, a place "where [they] are welcome, where [they] can be with people [they] may regard very much like themselves, where [they] are not at sea but have found safe harbor" (McLeod 2010, 242).

Nevertheless, as Boes underscores, "the hero no longer merely changes with the world; instead, the world also changes through *and without* the hero" (2006, 240, emphasis added). Back in their homeland, the two protagonists must accept or resist the values and norms imposed by "the world," i.e. modern Nigerian society. Their home country is not the same place they left before moving to the West, but "an adult Nigeria that they did not know about," like "the very expensive and transactional Lagos" (Adichie 2013, 429-430). Thus, they begin

criticizing people and many aspects of Nigerian culture. While Obinze is outraged by how many of his fellow citizens prioritize money and their values (even though he unavoidably conforms to what society expects him to be), in her new blog "The Small Redemptions of Lagos" Ifemelu, instead, as an openly critical Afropolitan, discusses the postcolonial changes in her homeland and how they affect Nigerian people.

Obinze and Ifemelu: two different diasporic, hybrid subjects

Ifemelu's bildung *process*

Ifemelu's learning process begins when she is a teenager, not a child, and mostly involves her real-life experience in America. As McLeod points out, the process of identity formation for the migrant begins with trauma and anxiety, since s/he is always torn between losing his/her original identity and the need to conform to new cultural expectations (2010, 254). It is not by chance that after her arrival in the United States, Ifemelu feels insecure, alienated from American society and its people. Nevertheless, through an important network of women including her friend Ginika, Aunty Uju and Wambui, her colleague at the University, that "provides her with moral guidance in the face of gender adversity," she gains self-awareness, becoming more independent in American's wealthy male-dominated society (Okuyade 2010, 10).

In the United States, the heroine has to negotiate between adaptation and resistance to American norms. She is firstly reluctant to conform to American attitudes and to learn the American-English accent; yet, when she goes to the international student office for her enrollment at the university, she meets Cristina Tomas, a white American employee, who purposely speaks to her in a slow way: "You. Will. First. To. Get. A. Letter. From. The. International. Students. Office" (Adichie 2013, 133). Ifemelu comes back with the letter, and Cristina says: "I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. Couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand. How. To. Fill. These. Out?" (133). Ifemelu realizes that Ms. Tomas is actually speaking in that way because of her "foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling" (133-134). According to Frantz Fanon, the black subject "will be proportionately whiter," "will come closer to being a real human being," as soon as s/he masters the *other* language, hence possessing "the world expressed and implied by that language" (1986, 18) or that unfamiliar accent, as in the case of Ifemelu. Soon enough, she decides to conform to an American accent in order to avoid being asked to repeat everything she says and being, therefore, considered different and foreign. Thus, the adaptation to American English can be considered Ifemulu's Fanonian mask of conformity. Nevertheless, when a call centre operator tells Ifemelu that her English "sound[s] totally American" (Adichie 2013, 175), she feels ashamed for having rejected her Nigerian English, her African identity, "her jungle" (Fanon 1986, 18), her very self, and she stops imitating the American accent.

Ifemelu starts being black when she settles in America: "I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America" (Adichie 2013, 290). Only when she goes back to Nigeria, she will finally "stop being black" (479). At a party organized by two American friends, full of wealthy white people, she meets a woman, chair of the board of a charity in Ghana, who offers her to work with her team in Africa. Ifemelu realizes "the luxury to charity that she could not identify with and did not have" (Adichie 2013, 169), "wanting suddenly and desperately to be from the country of people who gave and not who received" (170). Therefore, Ifemelu considers herself inferior, the 'other', because of wealthy Americans who think of Africa only in terms of charities and who, by demonstrating a "kind of patronizing, well-meaning pity," unconsciously and unintentionally manifest attitudes of superiority and dominance.[5] Similarly, the heroine's relationship with Curt, a white American man who helps her quickly obtain a job and consequently start her green card process, reflects American white privilege and racism. Since white people are astonished to see Ifemelu engaged with a rich white man, she becomes convinced that racism matters, and consequently, "because American society is set up to make it even rarer between American Black and American White, the problem of race in America will never be solved" (Adichie 2013, 305).

Unlike Catherine in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Ifemelu does not embody "the author's identification with those women that have been forced to conform to traditional gender roles" (Goodman 1983, 31). On the contrary, she is an outspoken and independent girl, more ambitious and powerful than her male counterpart, a girl who, from the outset, has never lowered herself to comply with the female behavioral patterns demanded by the Nigerian and American societies. She exhibits an "autobiographical propensity" (Okuyade 2010, 6) by reflecting the writer's own American experience, strong personality and activist role. Society's racism and sexism encourage her to follow in her author's footsteps, becoming a blogger, a storyteller of our globalized society, who, by using a virtual platform, voices her opinions in a provocative way, examining weighty issues and lighter topics such as hair and beauty.[6] Her blog and her hair, therefore, significantly contribute to her process of identity formation, guiding her towards her coming to voice and dealing with the third stage of her Bildung, "the exploration of femininity" (Okuyade 2010, 10). Ifemelu defines beauty magazines as "racially skewed" (Adichie 2013, 294), since they pretend to be for 'everyone': "blondes, brunettes and redheads," having "straight, wavy and curly hair," but she knows that she is "none of those" (Adichie 2013, 295), because of her black kinky hair that cannot "form ponytails."[7] When at the career centre office of the university, people suggest she straighten her hair, emulating Western hairstyles in order to look competitive and professional for a job interview, Ifemelu's hair

> was [actually] hanging down rather than standing up, straight and sleek, parted at the side and curving

to a slight bob at her chin. The verve was gone. She did not recognize herself. […] The smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss. (203)

The burning of her hair represents the violation of the black body and black standards through the imitation of the white body and the assimilation of white norms. Through her hair and her "fighting body" which "suffers, rejoices, and dies," Ifemelu carries out her struggles and interacts with the world (Santos 2016, 26). As with her American accent, her adaptation to white values can be considered a resistant form of mimicry (Bhabha 1994, 85). Indeed, after feeling alienated and by realizing she has just denied her African identity, she ultimately refuses to adopt white paradigms, keeping her "black-black," "thick" and "bristly" hair (Adichie 2013, 41). Natural hair is therefore 'political' for black women: "a key ethnic signifier, second only to skin [and] through [which] racist discourses have cast 'black' on the side of nature, wildness and ugliness" (Barker 2008, 421). This is probably the main reason why Ifemelu chooses to publish a post on her blog titled "A Michelle Obama Shout Out-Plus Hair as Race Metaphor," explaining why natural African hair is "the perfect metaphor for race in America" (Adichie 2013, 296-298) and why even well-known black women like Michelle Obama or Beyoncé straighten their hair in order to conform to white beauty standards. Through this blog post, Ifemelu openly disapproves of black women's tendency to equate female beauty with white femininity, since, in this way, they only reinforce racist stereotypes, and hair will always and inevitably be linked to notions of race and gender.

Similarly, make-up products, generally defined 'universal', are aimed at white women only as they do not meet the needs of dark-skinned women (295). As a black woman, Ifemelu feels she does not belong to a 'universal' or 'unique' category of women who use the same beauty commodities and hair toiletries; thus, through her blog, she defends her own position and criticizes the widespread Eurocentric perspective. Since "feminism should be an inclusive party […] a party full of different feminisms" (Adichie 2015), Adichie believes that each woman has the right to be feminist, to express her own ideas and convictions and celebrate her femininity in a personal way. Ifemelu and Adichie, therefore, embrace a "multiperspectival" and "intersectional" version of feminist activity (Snyder 2008, 2), promote individualism and diversity and "rightly reject the universalist claim that all women [should] share a set of common experiences" (184).

Ifemelu's decision to keep her Nigerian English accent, maintain her natural hair, and employ her blog as a personal weapon to fight against American society's racism, sexism, and classism are strategies of empowerment and resistance to rules imposed by the 'global North' and which, in Bhabha's words, define her as "a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (1994, 86), "almost the same, but not white" (89). After thirteen years in the United States, struggling to negotiate her feminine subjectivity "in a society plagued by the debilitating forces of patriarchy" (Okuyade 2011, 152), she closes her blog and makes the

decision to return to Nigeria, reaching in this way her 'coming to voice' as a self-reliant subject (Okuyade 2010, 1; 6).

Obinze's *bildung* process

While Ifemelu's formative process runs parallel to the growth of her blog, Obinze's psychological and moral *bildung* is mostly related to his own inner struggle to shape his identity, firstly in an unwelcoming and unknown Great Britain and later in a wealthy, corrupted and patriarchal Nigeria. Obinze is biographically the character most similar to Adichie, since both grew up in Nsukka with parents who worked at the university.[8] As the author confesses in an interview, her male protagonist is "the part that watches, dreams and mourns" because, like her, he is "nostalgic for things" (Adichie 2014a) and "a big dreamer" fond of American novels and movies (Adichie 2014b). Obinze symbolizes the writer's desire for learning, but not for "power, mobility, autonomy" (Goodman 1983, 31) as a reflection of Heathcliff in Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). Because of his insecurity and introverted nature, Obinze is not a legendary and invincible male hero (Frye 1957, 187), and he inevitably conforms to the role society expects him to play, becoming a married Nigerian 'Big man'. Like the classic modern male hero, his growth process takes the form of a "journey-adventure-wandering-loss" (Moretti 1999, 4), while touching all the stages of the African hero's development: individualism, concerning his individual life; his *Bildung* and the relationship to personal mentors like his mother; the European existence, thanks to his experience in the UK; and finally political understandings, associated with the nation state (Nigeria) or a wider global environment (Austen 2015, 214).

After graduation, Obinze lives with his mother for a year, trying to find a job in his home country without success. Finding "constraints, social and intellectual" (Buckley 1974, 17), like Ifemelu, he desperately tries to leave Nigeria to fulfill his dream of settling in the United States. Nevertheless, because he is denied a visa after 9/11, he moves to the United Kingdom, making his way independently in London. Unlike Ifemelu, Obinze does not enjoy white privilege; on the contrary he plunges into an impervious and undocumented life, taking a variety of menial jobs to pay the two Angolan men for his planned green-card marriage, which would give him the opportunity to become a legal citizen of the European Union. Abroad, like migrants, exiles and refugees, Obinze experiences firsthand the process of disidentification. In his case, this process of rejecting familiar identities is only related to the pain of loss and uprooting, and it will never become "an increased desire to belong" (Braidotti 2011, 322) to the new foreign reality. London is indeed "both the agent of liberation and a source of corruption," a "dark hell" full of "illusion and confusion," which firstly "promises infinite variety and newness" and then turns out to be an "illusory utopian place" (Buckley 1974, 20). It therefore truly disappoints Obinze more than his narrow provincial life in Nigeria. Forced to answer to the name of "Vincent Obi" in order to survive and avoid the risk of being deported, he becomes invisible and denies his Nigerian identity of a cultured, wealthy man. His existence becomes "an erased pencil

sketch," since "each time he saw a policeman, or anyone in a uniform, anyone with the faintest scent of authority, he would fight the urge to run" (Adichie 2013, 257). Unlike Ifemelu, Obinze, as an undocumented immigrant, "prefers passive resistance," since he knows that "open confrontation with the legal powers will mean deportation" (Santos 2016, 25).

Distinguishing characteristics of the *romance* hero (Frye 1957, 187) and the migrant subject (Shukla and Shukla 2005, 110) include alienation, nostalgia, loss, guilt and constant daydreaming, all of which feature in Obinze's experience in the UK: "he thought of his mother and of Ifemelu, and the life he had imagined for himself, and the life he now had, lacquered as it was by work and reading, by panic and hope. He had never felt so lonely" (Adichie 2013, 259). On the day of his green-card wedding, his true identity is finally disclosed. Arrested and consequently deported "as a thing without breath and mind" (279), he is resigned and dehumanized, yet he is happy to cease pretending to be someone he is not. By leaving oppressive London, Obinze returns to his homeland, his real shelter, and the distant presence of Ifemelu alleviates his sense of estrangement, reinforcing psychic connections between them.

In Nigeria, as a 'Big Man', Obinze inevitably becomes a member of the Nigerian male-dominated community, composed of overbearing and corrupted people who constantly flaunt their power and success and express their superiority towards women. His existence becomes a prison of gold, and his spirit chokes on the fumes of unexpected wealth, which disorients him and simultaneously fuels his inner conflict: "bloated from all he had acquired – the family, the houses, the cars, the bank accounts – and would, from time to time, be overcome by the urge to prick everything with a pin, to deflate it all, to be free" (21); "his mind had not changed at the same pace as his life, and he felt a hollow space between himself and the person he was supposed to be" (27).

Similarly, his marriage, a "second skin that had never quite fitted him snugly" (456), reflects Nigerian conventional love relationships. Kosi, his submissive and traditional wife acts as typical Nigerian men would like their wives to behave, embodying the identity that a male-dominated society expects of her. Indeed, she apologizes for giving birth to a girl and not a boy (458) and, when Obinze admits that he wants to leave her for Ifemelu, she tells him that the primary goal of a good marriage is the subsistence of family rather than love (Adichie 2013, 464). Like Kosi, Obinze's friend, Okwudiba, is subject to gender roles imposed by Nigerian patriarchal society when he suggests Obinze forget the "white-people behavior" of getting a divorce for the sake of love (467).

Conclusion

After many years of silence, Ifemelu and Obinze connect again through e-mails. Their correspondence quickly bridges the distance between them. Enfolded in the novel like the blog writing, the e-mail exchange works not only as an innovative way of communication − typical

of globalized society, replacing traditional love letters − but it represents, first and foremost, the author's deliberate attempt to establish a connection between them when they are separated. Thus, the two characters function as "psychological doubles," since each of them is involved in the psychic life of his/her counterpart (Goodman 1983, 31).

Their meeting in Nigeria represents the first and vital moment of their reunion, and it recalls their idyllic shared youth before their separation. By evoking their former love, still pure and sincere, part of their missing relationship is restored. After painful soul-searching, Obinze finally makes the decision to abandon his life, his conservative wife and his supposed success, rejecting the role that patriarchal society has forced upon him, and to which he has always conformed. Once reunited with Ifemelu, he "finally finds the accommodation to the modern world he can honestly make" (Buckley 1974, 18); consequently, by reaching his 'coming to voice' (Okuyade 2010, 1-6) his *Bildung* process is definitely over.

While Goodman suggests that a "harmonious and balanced androgynous self is fractured by a culture that assigns radically different roles to males and females," which emphasize the strong dichotomy between them, limiting their full development (1983, 31), in *Americanah* "androgyny" is possible, and "the dream of a common language" between the two characters can be realized (43). If the main theme of the quest-*romance* is the dragon-killing by the male hero (Frye 1957, 189), in *Americanah*, both the hero and heroine slay the dragon, or the serpent − metaphorically represented by the gender roles of patriarchal societies − regaining Eden and becoming androgynous again, as in the well-known myth from Plato's *Symposium*.

As an African feminist, Adichie strongly believes in the involvement of men in feminism, openly asserting that a feminist is a man or a woman striving to solve the problem with gender, which "prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are" (Adichie 2014c, 34). While Goodman asserts that it is our culture that assigns rigidly defined roles to men and to women (1983, 31), Adichie emphasizes that "culture does not make people. People make culture" (2017, 46). The only way to change our culture and society's expectations is to reject gender roles, albeit so deeply conditioned in people and consequently so difficult to unlearn (19), and to raise sons and daughters differently, focusing on their personal interests and abilities rather than on their gender (2014c, 36). Obinze and Ifemelu's final rejection of gender roles represents therefore their strategy of resistance to Nigerian and Western patriarchal norms.

Adichie rewrites the *single story* from the point of view of two marginalized subjects, who represent the 'global South' for having suffered the injustices, dominations and oppressions caused by colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy. By celebrating the "myth of the androgyne," i.e. equality between the male and female protagonists and their definitive rejection of gender roles, Adichie deconstructs the stereotypical plot of romance and the Western Bildungsroman. The reinterpretation of both literary genres from a postcolonial and anti-patriarchal perspective can be read, therefore, as a way of resisting the Eurocentric tradition. Finally, by employing

the technique of 'contamination' (Albertazzi 2004, 57), the author spreads new hybrid forms of cultural understanding and intercommunication, thus establishing a point of connection between the West and Africa, and between English and Igbo, also stressing the important role of Nigeria for herself and her characters, at the crossroads between the North and the South of the world.

Notes

[1] See https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?nolanguage=it.
[2] Every summer, in Lagos, Adichie teaches writing workshops, attempting to make stories, novels, and poems accessible to all. With her Nigerian publisher Muhtar Bakare she has also started a nonprofit organization called Farafina Trust, established to promote "reading, writing, a culture of social introspection and engagement with society through the literary arts." For further details, see http://farafinatrust.org/.
[3] Ifemelu and Obinze meet at college in Lagos as teenagers. One day, Kayode DaSilva, Obinze's friend, decides to organize an impromptu party in his graveled compound; on this occasion, Obinze and Ifemelu meet, fall in love and start dating.
[4] After publishing her masterpiece *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Adichie admits: "I was determined to make my novel about what I like to think of as grittiness of being human – a book about relationships, about people who have sex and eat food and laugh, about people who are fierce consumers of life" (2008, 50-51). This realist approach to fiction is also used in *Americanah*.
[5] In that regard, in "African 'Authenticity' and the Biafran Experience" (2008), Adichie points out how mainstream media are used to provide a stereotypical image of the continent, partly based on the image of the poor starving Africans in need of salvation by Western whites. Her opinion is therefore close to that of Ifemelu when she meets these people.
[6] *Americanah* is written from a third-person omniscient point-of-view, except for Ifemelu's blog entries, which are integrated into the narrative and located mostly at the end of chapters. As the writer confesses in interviews (2014a; 2014b), her characters are completely fictional, but they exhibit autobiographical inclination, a distinctive feature of the Bildungsroman (see Okuyade 2010, 6; Buckley 1974, 14, 23-24). Adichie's presence can therefore be perceived through the voice of the omniscient and anonymous narrator, through Ifemelu's provocative blog entries, and through facets of personality and life experience of both protagonists.
[7] Adichie uses this expression in "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009), referring to a distinctive hairstyle of Western women, which cannot be chosen by black women because of the texture of their hair. For further references, see https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.
[8] For Adichie's detailed biography, see *The Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie Website*, maintained by Daria Tunca.

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http://europeansouth.postcolonialitalia.it

“Today you have day off”: un’artista etiope-italiana e il mondo dell’arte postcoloniale

Gianpaolo Chiriacò

Libera Università di Bolzano

con Gabriella Ghermandi

ABSTRACT

“Today you have day off”: an Ethiopian-Italian artist and the world of postcolonial art

Gabriella Ghermandi is an Ethiopian-born storyteller and vocalist based in Bologna (Italy), who writes in Italian, sings in Amharic, and articulates her works around the (removed) memory of the experience of Italian soldiers in Ethiopia. Gabriella and I visited the 2015 Venice Biennale of Contemporary Art. The exhibition, held every two years, is particularly interesting when seen through the lenses of Ghermandi’s work, for it started more than 120 years ago as a celebration of (Western) nation-states, and it still carries that heritage. However, for the 2015 edition, Okwui Enwezor, a Nigerian art critic and curator, was selected as the main curator of the exhibition, making him the first African person to be appointed to this position. His promise to put together a “*postcolonial* Biennale” inspired our visit and, as a result, it produced this contribution in the form of a conversation. Our preliminary hypothesis was that Enwezor’s original ideas had to come terms with national interests and the cultural politics that lie behind such big events. Therefore, we decided to use the 2015 Venice Biennale as a space to discuss several issues: Ethiopian history and its connection with Italy; functions and values of traditional art and music; the business of world music; Ethiopian diaspora and Italian cultural identities; stereotypical representations of Africa; and the role and the image of women in contemporary Africa. What emerges is a reflection on the reasons, limits and motivations of singing and music-making, where the works of art symbolically represent the backdrop of an investigation into the practices and the life of a diasporic performer.

Keywords

World Music, musica etiope, diaspora africana, biennale, arte postcoloniale

Il 25 giugno del 2015, Gabriella Ghermandi e io ci siamo presi un giorno di libertà. Libertà dalle rispettive routine quotidiane, ma anche dai ruoli per così dire ‘tradizionali’ attorno ai quali avevamo organizzato i nostri rapporti. Il lavoro di Ghermandi scrittrice è probabilmente tutt’altro che sconosciuto all’interno dei circuiti accademici e degli studiosi di tematiche e pratiche postcoloniali. Quello che invece potrebbe risultare meno famigliare è il suo percorso come musicista, che tuttavia negli ultimi anni ha occupato gran parte della sua attività. Qui si chiarisce meglio il mio ruolo. In qualità di etnomusicologo interessato alle forme vocali di varie tradizioni africane utilizzate nei contesti diasporici, ho sempre avuto un grande interesse per il lavoro di Gabriella, che mi ha portato a seguirla in concerti, a intervistarla in diversi contesti, a scrivere di lei (Chiriacò e Guarracino 2016). Inoltre, il nostro rapporto si è sviluppato in un’ottica colla-

borativa, per cui ci siamo reciprocamente aiutati: laddove lei offriva il suo contributo alla mia ricerca, io ho provato in vari modi a starle a fianco in quel cammino di ri-articolazione artistica (nonché sociale e politica) che è stato il passaggio dal medium della scrittura a quello musicale. Su mio suggerimento, e come parte della mia idea di mutuo scambio, abbiamo utilizzato il nostro giorno di libertà per visitare insieme la 56° Biennale di Venezia.

Jeremy Deller, *Hello, You Have Day Off*, 2013.

La Biennale offriva uno scenario particolarmente interessante se osservata dalla prospettiva del lavoro di Ghermandi. Costituita più di 120 anni fa, quale celebrazione degli stati-nazione e delle loro rappresentazioni, porta ancora impressa – nella sua architettura e nella struttura concettuale – quella eredità. Tuttavia, l'edizione del 2015 vedeva come direttore Okwui Enwezor, curatore e critico d'arte nigeriano nonché primo intellettuale africano a essere selezionato per questo prestigioso ruolo. Enwezor promise sin dalle prime dichiarazioni che avrebbe messo insieme una "biennale postcoloniale," e la sua posizione ha decisamente ispirato la nostra scelta di visitare l'esposizione. Ci interessava vedere come le idee di Enwezor potessero funzionare una volta messe a contatto con gli interessi nazionali e con le politiche culturali che sostanziano eventi di questa portata. Ma soprattutto, nel corso della giornata, la Biennale di Venezia è diventata il luogo per discutere di alcuni temi cari a Ghermandi: la storia etiope, in particolare quella legata all'invasione italiana; la funzione e il valore della musica tradizionale e della world music; le rappresentazioni dell'Africa; il ruolo e l'immagine della donna nell'Africa contemporanea; il rapporto fra artista e istituzione. Quella che segue è la trascrizione di alcune conversazioni che abbiamo ripreso e registrato. Insieme a noi, a guidarci

in questa esplorazione, Alessandra Ferlito, curatrice d'arte e ricercatrice, che al tempo portava avanti una ricerca sul postcoloniale nell'arte italiana, poi confluita nella sua tesi di dottorato (Ferlito 2018).

Gianpaolo Chiriacò: Mi interesserebbe sviluppare con te una riflessione su due piani. Il primo è l'insieme dei motivi per cui sei passata da artista che predilige la scrittura ad artista che usa il canto, fino a rendere la musica un elemento fondamentale del tuo lavoro. In secondo luogo, vorrei approfondire insieme a te il rapporto fra artista e istituzione, da qui l'idea di visitare insieme la Biennale di Venezia, come luogo in cui questo rapporto è costantemente all'opera.

Gabriella Ghermandi: Ma non esiste un rapporto fra arte e istituzione.

Siamo ancora sul traghetto che ci porta dalla stazione alla sede della mostra. L'immediatezza della prima risposta di Ghermandi, espressa ancora prima di immergerci negli spazi della Biennale, si evolverà nelle ore seguenti in un'appassionata discussione. In realtà, proprio nello stesso periodo della Biennale, Gabriella stava sperimentando un'ulteriore trasformazione. Il suo impegno come musicista, e soprattutto come leader di un ampio ensemble, composto di musicisti etiopici e musicisti italiani, la stava portando a interessarsi al sistema dei finanziamenti pubblici. In particolare, Gabriella iniziava allora a impegnarsi nella stesura di proposte per partecipare a bandi ministeriali o europei, per la realizzazione di progetti artistici, educativi e sociali, costruiti attorno al nucleo di Atse Tewodros, la sua creazione musicale. Oggi, nel maggio 2018, questo aspetto del suo lavoro è diventato centrale: Gabriella infatti è appena tornata da un viaggio in Etiopia, finanziato dal Ministero dei Beni Culturali grazie a un bando intitolato MigrArti (Chiriacò 2017), in cui ha composto e registrato nuovi brani, che svolgono due funzioni principali: mettono in luce un immaginario articolato, positivo e storicamente informato della donna partendo dalle visioni elaborate all´interno di diversi gruppi etnici dell'Etiopia; e vanno a formare il nucleo del nuovo album della sua band.

GC: Allora puoi raccontarmi come e perché sei passata al canto.

GG: Tu mi fai queste domande ma lo sai che io mi vergogno a rispondere, perché che io sia un'artista lo dite voi. Io che sono un'artista lo scrivo solamente quando chiedo dei soldi. Perché sono una persona in cammino. E in questo cammino l'arte è fondamentale perché mi aiuta a ritrovarmi. È stato il mio modo di salvarmi, di mettere insieme i pezzi, di trovare una strategia di uscita da una situazione causata da motivi politici, in Etiopia, dalla morte di mio padre, da una condizione economica e da una condizione famigliare che era anche molto difficile. L'arte è stato un modo per uscirne. Quindi, già parlare di me come artista è molto difficile perché io non so cosa sono. Utilizzo l'arte, questo posso dirlo.

Per quanto riguarda il passaggio, uno dei motivi per cui dalla scrittura sono passata alla performance è stato un fatto emotivo. Perché mi invitavano ai convegni, dopo aver vinto un

premio con un racconto, e durante i convegni dovevo fare la scena dell'intellettuale che ha delle cose interessanti da dire. Ma quando ero là a me veniva un buio in testa che non mi passava neanche l'ombra di un pensiero. E poi, io voglio vivere, non voglio essere attrice di me stessa, e presentarmi in queste situazioni per autoincensarmi. Alla fine ho pensato, visto che ero lì per un motivo artistico, che quest'arte potesse parlare. E dato che io ho una grande memoria, ho pensato che i miei racconti potessero diventare delle performance ai convegni, così non dovevo per forza dire qualcosa di interessante. C'è una favola, etiopica, che secondo me riassume il mio atteggiamento nei confronti di queste prestazioni intellettuali che ti richiedono di performare quando sei invitato ai convegni. Tu la conosci? Quella dei tre studiosi.

GC: So che l'hai già raccontata, ma potresti narrarla di nuovo?

GG: Ci sono tre grandissimi studiosi, scienziati, che disquisiscono delle loro scienze, camminando. A un certo punto si infilano in una foresta e trovano uno scheletro di un animale, e cominciano a competere per chi è più intellettuale, chi è più scienziato. Quindi uno dice: *ah, perché io sono in grado di ricostruire lo scheletro partendo da dei frammenti*. E lo fa. E gli altri gli dicono: *eh, ma non vorrai lodarti per questo*. Il secondo dice: *va bene, hai ricostruito lo scheletro. Io sono in grado di ricostruire la muscolatura, insomma di rimetterlo in piedi fino ad arrivare alla pelliccia*. E lo fa. E gli altri dicono: *bravissimo*. E poi il terzo fa: *ma io sono quello che veramente si può considerare scienziato perché son riuscito a fare la cosa più importante per qualsiasi scienziato, che è ridare la vita. Cioè, ho capito il segreto di dio*. E mentre sta là per ridare la vita al leone, passa un misero contadino e chiede: *ma che state facendo voi tre?* Loro lo snobbano: *ma cosa vuoi saperne? Ché noi siamo degli scienziati e tu sei un misero contadino*. Allora, lui dice: *al di là del fatto che io sia un misero contadino, qualsiasi cosa state per fare, datemi il tempo di salire su quell'albero*. Lui sale su quell'albero e il terzo scienziato dà la vita al leone, e come il leone ha di nuovo la vita, si mangia i tre scienziati. E allora il contadino dice: *sarò uno stupido contadino, però se aveste avuto un po' di conoscenza della vita nel suo essenziale come ce l'ho io, non sareste nella pancia del leone*. E questa alla fine è un po' la difficoltà del perché, quando vai ai convegni, devi fare la figura di quello che sa dare le risposte per ridare la vita. E a me mette un gran disagio. E quindi qua è nata la performance. Ora, mi piace anche cantare, e poi alla fine c'è un'altra cosa, che è il fatto della convivialità. Perché la scrittura è una cosa solitaria, e io ho un animo solitario, ma ho un animo anche conviviale. La narrazione e la musica costituiscono una roba molto conviviale, quindi, che mi permette di legare i due aspetti. In più, c'è ancora un'altra cosa, che in Etiopia si racconta scrivendo, raccontando e cantando. Cioè, sono tre aspetti di un'unica arte che sta assieme. Mentre qua in Europa sono cose ben distinte, in Etiopia no. E quindi, per cultura, non mi sento di avere fatto un passaggio. Mi sento di aver incarnato i tre aspetti della stessa funzione. Cioè l'unica funzione del racconto.

GC: Dalle tue performance, sei passata ad approfondire il canto anche come tecnica, e a cercare di comprendere aspetti tecnici del linguaggio musicale. Mi sembra che un gran lavoro sulla tua arte, da quando ti ho conosciuto, si concentri proprio su quello. Sul comprendere le tecniche sempre un po' di più.

GG: Ma non è una questione di prestazione o cose del genere. Cantare è come volare. E quando ti riesci a liberare e la tua voce va dove vuoi tu, è un volo. Quindi sto cercando di imparare a volare.

GC: E a che punto stai?

GG: Sto... come l'uccellino che sta fuori dal nido, e che ha capito come deve muovere le ali ma non sa ancora fino a che punto può lanciarsi. Cioè, ha capito che può atterrare, però poi invece proseguire il volo… non è detto che lo sappia fare.

GC: E questo come si riflette nel tuo rapporto con i musicisti etiopi e italiani?

GG: In che senso, come si riflette?

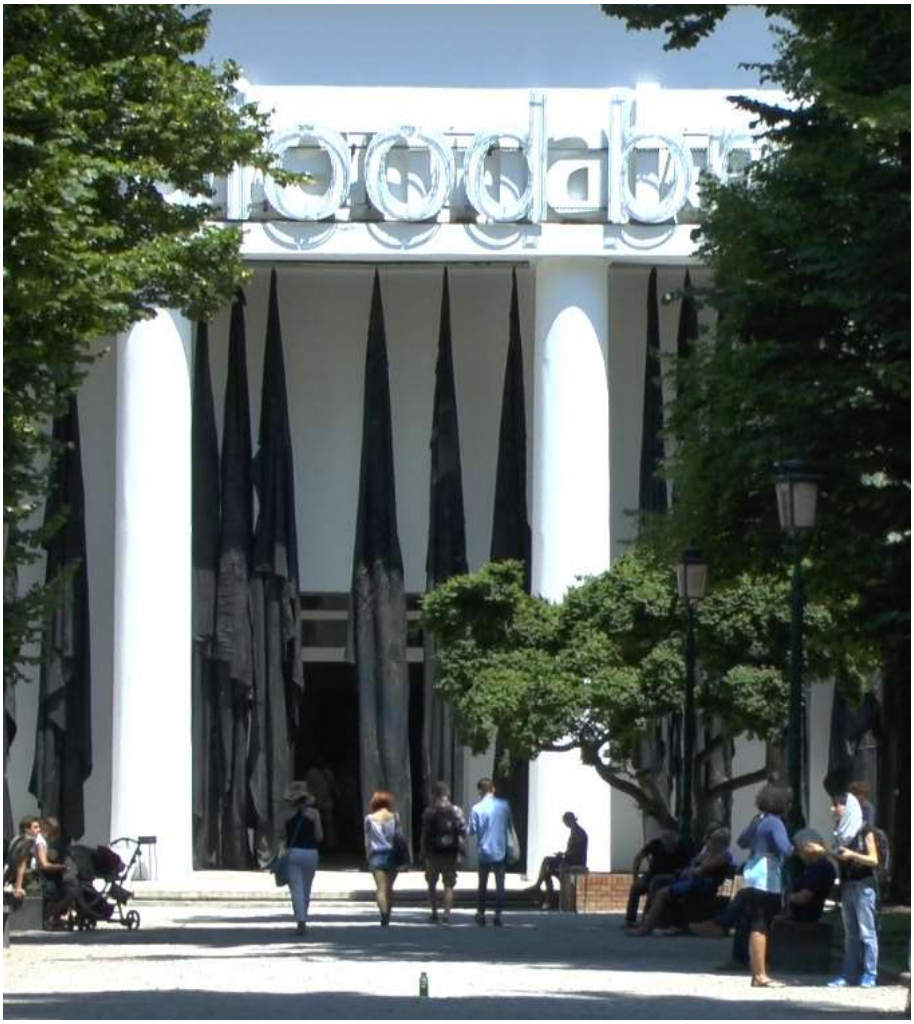
GC: Riesci a volare insieme a loro? Riesci a volare più con qualcuno meno con altri?

GG: Con i musicisti etiopici riesco a volare perché loro volano e mi portano loro dove devo andare. Mi capita adesso in questo periodo, quando sono triste, di riascoltare una registrazione di una prova di uno dei brani che io preferisco. Quando sento questo, penso: *lo so perché mi sto ammazzando per fare questi concerti, perché mi piace cantare con loro*. Perché sono disposta a passare queste forche, proprio per stare insieme a loro. Per sentire la loro energia. Quando sento la batteria di Mesale [Legese] alle spalle che dice: *vai, vai*.

GC: E perché però suoni con etiopi e italiani, allora?

GG: Ho una passione sfegatata per il piano. Sentire il pianoforte è una roba che mi piace da morire. La musica è stata una grande riconciliazione per me. Musicisti italiani e musicisti etiopici assieme sono le due mie anime che son riuscite a dialogare e non a cercare di prevalere una sull'altra. Io son cresciuta in una cultura che mitizzava l'Italia e che finiva per prendere a calci la mia parte etiopica. Poi, una volta che sono arrivata in Italia, quella parte si è ripresa e ha detto: *ah, e tu ti davi tante arie per questo... adesso prendo io le redini*. Adesso siamo arrivati al punto in cui queste due parti si guardano e dicono una dell´altra: *ma sai che quella cosa che hai tu mi piace?* Ed è quello che è successo attraverso la musica, e quindi questi due gruppi sono là e si guardano, e non si pigliano a calci.

Impegnati nella nostra conversazione, siamo arrivati all'entrata monumentale della Biennale. La grande struttura neoclassica, alla fine del lungo viale, ci accoglie.



Padiglione Centrale ai Giardini, Biennale di Venezia 2015; con opere di Glenn Ligon, "A small band" (2015) e Oscar Murillo, "signaling devices in now bastard territory" (2015).

GG: La mia parte etiopica sta lì con il fucile spianato perché appena vede un bianco vuole sparare. Perché dice: mi avete preso per i fondelli tutta l'infanzia, facendomi credere che eravate superiori, che eravate più democratici, che eravate ricchi, che avevate tutto. Poi sono venuta qua e mi sono accorta che era una gran fregatura, che tutto quello che millantavate davvero in realtà è molto meno di quello che c'è veramente. Quindi di voi non mi fido più. Adesso, questa parte qua, con i musicisti, ha tirato giù il fucile e si sta chiedendo: *aspetta un po', forse però mi posso fidare. Che faccio? Mi fido o non mi fido?* È come la favola della zuppa di sasso. Il lupo va a bussare alla gallina e le dice: *aprimi, sono il lupo*. La gallina dice: *il lupo?* e inizia a scappare da tutte le parti. E lui fuori dice: *dai, sono vecchio, ho perso il vizio, mi sono rimasti solo i peli*. *Sono sdentato, non ho più la possibilità di mangiare, quindi non ti azzannerei più. Voglio solo entrare per offrirti la mia zuppa di sasso*. E lei comincia a girare, pensando: *che faccio? Mi fido o non mi fido? Perché sono curiosa di vedere il lupo, ché non l'ho mai visto da vicino, però nello stesso momento non è che mi azzanna?* Così mi sento.

GC: Come la gallina o come il lupo?

GG: Come la gallina. Che comincia a dire: *beh, quasi quasi aprirei la porta*. Quindi, mentre sono sul palco si crea questa situazione di relativo equilibrio. Che però è dovuto anche al fatto che la parte etiopica ha finalmente abbassato il fucile e comincia a guardarsi attorno, per capire se può aprire la porta al lupo o no.

Questa conversazione fotografa un momento preciso nel percorso del progetto musicale Atse Tewodros. Oltre a essere cambiato al suo interno – alcuni musicisti sono arrivati in sostituzione di membri della prima ora presi da altri impegni – il progetto è approdato a quello che Gabriella ha definito il più bel concerto in assoluto. Nell'ottobre 2017, la band al completo ha potuto esibirsi all'interno dell'Istituto Italiano di Cultura di Addis Abeba. L'evento era ancora più significativo in quanto nel pubblico si registrava la presenza dell'associazione dei partigiani etiopici, che fino a quel momento avevano visto di cattivo occhio la stessa presenza dell'Istituto ad Addis Abeba. Alcuni fra i più anziani combattenti presenti in sala, poi, hanno accompagnato – con la loro danza – i versi di "Che Belew" intonati da Gabriella.

In quell'occasione si celebrava anche l'uscita della traduzione in amarico di Regina di fiori e di perle*, il romanzo pubblicato da Ghermandi nel 2007. Gabriella racconta anche un particolare di quella sera che descrive in una chiave diversa i contrasti fra l'animo etiope e quello italiano. Gabriella racconta che il concerto era previsto per le 18.00, ma la maggior parte degli italiani, ritenendo di conoscere le abitudini della popolazione locale, non si presentarono al concerto prima delle 19.00. Gli invitati etiopici, invece, in preda all'entusiasmo, avevano già riempito tutta la sala sin dalle 18:15. Il risultato visivo era che l'Istituto Italiano di Cultura era stato ufficialmente invaso – anni dopo la resistenza armata – da quei partigiani etiopici che si erano ribellati all'invasione.*

GC: Da come lo descrivi, sembra quasi che tutto il lavoro che fai per ottenere i tuoi spazi (i concerti, le performance) sia un lavoro destinato a ricostruire sul palco, e a rivivere, questa sensazione di pace fra le due anime dentro di te.

GG: Mi sa di sì. Lo so che può sembrare una roba folle ma quando ci sono questi momenti di sconforto, in cui tutti gli organizzatori di concerti mi dicono: *ah, interessante questo progetto però non va*; *ah, interessante però poi bisogna vedere, perché magari poi vi prendiamo e non viene nessuno al concerto*. Io penso: *ma a me chi me lo fa fare?* Poi ascolto la registrazione delle prove che abbiamo fatto l'anno scorso, e mi dico: *beh, me lo fa fare questo*.

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Fabio Mauri, *Il muro occidentale o del pianto*, 1993.

GG: C'era un vasetto di edera sopra le valigie del Muro. Che poi si è abbarbicata e mi sono chiesta se ce l'hanno messa, perché dà la sensazione di essere proprio cresciuta lì. Cioè nel senso che – nel momento in cui hanno fatto l'installazione – l'edera poi ha continuato a crescere infilandosi. Adesso inizia a seccarsi perché non le danno più nutrimento, ma fino a quando ha ricevuto nutrimento deve essersi abbarbicata e mi sono chiesta il significato di questo. Mi fa pensare all'uomo, ti racconta la storia dell'uomo; però anche dell'uomo che non va avanti. Tutte quelle valigie mi danno la sensazione del cammino. Però poi al centro di tutto questo cammino, cosa c'era? L'immagine di una donna ebrea con il numero sul petto. E quindi tutto questo cammino l'uomo l'ha fatto per poi arrivare a questo.

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In uno dei video pubblicati per presentare il lavoro sul campo, condotto in Etiopia all'interno del progetto Maqeda, Gabriella spiega il cuore del progetto su cui sta lavorando nel 2018. Come le era stato ricordato da sua nonna, che era giunta a salutarla prima di lasciare Addis

Abeba per l'Italia, le donne etiopi sono figlie di Maqeda, cioè figlie della regina di Saba: portano dentro di sé l'esempio di coraggio, lume e capacità amministrative della leggendaria regina. Questo è il punto di vista che Gabriella Ghermandi sta sviluppando per il nuovo disco del progetto Atse Tewodros. Alcune delle riflessioni fatte a Venezia hanno probabilmente contribuito a delineare questo nuovo sviluppo.

Falou Kandé Senghor, *Giving Birth*, 2015.

GG: Non son riuscita a capire tutto. Ma se devo essere sincera, mi verrebbe da dire che la donna africana così come la racconta [l'opera *Giving Birth*]), per quel poco che son riuscita a capire, l'abbiamo già vista. Ce lo siamo sentiti dire nelle orecchie un po' di volte.

Mi ha lasciato un punto di domanda. La donna intervistata aveva i vestiti tradizionali e poi quella casacca militare. Non ho capito cosa volesse significare. Mi son chiesta se lei poi sia andata in guerra. Se fosse una casacca del marito, che significato avesse. Non l'ho capito. Però non son riuscita ad arrivare fino in fondo per capire se è il solito modo di presentarci la donna, che la sposano troppo presto, che non ha ancora i seni, che devono farle gli interventi per partorire. È vero, però ci sono esempi, anche nella società europea, di come esista un sistema di convincimento che limita le possibilità per le donne. Vedo che anche le ragazze italiane – penso al modo in cui si vestono – entrano in un meccanismo che si potrebbe illustrare nello stesso modo, con lo stesso stereotipo con cui rendi la donna africana.

GC: E in che modo si differenzia il tuo di lavoro, quello che stai cercando di fare nel progetto sulla regina di Saba?

GG: Non riesco a concettualizzare. Secondo me, già quando formuli un concetto metti delle rigidità. Nella cultura etiopica, così come in tutte le altre culture, immagino, ci sono dei valori femminili molto forti, ci sono delle tradizioni legate alle donne molto forti. Ci sono degli spazi 'di dominio' che sono fuori dal casolare, i fornelli, i figli. E che stanno anche nella storia. E questi sono i modelli che devono essere di riferimento per la società.

GC: E che non lo sono ancora, però.

GG: No, non lo sono ancora. Per esempio, in Etiopia il tema ricorrente è che ci sia stata la regina di Saba. Però nessuno utilizza la figura della regina di Saba per una crescita. Cioè, si dice che la regina di Saba sia andata a incontrare Salomone non per ascoltare la sua intelligenza o conoscenza, ma per sfidarlo a un duello intellettuale. Sarebbe bello poter utilizzare questa cosa. Ma anche per esempio quello che mi ha detto un professore che mi ha scritto vari testi delle canzoni. Una cosa che io non sapevo, e cioè che nella Bibbia c'è la regina del Sud, che quando arriverà il giudizio universale sarà uno dei giudici, ed è la regina di Saba. Quindi, in realtà, c'è uno spazio di forza per le donne che non viene utilizzato.

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Hans Haacke, *DOCUMENTA-Besucherprofil (Visitor's profile)*, 1972, Biennale di Venezia 2015.

GC: Visto il lavoro che stai facendo da quando ti sei affacciata al mondo della musica, qual è il tuo rapporto con il mercato (discografico, dei concerti, etc.)? Che cos'è per te questo sistema? Come funziona? Come si regge? E cosa fai tu per essere sostenibile all'interno di questo sistema?

GG: In Italia intanto tu lo sai è molto difficile avere la possibilità di inserirsi in un meccanismo per cui tu possa avere un ritorno economico dalla musica. Poi, il mondo della musica è molto competitivo, soprattutto se lo confronti con la scrittura. Tu scrivi in italiano, sei uno straniero che scrive in italiano, il mercato letterario ti permette di identificarti. Hai molta più possibilità rispetto a fare world music, che è un linguaggio onnicomprensivo, quindi puoi ascoltare musica proveniente da tutto il mondo e non devi necessariamente capire cosa dicono perché la musica già di per sé è un linguaggio. È molto più competitivo della scrittura.

In più, è molto faticoso come sistema. Devi cogliere le occasioni al volo. Ho incontrato un'agente inglese qualche tempo fa, e mi ha chiesto di avvisarla qualora passassi a Londra

per un'intervista. Le ho detto: *guarda, facciamo che ci passo. Non per caso. Vengo direttamente per l'intervista.* Ed è stato per noi un modo per trovare un'etichetta, sennò non so quando l'avremmo trovata. Lo trovo molto più faticoso. C'è poi da dire che non so se questo è dovuto al fatto che io ho fatto una cosa che è folle. Perché, innanzitutto non sono più giovane, e quindi non è che ho il tempo di fare i percorsi che potrebbe fare un ragazzo che ha vent'anni, che inizia a suonare, si fa il gruppetto, che poi piano piano inizia a farsi conoscere. E poi, due: avere un gruppo composto da musicisti che sono suddivisi in due continenti è molto costoso. Per qualsiasi festival. Che sa già che, poiché non siamo ancora molto conosciuti, non può far pagare dei biglietti per i nostri concerti. Gli agenti italiani ti dicono che il progetto è bellissimo, che per loro è molto interessante. Ma loro non sono in condizione di investire. Perché in questo momento è molto difficile. Non so se approderà da qualche parte il progetto che ho fatto. Perché chiaramente un ritorno economico a un certo punto è indispensabile. Cioè, non è che puoi solo investire. Perché a volte l'energia che devi mettere per avere un ritorno economico, è tutta energia che togli alla creatività. Perché, per esempio, per quanto mi riguarda, dato che io ho ancora il secondo romanzo in salamoia perché non ho mai la tranquillità mentale di mettermi lì a scrivere, perché sono continuamente presa dal pensiero di far andare avanti il progetto musicale.

GC: Ed è anche per quello che stai provando a fare dei progetti istituzionali.

GG: Sì, perché è una di quelle cose. Perché comunque avere un budget ti permette per esempio di fare dei buoni video, di dare una visibilità al progetto che il budget che avevo per Atse Tewodros, il primo disco, non mi ha permesso.

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Terry Adkins, *Divine Mute*, 1998.

GG: Sembrano i *Negarit*. Il Negarit era il tamburo dell'imperatore – quello che si usava per fare gli annunci importanti. Soprattutto quando iniziavano le guerre.

GC: Quando io vengo in queste grandi esposizioni, finisco sempre per riflettere sulla disproporzione fra le grandi risorse che vengono investite in un'esposizione come questa, e i budget con cui sono costretti a lavorare la maggior parte degli artisti, sia che abitino nelle città del mondo cosiddetto occidentale, sia che operino in altri luoghi del mondo. Pensi anche tu a questo o ti lasci sorprendere da quello che c'è?

GG: No, non riesco a fare questa associazione. Non riesco a pensare: *ah, guarda un po', hanno speso un sacco di soldi, se tutti avessero questa possibilità*. Perché mi sorprende molto. Quindi alla fine in realtà non mi ritrovo a fare un discorso di questo genere, per quanto si potrebbe legare a quanto detto prima sulla difficoltà del reperire i fondi, ma non mi viene da pensare a questa cosa. Mi vien da pensare che per fortuna esistono queste rassegne. Cioè, in fondo, potrebbero non esserci risorse in assoluto. E quindi potrebbero non esserci queste mostre con la possibilità di vedere delle cose così belle. Quindi in questo momento mi viene da pensare: *meno male che c'è*.

Joana Hadjithomas e Khalil Joreige, *Latent Images: Diary of a Photographer*, 2015; Pino Pascali, *Cannone semovente*, 1965.

GC: Gabriella, che senso ha un canto partigiano oggi?

GG: È una domanda difficile. Che senso ha un canto partigiano oggi? Adesso in Italia, quest'anno sarebbe l'ottantesimo dall'inizio dell'invasione di Etiopia, e non ne parlerà nessuno. Secondo me questo risponde già alla domanda. Serve a ricordare. Cioè, poi la cosa che per me è sconvolgente – e io non riesco a non pensarla come un tentativo della storia di ricordare agli altri la storia – cioè che gli inizi dell'invasione dell'Etiopia da parte dell'Italia e la tragedia del Mediterraneo di due anni fa [2013] sono capitati nello stesso giorno, il 3 ottobre, perché poi in quella tragedia la maggior parte erano persone provenienti o dall'Eritrea o dall'Etiopia.

Quindi, ci sarà bisogno di un canto di guerra di quei tempi, fino a che qualcuno non prenda l'abitudine di ricordarsi degli eventi senza bisogno di dover lottare anche solo per suscitare un ricordo. Tu ti rendi conto che veramente di questa cosa non ne parlerà nessuno? Quest'anno è stato celebrato il settantesimo della Liberazione d'Italia, però nessuno farà menzione dell'invasione di Etiopia.

Per quanto mi riguarda questa cosa è molto dolorosa e mi dà la dimensione di quanto ci sia un pensiero di tipo colonialista che si trascina, anche inconsciamente, da quei tempi. Il fatto che non si faccia menzione di questo – magari inconsciamente – però è ancora un atteggiamento colonialista, perché questa cosa non è neanche importante ricordarsela. In un paese in cui si festeggia la Liberazione senza pensare a quanto abbiano contribuito i patrioti etiopi a sfiancare l'esercito e il governo fascista. Anche Paolo Rumiz disse che il fascismo non si è frantumato contro la Panzer-Division ma contro i partigiani scalzi dell'altopiano. Quindi, alla fine, voglio dire che, se si è potuto festeggiare il settantesimo, in parte è anche merito di queste persone. E che nessuno se lo ricordi è una di quelle cose che poi mi fa tirare su il fucile e dire: *oh, qua non ci si deve fidare.*

GC: Che però ti fa anche cantare quei canti là.

GG: Sì, io ci voglio provare. Cioè, per quello che mi sarà possibile fare, ed è una cosa piccolissima quella che mi è possibile fare, però questa cosa non la lascerò passare così. Dopo poi io non ho nessun potere di fare degli eventi grandi però quello che si potrà fare io lo faccio.

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Peter Greenway, installazione video; allestimento interno al Padiglione Italia, Arsenale, Biennale di Venezia 2015.

Entrati nel padiglione italiano, Alessandra Ferlito ci invita a osservare le scelte del curatore italiano come una risposta, un'elaborazione in antitesi alla proposta formulata da Enwezor.

Laddove una delle possibili interpretazioni del titolo dato all'esposizione, All the World's Future*, rimanda immediatamente a un insieme di connessioni che mettono in crisi i confini e le identità, il padiglione italiano – a cui è stato dato il titolo di* Codice Italia *– opta invece per andare alla ricerca di una cifra squisitamente italiana. Una cifra che va ricercata, e trovata, ci dice il curatore, nel glorioso passato artistico di marca italiana.*

GC: Gabriella Ghermandi e il suo rapporto con l'italianità.

GG: No, dai. Questa non è l'italianità. Non posso rispondere. Mi fa dolore che una mostra sull'essenzialità dell'Italia sia una roba del genere. Non so neanche come dirtelo. Non è quella l'Italia. Nel senso che ci sarebbero tante cose che si potrebbero mettere. Attuali, di adesso, di giovani, di ricerca, di discorso. Come fai a rimanere sempre al 1300? Perché anche adesso ci sono delle possibilità, delle capacità espressive. Non lo so, a me fa soffrire onestamente.

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Gabriella Ghermandi alla Biennale di Venezia del 2015.

Nell'apertura di questa intervista ho ricostruito il mio primo incontro con Gabriella. Poiché il mio campo di interesse è la vocalità delle diaspore nere, ero e sono particolarmente interessato al suo percorso artistico, al suo canto intriso di narrazione scritta. Come le sue parole in queste pagine spiegano bene, il canto le ha permesso di "volare" al di sopra delle sue identità, le permette di oltrepassare il bivio tra una o l'altra delle sue anime. E se nel testo la negoziazione tra identità multiple appare sofferta e complessa, la vocalità rappresenta un processo più rapido, immediato perché mutevole.

Le inflessioni dolci, divertite e profonde, della voce di Gabriella riecheggiano in queste righe, a ricordare che – in fondo – si trattava di un giorno di libertà, in cui una scrittrice-musicista e un etnomusicologo invadevano i confini di un'esposizione di arte visiva. Allo stesso tempo, la voce agisce sulla memoria in modi incontrollabili: il suo canto non fa altro che dotare

di un suono il racconto, che si imprime così nell'immaginazione in una maniera viva giacché non è solo visiva, ma reale, fisica e presente. Come ha affermato lo stesso Enwezor, presentando la sua Biennale:

I'm really deeply affected by the weight of words, and the way words sound, the emotional power of the human voice telling you something. That leaves its own residue on your imagination, on your psyche, and your skin. (Milliard 2015)

La componente mutevole della voce concede anche il lusso di giocare con le metafore, con i racconti, con le affermazioni estemporanee, a cui talvolta seguono riflessioni più elaborate. La voce di Gabriella illumina così i modi in cui estetiche personali e ideologie nazionali si sovrappongono all´interno delle pratiche performative di un'artista diasporica.

Gabriella affermava, all'inizio della giornata, che non esiste un rapporto fra artista e istituzione, ma la conversazione nella sua totalità mostra qualcosa di diverso. Non solo il suo progetto musicale si è sviluppato negli anni grazie a passaggi istituzionali (come il concerto all'Istituto Italiano di Cultura), ma anche la sua esperienza quotidiana è fortemente influenzata dal ruolo dell'istituzione: si pensi per esempio alla sofferenza descritta da Gabriella e provocata dalla mancanza di un riconoscimento ufficiale nei confronti dei patrioti etiopi nel corso dei festeggiamenti dei settant'anni dalla Liberazione.

L'immaginario musicale di Gabriella si nutre della necessità di stabilire un dialogo con forme istituzionalizzate del quotidiano. È un immaginario che vuole infiltrarsi nelle reti burocratiche delle istituzioni per scovarne i retaggi coloniali e rivelarne la violenza strutturale (Graeber 2012). La sua vocalità, così come il suo discorso musicale, rende viva la creazione letteraria, cosicché si possa comprendere il passato e trasformarlo nel presente, come farebbe una figlia di Maqeda.

GC: Iniziare a cantare in età adulta mi dà l'impressione che sia come tentare di far riaffiorare un ricordo.

GG: Che bella cosa.

GC: È così?

GG: Uhm, far affiorare un ricordo...

GC: È un lavoro con la memoria?

GG: No. Cantare secondo me è mettersi in contatto con la parte fanciullesca. Cioè, mia figlia mi dice: *mamma, guarda, imparo a far questo, imparo a far quell'altro*. E io le dico: *guarda, l'importante è che tu sia felice*. E lei mi dice: *già fatto!* E il canto secondo me ti riporta in contatto con questa parte. Però se è un canto fluido, libero: l'eccessiva impostazione toglie questa piacevolezza. Quindi bisogna sempre stare attenti. La cosa che mi piace del percorso che ho

fatto è che non mi ha limitato in questa spontaneità. Cantare per me ha proprio il piacere di quando sei bambino. È tutto una scoperta. Cantare ti fa stare nel presente. È ingoiare il momento attuale.

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Gianpaolo Chiriacò is an anthropologist of music who teaches ethnomusicology at the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano. He was a researcher at the University of Salento and worked for three years at the Center for Black Music Research (Chicago) as part of a Marie Curie research project funded by the European Union. He deals with vocality and cultural identities related to the African diaspora, and has been the curator and organizer of two editions of the symposium "Black Vocality: Cultural Memories, Identities, and Practices of African-American Singing Styles" at Columbia College in Chicago. He has presented his work in international conferences, performances, seminars, and installations (http://www.afrovocality.com). His volume *Black Voices: History and Anthropology of the African-American Song* will be released by Mimesis in 2018.

Gabriella Ghermandi is a singer, performer, writer of novels and short stories. Born in Addis Abeba of an Italian father and an Ethiopian mother, she moved to Italy in 1979 following her father's death. In 1999 his story "The neighbourhood telephone" won the first Eks & Tra prize. Founding member of the magazine *El Ghibli*, she achieved a remarkable success as a writer with her novel *Queen of Flowers and Pearls* (Indiana University Press 2007). Following her experiences as a performer in readings and conferences, in 2010 she decided to start the Atse Tewodros Project, a musical project in collaboration with the composer Aklilu Zewdy and professor Berhanu Gezaw. The band, which has performed in prestigious international festivals, released its first CD in 2013. The album got positive reviews and was selected for the final stage of the Grammy Award for World Music. At the moment, Gabriella Ghermandi is engaged in the making of a second album, *Maqeda*.

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Homi Bhabha at the University of Padua: a conversation

Annalisa Oboe and Unipd students

ABSTRACT

Homi Bhabha visited the University of Padua on 6 June, 2018 and delivered a public lecture entitled "Migrations, Human Rights, Survival: The Role of the Humanities," of which an excerpt appears in the present issue of *FES*. On that same occasion, Professor Bhabha was kind enough to accept an interview with my PhD and MA students in contemporary literatures and postcolonial studies. We all sat around the spectacular Gio Ponti table in the dining room of the Rectorate at Palazzo Bo, the University headquarters, and started an earnest, wide-ranging conversation, which juggled a series of ideas and comments we decided to share with our readers. What follows is a transcription of our dialogue. With deep gratitude for our guest's generosity and thanks to all involved.[1]

Keywords

intellectual connections, Frantz Fanon, migration, racism, contemporary politics, humanities, gender studies, Parsis

Student: This spring we attended the course on "Contemporary Anglophone Literatures and Postcolonial Studies" held by professor Annalisa Oboe, during which we read your work alongside the works of Edward Said and Frantz Fanon. We are interested in your own relationship, either personal or otherwise, with these great intellectual figures: could you tell us something?

Homi Bhabha: Sure, I had a living relationship with Edward Said and a long-standing intellectual relationship with Franz Fanon, which continues to this day. I was speaking at the MLA Presidential Plenary two years ago and I went back to Frantz Fanon in order to go forward to some of the work that I am doing now. I am trying to do some work on the question of "living death," as I call it, in a number of different discourses. In the context of the MLA lecture I went back to Fanon in order to go forward, to James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates, and a number of contemporary African-American writers, but also writers who work on caste in India, the Dalit writers.

So my relationship with Fanon continues, because I am very interested in thinking about political, cultural and ethical agency as it emerges in difficult situations where you don't expect to find it. I am thinking of those who are transfixed by the racial gaze and have no freedom to actually develop a sense of their autonomy or, indeed, in the recent migration crisis, of those who have to make choices where risk is predominant and where death is on your shoulders and yet you do it, you have to make a decision. I am interested in how those moments have

within a sense of ethics, a sense of dignity. But this is not the dignity as you read it in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is based on moral intuitionism – a dignity we all know because we are all human beings. We have dignity, we have inherited dignity, but we have also the second notion of birth, which is that we are all born into a moral universe that we know intuitively, in an unmediated fashion.

The reason for that, of course, in the drafting of the Universal Declaration, was that they did not want anybody to be able to appeal to historical relativism and say, "well, we did this in 1939 or in 1944," or "we are doing it in 2018, but you know in that time the circumstances were different." They wanted to get rid of it. But what they also wanted to get rid of are the forms of history, forms of time, that are very compressed and are very problematic. You've got to make certain decisions and these decisions are not simply irrational, nor instinctive. There is a moral balance in them. So, I am interested in that, and Fanon is particularly important to me, because with his interest in psychoanalysis he often talked about the human subject as an agent that has to contest these kinds of "temporalities of desperation" in order to construct a sense of the Self, of the Other, of relationality and so on.

Annalisa Oboe: In your work in progress on Fanon and Baldwin you speak of the kind of biopolitics that Fanon devises for us: not so much as 'bare life', in the Agambenian sense, but rather as the 'burdened life'. What Fanon is actually trying to do in *Black Skin, White Masks* is to 'unburden' himself from the burdens of the past, slavery, colonial history, the racial gaze…

HB: Yeah, absolutely. That notion of the burdened life is what I'm trying to develop in a number of papers, not simply 'bare life' or not 'mere existence' in the Oriental sense, but the 'burdened life'. Now, I want to try – and I'm trying in a number of ways, for the book that I'm writing – to think about the notion of the burdened life. It's still a concept that I'm working through. But where I think you've hit the point is that for Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, and in different ways also in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the person of colour, the discriminated, the minority – you can see this also about the current migration – have so much imposed upon them. As he says, there is so much projection on the Self, that before one can begin to construct some ontological sense of oneself, one has to deal with this burden. But, on the other hand, the burden is also the burden of history, you can't just wish it away. So, you have to find a way of taking it, using it, reversing it and then working through a question of identity.

Now, I'll give you an example. There's a part of the lecture I am going to deliver today, where I talk about the distinction between discrimination – the language of discrimination – and the language of denigration or the language of dishonor. And yesterday, the guy who was driving me in the car here in Padova, he's Romanian – a young guy, twenty years old – so I was talking with him, asking what he was doing. His parents are Romanian, and he said, "I went to Romania, I tried to get a job, the first month they paid me 400 euro, the second month they paid me 200 euro, so I had to return to Italy." So I answered, "well, that must be

disappointing, where do you prefer to live?" He said, "actually, my parents were Romanian, I prefer to live in Romania, although I've been brought up here since I was four," and he's now in his twenties. "Why, why do you prefer that?" He said, "because my experience in Italy is so racistly challenging." "You? I would have thought you were exactly from here, you don't look any different!" He said, "let me tell you," and this is what I mean about the burdened life, "I had a girlfriend, for three years, and for three years, every time I went to her home, every time I wanted to go on holiday, the parents would say "but you're a Romanian: people like you are murderous, people like you are rapists" in my face. After two years of being together, although she would have liked to be with me and I would have liked to be with her, I just decided I couldn't take it anymore." So, this is what I mean with 'burdened life'. How do you face this burdened life to produce a sense of agency?

St: May I just ask another question? You spoke about the situation of 'duress'. I believe you are hinting at either war or political struggle. Do you think that economic duress also has something to do with this equation?

HB: Absolutely, of course it's a condition of duress. I am not an economist, so I tend not to know the fine grain of the argument: I can largely acknowledge it but cannot enter into it. Let me tell you something that interests me about economic duress. This guy yesterday, this taxi driver – his family migrated for reasons of economic duress. Now, his family and himself have reached a certain economic level, they have jobs, they pay their taxes. Why still, irrespective of that, does social exclusion function? Not in terms of whether you're a good citizen or a bad citizen, but it functions on these aspects of cultural differences and their connotations. It seems to me that, for too long, we have thought "once you sort the economic problems out, then these other cultural problems will fall into place." They do, but for the super-rich or the super-privileged. My interest now – and I am thinking of the United States – regards the articulation of that issue in terms of polity and social community: the frustration or anxiety that comes out in these racist terms is not correlated with economics. For instance, people are not saying "I don't like X because I applied for a job and in fact this guy from Africa got the job." They don't say that. What they say is this: "X is a leech in our society." It doesn't matter if he is a citizen, it doesn't matter if he is making a contribution; "*he* shouldn't have got the job because *I* am somehow part of this indigenous race." I'm interested in why; why for instance people say that the victory of Trump was because there were all these neglected white people, who didn't have any jobs and are from the Rust Belt states. Not untrue: there is definitely something to be said about that. But whatever the condition of the white working class unemployed is, the condition of Mexicans, African Americans and some Asians (the situation of Asians is a bit different) is as bad, if not worse. Yet somehow, the political *milieu* that we have is such to move away from the political rationality of a kind to 'affect'.

I think one of the great problems of public discourse in ethics, morality, pedagogy is not

to take affect seriously. Political affect. There is work on affect generally, which I find problematic, but *political* affect is central; and stereotypes, which I have been writing about for a long time because they are much more complicated than people think they are, are central too.

So why does economic distress symptomatically present itself in these phenomenological ways? That is the question we have to understand, the one we have to ask ourselves; and it is not simply a question of a different skin colour, or of speaking a different brand of English. There is some profound kind of issue: and I think the issue is that we do not speak enough about affect in the political-institutional sense, not simply in the emotional sense.

St: It is just that. If you are actually considering politics, something else that comes to mind is the Italian Constitution. According to the Constitution we should be living in a Republic based on labour, and that labour should give us the means to live with dignity. There is the word 'dignity' in the Constitution. On the other hand, I speak with other students, my age or older, that can barely afford living because they are not paid adequately, but that is beside the point.

St: Since you mentioned American politics, we actually had something we wanted to ask you regarding that. It concerns your *Nation and Narration*: can we still identify a third space in contemporary America or has everything become a third space?

HB: That's a very good question. Now, please, let me just explain how I think that the notion of third space might be, or continues to be, relevant. Of course, I'm very fortunate that many of my concepts are in circulation but I cannot be often responsible for the way they are circulating. Let me say this: I think that, if there is a third space, the third space to think through now – remember, it's a conceptual space – is the following problem. I would take it back to the 2018 elections, but also to Brexit, maybe also to Italy now: I think there is a certain democratic exhaustion, a democratic exhaustion that to some extent is economic because, as you say, constitutional, legal rights offer you all kinds of things, but if you try to get them, the market doesn't provide them. And I think this democratic exhaustion has created a situation where we have what I call a "tit-for-tat democracy." Everybody wants to be part of this democratic conversation, but nobody has defined anymore what the rules of the game are, which means that political discourse is polarized – the 'enemy' of that third space if you like – is so polarized that there are no rules for the negotiation anymore.

AO: No political dialogue.

HB: No political dialogue. If I go to India, it's all about how the new Hindu fundamentalist nationalist party points to the Congress party: "when you were in Parliament you didn't this, you did this." If I go to America, most of the time Mr Trump during the campaign kept on saying to put Hillary Clinton in jail. When he was pointed out that he had done very corrupt things, he said, "if I was corrupt, why didn't you arrest me at that time? I was only playing by the rules of

the game." I believe that what we see in these elections now brings together what we were talking about. In Brexit, some people said, the real flashpoint, the symptom, were immigrants and immigration. The campaign in the United States was formed so much on Mexican murderers, Muslim terrorists, lazy people – there was so much on that. So, I think that party politics has really changed now and we're in a movement, we're in a place of 'movement politics'. Movement politics. The difference is that those constitutional rules, the rules of the game, have really been destroyed and when people say, "well, in the United States Hillary won the popular vote, it was a narrow margin," or "Brexit is a narrow margin," or again "the Indian elections were a narrow margin," I say these are not margins, these are not narrow margins, these are not divisions. These are like seismic cracks in an earthquake. Of course, there's a division of people, but in each camp there are further divisions. There's a real lack of democratic confidence, or trust, what we might call exhaustion, on *each* side. And in that third space now, you begin to get this movement politics.

I mean, Steve Bannon, who has been advising Italian Salvini, recognizes it: he says, "we don't care whether the Republicans become a little more rigorous on the market, or there is a little more deregulation. We don't care if the Democrats spend a little more time looking at the white working class rather than the black. They don't understand that now is the moment of movement politics, this is not the moment of a democratic discourse." And the problem with movement politics is that you begin to have these figures emerging that Hannah Arendt once called "tribal nationalists."

Tribal nationalism is about figures who invest or take in themselves social tensions. Social tensions are not supposed to be negotiated, social contradictions are not supposed to be parlayed in conversation or dialogue: they take it upon themselves. And they present themselves, the tyrants present themselves – I don't like the word 'tyrants' – but these figures present themselves as representative of majoritarian victimage: "*we* are under threat" – and that's when the 'we' gets identified with a certain kind of an American white majoritarian population; in India with the Hindus; in Turkey with Erdoğan, against all dissidents, against the courts; with Maduro in Venezuela. All these people have this tribal nationalism: *we* are under danger, *we* are threatened.

St: So once again, it becomes a blame game to see who is the best-suited scapegoat?

HB: Well, absolutely. And movement politics has a different temporality from democratic politics. It changes very quickly. The scapegoat is changing very quickly. Let me give you an example from my own experience: the election in November 2016. There's no question that most informed people thought that one of the big issues would be Black Lives Matter. You had an unprecedented number of young black people killed. The police force itself was in disarray in Chicago, the deaths in Chicago, where there was a mare for the Obama administration, the death rate of young black people went up. We all told this would be a crying election issue.

Suddenly, after November 2016, we are told that the issue is not that: it's white lives that are in danger. And I do feel that these shifts, these quick shifts in perspective are to do with movement politics. If you just think about it, in an analogy with say 1931/1932 in Germany, the earliest – as Giorgio Agamben suggests too – the earliest signs of the holocaust were what looked like strange, but simple requests: that all doctors should submit the names and records of people who had lung diseases or heart diseases. Why should they submit that? Because this was the start of identifying the 'unhealthy', and it slowly settled on the Jewish stereotype. Why I am saying this? Because with movement politics, our notion of cause, determination, and effect gets much more blurred. We can't read it with the same clarity, we may have a word for it, we may have a name for it, we may have a sense of what it is not. But it makes the reading, the philology of the politics much more problematic.

AO: Absolutely. That recalls the confusion that we have here, that we are experiencing here in Italy, now.

St: Our classes focused on women writers in the postcolonial context and we dealt with both gender and postcolonial issues. Therefore, we would like to know whether and how gender studies have influenced you and your work.

HB: Well, I will say that my professional life has been created by women, which is actually true, including this invitation here. The reason why gender studies had a major effect on me was that I learnt many of the methods that I started working with, initially – psychoanalysis, discourse analysis – I learnt all that through feminist writers. The channel for me came from feminist writers. They were writing about cinema, psychoanalysis, the notion of the figura, the notion of the body. I have a very special debt to gender studies because that's how I actually began to think about problematizing the question of race, so mine is a very obvious debt. I literally learnt from the proponents of feminism in general, these were my teachers – not formally, informally. But this takes me back to your question about Said, who I knew very, very well. He was a personal friend, and of course I saw him initially very much as a mentor. But he always castigated me in a very loving and friendly way for being so theoretical: "Why do you wanna do this? What are all these terms? Why do you wanna talk about metonymy? Why do you wanna talk about psychic desire? Get real!" And he had a point, but I had a different destiny, my purpose was different. The main difference between us you can see is that, for him, the notion of Self-and-Other has a polarizing aspect. That was very much the architecture of his work. I was very much more in the gender studies tradition of thinking about how interstitial and small differences could create a shift in questions of identity or value, or political strategy, or agency. He was very much within the tradition of a certain kind of dialectical contradiction. I was much more – and so was the work I started doing then, and even now – about dialectical ambivalence. Edward Said used to get very irritated with me, for my interest in

ambivalence: "Why don't you tell these people they're shits, they're bad?" Maybe we have to look at the relationship. He was much more into a certain kind of oppositional confrontation, I was more like Fanon, and indeed even Gramsci: more into questions of relationality, how do these different elements relate to each other. And of course, part of the work I've been doing lately is on history as montage, and the question of montage is very much part of this third space. Montage is not just two things, montage is the third space of the *tertium quid* that emerges from the confrontation of two positions, two images or two perspectives. So, I think, to answer your question, absolutely. And I've come back to your question about Said.

St: Thank you. In what way does your intellectual work relate to the Mahindra Humanities Centre at Harvard?

HB: The Humanities Centre at Harvard started off, I don't know, sometime in the 1980s I suppose, but it was called something different, it was called "The Centre for Literary and Cultural Analysis," or something like that, and I only took it over I think 9 or 10 years ago. I took it over because I felt that the Humanities needed a platform in a time when the professional schools and STEM were basically the disciplinary choices of many – choices that seemed to have with them possibilities and opportunities that people didn't have in the Humanities.

When Harvard offered this appointment to me, I took it because I wanted students, the faculty also, and the world more generally, to understand how the Humanities disseminate into all kinds of areas of work. One thing the Humanities teach you, I think, is to do something very simple, which is to read very carefully. And reading very carefully, whether it is in the law, whether it is in psychoanalysis, whether reading is used, more metaphorically, to listening to somebody, is absolutely central to the democratic dialogue and democratic interlocution. Attentive reading in the Humanities is not simply a philological issue: it is an ethical issue. It is the respect that I owe those whom I speak to, those whom I read, those whom I disagree with. It teaches you ethical attentiveness in a context of interaction – I don't say a context of 'tolerance', I am not keen on tolerance, tolerance is too passive for me – but ethical attentiveness in the context of wanting to be an interlocutor, having the will to intervene, the will to question, the will to interpret. So, it is an ethics of intervention, it is not simply an ethics of "you hold your views, I hold mine and then we can go in our different ways." That is one of the very important issues with the Humanities.

The other very important issue is – of course it is changing – that, generally, in scientific experimentation (which is the equivalent of humanistic interpretation), the responsibility of judgment and the relationship of knowledge to the world often happen at the end of a process; to get to the end of the experiment is very important. Then of course there's reflection on "did you use animals in a way you shouldn't have, did you use women in a way you shouldn't have, etc." Of course, scientists think about all these things and the procedures and practices become better over time, but the emphasis is very much on getting to the end of the experiment

and that's why you often see revealed after, even in major experiments, how placebo has been given to some people without them knowing, and all these kinds of moral tribulations. But in humanistic interpretation, you have to take a judgment all the time on what you are doing, you can't go from one sentence to another without weighing meaning, position, the effective word in the domain of the political and the domain of the community. It is a continual agonistic struggle with the ethical and moral imagination.

Another important issue with the contemporary Humanities is that the more we question the national framework and the more we try and work outside of one unitary disciplinary framework, the more we find ourselves at the crossroads of knowledge foundation. And that's the third space. And that is, I think, extremely important, because that's not only important intellectually, but it is important institutionally: increasingly, senior administration have to take the challenge of "how do I tenure this person whose work is in the middle of this, whose work is a network? How do I formulate a seminar or a curriculum which is in that context? How do I begin to measure excellence when you have these new and emergent disciplines?" And I think the Humanities are the midwives of that.

St: Before we conclude, I would like to ask you a personal question. How much has your personal experience as an intellectual and as an Indian and a Parsi migrant influenced your life?

HB: Well… how long do you have? Let me just start with the more unusual issue, because some of it is predictable. The more unusual issue is what it means to be a Parsi. That is not something people really think about. What does it mean to be a Parsi in Bombay? It is a very local situation as far as I am concerned. I think that both the advantages and disadvantages of the diaspora were actually apparent retrospectively to me, just growing up as a Parsi in Bombay. The Parsi is a very small community, they were a community that somehow was interstitial, they sort of fitted in between the British, the Muslims, the Hindus… they didn't have the same religious prescriptions. And because they could circulate through the society in various ways, they were also very strategic: as a community, they knew where they could stay and, as a minority, they have never been seriously persecuted in India, in any substantial way. Partly, it is due to their own understanding of minority trajectories and strategies and to their sense of tact, which created a tremendous sense of trust in the country as a whole. But the fact is that you always have that element of difference – not big differences, which are much easier to deal with. I would say, not the Saidian measure of difference, but a complicated, disseminated, fragmented kind of difference; and Parsis experienced that, you know. We Parsis never had a great Renaissance, we never had a great 19th century. If you think about Indian traditions, classical traditions, they go way back; if you think about Muslim traditions, they go way back. But, and I think Foucault once said that, when we relate to our past, most of us relate to about three hundred years, post-enlightenment. And most of the communities

had great novelists, great musicians, great books… but Parsis never did. So Parsis never had that. To me it felt both as a freedom and a burden. There was an exilic sense for a young person growing up, going to college… You know, when I went to Oxford I had to redo my undergraduate degree because I refused to go to Oxford after schooling: I wanted to be an undergraduate in my own city, in Bombay. And so, I did one B.A. there, and then I had to do a second one because they wouldn't recognize it in the UK. So, I wanted to stay on because, in a way, I wanted that in-between experience. Parsis are very much of that kind.

But there are many advantages to it, too. Our community was very cosmopolite. There were very traditional families, but they were less elite. I came from the absolute elite of the Parsi community. In my family, some of them were fluent in English, others were not, but all of them felt that I should cross as many intellectual and cultural frontiers as I could. They were very wealthy Parsis – the Parsis were the first 'European-style bourgeoisie' in India. There was no other group that saw itself as a bourgeoisie in the way in which the Parsis saw that: civic responsibility, philanthropy, building up the professions, building up a sense of professional probity and ethics. Many of these bourgeois ideas were embedded in the Parsis… that tiny, tiny community – today there are less than one hundred thousand Parsis in the world, 80,000 people. But it did give you a kind of confidence that you could negotiate with a hybridity that was powerful and not disempowering. The rest is less interesting [*laughing*].

Note

[1] My special gratitude goes to all who took part in the conversation and, particularly, the students who carefully transcribed the dialogue: Andrea Albertin, Sara Bucaletti, Sofia Costelli, Rossella Dattolo, Bogdan Groza, Giulia Marcolongo, Giulia Sossella, Claudia Lo Vetere, Isabella Villanova.

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On writing, reading, interpreting (and Pan Africanism): an interview with Caryl Phillips

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ABSTRACT

Caryl Phillips is one of the most thought-provoking creative voices of contemporary Anglophone literature. His publications, which include novels, essays, anthologies, plays as well as a number of screenplays, have achieved public and critical acclaim not only for the reflections they invite on issues of displacement, identity, belonging, and otherness, but also for the use of narrative techniques that often present the reader with discontinuous narrations, fragmented accounts of events, and multiple perspectives. The interview that follows, originally conceived as a conversation on the novel *The Nature of Blood* (1997), has unexpectedly broadened to take on wider issues such as the author's stance on Pan Africanism, intertextuality, character formation, and his perception of critical work.

Keywords

intertextuality, writing techniques, Pan Africanism, diaspora, Caryl Phillips

I met Caryl Phillips in Caen, on May 23, 2017 on the occasion of a conference on "Caryl Phillips – Inhabiting the voids of history."[1] My original intent was to interview Caryl Phillips about *The Nature of Blood*, which is at the core of my current research. As a matter of fact, every answer gave rise to more questions and led to interesting digressions.

Caryl Phillips was born on the Caribbean island of Saint Kitts, grew up in Leeds, England, studied at Oxford and currently lives in the USA, where he is a Professor of English at Yale University. Phillips's numerous publications include novels, essays, anthologies, plays that have been performed in theatres, on television and broadcast on radio, as well as a number of screenplays. In his works Phillips covers issues of displacement, identity, belonging, and otherness along with the triangular Atlantic trade which triggered the African diaspora. He challenges the readers of his novels by presenting them with discontinuous narrations, fragmented accounts of events, and multiple perspectives.

Scholar Bénédicte Ledent defines "the structure of *The Nature of Blood* (1997) as a labyrinth where characters are trapped in a kind of existential maze and involved in a quest for its centre."[2] Similarly, it is possible to argue that the novel embodies a distinctly non-linear understanding of Western history, in which the jumbled recounting of events frees readers from prevailing and often-repeated chronological accounts of what happened. The expectation of familiarity dissipates, and a fresh reading of history becomes possible. The stories occur

over a large span of time, between the 15th and the 20th century, and in the multistrand narrative, themes, characters, and incidents resonate against one another. Phillips seems to invite readers to draw connections between the gaps in the flow of stories in order to reveal recurring patterns and cycles in seemingly discrete, isolated events in Western history.

However, readers who are familiar with the writer's novels soon realise that there is a new element in Phillips's recurring concern about the triangular trade which involved Europe, Africa and North America: in *The Nature of Blood* the narrative develops in a geometrical shape that involves Europe, Africa and, rather than North America, the Middle East. This new geographical setting allows Phillips to focus on the Jewish diaspora. He shifts his reflections from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea, but a different scenario does not necessarily imply different actors.

Great Britain's entry into World War I was in large part motivated by the British government's intention to protect its Empire from the rising supremacies of the United States and Germany and to expand its dominion in the Middle East. In the aftermath of the war, the southern half of Syria referred to as Palestine was mandated to Great Britain. The European power's presence in the Mediterranean area persisted during World War II.[3] The British army participated in the liberation of Jews from the Nazi death camps, but, immediately after the end of the conflict, it went on to impose restrictive immigration quotas of Jews to Palestine and organised detention camps on the island of Cyprus.

Phillips's novel not only revisits the British Empire's behaviour in the conquered territories of Palestine, but it also examines the issue of diaspora, namely the African and the Jewish diaspora, two of the most widely studied and debated diasporas in human history and both still ongoing. To address this issue and the intersection of the two diasporas, Phillips relies on one of the minor characters in *The Nature of Blood*, Malka. She is a young Ethiopian black Jewish woman and through her soliloquies the unbalanced relationship between white and black peoples, despite their shared religious traditions, emerges. Phillips seems to encapsulate in Malka both the African and the Jewish diaspora along with post- and neo-colonial circumstances and questions. It can be argued that in *The Nature of Blood*, Phillips multistrand narrative echoes the multi-faceted reality of much of Western history (especially the historical events that occurred as a direct and indirect result of European colonialism). Malka reflects this refracted reality: she inhabits the intersection between Jewish and African diasporas, between citizen and foreigner, between kinship and otherness. The character embodies these complex, intertwined layers of history while highlighting the fact that the process of discrimination still operates in our contemporary societies.

Maria Festa: My first question is on intertextuality. For avid readers who are also writers, intertextuality can be unconscious and unintentional. You are a voracious reader. In your novels, you make clear references to various authors and their works. Do these references

represent a form of praising? Do they symbolise your intent to 'write back to the author' as some postcolonial writers, like Achebe for instance, did in their works?

Caryl Phillips: I think it is probably more an attempt to engage with, and somehow destabilize, the English canon. If you can engage with it, but also make people try and see it in a new way, thus destabilizing it, you are inevitably taking away some of its authority. The key authors in English literature have a tremendous hold on the imagination of British people and I am attempting to adjust the strength of that grip by suggesting that their canonical work is, in a sense, a part of my work. In this sense it is conscious, I don't think it is something that authors have done frequently in English, but they have done so in other languages, the French for example. Of course, in recent times, Coetzee has done it in English. It's a way of making the reader see things afresh, which is after all what literature is, a way of making you see the world anew. In this instance, part of what the reader is looking at anew is the so-called 'canon'.

MF: May I define *The Nature of Blood* one of your most challenging novels?

CP: Do you mean formally?

MF: Yes, I do.

CP: Probably. When I delivered that manuscript to my publishers in America, I think they were kind of horrified because the two books that had come before, *Cambridge* and *Crossing the River*, had sold a lot of copies. To look at it from a strictly commercial point of view, which I don't, I had an audience. I had people waiting for the next book, and I think I surprised my so-called audience with this book, because a lot of people found it challenging and I couldn't (or wouldn't) make the connections that the form and structure demands. I feel sure publishers wanted another book that was formally, and in terms of subject-matter, in the tradition of *Cambridge* or *Crossing the River*. But, you know, I've never really worried about how many books I've sold. I actually don't know how many copies a book sells, and I don't care. I'm not interested if I sell ten or if I sell ten thousand. Obviously, I would prefer to sell ten thousand, but I don't really care, because the hard thing – the important thing – is to write the book, and when I write a book I just hope that somebody will want to publish it and thereafter somebody might read it. If I had written *The Nature of Blood* before *Cambridge* and before *Crossing the River* I think I might have had some problems getting it published.

MF: In *The Nature of Blood*, the British Empire seems to be the intended target or, better, the addressee of the novel; is this perception correct?

CP: Well in some way, I think that everything I ever write is addressing British imperial notions of colonial history – a history that excludes me – so I think I am always trying to be a little bold and say "look at me, look at me over here, you know my story matters too, my experience

matters too." I think that there is some aspect of that in everything I write, but I never begin a story actually *thinking* that way. I always begin and pursue a story thinking of the characters, I never think of the themes. Themes are what other people tell you about when they are trying to work out what's going on in the novel. I just think, well I have got this character called Eva and I have got this other character called whatever he or she is called, and I've got to make them reveal the story and grow. Literally that's all I ever try to do, I let the characters lead. However, inevitably if you publish a number of books, people are not stupid, and they can see thematic links from one book to another book. In this sense themes are present, I can't say they don't exist, but I can definitively say I am never thinking of them too consciously while I am writing a book.

MF: This leads me to my next question, about characters. In your novels the words employed to present and describe a character turn her/him into a real human being and not simply a fictional one. You reveal characters with common imperfections and weaknesses and this in turn allows your reader to better identify with them. How does a character take shape in your mind?

CP: Slowly, really slowly. I don't even know I have a character fully realised until I hear the character's voice. The key element is the voice; when I know exactly how a character speaks, what words they use, for instance would they ever swear? Furthermore, what words would they *never* use because they might consider those words to be too vulgar? When I can answer these questions then I am beginning to really understand a character. I need to *feel* the rhythm when they're speaking. I need to know if they have an accent. Once I can hear the voice then I know that I have a character, but I also have to know a lot that's never in the book. If you were to ask me a series of questions such as what car do they drive? In fact, do they drive a car? And if they do drive a car, what colour is the car? What make is the car? I would have to be able to tell you the answers to these questions. I have to know the characters well enough to know irrelevant things, such as where would they go to shop for clothes? Would they ever consider buying clothes from a second-hand shop? Would they consider spending three hundred Euros on a pair of shoes? What would they say to somebody who would spend three hundred Euros on a pair of shoes, or would they even talk to such a person? I need to know the answers to these *irrelevant* questions even if the specifics never find their way into the book. However, the one thing that's *absolutely* necessary is hearing the voice.

MF: In *The Nature of Blood,* Stephan Stern joins Zionism for the cause of the 'Promised Land'. Have you inserted him in the narration as a probable counterpart of Pan Africanism? Moreover, in your travel book *The Atlantic Sound*, you dealt with Pan Africanism. Has your view on Pan Africanism changed in the meanwhile?

CP: My feelings on Pan Africanism haven't changed. In many ways they are similar to how I

feel about Christianity or religion in general. It is very hard to be too critical of something that enables people to survive the many problems of life. If people believe in a system that enables them to wake up in the morning and function as normal human beings, and such a belief system enables them to be kind to others and enables them to have a positive vision of the world, who am I to object? Pan Africanism is not something I personally believe in. I like the idea of unity, I like the idea of people having more in common with each other, but some ideas feel a little idealistic to me. Pan Europeanism hasn't worked, as we've just been reminded with Brexit, and Africa is much, much bigger than Europe. How are all the African diasporans of the world – be they from the Caribbean, or Brazil, and so on – supposed to seriously think they are going to have any meaningful interaction with each other around the idea of a mythical and often ahistorical notion of Africa? In truth, it is a nice idea but when you examine it closely there are many, many problems. And that's how I feel about religion too. It is a nice idea and it enables people to live, and so on. I'm not criticizing it, but when you examine it really closely there are some glaring illogicalities. Coming back to Pan Africanism, we have to accept that race – being of the African continent – constitutes just one element of our identity and so to base much of one's life decision-making process around this element is somewhat reductive. To do so misses out so many other things...

MF: As soon as the character of Stephan took shape in your mind, did you see Israel as a probable counterpart of Africa?

CP: Yes, I was aware of the multiple ironies of placing Africa next to Israel. In other words, what it means to try and build a society and a sense of self around one construct of identity which, as I've said, seems to me to be too narrow a way of looking at oneself and society. People are more complicated than just what religion or what ethnicity they are. It's complicated. One may argue that what the Pan Africanist movement tried to do, the Israelis have pulled it off. But is it successful? Well, it enables some people to get through the day, but I have been to Israel a couple of times, I didn't feel comfortable and left the country early. I simply didn't like the idea of a state where identity was principally built around just one thing. I saw young Israeli children carrying machine guns, who were militarized, and I thought, "no, don't do that to the children, don't do that to them. This is not healthy."

MF: To you, is the act of writing a means of establishing a sort of one-way communication channel with your readers? Or, is it a tool that is able to confer a voice to your thoughts, reflections and feelings with the intent to budge awareness in readers? Sometimes people tend to be lazy, and for those individuals your novels become synonymous with effort and commitment. Is it something that you require from your readers?

CP: I just think that we've become very lazy as a society in the last twenty years or so because of social media and because of the Internet. We don't even spell properly anymore because

of texting, and we don't have the same attention. That said, I can only be true to a certain form of literature which may be perceived by some people as being challenging and difficult, but if people feel this way they don't have to read the books. If they don't want to spend the energy or make the effort, then so be it. Hopefully, if they do read the work and expend the energy they will get something out of it. When I was a student I remember reading challenging work and thinking, "damn, this is hard going. I'm not having a lot of fun with this," but eventually I got something out of it. Does it mean that it was pleasurable? Not always. But if you're looking for an easy ride, then you wouldn't buy *The Nature of Blood* or *The Lost Child*. To my mind the reader has to make an investment; the reader has to pay attention and contribute. If the reader doesn't want to do this and they simply want to be entertained, then they should read something else. After all, there's nothing wrong with doing that.

MF: What does writing mean to you? Is it something in your DNA?

CP: Well, I'm not sure it's in my DNA. I think I only write because I have something to say and I've always thought to myself that when I don't have anything to say I won't write because there are already too many people out there writing books. I took up writing because I *felt* strongly that I had something to say, but I know the price of saying that 'something'. It has involved spending long periods of time by myself writing, so sometimes I just think I would like a different type of life, a more well-balanced type of life.

MF: I would like to go back to your characters. Earlier, you stated that before introducing a character to the reader you have at first to learn as many details as possible about him/her. Somehow, it seems to me that you intentionally leave the reader the possibility to formulate his/her own judgement on the fictional human being. Take *The Lost Child*, the character of Monica's father: he is so human, he has more flaws than virtues, he is strict, square minded, but at a certain point you seem to raise the possibility he could have been a paedophile.

CP: It seems to me that Monica is going through more than just the normal adolescent 'I-need-to-break-from-my-parents' kind of rebellion that most of us go through. Furthermore, there seems to be something slightly sexually repressed about her father. You didn't get the idea that he is having a particularly jolly sex life with his wife, so I began to think about this guy. He looks to me like the type of man who might have a hidden agenda. He's just one of those guys that on the surface seem very conventional, but if you scratch a little bit you might find something else. Now we don't know if Monica's suspicions are real, but that's the thing about fiction, we can make up our own mind. Personally, I think it's quite possible that he made some kind of unpleasant overture to one of Monica's friends. He's the kind of man that might have done that, but it's not clear that he did. As you know, you can't prove most of these allegations, a teacher making a pass at the student is hard to prove because there's only two people, nobody else is in the room, and it becomes his word against her word. It's often the same with

similarly serious allegations such as rape: there are no witnesses, so you have to look and make a decision about the characters. Who do you think is believable here, what's likely, what's possible? Well I think it's a similar situation that we have with Monica's father. Monica has an oblique, vague feeling, but whether it's plausible or not, whether it's believable or not just depends on your reading of Monica's father. One might read him as an absolute creep, or else just think 'oh, come on, the guy is a bit square, where's the evidence that he is some kind of sexual predator?' So you can read it whichever way you want depending on, of course, who you are or what life experience you bring to the novel.

MF: This implies that leaving things hanging is intentional, isn't it?

CP: Yes, I can't solve it, because that's how it is in life. I mean if Monica was saying, "he murdered somebody," these kinds of allegations are usually resolved one way or another. You know, you're guilty or not guilty. It's like a traffic ticket for speeding, you're guilty or not guilty. Evidence is produced and it's often difficult to argue against it. One of the reasons why issues of sexual harassment are so difficult is there are usually no witnesses. With Monica's father we just don't know, no evidence is presented, but my sense is Monica has a strong feeling, and anything beyond this depends on how you perceive of both Monica and her father.

MF: And he is someone who has also difficulties in engaging socially.

CP: Yes, which may well be why he would do something like that – pick on a young person who has little power – and proceed on the basis that they won't say anything because they're frightened to report him. If he is a man who has difficulty engaging socially he might do that rather than doing the normal thing which is to say to your wife, "I don't know if this marriage is working, we need to..." or conversely saying to his secretary "do you want to go to the motel tonight?" Making a pass at a young girl, who has no power in his eyes, might be his way forward. You know, men can be creepy like that.

MF: Out of curiosity, scholars always perform a sort of autopsy on your works. Why are you not interested in their analysis?

CP: Because it doesn't help me to write. It's not because I don't think their analysis is valid or insightful or worthwhile, I'm grateful that people read the work and want to write about it critically, but scholarly work doesn't help me to write another novel and if it doesn't help me write another book then I don't have to read it. I know that some writers read feedback looking for praise and in the hope that people say nice things about them, but when people don't say nice things those writers have got to read that too otherwise it is not fair to just read the good things. Were I to choose to read the bad reviews *and* the positive feedback, then I would just be riding a kind of roller-coaster. To my mind it's pointless and actually distracting. Obviously, without criticism literature would be a lot less rich. After all, writers need feedback, you need

people to take the work seriously, but you've got to be sensible and give scholars the room to work freely. The last thing a scholar or a critic needs is somebody telling them, "no, you got it wrong." Actually, they didn't get it wrong, it's their interpretation and so did they get it wrong? I have a chance when I'm writing a book to have it all my own way and to arrange things how I want, but when I've handed over the book to somebody, whatever emotions or critical response it provokes is beyond my control and it's not for me to worry about this. I know it's a strange analogy I'm going to make, but when Beethoven finished the Fifth Symphony it's thereafter none of his business whether people listen to it and cry every evening, or whether they listen to it and throw up because they hate it. It's not about Beethoven anymore; it is about the work. Now, if he needs to know how people feel about his work in order to know how to write the Sixth Symphony, then fine! Personally, I don't feel involved in a book once I've finished it, therefore why am I going to try and disturb scholars, or myself, by worrying about their interpretation of something that is finished and behind me? If critics want to check with me, like you're doing, and other people have done in the past, fine, I will often have a chat about the work. But I would never say, "no, you're absolutely wrong." I might say "no, you thought that this idea emerged out of that, but no, I wasn't thinking of that," but I don't think I would be dismissive or overly-defensive.

Notes

[1] The conference was organised by professor Françoise Kral in the framework of the Agrégation d'Anglais 2017-2018. The Agrégation d'Anglais is the French civil service exam that English majors take to be certified to teach English in French universities or high schools. This exam requires the study of set literary works by English-language authors, as well as humanities topics of importance to the English-speaking world. The official programme 2017-2018 also includes Caryl Phillips's *Crossing the River* (1993).

[2] See Ledent, Bénédicte. 2002. *Caryl Phillips*. Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 187-188.

[3] See Hart, Alan. 2015 [2009]. "Zionism: The Real Enemy of the Jews. Sionismo: il vero nemico degli ebrei." In *Il falso Messia*, edited by Diego Siragusa, vol.1, 113-137. Milan: Zambon Editore.

Maria Festa (University of Turin) is currently working on a cross-disciplinary analysis of Caryl Phillips's novel *The Nature of Blood* (1997). She is the author and co-editor (with Carmen Concilio) of *Word and Image in Literature and the Visual Arts* (Mimesis 2016).

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Rappresentare la nazione oltre i confinamenti

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Caterina Romeo, *Riscrivere la nazione. La letteratura italiana postcoloniale*. Milano: Mondadori Education, 2018 (192 pagine)

ABSTRACT

Representing the nation beyond confinements

In her book *Riscrivere la nazione. La letteratura italiana postcoloniale*, Caterina Romeo focuses on a nearly thirty-year-old cultural phenomenon that she calls "postcolonial Italian literature." Romeo analyses a wide group of texts written by authors who come from countries that had a colonial relationship with Italy and other European countries. In the first place, Romeo traces a diachronic historiography of the phenomenon, trying to group and define texts in as accurate a way as possible through geographical, historical, race, gender and theoretical tools. Her critical and theoretical references range from postcolonial to gender studies and theories, from more traditional literary studies and comparative literature to intersectionality, providing several references to fundamental postcolonial and feminist authors and texts, mostly from the English-speaking academic world. The book also offers an impressively complete bibliography, which lists the most important research works – both academic and independent – in the fields of Italian postcolonial and migration writings and cultures. Romeo sees postcolonial Italian literature as a strong reviving event in the country's contemporary culture, both as a conflictual site where non-white and foreign origin or second-generation Italians can claim to express their own voices, and as a tool of desirable transformation at the heart of Italian identity – still considered strictly white and peninsular – and Italian citizenship, which still excludes people who were born to foreign parents on Italian soil. Postcolonial Italian literature must be considered, Romeo maintains, as a resistant counternarrative to mainstream 'Italianness'.

Keywords

postcolonial Italian literature, identity, race, citizenship, cinema, Italianness, resistant counternarratives

L'estate italiana del 2018 sarà certamente ricordata come un momento particolarmente atroce dal punto di vista del razzismo, della chiusura delle frontiere e della maturazione di nuove e più feroci politiche di governo del confinamento. La decisione dei ministeri dell'Interno e dei Trasporti di chiudere i porti italiani alle navi delle ONG e della Marina militare italiana con a bordo migranti soccorsi in mare, la morte in due ravvicinati incidenti stradali di sedici migranti africani di ritorno dal lavoro nei campi del foggiano a bordo dei furgoni dei caporali e il tiro al bersaglio con pistole ad aria compressa o vere e proprie armi contro persone nere in tutta la penisola hanno imposto una cappa tetra sulla politica e la società italiana. In questa atmosfera plumbea, Igiaba Scego, scrittrice romana nata in Italia da genitori somali, ha pubblicato sul

settimanale *L'Espresso* un pezzo significativamente intitolato "Questo mondo non è più bianco. Tranne che in Italia." Scego passa in rassegna la vera e propria esplosione planetaria che sta imponendo la cultura nera – musica, cinema, letteratura – come il fenomeno culturale globalmente più rilevante: dal rapper Kendrick Lamar al saggista Ta-Nehisi Coates, dalla popstar Beyoncé al regista Raoul Peck, autore di uno splendido documentario su James Baldwin, largamente riscoperto da questa generazione di artisti, non c'è settore nel quale le culture della diaspora nera non primeggino, imponendo stili e pratiche. In Italia, sottolinea laconicamente l'autrice nelle poche righe conclusive, siamo quasi all'anno zero: gli e le afroitaliani/e sembrano non aver ancora diritto a un accesso adeguato alla diffusione delle proprie pratiche sociali e culturali.

Esattamente trent'anni fa, nel suo *New Ethnicities* (1988), Stuart Hall notava che un effettivo cambiamento nelle rappresentazioni di gruppi sociali discriminati – segnatamente neri – matura quando si passa dalla lotta per l'accesso alla rappresentazione allo sviluppo di politiche della rappresentazione. Ciò che Scego illustra in quell'articolo è esattamente il fatto che quel passaggio sia avvenuto nel mondo di lingua inglese (Stati Uniti e Regno Unito), evidenziando quanto in Italia, per certi aspetti, sembra invece non essersi nemmeno conclusa la prima fase.

È in questa congiuntura che si deve leggere *Riscrivere la nazione. La letteratura italiana postcoloniale* (2018) di Caterina Romeo, ricercatrice di Critica letteraria e Studi di genere presso l'Università di Roma "Sapienza," autrice, fra l'altro, di numerosi e rilevanti studi sul postcoloniale italiano (razza, genere, culture) e traduttrice. L'autrice ascrive il suo volume alla critica letteraria, rivendicando però il tentativo di avvicinamento ai testi analizzati attraverso le teorie e gli studi di genere, sulla razza e sulle migrazioni. Un posizionamento disciplinare certamente coraggioso in Italia, dove, come sottolinea l'autrice stessa, la teoria e la critica postcoloniale ancora faticano a trovare spazio nel dibattito sulla scrittura letteraria in italiano; ma coraggioso anche perché, in tempi di *convergence culture*, l'intero universo letterario (strettamente inteso) appare in progressivo, inesorabile esaurimento, lasciando sospeso l'interrogativo sull'effettiva capacità dei testi letterari di incidere in maniera significativa nel dibattito pubblico sia dal punto di vista storico sia dal punto di vista della comprensione dei processi di produzione dell'identità, delle pratiche sociali e culturali contemporanee. Consapevole di questo limite/questione, Romeo dedica anche una sezione al cinema, al documentario e alle serie televisive, in cui un breve percorso tra testi visuali permette di saggiare quanto i media contribuiscano sia a raccogliere e rivedere le voci e le storie delle comunità diasporiche, sia a rielaborare in nuove raffigurazioni e configurazioni le articolazioni di una società complessa, al centro della quale negli ultimi anni un ruolo importante lo ha avuto, tra l'altro, la discussione di una nuova cittadinanza basata sullo *ius soli* e non più sullo *ius sanguinis*.

Il volume, diviso in quattro capitoli e un'introduzione, mette a tema questioni di Storia, storiografia letteraria e narratologia (nel primo capitolo), genere sessuale e sue intersezioni

(secondo capitolo), questioni di nerezza e presunta norma cromatica italiana (terzo capitolo) e intreccio tra diaspore e nuove geografie urbane (quarto capitolo). L'autrice attinge da una bibliografia davvero sterminata, nella quale classici delle teorie postcoloniali come Frantz Fanon e Anne McClintock, per citarne solo alcuni, convivono con i classici del pensiero femminista nero nordamericano come Audre Lorde e bell hooks; così come sarebbe impossibile comprendere fino in fondo i testi analizzati senza rimandi comparatistici ad autrici di lingua inglese i cui testi sono fortemente connessi all'Italia e alle sue genealogie, come le nordamericane Louise DeSalvo e Kym Ragusa o l'etiope di lingua inglese Maaza Mengiste.

Romeo propone la storiografia diacronica di un corpus piuttosto articolato di testi "di scrittori e scrittrici provenienti da Paesi che con l'Italia e con altre nazioni europee hanno intrattenuto una relazione di tipo coloniale e dei/delle loro discendenti" (9). La data convenzionale di partenza di questo corpus è indicata nel 1990 e viene divisa in tre fasi, che marcano il graduale movimento dei testi dall'autobiografismo di matrice antropologica (che l'autrice definisce con l'espressione "letteratura della migrazione"), fino alla maturazione che coincide con una produzione più vasta e riconosciuta, passata anche attraverso l'istituzione di premi letterari. Si tratta di definizioni e periodizzazioni che l'autrice continuamente spiega, critica e ripensa, non essendo meri elementi di stabilizzazione critico-storiografica, bensì terreno di aperto scontro culturale, geografico e storico, nel quale deve maturare la presa d'atto delle numerose influenze multilinguistiche e multiculturali. Un fenomeno che l'autrice non teme di definire rivitalizzante per l'intero panorama culturale italiano nel quale, come nelle opere di Carlo Lucarelli, Andrea Camilleri ed Enrico Brizzi, indica Romeo, persistono elementi dalle forti connotazioni esotizzanti, coloniali e razziste, in particolare con il continuo ritorno di figure come quella della venere nera e tutta una pletora di metafore e metonimie direttamente collegate a una presunta sessualità selvaggia delle donne native e colonizzate.

Sono testi che Romeo inserisce nella "terza fase" (20) delle letteratura italiana postcoloniale, dai quali emergono mappe vertiginose a partire dall'instancabile sforzo tassonomico e definitorio dell'autrice che isola, per fare esempio, raggruppandoli, i testi scritti da autori e autrici di origine albanese – denominandoli "letteratura albanese italiana" – che si muovono tra Italia, Francia, Svizzera, Stati Uniti e ovviamente Albania stessa, anche tenendo conto dell'antica specificità della relazione tra Italia e Albania, considerando come l'arbëreshe, la lingua degli albanesi giunti nella penisola a partire dal XV secolo, sia patrimonio della cultura italiana. In questa stessa fase, l'autrice circoscrive uno specifico sottogruppo della "letteratura postcoloniale diretta" (27) – prodotta cioè da autrici provenienti da Corno d'Africa e Libia – nel quale inserisce Igiaba Scego, Ubax Cristina Ali Farah e Gabriella Ghermandi. Nei testi di queste autrici Romeo rintraccia una marcata presenza dello "spaesamento" (36) in quelle seconde generazioni di italiane e italiani smarriti nella frontiera tra appartenenza e diversità, integrazione e rigetto.

Uno spaesamento – raffigurato dal movimento e dalla sovrapposizione dei testi tra

passato coloniale, fase aurorale della decolonizzazione (comprese le eroiche lotte dei nativi e dei colonizzati contro gli italiani) e diaspore – che costruisce complesse cartografie dove passato e presente continuamente s'interrogano, in un gioco di drammatici rispecchiamenti e slittamenti. Non vi è un farsi dell'oggi – esperito sui corpi e sulle vite di queste seconde generazioni – che non sia una resa dei conti non più rinviabile, ma nemmeno liquidatoria, con il passato coloniale italiano. E lo dimostrano anche le "contromappature urbane postcoloniali" (125), che raccontano di come la grande trasformazione postcoloniale stia incidendo in profondità nelle vite e nei ritmi urbani delle città italiane, i cui confini interni risultano i guardiani della cittadinanza tradizionalmente intesa. La clandestinità e la vita ai margini, l'essere relegate a lavori di cura, l'essere neri e/o parte di traiettorie coloniali, sono elementi che scrittori e scrittrici mettono all'opera letterariamente per ridisegnare gli spazi urbani, far emergere invisibilità e contraddizioni.

Dunque, a ben vedere, quanto maggiore è la precisione dello sguardo sui luoghi, le storie e le Storie dei testi, tanto più risultano manifeste le relazioni intessute da questa sorta di diaspora polverizzata che ha, al suo centro, il continuo corpo a corpo di una molteplicità di soggetti con l'Italia, l'italianità, l'italiano. Qui "contronarrazioni" (59) è la parola chiave per comprendere la trama di una letteratura che ridisegna i confini e i conflitti tra ex-dominati ed ex-dominanti. Ci ritroviamo davanti alla scandalosa sanzione storiografica della natura labile di ciò che, oggi, può essere ragionevolmente e realisticamente considerato 'italiano' nel canone letterario italiano, di quale sia il ruolo dei soggetti non bianchi e, soprattutto, la necessità di ripensare ex novo le relazioni di genere e le loro rappresentazioni intersecandole con concetti quali la razza e la classe. Non potrà sfuggire, infatti, nemmeno a una lettura superficiale, quanto la presenza quantitativa e qualitativa di autrici donne, che affrontano temi quali il ruolo del racconto e della memoria, la critica al dominio patriarcale e all'imposizione della norma maschile e dell'eteronormatività, sia nelle culture colonizzatrici sia in quelle colonizzate, sia preponderante e potentissima.

Nella prosa saggistica di Romeo, ogni parola si deposita sulla pagina con tutto il peso di quello che appare come un lungo processo di riflessione e significazione, in una continua articolazione tra teoria, *close reading* e storiografia critica (non necessariamente in quest'ordine). La chiarezza espositiva non tradisce mai vacua trasparenza, né si perde nella ricerca di frasi o immagini a effetto. E anche grazie a questo dato stilistico – che appare come una deliberata scelta di politica culturale – il libro spalanca numerosi interrogativi di ordine generale: filosofico, politico e sociale nell'attuale congiuntura, come sottolineato all'inizio, lasciando comunque spazio all'incertezza, senza dare l'illusione che tutto possa essere normato e quindi addomesticato. "Riscrivere la nazione" è un vero e proprio impegno etico insito nella postura critica che il volume assume nel panorama della storiografia italiana, in un momento in cui l'ideologia cosiddetta 'sovranista' sembra nutrirsi di forme vecchie e nuove di nazionalismo e fascismo che, reclamando l'intervento dello Stato soprattutto per quanto concerne il

controllo dei confini reali e metaforici della nazione, ne sconta la crisi acuta: schiacciato da entità sovranazionali con caratteristiche molto diverse – quella politico-economica dell'Unione europea o della Banca centrale europea, quella finanziaria neoliberista del Fondo monetario internazionale o delle società di *rating* – che ne erodono in maniera sostanziale qualsiasi possibilità di intervento.

Per tradurre in questo contesto di nazionalismo post-imperiale alcune riflessioni di Achille Mbembe nel suo *Necropolitica* (2016), si potrebbe considerare questa recrudescenza di sovranità (pur privata del suo referente reale) come il desiderio di mettere sotto controllo la mortalità definendo la vita come quel luogo dove dispiegare il potere sui corpi di tutti i soggetti non bianchi tenuti ai margini e/o ai confini della cittadinanza e la cui eliminazione fisica sarebbe direttamente proporzionale alla sicurezza di chi, invece, abita legalmente/legittimamente quella cittadinanza. Basti pensare allo sconcertante attacco terroristico razzista avvenuto a Macerata il 3 febbraio 2018, quando Luca Traini (candidato della Lega Nord alle elezioni amministrative del giugno del 2017) sparò da un auto in corsa a qualsiasi persona nera gli capitasse a tiro. Questo volume si muove in direzione esattamente contraria a questa necropolitica, spostandosi invece sul versante della vita che prorompe da scritture che narrano della trasformazione, puntando per altro a questioni politiche concrete come la cittadinanza in una nazione la cui identità appare striata e i confini slabbrati.

Con questo volume studiose e studiosi dovranno confrontarsi a lungo: esso fissa un punto non su una linea – perché la linearità teleologica è un vero *moloch* per la critica e la teoria postcoloniale – ma in uno spettro pulviscolare di testi, interventi, ricerche e lavori sul campo che provano a gettare le fondamenta di un discorso epistemologico nuovo nel campo degli studi italiani – e di cui la bibliografia del volume dà ampio resoconto. È un volume destinato a restare sia come sintesi storica, critica e teorica di un fenomeno ormai trentennale (con una genealogia più che centenaria), sia come manuale per la formazione culturale e politica di una nuova generazione di italiane e italiani che, negli studi umanistici ormai scarnificati e sfigurati dal sistema creditizio neoliberista dell'Università, quando non considerati futile fardello economico della ricerca, possono trovare ispirazione per una cittadinanza critica, far proprie e rielaborare parole d'ordine, idee e immaginario per nuove lotte di liberazione, quanto meno intellettuale. Cominciando a interrogarsi su chi siano questi "italiani" nello slogan politico oggi così pervasivo "*prima gli italiani*": chi sono, quali sono le loro storie e le loro Storie. E, soprattutto, da dove vengono.

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letterari (with Bruno Brunetti, Bari 2009); and of *Identità, migrazioni e postcolonialismo in Italia. A partire da Edward Said* (Bari, 2014). He contributes regularly to *Altre Modernità* and *PULP libri*. E-mail: roberto.derobertis@iissfiore.gov.it.

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A proposito di razza e visualità

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A fior di pelle. Bianchezza, nerezza, visualità. Introduzione e cura di Elisa Bordin e Stefano Bosco. Verona: ombre corte, 2017 (301 pagine)

ABSTRACT

About race and visuality

The collection of essays *A fior di pelle. Bianchezza, nerezza, visualità* (2017), edited by Elisa Bordin and Stefano Bosco, explores the intersection between *critical race studies* and *visual studies*, by following an interdisciplinary and g/local approach. The work is divided into three sections: *Black Icons* investigates the shifting social, political, and symbolic role played by Black icons (such as Barack Obama, Django Freeman, Saartjie Baartman) in different historical periods and geographical settings; *Travelling Blackness* considers the historical construction of Blackness and its deliberate appropriation through performance by, among others, contemporary rappers; *Italians' Whiteness* critically interrogates the construction of whiteness in Italy during the post-war period with a specific focus on TV advertisements and movies. All the essays included in the volume agree on considering race as a fluctuating signifier, whose construction and manifold roles change across time and space.

Keywords

race, visual arts, g/local, gender, interdisciplinarity

La raccolta di saggi *A fior di pelle. Bianchezza, nerezza, visualità* (2017) curata da Elisa Bordin e Stefano Bosco si propone di portare anche in Italia il dibattito già presente a livello internazionale sull'intersezione tra i *critical races studies* e i *visual studies*. Si tratta di un discussione importante per il nostro Paese visto che affrontare i temi della razza e della visualità implica, da una parte, il confronto con un passato coloniale troppo spesso liquidato sbrigativamente nello spazio di poche righe e di conseguenza anche rimosso dalla coscienza collettiva, dall'altra, una riflessione consapevole sul presente dell'Italia che è sempre più meticcio, come ben ci dimostra il contributo sulle seconde generazioni di Annalisa Frisina e Camilla Hawthorne incluso in questo volume.

Come segnalano i curatori nell'introduzione, il convegno "Black Icons" organizzato da Anna Scacchi presso il Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari dell'Università di Padova nel giugno del 2015 rappresenta la prima tappa di questa interessante esplorazione del rapporto tra razza e visualità. La seconda sezione di *Fior di pelle*, dal titolo *Icone nere*, è dedicata proprio a questo tema. Nei loro rispettivi saggi, Nicole Fleetwood, Elisa Bordin, Stefano Bosco

e Farah Polato interrogano la funzione sociale, politica e simbolica di svariate icone nere in diversi contesti storici e geografici. Come fa notare Fleetwood, per esempio, l'immagine pubblica dell'ex-presidente statunitense Barack Obama può contare su una pluralità di significati che vengono continuamente ricostruiti e ridistribuiti con funzione normativa sia dal punto di vista del genere e della razza che della classe sociale. L'immagine pubblica di Obama oscilla, per Fleetwood, tra due poli opposti: da una parte, quella di patriota, presidente, uomo di successo, padre e marito impeccabile; dall'altra, quella di attivista, di cittadino afroamericano dall'identità multirazziale.

Molto più sovversiva, sostiene Bordin nel suo saggio, è l'icona di Django Freeman, così come è stata rappresentata nel film *Django Unchained* di Quentin Tarantino. La riproposizione cinematografica di Django Freeman come "eroe nero ex-schiavo cacciatore di taglie e vendicatore omicida" (88) ha infatti contribuito a scardinare nell'immaginario statunitense sia l'associazione del genere western con il tropo dell'eroe cowboy bianco, sia l'iconografia degradante legata alla rappresentazione dello schiavo nero supplicante, il cui corpo viene prima venduto e poi sfruttato. Si tratta di un intervento che va ad agire, come nota Bordin, sia sulla storia della schiavitù che sull'iconografia a essa collegata, proponendo attraverso la ri-scrittura cinematografica operata da Tarantino "un'estetica liberatoria" (104) capace di generare numerose altre rappresentazioni visuali di riscatto sia nel campo dei fumetti che nel mondo del cinema. Anche Stefano Bosco riflette sul controverso legame che unisce storiografia ufficiale (bianca) e figure di schiavi ribelli. Nel *graphic novel* che Kyle Baker dedica all'icona Nat Turner, l'autore stravolge l'interpretazione classica di Turner come "genio del male," rileggendo tale figura di leader nero addirittura in termini messianici. Turner viene infatti rappresentato "come un nuovo Messia" (121) che intraprende la lotta 'santa' contro la schiavitù.

Il tema dell'invisibilità e ipervisibilità dell'icona nera, questa volta declinata in chiave femminile, viene affrontato da Polato nel suo contributo dedicato alle figure di Saartjie Baartman, attraverso la ricostruzione storica effettuata dal regista Abdellatif Kechiche in *Venere nera* (2010), e Dido Elizabeth Belle, protagonista del film *La ragazza del dipinto* (Asante 2013). Polato si sofferma, in particolare, sulle dinamiche di sguardo che si articolano intorno al corpo di queste due donne e di come il medium cinematografico contribuisca a sovvertire o in alcuni casi addirittura a rinforzare l'invisibilità/ipervisibilità di cui sono oggetto. Si tratta di una tematica che viene ripresa anche dal terzo gruppo di saggi inclusi nella sezione *Blackness in viaggio*. Questa volta a essere approfondita è la costruzione della *blackness* in epoca contemporanea ma a partire da contesti diversi, dalla periferia urbana di Abidjan in Costa d'Avorio (Jordanna Matlon) all'Italia (Emilio Berrocal, Annlisa Frisina e Camilla Hawthorne). Il contributo di Matlon, che interseca questioni di genere, prestigio sociale, razza e cultura globale è certamente ricco di stimoli. A partire dalla propria esperienza diretta sul campo, mentre si trova bloccata nel traffico dell'ora di punta di Abidjan, Matlon avvista una serie di *celebrities* nere della musica e dello sport ritratte sui tipici *gbaka*, minivan privati che trasportano i pendolari dalla profonda

periferia urbana di Abidjan al centro città. Si tratta di icone maschili nere, come lo statunitense Barack Obama ma anche gli ivoriani Alpha Blondy e Didier Drogba che hanno raggiunto non solo il successo economico, ma anche il riconoscimento internazionale. Incrociando i miti del *globale* e della *blackness*, tali icone esaltano il potenziale consumistico e performativo di uomini neri di successo, contribuendo in tale maniera a rinvigorire la maschilità quanto mai precaria degli autisti di *gbaka*, uomini privi di salario e dunque anche di prestigio sociale all'interno della società ivoriana. Come sostiene Matlon: "I ritratti dei *gbaka* ricordano a coloro che lottano per sopravvivere le loro potenzialità e indicano come gli uomini di Abidjan creino degli alter ego pubblici ispirati dalle icone mediatiche della maschilità" (160). È sempre la *blackness* maschile statunitense, secondo Berrocal, ad aver influenzato la nascita e l'evoluzione del rap in Italia, andando però a offuscare un altro tipo di genealogia, ossia la derivazione da modelli espressivi locali come i canti in ottava rima italiani.

Il rapporto turbolento tra visualità, nerezza e bianchezza in Italia è invece al centro dei saggi raccolti nella quarta e ultima sezione del volume intitolata *La bianchezza degli italiani*. Vincenza Perilli utilizza *Carosello* come punto di osservazione privilegiato per indagare come razzismo e sessismo vengano articolati in alcune pubblicità dell'Italia del dopoguerra. L'analisi si sofferma, in particolare, sull'immagine tutta italiana della domestica nera che parla con accento veneto, ma anche su come la tv italiana abbia risentito nel corso degli anni dei risultati in termine di emancipazione raggiunti dalle lotte dei movimenti afroamericani e decoloniali. La rappresentazione stereotipata della donna nera come donna 'a servizio', nella doppia accezione di servizio sessuale e domestico, avviene nell'Italia del dopoguerra attraverso il mezzo televisivo, ma anche con il cinema. A partire dagli anni Settanta infatti, come fa notare Gaia Giuliani, la nascente industria pornografica contribuirà a ridurre il corpo femminile nero a semplice oggetto del desiderio.

Il tema della sessualità, o meglio, del tabù delle unioni tra donne bianche italiane e uomini neri, guida l'analisi di Leonardo De Franceschi sulla cartellonistica cinematografica italiana nel periodo che va dal ventennio fascista agli anni Novanta. Si tratta di un esame che dimostra come la frequentazione tra donne italiane bianche e uomini neri fosse praticamente interdetta in epoca fascista e dunque resa in tutti i modi invisibile e indicibile. Nel dopoguerra, tale invisibilità e indicibilità lasciò il posto a un'ipervisibilità, questa volta resa tramite la rappresentazione stereotipata dell'uomo nero come potenziale predatore sessuale al solo scopo di difendere un'identità razziale nazionale fondata in maniera artificiale sulla bianchezza. Che la bianchezza degli italiani sia incerta e si renda dunque necessario rinsaldarla continuamente mediante il contrasto visivo con chi non è bianco è la tesi sostenuta da Tatiana Petrovich Negosh nel contributo che chiude la raccolta e che analizza le pratiche del *blackface* e del *whiteface* in *Tale e quale show* (2012-2016). Questa questione ci riporta al saggio di Anna Scacchi con cui i curatori hanno deciso di aprire il volume e che articola la tesi teorica che sta alla base di tutti i contributi, vale a dire l'idea che la razza non sia una categoria chiara inequi-

vocabile, ma piuttosto un significante fluttuante che cambia a seconda del contesto storico e geografico di riferimento. Contenuto nella prima sezione che apre il volume e intitolata *Rappresentazioni/Rifrazioni*, il saggio di Scacchi ripercorre la storia della mercificazione del corpo nero ma anche la graduale riaffermazione orgogliosa della *blackness* in epoca più recente, con l'intento di dimostrare come la razza sia al contempo una costruzione identitaria imposta da altri e dunque alienante, ma anche una categoria dell'identità che viene volutamente riappropriata e rivendicata attraverso un atto performativo liberatorio. Tale ambiguità e polisemia del concetto di razza viene ripresa da Tania Rossetto nel suo contributo, che porta l'esempio delle cosiddette *racial/ethnic dot maps* per mostrare come la razza venga utilizzata per rimappare interi quartieri urbani precedentemente costruiti come razzialmente omogenei. Anche il contributo di Giulia D'Agostini è mirato a decostruire la rappresentazione stereotipata dell'Africa come "spazio omogeneo di violenza e irrimediabile fallimento" (52). Per fare ciò, D'Agostini si serve di due importanti romanzi della letteratura africana contemporanea, *Metà di un sole giallo* di Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2007) e *C'è bisogno di nuovi nomi* di NoViolet Bulawayo (2014), sottolineando come le tecniche del grottesco e del paradosso contribuiscano a sdoganare l'Africa dal cliché iconografico della fame.

Un'opera ricca di spunti e dalle molteplici rifrazioni*, A fior di pelle* ha il merito raro di mostrare la complessità del rapporto che lega la razza alla visualità, rendendo visibili appunto le molteplici forme che categorie agli antipodi come 'nerezza' e 'bianchezza' assumono nei diversi contesti socio-geografici e periodi storici per effetto di dinamiche sia locali che globali complesse. Non solo l'approccio g/locale, ma anche e soprattutto la prospettiva interdisciplinare rappresentano gli aspetti più apprezzabili di questa raccolta. Lo studio del rapporto tra razza e visualità a partire da una pluralità di discipline (tra cui gli studi culturali, la letteratura, il cinema etc.) e di strumenti mediatici molteplici (il *graphic novel*, il romanzo, la fotografia, la pubblicità televisiva etc.) rende questo volume una lettura imprescindibile non solo per coloro che si interessano di *racial* e *visual studies* dal punto di vista teorico ed estetico ma anche per chi nutre un interesse più ampio, per certi versi anche politico. Tutti i saggi presi in esame infatti concordano nell'affermare che *vedere* la razza non è mai un atto politicamente neutro o puramente teorico, ma al contrario dotato di un forte significato politico.

Lisa Marchi currently teaches at the University of Trento, Italy, where she received her doctoral degree in 2011. She has conducted research at UCLA, McGill University (Institute for Islamic Studies), the JFK Institute and the Center for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Her research interests include contemporary multilingual Arab literature, diaspora studies, interculturality, gender studies (particularly affect and queer theory), political theory, philosophy, and ethics. Lisa has published journal articles in *Comparative Literature Studies*, *Canadian Literature*, *Intersezioni, Altre Modernità*, and is currently working on her first monograph on the poetry written by contemporary Arab diasporic women. E-mail address: lisa.marchi@unitn.it.