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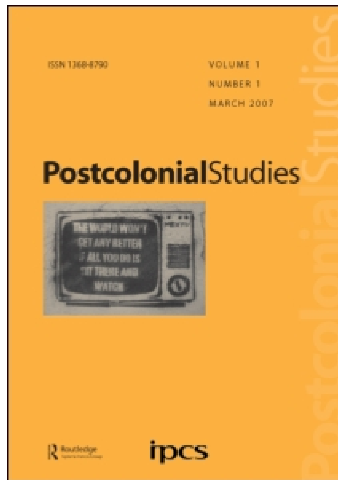

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Migrating modernities in the Mediterranean

IAIN CHAMBERS AND LIDIA CURTI

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The following discussion on the Mediterranean has been critically motivated by immediate considerations of locality and authority. Who speaks for whom, both in defining a history, a space, a language, a literature, and the subsequent articulation of a critical agenda? In our particular case, such pressing concerns arise from studying, teaching and promoting inter-disciplinary and inter-cultural studies in contemporary Italy. This approach, widely known under the rubric of cultural and postcolonial studies, forcibly raises multiple issues of *translation*. It also challenges the almost exclusive attention on the Anglophone world in the Italian engagement with cultural analysis and postcolonial critique. Simultaneously, critical disturbance and problematics that are usually located elsewhere, in the elsewhere, are brought home to interrogate the local and institutional complacencies of Italian studies and their particular understandings of the cultural, the historical and the critical.

An enterprise of this type also involves working over the decomposition, debris and ruins of many an existing discipline: from the stasis sought by inherited literary canons and histories of art to the rationalized pictures promoted by geopolitical framings of the area to be analysed. To promote a tear in the textures of knowledge means, then, to insist on the historical, cultural and political importance of *discontinuity*. Such a discontinuity evokes not so much the cancellation of previous understandings and their disciplinary protocols, but rather the development of an unfolding series of reconfigurations that come out of the past, hence potentially already exist, to *dissect* the present.

At this point, the centrality of the sea to any idea of the Mediterranean comes to our assistance. The sea itself confronts meaning. Its winds, currents, flotsam, varying depths and multiple shorelines induce a provocative contrast with the seemingly stable homelands proposed by the inherited archive of cultural, historical and disciplinary identities. Opposed to the geometrical (and geopolitical) logic of barriers to overcome and differences to integrate, the sea both reflects and absorbs maps that suggest an altogether more fluid understanding. It permits the possibility of an open-ended comprehension of the continual composition of a multiple Mediterranean, where West and East, North and South, Europe, Asia and Africa are caught up in a historical and cultural net that stretches over centuries, even millennia.

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Here the 'Mediterranean' is interrupted continually by a vulnerability that accompanies the encounter with other voices, other bodies, other histories.[1]

All of this suggests a critical rigour which is encouraged less by the conclusive rationalizations of disciplinary procedures and rather more by the registration of the complex and contingent conditions induced by the transit of bodies, histories and languages in which the analytical categories are themselves both suspended and sustained. In this excessive and often undisciplined space, heterogeneous tempos and mixed temporalities disturb the discursive desire for transparency and homecoming, proposing another Mediterranean, whose interpretations affect our sense of modernity, our sense of our selves and others.

Migrating modernities

The often painful, sometimes violent, and invariably unwelcomed mixtures, promoted by métissage and creolization, evidenced in Mediterranean history from the very inception of human settlement, suggest the adoption of a historio-graphy and a geo-graphy, that is to say, a narrating of time and territory, that critically explores the rhetorical explanations of time, history, from within its widely assumed representations. This undoing and uprooting of the habitual accounting of time is obviously also suggested by other sea narratives, other evaluations of the making of modernity: for example, that proposed by Paul Gilroy and his critical elaboration of the Black Atlantic.[2] In a painting that Gilroy himself discusses, Joseph Mallord William Turner's *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and the Dying—Typhoon Coming On ('The Slave Ship')* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1840), we are confronted with a ship's cargo being thrown overboard in order to ride out the oncoming storm.[3] The cargo is composed of slaves in transit from Africa to the Americas. Perhaps these slaves were destined for the sugar plantations in Brazil, whose produce was destined for a Great Britain that a few years earlier had abolished slavery and whose navy sequestered slave ships on the high seas, while continuing to enjoy the benefits of slave labour. In the heart of an aesthetic discourse (Romanticism, the visual arts) there is the simultaneous manifestation of a historical sign and an ethical interrogation: the aesthetical slides into the ethical. From the rich ambiguity of the painting there emerge diverse modes for interpreting and understanding the work; that is, diverse ways of interpreting and understanding modernity itself. Putting slavery back in the picture, taking those abandoned black bodies and reinserting them back into history, implies not only confronting the limits of a reason and an aesthetics unwilling to consider the other side of history (the negated Black Atlantic), it also means to register the limits of such reasoning, and its political and cultural manner of narrating the world, in order to suggest that there are other histories, other modernities, to narrate.

Hence, to follow the chained black leg about to disappear into oblivion in the bottom right-hand corner of the picture out of the frame, is also to exit from the framing of established explanations in order to encounter the actuality of Derek Walcott's noted phrase: 'I met History once, but he ain't

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recognise me.' It is not merely to register an omission or adjust the existing historical picture. It is to undo and expose the scaffolding with which that 'history' constructs its explanations. And this, to link the Black Atlantic to the Mediterranean, would also mean to re-insert that black leg into other histories. One would be that of slavery around all of the Mediterranean (and not just in the Muslim world), another would be that of the long history of migration, invariably forced, that has characterized modernity from its very beginnings 500 years ago. This latter history also includes 27 million Italians. Although separated in time, yesterday's migrant who abandoned rural life in southern Italy for Buenos Aires, and today's migrant abandoned on a beach in Puglia or Lampedusa are part of the same historical constellation.

All of this also suggests that we re-think the Mediterranean, and with it, Europe and its modernity, in the disquieting light of its doubling and displacement by a past that never fades away; a past that persists to interrogate and interrupt the present and its potential futures.

The further shores

In re-opening the archive of thwarted memories there exists the immediate Italian case of a forgotten and largely negated colonial past that is both direct—the colonies of Eritrea, Libya, Somalia and Ethiopia—and indirect. From our house in Naples, we can take a short walk to take a coffee in a historic bar: Gambrinus, on the corner of Piazza Plebiscito and Piazza Trieste e Trento. From here it is possible to verify the well known observation by Hannah Arendt on how the metropolitan interiors of Europe—the squares, cafes, streets, houses and food—depend upon an external that was once colonial and is now 'global': all that coffee, tomatoes and chilli; all that Baroque art.[4] To contemplate the material making of the modern European city, any European city, is to recognize that the spaces of modernity are always, and simultaneously, colonial spaces. This leads to the invitation to revaluate modernity in the light of the histories that have been marginalized and repressed in order to permit the triumphant passage of progress. It is also to reconsider a Mediterranean that has been framed and disciplined over the last 200 years by knowledges and powers that have arrived from the north: from industrialized and nationalized Europe. Here the Mediterranean, as another painting by Turner, *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus—Homer's Odyssey* (National Gallery, London, 1829), strikingly reminds us, is clearly understood as the site of the now superseded, mythical and bucolic, origins of the West, traced in the singular purpose of Ulysses and the Logos homeward bound, oblivious to the disruptive and dispersive challenge of the multivocal and the multiple: *poly-phemos.*

This purposeful exclusion and rationalized framing inadvertently exposes the secret side of the tale: that heart of darkness that resides within 'our' modernity where, as Walter Benjamin once famously reminded us, every document of civilization is also, at the very same time, a document of barbarism. Such scattered, but structural, considerations can be brought home to consider a Mediterranean that historically has always been

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hybridized, often violently so, in its formation. Working with an inter-disciplinary and inter-cultural cartography of the Mediterranean, literary, cinematic, musical and culinary maps can become potential testimonies of other histories, permitting us to reach out beyond existing critical modalities. Such an 'interruption', proposed by the transit and transformation of these languages, forces a breach in the walls of our 'home', creating an opening in our time which can be traversed in order to review the categories, premises and protocols that sustain 'our' world. Here, beyond the obvious discomfort disseminated by displacement, it becomes possible to renegotiate the very sense of cultural, historical and political belonging. This particular space inaugurates the space of *translation*. Here, where everything is located, identified, catalogued and explained in subjective reception, we stumble across the signs and symptoms of something that potentially exists beyond the subject: elsewhere in a coeval time and space. Translation introduces the possibility of alterity, and of being 'othered'.

Recognizing the perpetual translatability of the con-temporary, or shared world, takes us far beyond a simple 'adjustment' of the existing critical picture. The re-configuration of the narration of the nation and modern identities in the 'outraged light' (Adrienne Rich) of the histories, cultures and lives that have been structurally excluded from the account, permits us to conceive of a Mediterranean and Europe, in a diverse critical space. This would be a critical space in which it becomes possible to recognize Cairo as a Mediterranean city, Islam as a European religion (the second, and soon to be the first in terms of active participation in the United Kingdom), and Turkey as a part of the formation of Europe for at least the last six centuries. This is the challenge in which the forgotten two-thirds of the Mediterranean, represented by its African and Asian shorelines, return to re-propose a critical awareness of this sea of histories and cultures 'suspended' in a fluid 'solution', still to be elaborated.

All of this suggests abandoning the idea of a critical disposition sustained by a unilateral modernity that insists on sharp distinctions between *tradition* and *modernity* (and with it, between development and underdevelopment and all the other hierarchies of instrumental truth that are established in its wake), and to substitute it, as the great Sardinian intellectual Antonio Gramsci argued, with the complex relationships between *subaltern* and *hegemonic* historical formations in the struggle for the sense, the direction and the unfolding of the world. This proposal emerges from within a particular historical formation that has experienced over a long period of time, and not only in the recent epoch of so-called globalization, the proximity and intermingling of differences in a continual contamination and creolization of the languages that sound out and suggest a diverse Mediterranean, and with it, a diverse modernity.

Musical maps

For example, such a prospect is there to be felt, touched, experienced, in the immediate proximities that resonate in musical sounds, where histories and

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cultures overlap and intertwine, as Edward Said would have put it. In the opening sequence of Tony Gatlif's film *Vengo* (1998), there is a musical concert in a small monastery on the banks of the Guadiana river in Spain. There are two groups of musicians, one led by the flamenco guitarist Tomatito, and the other by Sheikh Ahmad Al-Tuni, maestro of Egyptian Sufi song. At the beginning the two groups play separately, then Tomatito's guitar inserts itself in the Arab performance. A dialogue begins, an exchange occurs between two Mediterranean shores: north and south, east and west, past and present, are superimposed, mixed and reproposed. To send thought along these oblique axes, where sounds exceed the limits of structured politics and unilateral reasoning, means to challenge and disturb the historical and cultural mappings we have inherited. It also means to undo the consensual chronologies of 'progress' and their linear accumulation of meaning.

Such maps, in this case of musical geography—the simultaneous bringing into sound and the sounding out of the historical and cultural terrain being traversed as the Mediterranean becomes a sonic sea—are to be considered not merely as historical and cultural documents, but also as composing an irreverent or undisciplined critical language, suspended and sustained in the sound itself. Music itself becomes a critical language able to configure a diverse understanding: not a sociology of music nor simply a history of sounds. Rather, in exceeding the disciplinary protocols and restricted chronologies of sociology, musicology and historiography, the unruly reach of the sound proposes music itself as sociology. In the place of the history of sounds, we experience the sounds of an untimely history, one that is always out of joint with respect to the official version. This is perhaps close to Gilles Deleuze's ideas on affective 'time-images', or Walter Benjamin's 'dialectical image'.[5] We are dealing neither simply with a historical document nor with an isolated aesthetic object.

Here we touch and travel with the language of poetics—literary, musical, visual—that exceed both national myths and the rationalizing desire for transparency and political certitude. Word-less is the ambiguous truth disseminated in works of art that, as Theodor Adorno once put it, 'provide the unconscious historiography of their epoch'.[6] Not only of their epoch, however; the presence of the 'exuberant tempos' of the more-than-past and more-than-present in the visual, sensorial and poetical image confronts us with time itself (Georges Didi-Huberman), and 'the detonation of explosive material that lies in the already having been' (Walter Benjamin).[7] This is what carries us elsewhere, into the elsewhere, where we are encouraged to 'cultivate the atrocity of doubt' (Pier Paolo Pasolini).[8]

Confronted with the coeval contemporaneity of a multiple and multilateral world, the languages of occidental modernity—its cultures, histories, and institutionalized knowledges—do not simply belong to the West. They turn out to be languages—literary, historical, cultural, critical, political, poetical, technical and economical—that are *uprooted* with respect to any 'origin'. They are languages and powers that also speak of histories, cultures and possibilities that have *not necessarily been authorized by 'us'*. In the words of the Maghrebian(?), Jewish(?), Algerian(?), French(?), European(?) philosopher,

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Jacques Derrida, we perhaps need to acknowledge that 'never will this language be mine. And truth to tell, it never was.'[9] This suggests that the archive of our histories and cultures turns out to be not only 'ours', as it now exposes us to a diverse becoming, an uninvited narrative, still to be written.

The uninvited guest

A further challenge to a consolidated modernity, with its canons and criteria, comes from recent migration writings in Italy, transforming its languages, be they critical and/or poetical (and perhaps they cannot be separated), into sites of doubt, interrogation: strangers to themselves. We could consider the Mediterranean, encompassing a great part of contemporary migration to Italy, as aesthetic and cultural, as well as geographic, borderlands. Right now it is actually the site of a crossing that recalls the atrocities of the 'middle passage' so recurrent in the postcolonial imaginary. Recent Italian migration writing has been linked to slavery literature in the Americas.[10] Feven Abraha Tekle in her novel *Libera* tells of the notorious crossing from Libya to Sicily, which as a fugitive from Eritrea she experienced herself. With its difficulties and risks, the crossing from Tripoli to the small Sicilian island of Lampedusa reminds her of the other passage, two centuries earlier, of the African slaves over the Atlantic.[11] Isaac Julien's recent audiovisual installation *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007) looks at the traces left on Lampedusa by the thousands who have drowned attempting the crossing.

There is now a substantial body of literature by migrants who choose to write in a Western language: the language of domination that was not intended for them. In Italy this began later than in other countries due to the minor diffusion of Italian in the world and even in its colonies: mixed schools were not encouraged, and education for the natives was neglected or kept at an elementary level. This is in sharp contrast with the British imperial care where literacy was deployed as a means of indoctrination for the creation of a local elite. So, the growth in recent decades of a diasporic literature in Italian is all the more surprising. Here the term diasporic seems best able to describe both writings linked to the ex-colonies and those by authors from other countries, all caught in a transcultural condition.[12]

In recent decades, Italy has begun to know what Europe and other parts of the Western world had experienced early, through accepting (though not welcoming) immigrants, often of a different ethnicity and colour. Italy, a nation of emigrants, unconsciously mirrors itself in these figures, while ignoring or preferring to forget that some of them come from its own ex-colonies. The colonial adventure is cancelled in the Italian imaginary; it is neither studied in school, nor, until recently, has it been the object of research and reassessment. Fascism has been recalled and re-appraised, but Italy's colonial chapter is still erased, consigned to cultural amnesia.[13] If commented upon, Italian colonialism is remembered as a humane colonialism. Such a repression of the violent and brutal character of colonialism also expresses the will to ignore the defeat and the loss of the colonies: a working through of a mourning that is never confronted.

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Elsewhere, Michael Haneke's film *Caché* (2005) has dealt with the French colonial amnesia and the collective responsibility in the events of the Algerian liberation war, invoking the self-analysis stubbornly refused by its protagonists. In *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Paul Gilroy has written of the British failure to mourn the loss of empire, while in *Precarious Life* Judith Butler confronts the refusal to acknowledge the damage and violence inflicted on others in post 9/11 America: '. . . a national melancholia, understood as a disavowed mourning, follows upon the erasure from public representations of the names, images, and narratives of those the US has killed'.[14]

Sandra Ponzanesi has appropriately spoken of a 'postcolonial unconscious' for Italy. Despite the upsurge in recent research, there is little awareness of the essential role that colonial discourse has had in the formation of a national identity. It is all too easy to forget that the hybridity of contemporary immigrants includes us. 'Strangely, the stranger inhabits us: as the hidden face of our identity, the space that ruins our habitation . . .', as Julia Kristeva says. 'In recognising them in us, we render the "us" problematic, perhaps impossible.' As Jacques Derrida observed, in French and Italian the term for host and guest is the same, respectively *hôte* and *ospite*, but even in those languages that have two different words, each of them leads back to the other, suggesting an 'exchange of roles'.[15]

Such ambivalence laces Nuruddin Farah's novels. These frequently describe the connections and interchangeable identities between Somalia and Italy. In *Sardines* (1981) he describes Somalia as a country in constant dialogue with Italian traditions and ways of life. The central character Medina, while challenging traditional female oppressions, calls attention to women's important role in the recent political struggle in Somalia, underlining the link between the Italian feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the struggles in Somalia's own troubled postcolonial period. As has happened in many other countries, Somalia has experienced decolonization as the brutal substitution of a colonial power by a national regime.[16]

More recently, authors belonging to the Somalian diaspora in Italy, from Ali Mumin Ahad and Cristina Ali Farah to Sirad Hassan, Shirin Ramzanali Fazel and Igiaba Scego, have added their voice to Farah's considerations on the proximity between the two countries. Scego, born in Italy of Somalian parents, declares that her formation is Italian. Her parents and brothers attended Italian schools in Somalia and her father wore the Fascist 'balilla' uniform in childhood. Similarly Fazel had Italian school friends, or friends from mixed families, and recalls growing up in the shadow of Italian culture, cinema, music and literature. It is repeatedly noted, however, that this proximity is rarely reciprocal. Somalia is largely an unknown reality in contemporary Italy. When not openly racist, there is a curiosity for diversity that rarely arrives at solidarity. Fazel notes that though she spoke Italian well, people insisted on speaking to her in a loud voice and using the infinitive form of verbs. The colour of her skin was undoubtedly the factor; the clearer-skinned Palestinian Salwa Salem notes on the contrary that Italians treat her as one of them, differently from the Austrians.[17]

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Which language? Which identity?

For many writers, estranged from their initial cultures as migrants or exiles, writing itself provides a home: the stories they tell offer cohesion for their fragmented identities. In a similar vein, migrants who write in Italian today express the same feeling of urgency and necessity, the same insistence on the value of writing as a bridge between cultures: 'the place where we exchange our experiences, and each of us meets the other', says Tahar Lamri, an Algerian writer living in Italy. He describes writing as a search for identity, a second baptism; an obsessive search for representation in the scene of the host country.[18] Salwa Salem, the Palestinian author, speaks of the book she is writing in Italian in the last year of her life as indispensable in putting together the various parts of her nomad existence: 'I hate nothingness. I hate disappearing. . . . This is the reason I really want to tell my story and make a book of it . . .'[19]

The insistence on the importance of writing in Italian comes mainly—though not only—from those who have no connection to the ex-empire, such as Lamri and Salem, to indicate a choice that, by no means obvious, acquires particular significance. They all wonder whether it is more important to be considered an Italian writer, or to remain 'foreign', safeguarding their difference. The important choice of writing in Italian partly mirrors the wish to create a way of belonging, at once a path to reciprocal knowledge and a mode of survival, but is also a gesture towards bridging past and present, origin and destination, tradition and newness.

Words become particularly important in curing the alienation from the self, the double estrangement of exile. For the Albanian poet Gezim Hajdari they are like crows flying over the painful passage from one language to another: 'la nostra lingua si riveste/di un'altra lingua che germoglia/corvi—/corvi che volano su ghiacci e muri/ disfatti . . .'; in another poem he defines his own voice as a 'twilight voice'. For the Peruvian Gladys Basagoitia Dazza, words in the 'foreign melody' are a key to opening souls and doors, though she remains suspended between one language and another: 'accettando la sfida/ fai tua la estranea melodia/attraversi frontiere/conservi la canzone di tua madre/per cantarla ai tuoi figli'.[20]

Maria Abbebù Viarengo, the daughter of an Ethiopian mother and a Piedmontese father, is another example of nomadism between languages and cultures. In *Scirscir'n demna* ('Let's go for a walk'), she narrates how once she had emigrated to Turin from Ghidami in Ethiopia, she moved among three languages: the originary Oromo, Italian and the local Turin dialect. The passage from one vernacular to another is a thread uniting the old and the new life. Oromo lingers on as the language of sister and mother, a young mother who died too early, the language of her first games. Later, when the rest of the family finally settles in Turin, she finds a sort of home in the local dialect. Language, which is usually the dividing line between us and them, the oppressor and the oppressed, the global and the local, in this case operates as a flexible mediation: 'I have inside me fragments of many languages: Oromo,

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Amharic, Tigrin, English, Arabic, of gestures, tastes, religions, perfumes, costumes, feasts, sounds, music, looks, faces, places, spaces, silences.'[21]

Identitarian complexities are added to linguistic contaminations, as in the case of Salwa Salem, first exiled in Kuwait and Syria, then migrating with her husband and children to Vienna and finally Parma, where she finds a community of women sharing her experience as a mother and her new beginning in pro-Palestine politics. She sees Italy as an interstice between her own country and the rest of the Western world, an intermediate place between north and south reflecting her doubly isolated condition as an exile and a woman. A life in translation, a double non-belonging, somehow similar to the isolation Rosalba, her closest friend, experiences as an immigrant from southern Italy in a country still divided in two, as described by Gramsci in *La questione meridionale* (1926). *The Wind in My Hair* was written in collaboration with Laura Maritano, who in her postface to the book describes the phases of their collaboration and her efforts to reflect the idiosyncrasies of Salwa's Italian. She followed the indications of oral history: an attentive listening to the authorial voice, awareness of her own influence, the rendering of Salwa's symbols and images alongside facts.

Works written in collaboration with an Italian have been quite widespread owing to the linguistic difficulties encountered by first-generation migrants. This has often led to these writings being assigned to the category of inferior literature, though others see in this meeting of two authors an important cultural significance. Unavoidably, the migrant's voice is weakened, particularly in Salem's case as Laura Maritano finished transcribing the tapes only after her death. *The Wind in My Hair* is, however, the fruit of a strict collaboration between Salwa and Maritano and Salwa's daughter, Ruba Salih, who shared her feminism, her political commitment and were very close to Salwa during that last year of her life when her autobiography was elaborated. The cultural and linguistic encounter of the 'native' with the 'alien' (and who is who here?) may also propose new styles of writing, modalities for breaking the patrolled frontiers of our language and literature, 'a way of opening up the Italian literary system still closed to the voices of women on the margins'.[22]

In her autobiography *Lontano da Mogadiscio* (1994), Shirin Ramzanali Fazel also presents space and time in fragments that describe a nomadic route from Somalia to Italy and the United States, and Italy again. Against this fragmentation she builds a nostalgic vision of her country and of the nomadic life of her family of origin—a kind of earthly paradise—before war and tyranny obliged her to become a refugee. Maria Abbebù Viarengo writes of the difficulty of identifying with any one culture while others want to file her away in a neat pigeon hole, recalling her many names and identities: 'Mi hanno definita hanfez, klls, meticcia, mulatta, caffelatte, half-cast, ciuculatin, colored, armusch. . . . Sono stata indiana, araba, latina americana, siciliana . . . '.[23] More than once she refers to the contrast between the two emigrations, one internal, from southern Italy, the other external, mainly from Africa. On the subaltern chess-boards, she notes how 'i napuli' (a term for southern Italian immigrants in general, not limited to Neapolitans) are

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being substituted by the 'marocchino', to indicate anybody who is less than white.

Voices of exile

As we have seen, the voices of exile occupy an ambiguous space where new possibilities and paradigms emerge intersected with pain, displacement and loss. The dreams, the stories, the images of these 'others' can give a new life to Italian, as language and culture, bringing angles, lights, colours, tones from other worlds. In these writings, symbols, images and icons acquire an ambivalent value, memory is accompanied by desire, the loss of the past and the anxieties of the present meet in dreams of reconciliation: the painful memory of the journey and of the initial arrival is followed by the strength and hope required by the new life. Home, a recurrent topos in women's writings, has the double dimension of loss and conquest, as has the sea, the landscape, dreams and nightmares. Igiaba Scego, speaking of the new life inscribed in Italian by the dreams, the stories, the images of these 'others', wonders in how many languages can you dream.[24]

The Eritrean poet Abraha Hewan dreams of stopping time, transforming horror in a gift of love: 'Sogno/di fermare a mezz'aria/la mano dell'aggressore/in un gesto/di pace.' The Iranian Vida Bardiyaz writes of the sense of solitude in the slumber between sleep and waking, dreams and reality; her empty days are marked by the steps of her neighbour going away to work in the morning and returning at night to a similar solitude. Similarly Gladys Basagoitia Dazza represents solitude in most of her poems. In 'Sola' she presents herself as 'straniera nel luogo di nascita/ovunque/sempre estranea diversa/un altro linguaggio nello sguardo/un altro colore nei pensieri'.[25]

Here or there, the loss and the nostalgia for the other half will always be felt: the protagonist of Kossi Komla-Ebri's 'Mal di . . .' has emigrated to Rome from her village in Togo and tells of the swing between the old and the new ways of life. Going back to Togo is no cure, as she realizes that she has two homelands: she will always be prey to some 'mal di . . .' (homesickness for . . .). In 'Salsicce', Scego describes the same situation: when her heroine is asked whether she feels more Italian or Somali, she is pulled apart by two parallel lists of replies, two belongings, two identities or no identity: '. . . must I thank Italy for still having my clitoris? And Somalia? Don't I owe it my respect for others and the splendid nature surrounding me in the glorious land of Punt?' Gezim Hajdari expresses solitude and despair in most of his poems, suspended as he is at a crossroad with no belonging: 'Vivo sospeso/senza appartenere a nessuna dimora/al bivio di un equilibrio.'[26]

The attempt to move from precarity to stability, from initial arrival to final destination, from the real to the imaginary, from document to fiction, is at the centre of many recent narratives. In *Le pecore nere* (2005), this change is illustrated in the tales of four young authors. They were born, or grew up, in Italy and have no memory of the journey, or of the first impact with diversity. The stories hardly display any nostalgia for the country of origin but rather interrogate the senses and events of their lives, and the aspiration to belong,

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shadowed by the troubled theme of the return 'home'. Sometimes there are parents or grandparents who represent tradition and inspire the need for rebellion; at other times there is the wilful return to traditional customs and costumes, or at least the need to re-create them poetically.

The wished-for integration in Italian life is contrasted with the desire to maintain a double identity, to be the same and different all at once. The ambiguity between past and present is evident in Ingy Mubiayi's story *Concorso*, centred on two Muslim women, born and educated in Rome, and their Egyptian mother.[27] Simona, the narrator, is fully intent on integrating in Italian society and finishing her degree in law, but also tempted to take the entrance exam for the state police. The indecision is between being a black Italian attorney or a black police officer, both unlikely figures in contemporary Italy, even in the imaginative world of television fiction. Her sister, on the contrary, in spite of her lay education, has converted to radical Islamism, to her mother's dismay. Her new zeal bans all music or talk while washing, a great sacrifice required of mother and sister who consider the pleasure of listening to the radio essential to the leisure afforded by their new bathroom. The presence of the media, in this case particularly television police series, is constantly evoked in these narratives as a background more real than the real. The relative luxury of their new condition is contrasted with the extreme poverty of the Arab woman immigrant they assist in a dramatic situation. The overall playful tone of the tale does not leave out the detailed description of the one-room house in which Azira lives with her two children, and above all of the very poor and degraded Roman suburbs in which immigrants, alongside gypsies or Roma, are housed.

The other writers in the volume are, apart from Igiaba Scego, Laila Wadia and Gabriella Kuruvilla. Their stories, too, describe a world pitched between modernity and tradition, with a constant reference to a cosmopolitan youth culture with its music, films and media alongside an ironic indulgent look at traditional customs. Such accents recall Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, and the consonance with other postcolonial works is frequent. Scego's story *Dismatria*—the title itself is a newly coined word indicating the loss of the mother country—is located in an all-female household again, with many suitcases and no cupboards. It suggests a condition of impermanence and transit while waiting, in hope or fear, for the (im)possible return home.

Comments and observations on the host country emerge more and more frequently: Italian racism, bureaucracy, incomprehension and closures appear alongside friendship and solidarity. In some cases the protagonist of the stories is an Italian, as in Scego's interesting *La strana notte di Vito Renica, leghista meridionale*, which presents a southern immigrant who joins the northern right-wing separatist Lega party. Once again the split between the two Italys appears in the writing of the newcomers. Italians who now find themselves mirrored in the gaze of the other, also discover themselves through that gaze. It is to be expected that these other and 'othering' representations will eventually find their space and place in Italian culture and literature, and that the traces and transformations of alterity will become an integral part of its history, its imaginary.

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Out of the complex combinations of histories, cultures, and lives that have both formed and are right now shaping the futures of the Mediterranean, all coupled to the unsuspected transit and transformation of language itself, our very understanding of the Mediterranean and, with it, of Europe and its associated modernity, mutes and multiplies.

Notes

[1] This argument is explored in altogether greater detail in Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings. The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.

[2] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: Verso, 1993.

[3] Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*, London: Serpent's Tail, 1993.

[4] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973.

[5] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, London: Continuum, 2005; Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, London: Pimlico, 1999.

[6] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, London: Continuum, 2004.

[7] Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps. Histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2000; Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999.

[8] Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Scritti corsari*, Milan: Garzanti, 2006.

[9] Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or the Prosthesis of Origin*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

[10] Alessandro Portelli, 'Le origini della letteratura afroitaliana e l'esempio afroamericano', *El Ghibli* 3, 2004, pp 4–9. Cristina Lombardi-Diop, *Ghosts of Memories, Spirit of Ancestors: Slavery, the Mediterranean and the Atlantic* (forthcoming). Lombardi-Diop analyses the Italian historical role at the outset of the Atlantic slave trade as one of the connections between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic and underlines the links existing in African-Italian literary texts between contemporary migrations and the Atlantic passage.

[11] Feven Abraha Tekle, *Libera*, with Raffaele Masto, Milano: Sperling & Kupfer, 2005.

[12] It is important to recall that the condition of 'foreignness' has been present in the works of Italian writers living in the 'in-between', such as Fabrizia Ramondino, Toni Maraini and Erminia Dell'Oro. Dell'Oro, born in Eritrea in 1938 in a family of Italian colonialists and having gone to live in Italy in her early twenties, has kept strong links with the country she consider hers and writes about it in *Asmara addio* (1997) and *L'abbandono. Una storia eritrea* (2006). Annamaria Ortese lived part of her childhood in North Africa and writes of Libya with nostalgia but also overwhelming awe as 'a land of dream' (*Corpo celeste*, Milano: Adelphi, 1997, p 63).

[13] The Italian presence in Africa is considered short and limited, and connected to the fascist 'parenthesis'. In actual fact the colonial adventure had started in 1882 with the occupation of the Assab Bay, whose rights had been bought by the Compagnia Navale Rubattino in 1869, followed by the proclamation of Eritrea as first colony in 1890, Somalia in 1908, Tripolitania and Cirenaica in 1934 and Ethiopia in 1935. In 1941 the colonies passed under British protectorate, and in 1947 were granted independence.

[14] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London: Verso, 2004, p 14. See also Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

[15] Sandra Ponzanesi, 'Il postcolonialismo italiano. Figlie dell'Impero e letteratura meticcia', *Quaderni del '900, La letteratura postcoloniale italiana* IV, 2004, pp 25–34 (p 26). Julia Kristeva, *Stranieri a se stessi*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1990, p 9. Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000, pp 124–125.

[16] Ali Mumin Ahad and Vivian Gerrand, 'Italian Cultural Influences in Somalia. A Reciprocity?' *Quaderni del '900, La letteratura postcoloniale italiana* IV, 2004, pp 13–24. The authors of this essay on the Somalian diaspora call for cultural hybridity and a polyphony of voices that could bring about new perspectives in Italian culture and literature. The word 'reciprocity' (with a question mark in their title) points to their main argument.

[17] Igiaba Scego, 'La seconda generazione di autori transnazionali sta già emergendo', *El Ghibli* 4, 2004, pp 1–3. Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, *Lontano da Mogadiscio*, Roma: Datanews, 1994. Salwa Salem, *Con il vento nei capelli. Una palestinese racconta*, with L Maritano, Firenze: Giunti, 2001; *The Wind in My Hair*, Yvonne Freccero (trans), Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2007.

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[18] Tahar Lamri, 'E della mia presenza solo il mio silenzio. Una riflessione lunga cinque antologie', in *Parole oltre i confini*, R Sangiorgi and A Ramberti (eds), Santarcangelo di Romagna: Fara Editore, 1999, p 27. 'Interview with Iain Chambers', in *Paesaggi migratori*, *V Convegno Nazionale di Culture e Letterature della Migrazione*, Valentina Acava Mmaka (ed), Ferrara, 11 April 2006, p 8. www.libria lice.it/news/primo/paesaggimigratori.htm.

[19] Salem, *The Wind in My Hair*, p viii.

[20] Gezim Hajdari, 'Quelli che continuano a fuggire', in *Parole oltre i confini*, p 54; *Stigmate/Vragë—Poesie*, Nardò (Lecce): BESA Editrice, 2002, p 55. Gladys Basagoitia Dazza, 'Altra lingua', in *Destini sospesi di volti in cammino*, R Sangiorgi and A Ramberti (eds), Santarcangelo di Romagna: Fara Editore, 1998, p 63.

[21] Maria Abbebù Viarengo, 'Scirscir'n demna. Extracts from an Autobiography', *Wasafiri* 31, 2000, p 21.

[22] Clotilde Barbarulli, 'L'immaginario dell'erranza delle parole: scritture migranti in lingua italiana', in *Visioni in/sostenibili*, C Barbarulli and L Borghi (eds), Cagliari: CUEC, 2003, p 169.

[23] Abbebù Viarengo, 'Andiamo a spasso?' *Linea d'ombra* 54, 1990, p 74.

[24] Igiaba Scego, 'Introduzione', in *Italiani per vocazione. Antologia di racconti*, I Scego (ed), Roma: Edizioni Cadmo, 2005, pp 5–22.

[25] Abraha Hewan, 'Sogno', in *Destini sospesi*, p 56. Vida Bardiyaz, 'La vicina del piano di solitudine', in *Parole oltre i confini*, p 59. Basagoitia Dazza, 'Sola', in *Parole oltre i confini*, p 64.

[26] Kossi Komla-Ebri, 'Mal di . . .', in *Destini sospesi*, pp 125–135. Scego, 'Salsicce', in *Pecore nere. Racconti*, Bari: Laterza, 2005, p 30. Hajdari, 'Quelli che continuano a fuggire', p 56.

[27] Ingy Mubiayi, 'Concorso', in *Pecore nere*, pp 109–138. Ingy Mubiayi emigrated to Rome from Egypt in 1977, attended French and Italian schools, and has a degree from La Sapienza in History of Arab-Islamic Culture; today she directs a bookshop in Rome. She defines herself as both a Muslim and a Westerner.

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