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Reading the Discourse of Multicultural Italy: Promises and Challenges of Transnational Italy in an Era of Global Migration

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This article argues that while the transformation of Italy from an emigrant to an immigrant country has yet to be translated into a serious reassessment of the civic and legal foundations governing citizenship and nationality, migrant narratives give voice to experiences common to generations of Italians, thus facilitating the recovery of the repressed texts of Italy's own colonial and migrant past. In particular, more recently established authors debunk homogeneous, normative models of Italian-ness and join the reconsideration of Italy's hybrid Mediterranean identity that is traversing the works of well-established autochthonous voices.

KEYWORDS immigration, emigration, migrant writing, nationalism, colonialism

Introduction

In 1964, the poet, filmmaker, and novelist Pier Paolo Pasolini composed the poem "Profezia," dedicated to Jean Paul Sartre who had written a preface of Franz Fanon's *Les damnés de la terre*. With a gift for foreseeing so many of the changes that would occur in the Italian peninsula during the post-World War II era, Pasolini prophesied the transformation of Italy from an emigrant to an immigrant country. He imagined the encounter between southern Italians from Calabria and Algerian migrants as a moment of unconditional hospitality forming the basis for a post-national cosmopolitan society. The Calabrese would recognize the Algerians as participants in the same history of Mediterranean colonization and migration and join them in a transnational coalition of subalterns.¹

While the transformation of Italy from an emigrant to an immigrant destination has indeed occurred, the arrival of migrants has failed to unfold into the type of encounter imagined by Pasolini. The presence on Italian soil of underprivileged and economically disadvantaged people coming from Africa, Asia, Latin America, the

Middle East, and Eastern Europe, has led to a fermentation of nationalistic myths based on geography, culture, and ethnicity coupled with increasingly stricter legislative measures to contain and minimize their influx. However, if the arrival of immigrants has yet to be translated into a serious reassessment of the civic and legal foundations governing citizenship and nationality, their growing presence in the Italian literary landscape represents a significant development for the contemporary imaginary. Through testimonial accounts, migrant narratives give voice to experiences common to generations of Italians, facilitating the recovery of the repressed texts of Italy's own colonial and migrant past. Moreover, the increasingly sophisticated writings of newer authors debunk homogeneous, normative models of Italian-ness and join the reconsideration of Italy's hybrid Mediterranean identity that traverses the works of well-established autochthonous voices. Ultimately, then, in this shared literary discourse lies the possibility of imagining a more inclusive future, where civic, social, and political rights, along with the responsibilities that come with them, will no longer be tied to untenable models of origins and belongings formulated at the height of the European nation-state system.

Fortress Italy

In the first few days of January 2010, a bloody clash occurred between residents of a town in Calabria, a region of chronic underemployment, and a group of immigrants from Nigeria, Ghana, and other African nations. The residents of Rosarno responded to the arrival of the Africans with a hostility that quickly turned violent. The immigrants, who had traveled from northern to southern Italy to work in the agricultural fields, were not new to such episodes. A year earlier, they had reacted to the shooting of two immigrants with a peaceful demonstration. But last January they fought back in a spiraling of violence that required police intervention.

This episode not only casts a dark shadow on Pasolini's poem, but more importantly, testifies to the challenges faced by Italy as it morphs from an emigrant to an immigrant country. This transformation started in the mid-1970s when Italy, one of southern Europe's traditional emigration countries (like Greece and Spain), became a transit region for vast transnational migratory movements. By the end of the Cold War-inspired bipolar divide, Italy had fully evolved from a transit zone to a destination country. In 2007, the dossiers of Caritas/Migrantes estimated that over 3.7 million immigrants were residing on Italian soil (57). However, as many commentators have observed,² the arrival of so many immigrants from Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America caused Italians to perceive migration as a foreign invasion and as a threat to a presumed Italian authenticity, culture, and way of life. The xenophobic discourses and practices that ensued revealed that, despite centuries of cultural, ethnic, religious, and linguistic plurality, the project of nation-building pursued by Italian governments from Unification on, had somewhat succeeded. The revival of a mythology of Italian national identity based on imaginary notions of shared civic values, a territory linked to a common culture, and, at times, even a genealogical descent, testify to this. As documented by Triandafyllidou, widely circulating press discourses stressed "the different ethnic origins of immigrants [...] identified as 'foreigners,' 'North Africans' or 'Albanians,' and hence distinguished from 'Us,' 'Italians,' 'Europeans'" (2001: 106). Even more disquietingly, in

2005, Marcello Pera, President of the Senate, sought to mobilize latent Fascist fantasies of racial purity by declaring that the immigrants would transform the Italian stock into a “half-caste.”³

This nationalistic mythology has accompanied a series of violent episodes of hostility coupled with a fortification of juridical borders and frontiers regulating and redrawing the boundaries between the inside and the outside, the native and the foreign, the self and the other. In a manner similar to what Balibar in *We the People of Europe* calls the “European apartheid” (2004: x), Italy has put into place a series of new legislation (referenced as the Martelli Law of 1989 first and the Law of 1998 after) culminating in the Bossi-Fini immigration Law of July 30, 2002.

The Bossi-Fini Law is, by all accounts, a repressive bio-political apparatus that transforms the immigrant into the *homo sacer* of Agamben’s *State of Exception* (2005), that is to say, into the bare life of the *bios*.⁴ It mandates fingerprinting, confines immigrants to so-called CPTs (Centers of Temporary Permanence), and has “a punitive and segregationist content [...] in line with the constitutional state sanctioned by the anti-terrorism laws” (Mellino, 2006: 469). But the peak of Italy’s ill-conceived immigration policy was reached with the Rome-Tripoli agreement of 2005. Signed by Berlusconi and Gaddafi, this agreement seeks to contain the arrival of clandestine immigrants coming from and through Libya by repatriating them. Since non-Libyan immigrants are deported to the edge of the Sahara and left to their own devices, the 2005 agreement has claimed hundreds of lives. Yet, Berlusconi⁵ shows no signs of loosening the grip of the repressive, anti-immigrant apparatus that has taken hold throughout the peninsula and its surrounding Mediterranean waters. He continuously dismisses the notion of a multiethnic Italy, despite the criticism of human rights advocates, the Vatican, and UN officials.

Founding moments of Italian-ness: colonialisms and global migration

And yet — despite the inability, or unwillingness of politicians to reconceptualize the very pressing issues of global migration, citizenship, and nationality in ways other than border defense, surveillance, and security — present-day migration is leading to a reconsideration of the multiple sites and locations of Italian identity. It is this productive, fruitful reconsideration of an Italy irrevocably “at large” (to reprise the title of Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large* (1996)) that I would like to sketch in the pages that follow. My intent is to place in historical perspective the founding moments of modern definitions of Italian identity — the often “precluded discourse” of colonialisms and labor and settler migrations⁶ — before turning to the ways in which the cultural work of so-called migrant, post-migrant, and post-colonial authors is facilitating the recovery of Italy’s colonized, colonialist, and migrant pasts while questioning the nationalistic agendas of Italian culture and its social and political institutions.

As Gramsci reminds us near the outset of *La questione meridionale*, the founding moment of the modern Italian state in 1860 — and by implication the concept of “Italian-ness” — cannot be separated from processes of colonization and global migratory flows (1966: 56, 73).⁷ Following the territorial unification of the Italian

peninsula in 1860, the independent Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was annexed to the northern monarchy of the Savoy. Within a few decades, the Savoy turned the Kingdom into a supplying base of natural resources and cheap human labor by way of a liberalized agenda that severely weakened the southern economy through trade blocks and tariff structures while impoverishing the peasantry in the erosion of collective land-use rights. Such colonial practice went hand in hand with a sustained effort of deculturation and colonial acculturation, leading to the erasure of minority languages and cultures, as documented by, for example, Piromalli and Scafoglio's *L'identità minacciata* (1977) and Cianflone and Scafoglio's *Le parole e il potere* (1977). It was also accompanied by a discourse that represented the south as an exotic and bizarre land: one that was compared to Africa or Turkey, and more generally, described in a way that reproduced the rhetoric of the European colonization of Africa, Asia, and the Americas.⁸ In short, the south came to be viewed as a place of barbarism, irrationality, and backwardness and therefore as a colony to be tamed by the civilized and progressive north. The voices of the opposition confirmed such colonial dynamics⁹ and were well summed up in Gaetano Salvemini's *La questione meridionale e il federalismo* which compared the Italian south to the Lombard-Veneto under the hegemony of the Austrian empire (Wong, 2006: 42). At the end of the nineteenth century, a body of pseudo-scientific research produced by Cesare Lombroso, Alfredo Niceforo, Giuseppe Sergi, and Enrico Ferri reified southern diversity from the frameworks of biology, phrenology, anthropology, and criminology. The result was the creation of a very resilient discourse of racial inferiority that provided a justification for the failure of the Liberal State to bring about effective economic and social reforms in the south.

As the plight of southern peasants continued to worsen, two related phenomena of social unrest took place that would lead to yet another fold in Italy's early colonial history; rebellion and emigration. Destitute masses fought against the Italian army — the so-called “brigand's war”¹⁰ — in a conflict that would claim more lives than all the battles of Unification combined and would engage two-fifths of the Italian army for decades. Others, however, chose the path of mass migration in a post-colonial exodus that, from 1876 to 1976, saw the departure of 25 million people, two-thirds of them originating from the south. And while the Americas were the top destinations, a significant number also left for the African continent, especially Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco. Italian settlements in Goletta, Biserta, Monastir, Sfax, and Gafsa testify to this,¹¹ as do the places of birth of important figures in the pantheon of the Italian literary canon, such as Marinetti and Ungaretti.

The mass emigration that followed the creation of the Italian nation-state was soon transformed into one more chapter of colonialism, a colonialism that now looked outside the Italian peninsula, towards the African territories, seen not just as a form of nationalistic expansionism but as a solution to an oversupply of labor and a large landless peasantry.¹² In 1887 Francesco Crispi became prime minister on a platform of imperial expansion that led to the occupation of Somalia in 1889 and the invasion and declaration of Eritrea as colony in 1890. Despite a number of catastrophic defeats (Amba Alagi, 1895; Adua, 1896, among others), Italy pursued its colonial ambition amid a triumphant imperialistic rhetoric that “reclaim(ed) the emigrant masses by

recasting them as conquering warriors rather than discarded surplus” (Verdicchio, 1997b: 48). But, in the reclaiming of the “emigrant masses” as “conquering warriors” of Africa, the same discursive tropes employed to describe southern Italians were once again mobilized. The dichotomies of white/black, conqueror/conquered, progressive/backward, civilized/barbarian established in the years following Unification, now justified the acquisition of African territories and the subjugation of native peoples despite the opposition of those — mainly the socialists — who considered emigration, rather than colonization, as a better solution to the problems of the Italian state (Wong, 2006: 79–112).¹³ Yet, imperialists won the upper hand and — armed with a rhetoric that combined economics with racial discourses — made colonialism acceptable. By 1912, Italy proclaimed sovereignty over Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, lands that were under the control of the Ottoman Empire and inhabited by nomadic populations. With the fall of the Liberal State and the advent of Fascism, African colonialism entered its most violent phase. In 1925 Mussolini made the stability of the African territories a priority and initiated a repressive military campaign that led to the proclamation of the *Colonia di Libia* in 1935 and the declaration of *Africa Orientale Italiana* (AOI) in 1936, a territory that encompassed Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. But hopes that the second, external colonization would provide a solution to the problems of the earlier, internal one were short-lived. Not only it is estimated that just 300,000 Italians went to Africa, as opposed to the nine million that left for the Americas,¹⁴ but the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947 forced Italy to abandon all claims to its colonies. As a result, Italy entered the era of post-colonialism without undergoing the loss of territories typically associated with a process of post-independence state formation, as was the case with other European colonial powers, such as France, Great Britain, and Belgium. Yet, Italian migration did not cease in 1947. In what would become the largest European interregional migration of the postwar era, two million southerners relocated to work in the factories of Genoa, Turin, and Milan between 1951 and 1972. This was to be the last chapter of a long history of mass migration that would last until the arrival of immigrants on Italian soil in the early 1980s.

As this historical parenthesis illustrates, contexts of national and transnational colonialism and migration are undoubtedly part and parcel of modern definition of Italian-ness. They constitute the global Italian nation, a transnational Greater Italy, often originating from the subaltern classes,¹⁵ and existing outside territorial jurisdiction, with frames of references encompassing not only central and northern Europe but also Africa, the Middle East, the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand. However, these transnational contexts have not been elaborated by the collective culture. As Livia Turco, has written, “L’esperienza migratoria degli italiani non è stata ancora elaborata dalla cultura collettiva, non ha neppure una collocazione di rilievo nella ricostruzione storiografica, nè ha prodotto memoria, immagini, simboli. Si ricorda solo la fatica, e l’avventura privata non è diventata un tratto della nostra storia nazionale, non fa parte di un *ethos* collettivo, non alimenta il sentimento e l’etica pubblica” (2005: 11).

Turco’s observations are amply corroborated by the endless narrations, celebrations, and commemorations of Unification as a project of collective emancipation and resurgence (hence the word: *Risorgimento*). The migratory experience of the

subaltern has been removed and repressed, particularly with regards to the considerable cultural production that has emerged from the global diaspora.¹⁶ The colonial expansion into Africa was literally bracketed and archived until very recently, as mainstream culture selectively recollected the past while cultivating the idea of Italians as “*brava gente*,” or good people, and of their colonialism as “*straccione*,” that is to say, done on the cheap and somehow benign.¹⁷ Such representations hid a post-1929 Geneva Convention history full of episodes of air strikes on civilian populations, chemical warfare, mass hangings, and deportation of entire populations in concentration camps where forced labor, executions, rape, and death by starvation were common occurrences.

Migrant voices of the first decade

However, in the current epochal moment of migratory movements through and into Italy, the founding — albeit repressed — moments of Italian-ness, can no longer be forgotten. In the early 1990s, as the new migrants reconfigured the labor markets as well as the ethnoscares of piazzas, train stations, and neighborhoods in Italian cities and suburbs — as was the case with the internal migration of two million southerners did between 1951 and 1972 — the new arrivals also inscribed their presence through written words. As Gnisci¹⁸ was keen to recognize, new cultural practices had emerged. Pap Khouma, Salah Methnani, Mohamed Bouchane, Saidou Moussa Ba, and Nasser Chohra, among others, published what would become the first generation of migrant writing in Italy.¹⁹ Coming primarily from countries colonized by other European nations,²⁰ they authored or, in most cases, co-authored works that gave testimonial, mimetic accounts of their experience living as immigrants. While the practice of co-authoring raised legitimate questions of linguistic agency and symbolic empowerment,²¹ these works were nevertheless acts of “talking back” (Parati, 2005: 23–53), gestures that “created multifaceted alternative portrayals of the essentialized and homogeneous ‘immigrant’ as defined by prejudice and racism in Italy” (Parati, 1999: 13). But besides carving symbolic spaces capable of recovering the self from the status of the reified Other, trapped in and culturally effaced by the economy of the host country, these early migrant writers are also significant because they gave voice to experiences common to the millions of Italians who emigrated during the period from Unification well into the post-World War II era: a voice that expressed the pain of uprooting, the sentiments of prejudice, violence, and exclusion, the struggle to attain legal status while coming to terms with the forging of diasporic identities straddled across past and present lives and circumstances. In other words, the importance of the works of these early migrants extends far beyond the experience of the single individual as recorded in the diaries of Bouchane, Khouma, or Methnani; they give voice to what the dominant culture did not fully articulate: the repressed text of *La storia*,²² the history of the Italian emigrants’ experience of painful uprooting, exclusion, racialization, and prejudice. This is, of course, a most significant gesture and one whose broad impact was not lost on Angioni and De Luca, as evidenced by their work in the 1990s.²³

Angioni’s novel *Una ignota compagnia* (1992) is set in the 1980s and focuses on the relationship between a southern Italian immigrant to Milan, the Sardinian Tore, and

Warùì, who works in the same factory as Tore; Warùì has come to Milan from Kenya to study. Following their meeting in a squalid *pensione*, where both of them are staying, Tore and Warùì realize that they share similar experiences even though they come from different cultures and traditions. Among their shared experiences are their origins in regions profoundly transformed by modernization and their presence in a city where they are both subject to the prejudices of northern Italians. One of these northern Italians is Carlino who, in disparaging sentences that mix northern dialect with standard Italian, explicitly ties Kenyans to southern Italian immigrants from Naples: “E allora, perchè i negri *vègnen chi*? Eh? Perchè? Perchè *i se* come *i nàpuli*, anzi peggio” (14). While Carlino’s sentiments are widespread in the northern city of Milan, the relationship of solidarity among the subalterns of the global south(s) prevails, to the point that Tore helps Warùì return to Kenya after the latter is accused of a murder he did not commit.

Like Angioni, De Luca also recovers the repressed text of the migrant experience of Italians while setting in motion a practice of recognition in the short story “Udito: Un grido” collected in the 1993 anthology *I colpi dei sensi*.²⁴ The reader is told that the narrator’s uncle, born in 1910 and the son of a Neapolitan immigrant and an American woman, worked for a navigation company where he checked documents at the embarkation point. In that role, he had become used to the many scenes of separation and uprooting but there was one in particular that had been impressed on his soul: the scream of an elderly mother clad in a black dress: “*Sal va to re e*” (10; emphasis added). That scream was passed on from the uncle to the narrator’s mother to the narrator himself who, against the background of the 1990s migratory flows to southern Italy, recalls it as a sound that should never be lost. Through the metaphor of a seed generating a plant, which in turn will produce another seed, the narrator promotes the scream to the emblem of the memory that binds yesterday’s with today’s migrants.²⁵

In sum, in the discourse shared by emerging and autochthonous texts — exemplified by the writings of “Bouchane, Khouma, Methnani, Angioni, and De Luca — the I” is made to collapse into the “Thou” while the bar of difference and identity separating the same from the other is crossed. As Sayad reminds us in *The Suffering of the Immigrant*, this crossing is of fundamental importance. Emigration and immigration cannot and should not be separated. Immigrants are, at their origins, emigrants, that is, individuals with a history, a country, a memory, and a culture: “One’s country immigration is another country’s emigration. The two are not dissociable aspects of a single reality and one cannot be explained without reference to the other” (2004: 1). And it is precisely by acknowledging the twin-existence of migrants as both emigrants and immigrants, by reminding readers that the face of the other is also the face that was one’s uncle or one’s father, that the affective and cultural dispositions necessary to overcome separations and divisions can be mobilized.

Voices of the second decade

While the importance of the first generation of migrant writers cannot be underestimated, it remains equally true that these works were “by and large confined to a

limited range of tones; a pathetic testimony of hardship and pain, a lyrical expression of feelings, an exotic tinge of nostalgia” (Portelli, 2006: 474). In other words, as was often the case of the early voices of the Italian American diaspora,²⁶ for these authors the experience of migration unfolded into the unmediated realism of testimonial accounts, rather than the reflexive questioning of the foundations regulating national identity and belonging. These limits have been greatly surpassed by the second generation of authors. Highly educated²⁷ and politically involved in a wide range of grassroots initiatives, civil associations, and NGOs,²⁸ they have emerged from that condition of linguistic subalternity that characterized earlier writers’ collaboration with Italian authors. Their novels, short stories, poetry, dramas, and films²⁹ have evolved into “the performative space of *auctoritas*” (Wright, 2004: 99), into acts of symbolic self-assertion and empowerment that often even extend to the production and distribution of their own written works.³⁰ Their names are Fatima Ahmed, Adrian Nazareno Bravi, Uba Christina Ali Farah, Viola Chandra, Christiana de Caldas Brito, Amor Dekhis, Jadelin Mabilia Gangbo, Gabriella Ghermandi, Kossi Komla-Ebri, Ron Kubati, Tahar Lamri, Carmelo Quijada, Igiaba Scego, Laila Wadia, Barbara Serdakowski, Yousef Wakkas, Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, Maria Abbebù Viarengo, Genevieve Makaping, Ornella Vorpsi, Ingy Mubiayi, and Mohammed Lamsuni, to name a few.³¹ Many, but not all, of these new Italian writers are the children of one or two parents from former Italian colonies of Eritrea, Somalia, and Ethiopia. Such is the case of Fazel, Viarengo, and Ghermandi. Scego and Ali Farah, however, were born in Italy of one or more parent from the Italian African colonies while others have migrated from non-Italian colonial contexts. Other still come from regions that escaped colonization. Their origins are varied and range from Albania, Serbia, Croatia, Slovakia, India, Cameroon, Egypt, Zaire, Congo, Argentina, Venezuela, Brazil, Iran, Palestine, Poland, Russia, and more.³² Some are Italian citizens; others are not. For some, Italian is the language of the former colonizer; for others, it is the second or third language; for others still, it is their first language. This polyphony of voices not only raises questions of definition —are they second-generation migrant writers? Post-migrant? Trans-migrant? Post-colonial? Multicultural? Italophone? Multiethnic? Post-Ethnic? Hyphenated?³³ — but, more relevant to my purpose, is that their work not only bears witness to the experience of migration in its two-fold dimension of emigration and immigration; their writings also overtly challenge hegemonic definitions of Italian-ness. Their writings inscribe diasporic and hybrid subjectivities that cross borders of space, time, and culture. They expose, as fantasies and reified constructions, the many bounded forms of identity of Eurocentric knowledge that they replace by the polycentrism of a “border gnosis,” a gnoseology from, of, and about interior and exterior borders.³⁴ Otherwise stated, these are writers who, in Sayad’s words, are leading to a sophisticated questioning of the foundations of “state-thought” (that is, the system that regulates traditional ideas of nation based upon ontologies of origins and belongings) by:

reveal[ing] in broad daylight the hidden truth and the deepest foundations of the social and political order we describe as national. [. . .] “denaturalizing,” so to speak, what we take to be natural, and “rehistoricizing” that state and that element within the state that seems to have been afflicted by historical amnesia [. . .] recalling the social and historical conditions of its genesis. (2004: 280)

Thus, for example, the writings of Uxax Cristina Ali Farah, born in Italy of an Italian mother and a Somali father, but raised in Mogadishu, express what the dominant culture represses: the African referent of Italian-ness. Through the characters of the two childhood friends, the cousins Barni and Domenica Axad, Ali Farah's *Madre piccola* evokes Italian colonial ties to Africa, Somali resettlements in Italy after 1991, and the struggles faced by many to gain Italian citizenship since citizenship in Italy is still dependent upon *jus sanguinis*, or blood ties, rather than residency in the country. But hybridity and contamination is also expressed in a prose marked by a daring code-switching, where Somali words or Italian words as they are pronounced by Somali speakers, are included in the Italian text³⁵ to remind readers of indelible Italo-African legacies and heritages. Like Ali Farah, Gabriella Ghermandi, born in Addis Abeba, and Igiaba Scego, born in Rome of Somali parents, bring to light the cultural and historic ties that bind Italy to Ethiopia and Somalia. In *Rhoda* (2004b) Scego focuses on the communities of Somalis who have resettled in Rome and explores the difficult integration in the society of the former colonizer that befalls the character of Rhoda, who works as a prostitute and eventually returns to Mogadishu after contracting HIV. Gabriella Ghermandi's *Regina di fiori e di perle* (2007) recovers the text of the resistance of the Abergnà tribe against the Italian occupying forces through the stories of Yacob, the old man of the domestic household, who tells the female protagonist Mahlet that her fate is to narrate the history of Ethiopia to the Italians. But one should also mention Tahar Lamri, Algerian born but a citizen and resident of Italy, who authors a prose³⁶ where memories, experiences, and heritages that weave Italy and North Africa together are narrated in a plurilingualism of French, Arabic, Italian, Romagnolo, Mantovano, and Venetian dialects. As this artificially separated polyphony of voices, cultures, and identities come together, borders are crossed or, as Lamri puts it in "Il pellegrinaggio della voce" (2003), writing only puts down roots similar to those of the mangrove trees, that is, "in superficie, sempre sulla linea di confine."³⁷ Yet, Lamri's linguistic experimentation is not a quest for a perpetual nomadism, but strives to reach a point where identity can encompass multiple, broadly based affiliations, where belonging can accommodate hybrid and diasporic subjects, or what he calls "l'anima plurale" (2003).

But the "denaturalizing" of the foundations of "state-thought" that characterizes the voices of writers of the second decade also takes other forms, including rhetorical strategies of irony, satire and parody to question the many legal and cultural fortifications of the nation-state.

Christiana de Caldas Brito, for example, responds to the Bossi-Fini Law of 2002 (Law 189/2002), requiring fingerprinting of non-EU nationals residing in Italy who wished a renewal of their permits, with the surreal brief narrative "Io, polpastrello, 5.423" (2004) in which she describes fingertips that, having been separated from their owners, go to the immigration office of an Italian city and are subsequently hired to perform jobs despised by contemporary Italians. For example, they exhibit stains of tomatoes, acquired after a day's work in the field, or of blood and excrement earned after caring for the sick and the elderly. As Portelli notes, by fragmenting the body of the fingertips' owners, the story foregrounds the absurdity of legislative measures that seek to divide and separate (2006: 474). However, the story also seeks to transcend fragmentation by recreating a more complete image of immigrants' lives.

The absurdity of the Bossi-Fini law that shapes de Caldas Brito's tale, also elicits Igiaba Scego's story "Salcicce" (2005a).³⁸ The protagonist, a Sunni Muslim, has just purchased 5 kilos of sausages but is now prey to indecisions and doubts. While the consumption of the sausages would conform to normative definition of Italian identity, the narrator refuses the sameness they promise. She decides to neither cook nor consume them. Instead, she settles on a catalogue of Italian and Somali references to a mixed heritage that spans from the orders of food, fashion, and patterns of behavior to icons of high and popular culture. By so doing, Scego effectively implicates sameness with otherness and negates, though humor, the exclusive national interpellation of a "state-thought" incapable of coming to terms with the syncretism of every self, with the hybridity of every identity: "mi sento Somala quando: 1) bevo il tè con il cardamomo, i chiodi di garofano e la canella; 2) faccio le 5 preghiere quotidiane verso la Mecca; 3) mi metto il *dirah* [. . .]. Mi sento italiana quando: 1) faccio una colazione dolce [. . .] 2) vado a visitare mostre, musei e monumenti; 3) parlo di sesso, uomini e depressioni [. . .]; 4) vedo i film di Alberto Sordi, Nino Manfredi, Vittorio Gassman [. . .]" (Scego, 2005a: 29).

But the mobilization of a vast array of rhetorical strategies by these authors even extends to parodic rewritings of the national literary canon. This is the case with Jadelin Gangbo, who moved to Italy from Congo. In the novel *Rometta and Giulio* (2001)³⁹ Gangbo rewrites the mythical story of the star-crossed lovers from Verona (transformed in the narrative into "Vergogna") into a love story between a Chinese immigrant who works as a pizza delivery boy and an Italian university student. Besides seeking a symbolic empowerment through one of the better-known texts of the Western canon, Gangbo also experiments with the high codes of the literary language, interspersing his text with lexical and syntactic displays of archaisms.

Parodies and rewriting of the literary canon also traverse the story "Documenti, prego" (2005), by Ingy Mubiayi, who draws upon Dante's journey in the underworld to establish an analogy with the struggles of her family to attain legal status in Italy. Yet another example is provided by *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio* (2006), by Algerian-born Amara Lakhous.⁴⁰ A detective fiction written, by the author's own admission,⁴¹ in the tradition of Gadda's *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* and Sciascia's *Il giorno della civetta*, Lakhous' novel places a mysterious murder at the center of the detective process. As was the case of the stories spun in *via Merulana* by the sight of the cadaver of Liliana Balducci, the corpse of Gladiatore, found in the elevator of the apartment complex of Piazza Vittorio, an area of Rome that is now home to many immigrants, creates eleven narrative accounts. Located in these voices, carefully commented by Amedeo/Ahmed, is a pluralization of points of view that questions, just as Gadda had done, the very idea of truth. This is done through the speeches of Italians from Naples and Milan, all replete with regional inflexions, and those of the immigrants themselves: a Peruvian, a Dutch, a Bengalese, an Algerian, and an Iranian. Yet, Gadda's "gnommero" [entanglement or knot] not only returns but is now made much more complex by the identity of Amedeo/Ahmed. At ease in the multicultural world of Piazza Vittorio, he straddles and crosses the boundaries of culture, class, languages, religion, and ethnicity that are exemplified in many of the characters' points-of-view. But precisely because he is an Italian in the voices of immigrants and Italians alike, the novel

problematizes received markers of identity upon which claims of authenticity, legal status, citizenship, and nationality are made. In the words of the Iranian character Parviz, “Ma poi chi è italiano? Chi è nato in Italia, ha un passaporto italiano, carta d’identità, conosce bene la lingua, porta un nome italiano e risiede in Italia? Come vedete la questione è molto complessa” (14).

While Lakhous and Gangbo traffic in the high literary canon, these are also writers who are at home with the codes of present-day Italian sub-cultures: youth, hip-hop, and popular cultures. As Scego notes in “Scrittori migranti di seconda generazione” (2004a) and as anthologies such as *Pecore nere* (2005a) and *Italiani per vocazione* (2005b) illustrate,⁴² “Non siamo diversi dai vari Andrea, Luca e Gaetano. Abbiamo visto l’Italia vincere i mondiali di calcio dell’82. Abbiamo fatto una sana overdose di cartoni animati giapponesi come ogni ragazzino italiano che si rispetti (da Capitan Harlock a Lady Oscar, passando per l’immancabile Lupin alla riccioluta Candy Candy), abbiamo visto anche Tiziana Rivale vincere il festival di Sanremo.”⁴³

But as was the case with the first migrant texts of Bouchane, Khouma, and Methnani, the voices of Lamri, Scego, Ghermandi, de Brito, and others are joined by autochthonous ones.

As Maria Cristina Mauceri and Maria Grazia Negro have documented in their recently published *Nuovo immaginario italiano* (2009), from 1998 to 2008, a large number of writers have placed at the center of their work issues of migration, border-crossing, and the construction of hybrid and diasporic subjects. In the rich bibliography provided by Mauceri and Negro are well-known names: Raffaele Nigro, Andrea Camilleri, Gianrico Carofiglio, Giosuè Calaciura, Giancarlo De Cataldo, Vincenzo Consolo, Erri De Luca, Susanna Tamaro, Paola Capriolo, Dacia Maraini, Simona Vinci, and Melania Mazzucco, among others. While this textual “*mare magnum*” (Mauceri and Negro, 2009: 311) is not without an Orientalist gaze, as witnessed by a predominance of exotic and stock figures, a number of autochthonous writers are effectively questioning hegemonic notions of belonging while calling for wider, more inclusive definitions of the “we” of the Italians. As Cassano writes in *Il pensiero meridiano* (1996), “l’altro non arriva oggi per la prima volta sulle nostre terre [...] contaminazioni, arrivi, partenze, quella inquieta mobilità dei geni [...] fa di tanti mediterranei [...] degli incurabili bastardi, l’antitesi di ogni purezza, di ogni integrità e di ogni integrismo. Il nostro ‘noi’ è pieno di altri” (1996: xxiv–xxv).

A significant example of this kind of work is Consolo’s “Porta Venezia” (1988). Set on an evening in the month of June in the city of Milan, this brief narrative tells of the arrival in Milan’s Corso Buenos Aires of Eritrean, Arab, Tunisian, Egyptian, Moroccan, Senegalese, and Philippine immigrants who set out their merchandise after the closing of Italian stores, or get together to chat in the streets. To the thinly veiled autobiographical *I*, these dark-skinned immigrants evoke the memory of another migration, that of Southern Italians to the industrial cities of the North during the postwar era: “Da questa umanità intensamente colorata, si partiva poi tutta una gamma di bruno meridionale. Ed erano quelli dietro le bancarelle dei dolciumi ‘tipici,’ delle cravatte, delle musicassette; erano famiglie di siciliani, calabresi, pugliesi” (35). In this intersecting vision of yesterday’s and today’s migrants, the narrating *I* frees himself from the strictures of an identity defined by the boundaries of a national cartography and affirms a Mediterranean subjectivity defined by a plurality of cultural, linguistic, and religious heritages:

Erano, i marciapiedi di Corso Buenos Aires [...] tutta un'ondata di mediterraneità, di meridionalità, dentro cui m'immergevo e crogiolavo, con una sensazione di distensione, di riconciliazione. Io che non sono nato in questa Nordica metropoli, io trapiantato qui, come tanti, da un Sud dove la Storia s'è conclusa, o come questi africani, da una terra d'esistenza [...] dove la storia è appena o non è ancora cominciata; io che sono di tante razze e che non appartengo a nessuna razza, frutto dell'estenuazione bizantina, del dissolvimento ebraico, della ritrazione araba, del seppellimento etiopico, io, da una svariata commistione nato per caso bianco [...]. Mi crogiolavo e distendevo dentro questa umanità come sulla spiaggia al primo, tiepido sole del mattino. (36)

The story concludes with an invitation to embrace the newcomers since in them lies “una perentoria affermazione dell'esistenza” (35), a blackness which is life, as opposed to the whiteness of death:

Nero e bianco: l'esistenza e l'inesistenza; la vita e la morte [...]. Ecco, noi ci stiamo avvicinando alla morte. Come m'avvicino io, sbiancando ogni giorno nei capelli, nella pelle, preludio a quel bianco definitivo e immobile che è la morte. (35)

Like Consolo, De Luca makes it clear that migration is our future, that migrants are the movers and engine of history. In the poem *Solo andata* (2005), he narrates the journey of a group of migrants, “deserto che cammina, popolo di sabbia” (24), across Africa to the Mediterranean shores from where they embark in a dangerous journey for the island of Lampedusa. In yet another gesture of recognition, the author of “Udito: Un grido,” ventriloquizes the migrants' narratives. By way of a first-person narrative, he gives voice to their reasons for leaving, their aspirations and hopes, before moving to the recollection of their rescue by the coastal police and their confinement under strict surveillance. When found guilty — “colpevoli di viaggio” (31) — and ordered to return home, the migrants reply in a choral voice: “Potete respingere, non riportare indietro, è cenere dispersa la partenza, noi siamo solo andata” (34). As is the case with Consolo's “Porta Venezia,” De Luca's poem concludes with an image of a plural or multiple self, of a “we” full of “others” carrying the renewal and regeneration that only comes from migration: “Dai nostri fianchi nasce il vostro nuovo mondo [...] noi siamo i piedi in marcia per raggiungervi, vi reggeremo il corpo, fresco di forze nostre” (36).

Conclusion

Passages such as those just cited only represent sites of possibility. In their discovery or recovery, creation or recreation of other models of Italian-ness, they express broad transnational desires and yearnings or, to use Balibar's phrasing, are “postnational cosmopolitical anticipation(s)” (2004: x) against a context where the nation and its normative models of identifications continue to exert a great deal of hegemony on the subject and its representations. Otherwise stated, they remain minor voices in a mainstream Italy that has yet to achieve a fundamental change in its attitudes and practices despite its transformation from a country of emigrants to one of immigrants. As I write, the video “Morire nel deserto” circulated by *L'espresso* in January 14, 2010,⁴⁴ questions the message of regeneration contained in the epilogue of De Luca's *Solo andata* by documenting the horrifying human cost of Berlusconi's

repatriation acts from Lampedusa to the edge of the Libyan desert. Meanwhile, a Right-wing legislature coldly moves forward, pressing for additional borders and frontiers, surveillances and controls. In short, mainstream Italy remains trapped in discourses and practices of binary exclusions that reveal the resilience of a nationalist agenda and the strength of the legal and political institutions erected by “state-thought.” But, while the Italian political and legislative terrain is far from being a space of transnationalism and mobile citizenship, these signs question the foundations of national identity projects; therefore, they can be instrumental in bringing about change.

If the nation, as Anderson puts it, require an imaginative logic to achieve unity,⁴⁵ that same logic, sparked by the forces of global migratory flows, now promotes other models of identity that allow us to imagine, or re-imagine, forms of belonging capable of crossing boundaries of spaces, cultures, and ethnicities. What is clear, however, is that, to quote Allen and Russo, “at this demographic juncture” of global migratory flows and on the year of the 150th anniversary of the founding of the modern Italian nation-state in 1860, a new discourse has been established. It is one which has forcefully foregrounded the impossibility of ever conceptualizing Italian-ness “outside a theory of cultural dispersion” (9).

Notes

- ¹ “Ali dagli Occhi Azzurri / uno dei tanti figli di figli, scenderà da Algeri su navi / a vela e a remi. Saranno / con lui migliaia di uomini / coi corpicini e gli occhi/di poveri cani dei padri / sulle barche varate nei Regni della Fame [...] Subito i Calabresi diranno [...] ‘Ecco i vecchi fratelli,’ coi figli e il pane e il formaggio” (Pasolini, 1992: 491).
- ² See Dal Lago (2004), Turco (2005), Bonifazi (1998), and Pugliese (2006).
- ³ Pera’s declaration (as reported by Triulzi, 2006: 433) was made in an interview published in *L’unità*, 22 (August 2005) by Mo. Be. (unknown abbreviated name).
- ⁴ For Agamben, the “state of exception” provides the legal justification for the forms of imprisonment of the modern state (asylum-seekers and refugees camps, detention centers, etc.). In the “state of exception,” political and legal rights take precedence over human rights and determine the distinction between humanity and “bare life.”
- ⁵ Others, however, participate in the fortification of borders of Berlusconi’s government. See, for example, the recent work of Però (2007) which charts the contradictory practices of the post-socialist Italian left.
- ⁶ I am referring to Verdicchio’s argument concerning the preclusion of postcolonial and migration discourse in an Italian context and his description of southern Italian immigrants to North America as “unrecognized postcolonials,” (1997a: 191–212). But see also Verdicchio (1997b).
- ⁷ See, for example, the following: “L’unificazione pose in intimo contatto le due parti della penisola [...] e l’effetto fu l’emigrazione [...] degli uomini all’estero per trovare quel lavoro che veniva a mancare nel proprio paese” (57). A few pages later, Gramsci adds: “La borghesia settentrionale ha soggiogato l’Italia meridionale e le isole e le ha ridotte a colonie di sfruttamento” (73).
- ⁸ Abba, for instance, compared Sicilian traditions with those of the Bedouins and described the Sicilian dialect as an African language. Nigra saw affinities between southern Italians and the Negroes of South America, while Pantaleoni drew analogies between southerners and the Sepoy Indians. For an in-depth discussion, see Wong (2006).
- ⁹ Napoleone Colajanni, in *Settentrionali e Meridionali d’Italia*, saw the north as the colonizer, exploiting the south to further its progress and facilitate inclusion in the European sphere. In *Il Mezzogiorno*, Nitti wrote that the south had become a colonial market for the north. Carlo Cattaneo questioned the real motives of Piedmont and the Piedmontization of the nation, as did Antonio Ghisleri who saw the relationship as one of domination and dominated (Wong, 2006: 39–42).
- ¹⁰ See Molfese (1966).
- ¹¹ For additional discussion, see Giannotti *et al.* (2002).
- ¹² This solution was proposed by Franchetti, Sonnino, De Marco, Perrone, Seghele, Nitti, and Turiello, among others (Wong, 2006: 79–111).

- ¹³ For an in-depth discussion of this debate, see also Choates (2008).
- ¹⁴ See Choates, especially the chapter "From Africa to the Americas" (2008: 21–56).
- ¹⁵ For an excellent account of transnationalism from below, see Gabaccia (1988; 2001).
- ¹⁶ While there is a long tradition in Italy of studies of Italian emigration authored by political scientists and historians, the voices of the diaspora struggle to acquire recognition. They are not part of the scholastic curriculum and are seldom studied by Italian academics.
- ¹⁷ For a discussion of Italian colonialism, see Del Boca (2005), Rochat (1973), Labanca (2002), Palumbo (2003), Triulzi (2006), Ben-Ghiat and Fuller (2005).
- ¹⁸ Gnisci's *Il rovescio del gioco* was published in 1993. His *La letteratura italiana della migrazione* is from 1998. Gnisci is also one of the founders of the on-line journal of migration literature *Kùmà Creolizzare l'Europa*, <<http://www.disp.let.uniroma1.it/kuma/redazione.html>>
- ¹⁹ Khouma and Pivetta (1990), Methnani and Fortunato (1990), Moussa Ba and Micheletti (1991), Bouchane (1990), Chora (1993). To this group one should also add other works from the 1990s: Fazel (1994), an autobiographical novel about her life as a Somali Pakistani who moved from Mogadishu to Italy in 1970 as a refugee, Salem and Maritano (1993), Laitef (1994), and Jesus de Lourdes, *Vengo da un'isola di Capo Verde*.
- ²⁰ For many of these writers, the countries of origins are former French colonies. Bouchane is from Morocco, Khouma and Moussa Ba are from Senegal, Methnani is from Tunisia, Nasser Chora is the daughter of Algerian immigrants but was born in Marseilles. For a discussion of these writers, see Parati (1997). English anthologies of these writers' works are Parati (1999) and Orton and Parati (2007).
- ²¹ Compare Wright (2004).
- ²² I am referring to Mangione and Morreale's classic English language account of the Italian migratory experience.
- ²³ I should note that in his *Pantanella, canto lungo la strada* (1992), Tunisian-born Mohsen Melliti, explicitly evokes the past experience of Italian migration when he has the Italian bartender Rosario narrate to a group of recent immigrant stories his own, past experience as an emigrant to Germany (71).
- ²⁴ Aside from Angioni's *Una ignota compagnia* and some works by Erri De Luca, there exist very few texts written by Italian authors between the 1980s and the 1990s that address the experience of immigration to Italy. Among the few authors are Dell'Oro (1991), Lodoli (1990), and Ottieri (1984).
- ²⁵ But see also de Luca (1999), where the Italian gardener who was once an immigrant to Argentina befriends the African Selim. Through Selim's hard work in the tomato fields for half-pay, the narrator recognizes a fellow migrant.
- ²⁶ For a classification of the expressive modes typical of successive generations of Italian American writers, see Tamburri (1998).
- ²⁷ Many of these writers hold university degrees and have professional careers. A number of them are also multilingual speakers and writers.
- ²⁸ For additional discussion, see Scego (2004a).
- ²⁹ While I think that it is important to acknowledge these authors' work across a variety of genres, including film, I have decided to focus on narrative since it constitutes the majority of their cultural production to date.
- ³⁰ There are a number of on-line journals and initiatives promoted by this generation of writers. See: *Roma multiethnica*, <<http://www.romamultiethnica.it/it/bibliografie/letteratura-della-migrazione/bibliografie/>>, *Sagarana*, <<http://www.sagarana.it/rivista/numero8/index.html>>, *Letteranza*, <<http://www.letteranza.org/autori/kubati.html>>, *Eks&Tra*, <<http://www.eksetra.net/>>, *Voci dal silenzio: Culture e letteratura della migrazione*, <<http://www.comune.fe.it/vocidalsilenzio/>>, and *El-Ghibli. Rivista online della letteratura della migrazione*, <<http://www.el-ghibli.provincia.bologna.it/>>.
- ³¹ For a more complete bibliography, see *Kùmà Creolizzare L'Europa*, as well as *El-Ghibli*.
- ³² For more information on these writers' countries of origin, see Basili 2001.
- ³³ Critics have attempted to variously define these writers as Italo-Phone, Postcolonial, Migrant, Post-Migrant, and so on but, as Lucie Benchouiha notes in her discussion of Shirin Ramzanali Fazel's *Lontano da Mogadiscio*, we would do well to endorse the position taken by Sneja Gunew about the impossibility, after Derrida, to connect writing to notions of space, authenticity, and origins (35, 2n).
- ³⁴ My reference is to Mignolo (2000).
- ³⁵ For further discussion, see Gerrand (2008) and Sabelli (2008).
- ³⁶ See Lamri (2006).
- ³⁷ Tahar (2003).
- ³⁸ For additional discussion on Scego's story, see Wright (2004).
- ³⁹ For additional discussion, see Benelli (2008) and Portelli (2006).
- ⁴⁰ For additional discussion, see Derobertis (2008).
- ⁴¹ See Ali Farah (2005).
- ⁴² Capitani and Coen (2005), and Scego (2005b), anthologize stories by Wadia, Scego, Kuruvilla, Mubiayi, Wakkas, Kossi Komla Ebri, Ali Farah, and Gangbo, among others. Both works are replete with references to a vast encyclopedia of Italian and global hip hop and popular culture.
- ⁴³ Scego (2004a).
- ⁴⁴ See 'Morire nel deserto' 2010.
- ⁴⁵ My reference is to Anderson (1991).

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