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Italy and the Literatures from the Horn of Africa. Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Djibouti

Daniele Comberiati

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Autori, opere e percorsi “minori”
della storia letteraria italiana

« Forse un’esagerazione della maestra: *borderline* in fondo significa soltanto “frontiera”, al di qua o al di là dipende magari da come ti trattano ».

CLARA SERENI, *Manicomio primavera*

La collana, a larga vocazione internazionale, propone una lettura innovativa di opere, autori e percorsi letterari italofofoni (con particolare attenzione agli ultimi tre secoli, ma non solo) che, per diverse ragioni, non sono entrati a far parte del canone nazionale. A partire dalle riflessioni di Deleuze e Guattari sul concetto di “letteratura minore” e da quelle di Said sulla formazione esclusiva del canone, i testi presentati sono a firma di scrittori ancora poco noti, sono opere non studiate o dimenticate, generi o modalità di scrittura originali. Con l’idea che un ripensamento delle letterature nazionali sia oggi quanto mai necessario.

The collection, with a great international vocation, wants to propose an innovative reading of Italian literary works, authors and literary paths (with special attention to the last three centuries, but not only), which, for various reasons, are not entered the national canonization. From the reflections of Deleuze and Guattari on the concept of “minor literature” and those of Said on the exclusive formation of the canon, we will try to propose texts that are still unknown writers, forgotten works, genres or original writing modes. With the idea that a rethinking of national literature is as far as needed today.

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**Italy and the Literatures
from the Horn of Africa
(Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Djibouti)**

Beyond the Language and the Territory

edited by

**Daniele Comberiati
Xavier Luffin**

contributes by

Emma Bond, Monica Jansen, Alessandro Jedlowski
Linde Luijnenburg, Lorenzo Mari
Sara Marzagora, Teresa Solis





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A Carla Macoggi

Mia madre era la mia stella polare,
sì, ma il Nord non è stato indicato
sempre dal medesimo.

Carla Macoggi, *Kkweya*

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Daniele Comberiati

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Introduction

Literatures of the Horn of Africa

DANIELE COMBERIATI, XAVIER LUFFIN¹

The idea for this book comes from a conference organized at the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* (ULB, Belgium) on 19 and 20 September 2013. This conference explored the literature of the Horn of Africa (Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti) and its relation with Italian and European cultures. Afterwards, we decided to publish a collection of essays, each one dedicated to either a particular dimension of this literature or culture or to a single writer. The chapters of this book do not correspond to the proceedings of the conference. Rather, the conference was the starting point for a deeper examination of the literatures of this area of the world. It also prompted some fresh thinking about contemporary writing such as when and in which cases we should use theoretical concepts such as “postcolonial”, “migrant”, “transnational” or “multilingual”. In the last decades, writers from the Horn of Africa have developed an important literature characterized by some defining features, such as multilingualism (national languages, French, Italian, English and Arabic) and the notable voices of the diaspora’s authors, especially from the second generation of migrants (in Europe, North America, the Middle East and the Arabian Peninsula).

The main concern of the book will be to analyze contemporary writing highlighting the choices it has made in terms of language, considering its impact on national literature, exploring its interaction with contemporary history and looking into the personal lives of the authors. We shall review the growing recognition and dissemination

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of this writing in Africa, and its bearing on other areas where the author's adopted language is spoken (i.e. in French-, English-, Italian- and Arabic-speaking countries). We shall also consider the relations, or lack thereof, between the authors themselves. For instance, do authors originating from the same country but writing in different languages and now living in different countries know each other? Do they interact? Our initial thoughts on the subject focused on Italian literature (authors such as Uba Cristina Ali Farah and Gabriella Ghermandi), but we then decided to extend the scope of our analysis to include other writers and other languages. The book therefore contains essays on Dutch, American, French, Tigrinya and Amharic writers from the Horn of Africa.

Ranging across the Horn of Africa as a large geographical and cultural area, this collection considers the works of the writers of this diaspora as well as the political, human, cultural, literary and linguistic bonds between them and their places of abode. Even for the second generation of émigrés, the bond is very strong. The literature of the diaspora in some senses enlarges the geographical/cultural area. The writers form a sort of literary community whose cultural and literary affinities are stronger than their historical and ethnic backgrounds. As the collection unfolds, the sequence of discussions reflects on a number of features distinguishing contemporary writing: the hybridism between different languages, the links between the colonial past and the postcolonial present, the way literary language is used, the mixers of literary categories, and their interpretation of history. Moreover, the discussions which follow address the question of postcolonial studies not only in terms of the relationship between former colonizers and colonized, nor even in terms of a rereading of colonial history and culture; rather, it considers how the links between colonial and postcolonial elements in the Horn of Africa have generated new epistemologies from previously voiceless subjects.

The overriding idea is that we can observe a kind of "Interliterary Community" among Horn of Africa writers, precisely because the links between colonialism, postcolonialism and diaspora remains so close. In 1995, Dionýs Ďurišín proposed to substitute the concept of "National Literature" with the concept of "Interliterary Community", where the interliterary connections are more important than the na-

tional environments². This “Interliterary Community” is characterized by an internal and external dynamism arising from the different literatures that compose it and from its links with other literatures. Dionýs Ďurišin’s suggestions have opened up a discussion on the role of literature and culture in the process of national identity-building. The Horn of Africa thus provides a literary space in which we can discuss and re-define national identities. It affords us an opportunity to reflect on the connections between literature, the nation, and geo-political borders.

We can use different criteria to organize our understanding of this literature: generational (Gabiella Ghermandi and Maaza Mengiste are from different generations to, for example, Abdourahman Waberi or Abu Bakr Hamid Kahhal); geographic (are writers from Eritrea different from writers from Ethiopia? Do they still produce national works or have the literatures of the Horn of Africa become part of a pluralist identity?); or theoretical (these writers might be analysed in terms of postcolonial, African, English, French, Italian, or Dutch Studies). In addition, these different criteria are overlapping, indicative of the complexity of the narratives whose range covers matters of transnationalism, postcolonialism and globalism. The literatures of the Horn of Africa suggest a «vanishing present», to use Spivak’s words.³ Indeed, the literatures of the Horn of Africa make up a complex lens with which to consider the broader undertakings of contemporary literature itself. The writers discussed in this collection (authors writing and publishing in Arabian, Italian, French, English, Dutch, and in some of the original languages of the Horn of Africa, such as Amharic and Tigrinya) show us the trajectory of this diasporic literature, which is at once hybrid, national, transnational and local. Since the turn of the new millennium, migration studies with regard to the Horn of Africa have focused on the continuity between internal migrations, civil wars and colonialism as well as transoceanic and trans-Mediterranean migrations⁴. Furthermore, emigration and the colonization of the Horn

² D. ĎURIŠIN, *Theory of Literary Comparatistics*, Slovak Academy, Bratislava 1984.

³ G.C. SPIVAK, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1999.

⁴ I.M. LEWIS, *A modern history of the Somali. Revised, updated and expanded*, Ohio University Press, Athens 2003; W. JAMES, E. KURIMOTO, D.L. DONHAM, A. TRIULZI, *Re-mapping Ethiopia. Socialism and after*, Ohio University Press, Athens 2002.

of Africa have recently been analyzed as interrelated phenomena.⁵ The implications of all of these lines of vision will be developed and, in some cases, interrogated.

The collection is divided into two sections. The first, *Cultural Issues: History, Nation-building, Italian Colonialism and Literatures of the Horn of Africa*, analyses some theoretical aspects (nation-building, the role of literature and cinema, the history of the Horn of Africa) and some general themes such as female genital excision or reflections on the diaspora. The second section, *The Languages of Literature: Dutch, Italian and English*, focuses on specific studies of different writers. The works of Nuruddin Farah, Uxax Cristina Ali Farah, Carla Macoggi and others are analysed and discussed here. The whole collection begins with a historical introduction to the idea of the Horn of Africa and how it received its name.

The first chapter by Sara Marzagora, entitled “On either end of modernity: Ethiopian writers on history and social change at the beginning and at the end of the twentieth century”, considers the emergence in the last two decades of an Italoophone literature by Ethiopian writers. This literature has been explored by scholars for its contribution to contemporary Italian literature and the Italian public debate on postcolonialism and multiculturalism⁶, but less so by scholars of Africanist and African Studies. Marzagora examines the field from the point of view of Ethiopian studies and investigates the relationship between Amharic literature in Ethiopia and the literature of the Ethiopian diaspora in Italy. For example, Gabriella Ghermandi in her *Regina di Fiori e di Perle* is willing to challenge a recurrent trope in Amharic literature, the moral condemnation of women who had relationships with Italian soldiers at the time of the occupation, which is a recurrent theme in, for instance, Mekonnen Endelkachew’s works. Secondly, her description of the cultural alienation of foreign-educated Ethiopians shows strong similarities with, among others, some of Heruy Welde-Sellase’s novels on the same topic. Finally, the emphasis on the military as opposed to the cultural aspects of colonial exploitation is in line with the centrality of warfare in the Ethiopian historiograph-

⁵ K. FUKUI, *Ethnicity and conflict in the Horn of Africa*, Ohio University Press, Athens 1994.

⁶ C. LOMBARDI-DIOP, C. ROMEO, *Postcolonial Italy. Challenging National Homogeneity*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2012; G. PARATI, *Migration Italy: the Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2005.

ical narrative. The chapter compares how Amharic-language novels and Italian-language novels by Ethiopian writers represent Ethiopian history, especially with regard to ethnicity, religion and class. It explores in detail how the Ethiopian “nation” is conceived of very differently way by Ethiopian-based and diasporic authors.

The title of the second chapter, “Somalia is a Caribbean Island. Reflections on Transnationalism and Failed-State Fiction in Somali and Haitian Postcolonial Literatures” refers to the title of a book written in Italian and published in 2010 by Somali author Mohamed Aden Sheikh, *La Somalia non è un’isola dei Caraibi (Somalia is not a Caribbean Island)*. Aden Sheikh wrote as a sort of postcolonial reply to the widespread Italian ignorance about its colonial past in the Somalia. The chapter title inverts Aden Sheikh’s phrase, however, because its goal is to highlight the transnational links between Somali and Haitian postcolonial literatures. By analyzing the works of Nuruddin Farah and Shirin Ramzanali Fazel (from Somalia), and Dany Laferrière and Marie Chauvet (from Haiti), the chapter describes a form of «failed-state fiction» common to both literary traditions⁷. In the place of neo-colonial discourses about postcolonial national failures, the chapter proposes a different theoretical framework based on of minor «transnationalisms», as described in the eponymous anthology of essays edited by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih.⁸

The last chapter of this first section, “Ethiopian cinema and the politics of migration: the work of Tewodros Teshome and Dagmawi Yimer” by Alessandro Jedlowsky, explores how Ethiopian cinema from 1960 to now has contributed to a re-thinking of the colonial past and the independence era. With reference to Tewodros Teshome and Dagmawi Yimer films, Jedlowsky shows how the brief, but very intense Italian colonization (1936-1941) changed the direction of Ethiopian history up to and including the present day. Contemporary Ethiopian films demonstrate how important the film industry was to forming the idea of “new” nation in the collective mind. Directors such as Tewodros Teshome produced films that dealt with the social and political changes in the country following its independence. Jedlowsky examines how cinema has been used for propaganda, anticolonialism and entertainment, considers the thematic concerns of diaspora direc-

⁷ J. MARX, *Failed-State fiction*, «Contemporary Literature», 49, 2008, pp. 597-633.

⁸ F. LIONNET, S. SHIH, *Minor Transnationalism*, Duke University Press, Durham 2005.

tors, and looks at the links between cinema and literature in these countries.

The second section opens with the discussions of Teresa Solis and Monica Jansen who analyze authors writing in Italian. In the chapter entitled “Writing as a way of healing: Carla Macoggi’s novels”, Teresa Solis considers the work of Carla Macoggi, an Ethiopian/Italian who writes about her “mestizo” identity. Monica Jansen, in the chapter “Relational and Translational Practices of Postcolonial Citizenship in Kaha Mohamed Aden’s *Fra-intendimenti*”, looks at labor insecurity, emigration and how these are reflected in the short stories of Italian/Somali writer Kaha Mohamed Aden. The following discussions concentrate upon Somali and Ethiopian diaspora writers. Emma Bond focuses on one of the most famous Ethiopian-born writers, Dinaw Mengestu, who in 2010 published his first novel *How to Read the Air*. Bond also considers Claude McKay, a Jamaican writer, one of the seminal figures in the Harlem Renaissance. In the last chapter, in order to show other examples of transnationalism, Linde Luijnenburg introduces us to Dutch-Somali, Dutch-Eritrean and Dutch-Ethiopian writers (Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Yasmine Allas, Sayadin Hersi and Zeinab Jumale) and describes the substantial Somali, Eritrean and Ethiopian communities in the Netherlands, while looking also at the civil war, exile and human rights. This is one of the first overviews of these writers who are otherwise divided by generation, styles, and themes.

PART I

CULTURAL ISSUES: HISTORY,
NATION BUILDING, ITALIAN
COLONIALISM, AND THE LITERATURES
OF THE HORN OF AFRICA

On either end of modernity

Ethiopian writers on history and social change at the beginning
and at the end of the twentieth century

SARA MARZAGORA¹

The emergence, in the last two decades, of an Italophone literature by writers from the Horn of Africa has been mostly explored within Italian studies. This decision can be easily understood, as these writers are based in Italy and active in the Italian cultural environment and their books are mostly read in Italy. Although there is still a critical resistance to including these works within the mainstream of Italian literature, in recent years scholars have challenged the conservatism of Italian academia and effectively opened up the Italian literary canon.

Italophone novels by writers of Eritrean, Ethiopian and Somali origin are deeply rooted in Italian cultural life and engaged in Italian contemporary debates – especially about postcolonialism and multiculturalism. Yet at the same time, the authors, via their characters, reject an all-too-easy assimilation into an entirely italophone culture, and ask for their diversity to be recognized and their right to cultural plurality to be respected. To unravel their personal dilemmas, they try to create a narration that makes manifest the connection between the diaspora they are part of, the country they are living in and the colonial roots shaping their families' past. Most characters in the novels have a conflicting relationship with their own cultural hybridity, and try to resolve it either by clinging to their roots or by trying to adapt to their host society as much as possible – but they generally end up recognizing that their competing ties of cultural belonging cannot be entirely reconciled.

¹ Sara Marzagora works at the SOAS (University of London, UK).

They accept that the tensions of different cultural backgrounds will be a constant source of anxiety and, at the same time, a constant source of cultural richness in their lives. In parallel, the authors want their Italian readership to recognize their full Italianness without erasing their difference. The authors ask to be recognized as plural and double – fully Italian, yet Italian in a different way.

These authors have been analysed for their contribution to Italian studies, but not as much for their contribution to the other side of their doubleness – Somali, Eritrean or Ethiopian literature. This discussion attempts to address this knowledge gap by investigating Gabriella Ghermandi's 2007 novel *Regina di fiori e di perle*², and the subtle but constant dialogue that it maintains with Ethiopian literature in Amharic.

The central assumption of the discussion is that certain peculiarities of *Regina di Fiori e di Perle* can be identified only when the text is placed within the context of Ethiopian intellectual history. Among the many points of possible comparison between Ghermandi's work and Amharic novels, three in particular will be analysed here: firstly, the representation of tradition and the attitude towards modernization and cultural change. The latter is possibly the one key theme of much literature in Amharic, from its inception to contemporary writings, and the debate on history and modernity is and has always been the key intellectual concern of twentieth century Ethiopian intellectuals. The second point of comparison will be in terms of question of gender, a theme that is a central concern in much of Italophone literature by writers from the Horn of Africa, and one that is emerging as one key aspect of contemporary Ethiopian literary production and criticism as well.

² Gabriella Ghermandi was born in Addis Ababa in 1965. She moved to Bologna, her father's birth city, in 1979, and has lived in Italy ever since. Her career as a writer started in 1999, when she won the first prize in a literary competition for migrant writers. She is among the founders of the online magazine «El Ghibli» and is very active as a festival organizer and journalist. Her first novel, *Regina di fiori e di perle*, (Queen of flowers and pearls) was published in 2007. She feels strongly about the importance of oral narration, and, alongside her career as a writer, she has written and interpreted many plays centred on storytelling. Since 2012 she has led a musical project called Atse Tewodros, based on the collaboration between Ethiopian and Italian jazz musicians.

The importance of the very act of narration is the central theme of *Regina di fiori e di perle*, built around a jigsaw puzzle of narrators, stories and listeners. A frame narrative follows the story of Mahlet, the first-person narrator, from her childhood under Mengistu's regime, through her university studies in Italy, to her return to Ethiopia and her decision to write down her story. Enclosed within the first-level narrative are seven sub-stories about the armed resistance to Italian colonialism, narrated to Mahlet by different characters. The first of these is by Abba Yacob, one of the venerable elders of her family, who decides to tell a young Mahlet of his own personal experience as an *arbäñña* believing she has the qualities to become «the voice of our history, which does not want to be forgotten»³. The other six stories are narrated to Mahlet years later, after her return to Ethiopia from Italy. Abba Yacob has just died and Mahlet is mourning for him at St. George's Cathedral in Addis Ababa. Every day of mourning, a new character interrupts her prayers and, to the girl's puzzlement, starts telling her stories from the time of the Italian occupation. The stories are in fact part of a concerted plan to bring Mahlet to remember the promise she made as a child to Abba Yacob to «cross the sea that Peter and Paul also crossed and bring our stories to the land of the Italians» (Ghermandi 2007: 6). Once she gets her memory back, she sets out to write.

Ghermandi's literary project revolves around a historiographical challenge: "re-colonizing" the minds of the Italians, bringing the legacies of Italian colonialism back into Italian consciousness and to the centre of collective debate⁴. A central passage in *Regina* is the re-writing of a scene from Ennio Flaiano's 1947 novel *Tempo di uccidere*. Flaiano's book is set during the 1935-1936 Italian campaign in Ethiopia; its main character is an Italian soldier who, confronted with a culture he does not understand and entangled in a war he does not support, feels lost and disoriented. Derobertis noticed that the main obsession of

³ G. GHERMANDI, *Regina di fiori e di perle*, Donzelli, Roma 2007, p. 10. The following quotations will be from this book.

⁴ On the removal of colonialism from Italian public consciousness, see the works of Angelo Del Boca and Nicola Labanca. On the way Italoophone writers of Eritrean, Somali and Ethiopian origin opposed the one-sidedness of the Italian dominant narrative of the colonial period, see the work of Franca Sinopoli.

Flaiano's protagonist is a deep sense of historical decadence⁵: the atmosphere is that of a primordial land, where time is suspended and slowly rots away, preventing any development of a linear Western-like history. The perception of a mysterious obstacle impeding a process of Westernisation is what scares Flaiano's soldier: he feels constantly threatened, in his culture and body, by a primitive immobility.

Bruno Brunetti notices strong similarities between Flaiano's novel and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, as they are both investigations of the "disease" of the Western consciousness⁶. The oxymoron of "blind sight" structures the way Flaiano's and Conrad's protagonists see the native world: as a cultural and historical darkness beyond comprehension and beyond redemption. However, they both progressively realize that the decadence is in their own sight, and not in the African world outside: it is the moral corruption of Western "civilization", its inability to see and know anything other than itself.

In *Tempo di uccidere*, the main character has a brief relationship with a local girl, and eventually shoots her dead by accident. The first time he saw the girl she was bathing in a river – the soldier stares at her as a mysterious exotic object for whom he feels both repulsion and attraction. Ghermandi writes this scene anew. Now the story is told by the point of view of a female *arbännna*, a freedom fighter in the Ethiopian resistance. In a break from battle, the woman is sent to a river to draw some water for the troops. She goes to the river, puts down her rifle and starts washing. Then, she suddenly sees an Italian soldier on the other side of the lake – she does not know his intentions, but, although hesitant at the beginning, shoots him dead.

Ghermandi openly refers to Flaiano as one of her literary inspirations, but despite this act of textual homage, the two texts could not be more different: Flaiano's (like Conrad's) novel is filled with allegorical references and philosophical doubts,

⁵ R. DEROBERTIS, *Per la critica di una modernità maschile e coloniale italiana. Note su Tempo di uccidere di Ennio Flaiano e Regina di fiori e di perle di Gabriella Ghermandi*, 2008. www.italianisti.it/Derobertis (accessed 28 07 2018).

⁶ B. BRUNETTI, *Modernità malata. Note su Tempo di uccidere di Ennio Flaiano*, in *Fuori centro. Studi postcoloniali e letteratura italiana*, ed. by R. Derobertis, Aracne, Roma 2010, pp. 57-72.

which take the shape, in the protagonist's narration, of hallucinatory descriptions of disease and contamination, and fantasies of persecution at the hand of invisible enemies – all metaphors of the soldier's painful inability to explain and account for the natural and cultural alterity around him. This spectral symbolism and existentialist dimension are all but erased in Ghermandi's novel, which is characterized instead by a self-assured realism and a positivistic attitude towards history and narration. Flaiano was concerned with the existential meaning of the colonial encounter: what is the essence of history? Is it really possible to know the Other? What is the meaning of civilization?

Ghermandi's characters, on the contrary, are confident in their own culture and their own history and far from these philosophical disquisitions. Ethiopian society is described as peaceful and harmonious, and no social tensions are hinted at. The plot alternates between stories from the 1930s and Mahlet's own life in the 1980s and 1990s: no changes in Ethiopian culture are hinted at in this whole sixty-year period. In an attempt to validate Ethiopian heritage in the eyes of the Italian reader, Ghermandi traces the lines of a culture so resilient that it actually seems immutable and closed to outside influences. Such a utopic representation might have been consciously constructed as a narrative counterpoint to the decadence of Western civilization permeating Flaiano's and Conrad's books. However, in Ghermandi's romanticized depiction of a flawless Ethiopian society it may also be possible to discern in Silvia Contarini's words to identify «a prudence, an embarrassment to face certain sore points», as if revealing some ambiguities or conflicts in her culture of origin would confirm, in the eyes of Eurocentric readers, that African societies are indeed backward and inferior⁷. Nonetheless, Ghermandi wants to debunk these widespread racist assumptions, and show the reader the splendid beauty (and at times even superiority) of her culture instead.

Ghermandi attempts to subvert what she sees as the dominant narrative about Africa and the dominant narrative about Italy's

⁷ S. CONTARINI, *Narrazioni, migrazioni e genere*, in *Certi Confini. Sulla letteratura italiana dell'immigrazione*, ed. by L. Quaquarelli, Morellini, Milano 2010, pp. 57-79.

colonial past. Her subversion is effective, but perhaps too optimistic, as Ghermandi shies by her literary antecedents: are the Ethiopians/Amhara able to see and know the Other, and how? Does the Ethiopian/Amhara conception of history point to a different, more inclusive, way to account for the world's cultural diversity? Is Western culture really rotting away, as Flaiano suggests? And why is Ethiopian culture different in this regard? These questions are left unanswered by Ghermandi, and in fact Ethiopian historiography has highlighted numerous instances of cultural, religious and linguistic assimilationism and exclusiveness in the country's past, together with the persistence of racial and cultural discrimination against non-*habäsha* people.

The main characters are from the country's landowner class and when an individual worker is mentioned, he is consistently referred to as their «trusted servant» (Ghermandi, 34, 44, 45). Gender roles in traditional Ethiopian society are described as perfectly balanced: women hold a good share of domestic and political power and are always treated with due respect.

Sexuality is depicted as free and unconstrained:

“Workenesh is pregnant from Milion”. General dismay among the girls. “Will they get married?” “No. She doesn't want to. When she found out she was pregnant she had just left him”. “What will she do now?”. “Milion's mother said she is willing to raise the child herself”. “Given how many children she has she will not even notice that there is one more”. General chuckle. “Hi Almaz”, they waived to an approaching friend who was walking in the dust in a sensuous way. “Your skins shines with the ointment of well-being”, someone said. She smirked with a sense of superiority. “Of course, I satiated my needs until dawn. [...] My parents went to a funeral in the village of Agi and Tesfaye stayed with me. All night!”. There were also discussions about who married as a virgin, like Aster, who decided to marry Dawit when she was only nineteen [...]. And the savviest cousins had commented: “Let's hope she will like how he has sex!”. [...] I knew the details about sexuality from the conversations between Mulu and Alemitu. Mulu was a virgin, while Alemitu was enjoying the spiciness of sex with Ghirma [...]. After every date [...] she used to tell me and Mulu everything, with an abundance of details. At the end of the recounting she concluded the chat with the usual statement: “You should try it Mulu. It would even cure the pains of your ‘monthly

flower”’. And Mulu used to retort: “What a useless waste of time!” (Ghermandi, 79-80).⁸

In such a vision, different ethnicities are shown to co-exist in a perfect social harmony. However, when Ghermandi describes «Ethiopia», «Ethiopian culture» and «Ethiopian history», she only actually refers to *habäsha* Ethiopia, replicating an age-long Amhara-centrism that has been steadily challenged in Ethiopian historiography from the 1960s onwards⁹. Different ethnic groups are mentioned, but mostly as picturesque additions to colourful scenes.

And then, after a short wait, the women crowding the entrance shouted with joy, and among their trills entered the *Tabot* of the Virgin Mary followed by tens of Oromo riders on barded horses (Ghermandi, 121). Or they are briefly mentioned as part of contextual historical explanations:

Everywhere there were organized groups fighting against the regime. In the North, alongside the Eritrean People Liberation Front, there blossomed the Tigrayan front, in the centre and in the highlands the Amhara front, in the south the Oromo front. Mengistu’s regular army was fighting on multiple fronts. The most challenging one was in the North. Against the Eritreans and the Tigrayans (Ghermandi, 97).

Ultimately, the Tigrayans, the Oromo, the Eritreans’ cultural traditions, their histories, and their voices never find a place in the narration – the Ethiopia Ghermandi described is consistently as mono-cultural, mono-ethnic and mono-religious: despite its rich and ancient history in the country, Islam is not even mentioned as part of the Ethiopia’s collective heritage.

Society in Ghermandi’s novels is described as remarkably compact, with almost no political fractures. Thus, the Derg’s oppression is something external to society – almost a natural cataclysm rather than a human event: «Unfortunately, before

⁸ All translations from Italian are mine.

⁹ C. CLAPHAM, *Rewriting Ethiopian History*, «Annales d’Ethiopie», 18, 2002, pp. 37-54. For lack of a better term this discussion will continue to refer to Ghermandi’s representation of “Ethiopian culture”, with the implicit connotation that what she refers to as “Ethiopia” and “Ethiopian tradition” is in fact a very ethnically-limited segment of the whole of “Ethiopia” and only one among many “Ethiopian traditions”.

any decision could be taken there was the coup, which swept away the country with its swelling waters and its devastating fury, and nothing was as it used to be anymore» (Ghermandi, 116). In the passage quoted, the armed insurgency against the Derg «blossomed in the North» (Ghermandi, 97) like a flower.

The Derg's regime is not humanised, its members are never given a face, its rise and ideology are not historicized and the opposition against it is always presented as unanimous – a description completely antithetical to Maaza Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* in which arguments pro- and anti-Revolution and pro- and anti-resistance to the Derg cause a split in one family and the community around it. In Mengiste's novel, ideological conflict builds up between father and son (Hailu and Dawit) and between close friends (Dawit and Mickey) – and even the deposed Emperor and the alter ego of Mengistu Haile Maryam are given a chance to explain their position and vision.

The landscape in *Regina* is also idealized, and even the occasional ugly and distasteful detail is described with a general tone of fascination – it do not significantly erode the postcard-like images of gardens full of flowers, lush valleys, magnificent mountains, coloured markets, and picturesque villages.

I was born in the town of Debre Zeit, fifty kilometres from Addis Ababa. There are five lakes within and without the city, among the houses and the edge of the town. At sunset flamingos streak across the sky to move from one lake to the other and the deep pink of their wings merges with the colours of sunset. They fly in the amber hours at the end of the day, together with flocks of other birds. [...] Debre Zeit is the town of lakes and of the great sycamore tree of Ireccia Lake, where the *kallichà* celebrated Meskerem at the end and the beginning of the year giving thanks and bringing offers to the deity of the lake. When I was young I often went there with my cousins to look at our reflection in the water inhabited by the spirit. [...] Debre Zeit is the place of dust, of flowers that, when dry, fall from the trees and are swept around by dust devils. Dust, flowers, market spices, pink pepper trees, smell of piss in street corners and a handwritten sign. [...] “It is only dogs who piss on the road”. And our house is right there, next to the sign, close to the bus station. Azure with blue doors and windows (Ghermandi, 297-298).

Not only is the landscape idealized, but it is partly exoticized too: even in the scenes that are set in the late 1990s, most women in the novel wears a *nät'āla* and most men a *shāmma*.

For Ghermandi, Ethiopia is the land of her childhood and this can lead to a romanticized representation of the society in question. Often in *Regina* there surfaces the author's nostalgia for a culture she lived through as a child, and which remains, in her memory, full of poetry and fascination. It is not a coincidence that many short stories written by Ghermandi (such as the short story *All'ombra dei rami sfacciati, carichi di fiori rossi vermiglio*, «In the shadow of brazen branches laden with bright red flowers») have a young girl as the narrator, in direct comparison with *Regina*. Ethiopia is often seen through the eyes of a child who is discovering the world, and is enchanted by the reality surrounding her. The magic of this discovery charms both the main character and the reader, as they discover, side by side, the Ethiopian world.

The distance experienced by the diaspora, the fact that the author only lived in the country as a child, her determination to present Ethiopian culture to the unacquainted Italian reader in the best possible light – all these elements lead to a process of idealizing Ethiopian culture. This process is very common in the literary works and theoretical texts of writers of the African diaspora, as has been famously observed by Stuart Hall¹⁰. Ghermandi seems to resist the trauma of her uprooting by clinging to Ethiopian culture the way she lived it and remembers it. No wonder she feels strongly about the “black hole” of the encroaching Western modernity, as she sees it, which threatens to displace what, in her view, is the traditional Ethiopian way of life. The idealization of what Ghermandi sees as the Ethiopian cultural tradition goes hand in hand with a profound disillusionment with regard to Western modernity. In *Regina di fiori e di perle*, the contrast between the two is explicit and deliberate, as the author explains in an interview:

¹⁰ S. HALL, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by J. Rutherford, Lawrence & Wishart, London 1990, pp. 222-237.

In the novel there is a strong contrast between a tradition that had been unremittingly handed down and a modernity in which roots are being lost. The economic system that is asserting itself even there [in Ethiopia] needs to be constantly fed and is like a black hole sucking everything in. I see that in Ethiopia, nowadays, there is little awareness of the importance of one's culture: the respect for the elders and the importance of the family are diminishing; ancient traditions are getting lost. This happens mostly in Addis Ababa; in rural contexts traditions are still strong.¹¹

In another interview, the author further extends her metaphor of the “black hole” – Western modernity is seen as akin to «a giant animal feeding on its own blood» and to an «ivy plant suffocating a hundred-year old oak tree»:

Here [in the West] people live in a system that takes away as much as it gives back, as if everything was a giant animal feeding on its own blood. There is an immense solitude and the terrible thing is that currently in the Ethiopian capital, where the Western economic and productive model is gaining ground, you can start to feel the same solitude. The economic system of the industrialized world is like an ivy plant suffocating a hundred-year old oak tree. The industrialized world plunders every natural resource of the South of the world and feeds on it. What kind of teaching can this convey, is it not the message that the big shark eats the small fish? Then can we say that the one who behaves like a shark the most wins?¹²

The perfect harmony, reassuring immutability and unfaltering cultural confidence Ghermandi describes are in fact quite distant from the reality of Ethiopian history – as is the case with any culture. All cultures are subject to change; all traditions are dynamic and constantly renegotiated. In the case of Ethiopia, successive generations of intellectuals and political leaders have actively challenged what, in their views, were their country's reactionary customs and backward-looking traditions. Ghermandi's romantic vision of “tradition” and her conservative attitude towards cultural change are in stark contrast with the reformist tendency that has characterized Amharic literature since its inception. Since the beginning of the twentieth

¹¹ D. COMBERIATI, *La quarta sponda: Scrittrici in viaggio dall'Africa coloniale all'Italia di oggi*, Caravan, Roma 2009, p. 152.

¹² F. SOSSI, *Dialogo a distanza con Gabriella Ghermandi, Storie Migranti*, <http://www.storiemigranti.org/spip.php?article388>, 2008 (Accessed October 10 2013).

century, the Ethiopian intellectual scene has been characterized by a strong progressive trend. Most Ethiopian thinkers at the time seemed to believe that modernity was not a prerogative of the West. Ethiopia had a glorious cultural, religious and political tradition: it was possible, drawing on it, to theorize a *uniquely Ethiopian way towards modernization*, through which European-like levels of economic and social welfare could be obtained. In their writing, just like in their novels, dramas and poems, Ethiopian intellectuals pushed for the implementation of a system of reforms that, in their view, would achieve for their country technological advancement, military power, economic growth, more secular social values and a fairer social system. Bahru Zewde effectively summarizes the reformers' political stance:

The reforms they recommended included the introduction of a fixed tax; religious freedom; an updating of the traditional code, the *Fetha Nagast* (the Law Of Kings); a rationalization of the Amharic alphabet [...]; an institution of centralized and uniform custom administration; and military and currency reforms. But the two themes that received the widest attention were the elimination of the *gabbar* system [the traditional system of land tenure], and the promotion of education¹³.

Positions, of course, varied. On the one end of the spectrum was the very cautious reformism of Mäkönnin Īndalkäččäw, who wanted Ethiopia to progress technologically and economically, but wrote from a strict Christian perspective, rejecting Western ascendancy and defending aristocratic privileges. From an alternative perspective, there were radical intellectuals such as Gäbrä-Heywät Beykädän, who openly encouraged Ethiopian rulers to follow the European example:

The task awaiting the present Ethiopian king is not like that of his predecessors. In the old days, ignorance held sway. Today, however, a strong and unassailable enemy called the European mind has risen against her. Whoever opens his door to the European mind, prospers; whoever closes

¹³ B. ZEWEDE, *A History of Modern Ethiopia 1855-1991*, Ohio University Press, Athens 1999, p. 110.

his door will be destroyed. If our Ethiopia accepts the European mind, no one would dare attack her. If not, she will disintegrate and be enslaved¹⁴.

Between these two poles, a hybrid model of modernity prevails¹⁵. Intellectuals did not call for a complete adoption of Western values – they sought an integration of aspects of European progress into Ethiopian cultural society, and called for «an *appropriate appropriation* of Western modernity on Ethiopian grounds, rejecting anything that goes counter to Ethiopia’s culture and honour»¹⁶. The West was examined critically: while its socio-economic system was admired, its ethical code, perceived to be based on the pursuit of luxury, materialism and loose morality, was vehemently rejected. The Ethiopian cultural heritage was closely scrutinized too – some of what were seen as its key values were upheld, some discarded. Overall, throughout the history of twentieth-century Ethiopia, intellectuals sought to combine and integrate the concepts of tradition and modernity – reflecting on what to make of the glorious historical heritage of Ethiopia’s imperial past and of the great potential, offered by the victory at Adwa, of an internally-driven and non-colonial development. The concepts of “tradition” and “modernity” were of course variously defined, and their definition changed in time, but their critical appraisal remained at the centre of Ethiopian philosophical debates throughout the century. In this lively intellectual scene literature has played a major role. Most Ethiopian ideologues were also influential fiction writers, and their literary works are imbued with their political ideas. Literature was often used as a fictional exemplification of wider socio-political arguments over the management of the Ethiopian state.

Ghermandi interweaves her narration with reflections over “tradition” and “modernity” too, but the aforementioned process of critical appraisal seems to be absent in *Regina*. In order to contrast Ghermandi’s cultural conservatism with the progressive

¹⁴ G. BEYKĀDĀÑ, *At’e Minilik na Itiop’ya* [*Emperor Menelik and Ethiopia*], Behnan Tehun, Addis Ababa 1912.

¹⁵ R.K. MOLVAER, *Tradition and Change in Ethiopia. Social and Cultural Life as Reflected in Amharic Fictional Literature (1930-1974)*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 2008, p. 32.

¹⁶ T. TIBEBU, *The Making of Modern Ethiopia 1896-1974*, Red Sea Press, Lawrenceville (NJ) 1995, p. 354.

attitude of Ethiopian intellectuals, a useful comparison can be drawn between *Regina di fiori e di perle* and Hiruy Wäldä Sällase's *Addis Aläm*¹⁷.

Heruy's text is one of the first novels of Amharic literature – still highly regarded in Ethiopian literary circles as an example of the political literature of the first half of the twentieth century. Despite the temporal distance between the two novels, there are striking similarities in the themes and narrative framework: both novels are based on the return to Ethiopia of a character that spent some time abroad – which itself is a recurrent theme of Amharic literary production and African political philosophy at large. The theme was used by Ethiopian intellectuals to generate a conflict between two sets of ideas – those that the protagonist was exposed to while abroad, and those of the homeland. Underscoring these travel narratives is the transformative power of travel – the changes in the protagonist's attitudes, ideas and lifestyle create a distance between individual and society, and the story is triggered precisely by the necessity to negotiate that distance.

In *Addis Aläm*, the main character, Awwäqä, comes back from France with new progressive ideas and a new lifestyle. A strong clash in values builds up between him and his community, and Awwäqä eventually wins the day, prompting the leaders of the Church to promulgate ten of his proposals – from limiting drunkenness and extravagant expenses to a better religious education and stricter code of conduct for priests. Both Heruy and Ghermandi problematize the alienation of characters returning from abroad by using the metaphor of clothing. Awwäqä gets mocked after his return for his insistence on dressing like a European, and Mahlet, too, is gently rebuked by the monk at St. Georges' church for not dressing modestly enough. Other metaphors are used to show Mahlet's changes while abroad: she is no longer used to drinking tea with lots of sugar as is common in Ethiopia (Ghermandi, 281-282), and she is not used to the old taxis in Ethiopia whose doors only close when slammed (Ghermandi, 234-235). But, as we shall see, the most pervasive sym-

¹⁷ All dates in Ethiopian calendar have been converted into their equivalent in Gregorian calendar.

bolism in the book is that of clothing, which also follows Mahlet's process of spiritual growth.

However, *Regina's* fate is radically different from *Addis Alām's*: Awwāqā stands firm in his newly-acquired beliefs, while Mahlet quickly steps back into the orthodoxies of Ethiopian tradition. No character in *Regina* expresses an intention to modify the tradition – all are fondly attached to their cultural heritage and committed to preserving it as it is. In the past, they stood up to defend it when it was threatened by the Italian invasion, and their heroic efforts paid off – Ethiopian culture, in *Regina*, re-emerges intact after the liberation. Mahlet herself proves willing to fully embody this tradition: she is increasingly irritated by people remarking that she looks foreign, denying that any significant change has occurred in her while she has been abroad, except for superficial habits or tastes. She duly obeys Abba Chereka, the old monk who advises her to dress more modestly and to cover up her shoulders with a cardigan – thus complying with the elders and conforming to accepted customs. Mahlet's adherence to tradition is mostly represented via a continuous emphasis on clothes throughout the book. The first time Abba Yacob tells her about his past as an *arbäñña*, he asks her to go through all of his clothes in a chest in order to find his Italian-era residency permit. Towards the end of the book, Mahlet needs to rummage through that heritage made of fabric once again when she decides to write down the stories from the occupation. On that first occasion, Abba Yacob makes a remark about what Mahlet wears: «I like your dress – he said – skirts befit women and make them even more beautiful. Remember that when you grow up» (Ghermandi 1997, 8), and his observation prompts the young girl to become self-conscious about her dress every time she moves in the room:

I grabbed the pillow, put it against the wall and I shifted backward until I was leaning on it. I adjusted the dress and turned my face towards old Yacob [...]. I moved forward crawling out of the bed. I put my feet on the floor, I adjusted the dress and I motioned old Yacob to go on (Ghermandi, 14, 15).

Later on in the story, when Mahlet is mourning Abba Yacob's death at St. George's cathedral, Abba Chereka, upon meeting her for the first time, suggests that she wear a skirt, echoing on purpose Abba Yacob's words in order to make her remember her promise to him many years before:

"My child, you may well be from Debre Zeit, but your clothes smell like a foreigner". "You are right Abba. I have arrived from Italy". [...] "If you come back to pray for your elder, put on a skirt. Skirts befit women" (Ghermandi, 148-149).

This time the remark that skirts befit women is uttered to awaken Mahlet's memory. But when Abba Chereka sees her again the next day, he continues with his gentle reproaches:

"I see you put on a skirt. Well done!", he [Abba Chereka] said, then he looked at my naked arms, half covered by the too small *nät'äla*. "You put on a skirt, and yet...! You still show the habits of that country you come from. You expose God's gifts suggesting you are not used to the sun of your country anymore". I stood up without a word, I picked up my cardigan, lifted the *nät'äla* without uncovering my head, put the cardigan back on and sat down again (Ghermandi, 158).

And once again the monk comments on her appearance:

I rummaged in my bra where I had put my money, I took out ten birr and hand them to him. "Well done my child, you keep your money like our mothers and grandmothers", he commented (Ghermandi, 159).

Mahlet quickly internalizes his observations, once again without a word:

I quickly got dressed and went out. Without explanation, at the gate [my mother] handed over to me a wider *nät'äla* than the one I was wearing. "May the light follow you", she said. Without a word, I grabbed the *nät'äla*, I handed mine over to her, I hugged her and walked past the gate (Ghermandi, 162)

[At St. George's cathedral] I slumped on the stone slab. And I didn't take off the cardigan (Ghermandi, 164).

In the end, Mahlet's identification with the accepted customs is total:

I gazed left and right to find myself in other people's eyes and to identify myself as one of the many women who were there to pray. I too, like all of them, wrapped in my white *nät'āla* with an embroidered hem, I too with my step synchronized with low chanting (Ghermandi, 239).

After all of the venerable elders in her family die, Mahlet's parents prepare to become the new elders, reinforcing the idea of a heritage that is handed down from generation to generation, identical and unchanging:

"You can't imagine how worried I was for you", my father interjected. Auntie Fanus and my mother laughed. "Every night – my mother continued – he wanted to come to you and spill the beans. I had to force him not to. Every night I told him: 'What kind of elders will we become if we don't know the art of waiting? Wait and have faith!'" (Ghermandi, 294).

Most characters speaking to Mahlet have a very disillusioned view of the present, and conceive of it as dominated by avidity and materialism. The «lady of the turtles», one of the characters telling Mahlet her experience under the Italian occupation, is characterized as a nostalgic old lady, and her story is full of remarks such as the following:

"In those days, we used to keep stocks of everything. It was nothing like today, with peasants feasting after the harvest, selling everything, eating and drinking and then crying from hunger during the long rainy season. Back then, we thought things through!" (Ghermandi, 187).

"My children tell me that I was born in feudal Ethiopia and today, thanks to God and to Mengistu Haile Mariam, and the only good thing he did, abolishing feudal society, slavery does not exist anymore. But I say: this is not true. Slavery still exists. It is disguised as "need". Everything is indispensable, and yet, when I was young we still got by, without all these needs, we met up anyways, without the indispensable phone, and there were people who lived over one hundred years old, more than now. Because of this, I tell my children they are stupid, blind" (Ghermandi, 184).

Nobody, whether young or old, counters these considerations in the book, so the nostalgic vision of old characters remains unchallenged. Only once does Mahlet feebly protest:

An old woman was spinning cotton and teaching Alemitu and Mulu how to do it. “Eh! Girls nowadays – she commented keeping her eyes on their clumsy hands – they are not good anymore at women’s crafts. Today they are only interested in *office practice*”¹⁸. Alemitu and Mulu laughed, and in the meantime the excessively thin cotton thread kept breaking. “Not like that! – the old woman told them – you have to make it thicker. Thicker! – and then, turning towards the other women – there is no hope. If they don’t learn when they are young...”. When the women noticed my presence, the old woman spoke again: “Here is our foreigner!”. Again! I thought, annoyed, but to be polite I smiled. “Mother, I am not a foreigner. I am Ethiopian, my mother and father are Ethiopian, my grandparents are Ethiopian...”. “Then – she went on, unsatisfied – if you are Ethiopia show me how to spin”. “I am a modern Ethiopian, like my cousins”, I said ironically. All the women in the courtyard laughed, but the old woman didn’t give up: “Then come here and I’ll teach you”. “No thanks mother”, I answered, and oddly she did not insist (Ghermandi, 235-236).

Even here, Mahlet does not elaborate on this concept of “modern Ethiopian” and why it is “odd” that the old lady did not insist. And why is Mahlet “ironic” when she claims she is a modern Ethiopian woman? Mahlet does not confront the old lady, nor does she try to initiate a dialogue to discuss the “old” and “modern” ways of being a woman. She wants to be polite and show respect, and avoids direct confrontation even when the women’s mockery goes on:

“Mother”, I called out [to her mum]. “Tell me, my child”. “Do you know who the great Kebedech Seyoum was?”. The old lady spoke again: “Eh! The women of the old days!”. The courtyard was filled again by a collective laughter. I took advantage of that laughter break to walk away (Ghermandi, 236).

Nobody seriously challenges the old woman’s view: Alemitu and Mulu laugh at her reproaches, and Mahlet refuses to be taught how to spin – yet, Alemitu and Mulu are nevertheless learning and heeding the old woman’s directions, thus validating

¹⁸ In English in the original.

her value system, and Mahlet appears so undecided, doubtful and worried about coming across as impolite that she decides not (or is unable) to counteract the rebuke and the attitudes of scorn she is encountering. The suggestion that there may be a way to build a “modern Ethiopian” without betraying one’s cultural roots does not get elaborated further.

Towards the end of the novel, Mahlet has grown to embody fully that tradition to the point of becoming Ethiopia’s cultural ambassador. But it is unclear whether she becomes one out of a process of intellectual maturation, or simply to fulfil Abba Yacob’s wish. Mahlet is chosen by Abba Yacob as a sort of “post-colonial prophet” – he prophesizes for her a destiny as her people’s bard. However, Mahlet appears irritated by people continuously interrupting her prayers for Yacob at St. George’s Cathedral; and she remains equally annoyed at being targeted as «the person who collects stories about the Italians». She is fascinated by the stories, but out of an innate curiosity rather than a political interest (Ghermandi, 43). Despite a brief moment of resentment against Italians’ benevolent view of their colonial past (Ghermandi, 204), until the end she declares she has no intention of using the stories as part of a cultural project (Ghermandi, 239). At the very end of the novel she is enthusiastic about fulfilling the mission that Abba Yacob had laid out for her – but her previous reluctance makes the reader wonder whether she is doing it out of genuine interest, ambition and inclination or just to comply with Abba Yacob’s plan for her.

Addis Alām on the contrary is built precisely on the attempt to reform Ethiopian customs. Awwāqā fights to change what he considers negative elements of his cultural heritage and succeeds in convincing his countrymen of the necessity to alter them. The difference is evident when comparing the titles of the two works: Mahlet is the recipient/collector/narrator of an old and long-existing world, while Awwāqā is the maker of a new world. For Awwāqā there is no contradiction between loving one’s cultural background and campaigning to improve customs that are perceived to be unjust, outdated or dysfunctional. For Mahlet, the love for one’s country means the acceptance of, and submission to, the cultural orthodoxy dictated by the elders. One may argue that the comparison can be invalidated by the fact

that Heruy was writing in the 1930s, and “modernity” may have looked very different at the time. But when looking at contemporary Amharic literature, it is clear that there is a strong continuity between Heruy’s political thought and that of contemporary Amharic writers. Yismake Worku’s *Dertogada*, perhaps the most famous contemporary novel in Amharic, is an action-packed crime novel, where the protagonist, an Ethiopian NASA space engineer, is chased by the Mossad, the CIA, and Ethiopian secret services in a race for global scientific and military hegemony. The novel’s title refers to a massive undercover project in Ethiopia, where the best Ethiopian scientists of the world are working in a secret laboratory to develop a missile system able to turn Ethiopia into a major world power. Modernity here is clearly welcomed – the question is rather how to turn it in Ethiopia’s favour. Tradition is an essential part of the process of national resurgence: the *Dertogada* facilities are hidden below a very ancient Christian monastery, and therefore you need to go through the monastery (representing the country’s past and tradition) to access them (representing the dream for a glorious future). But then tradition clearly needs to be dispensed with: the criticism of those who indulge in it is as harsh as ever. Engineer Shagiz, the protagonist, so summarizes his views:

There is something the country needs. That is, to commit oneself to change. Once more... Ethiopia is in need of a revolution. A revolution that shall not consume its children! A revolution that is not self-destructive! A scientific revolution backed up with modern technology. You see Miraje... every Ethiopian loves change, except a few who lose their unfair advantages through change. The problem is that you cannot find anyone willing to be part of the group in charge with change. There are many who longed to live in comfort on the spilt blood and death of others¹⁹.

The novel denounces the neo-colonial policies of Western states in Africa (the villain is a Sicilian mafia boss whose family got rich out of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia), but at the same time Ethiopians are depicted as far from being mere victims.

¹⁹ Y. WORKU, *Dertogada*, Addis Ababa 2012, p. 153. From the English translation of the novel.

Ghermandi, on the other side, shows a deeply conservative attitude towards cultural change, which ties in very closely with her disillusionment with modernity. She depicts Ethiopia almost as a gerontocracy – in which the young are unwilling, unable or prevented from objecting to the elders’ interpretation of rules and customs. Individual dissent, for her characters, is a form of cultural betrayal. Ethiopian culture, in *Regina*, is rather monolithic, homogeneous, static and defined in essentialist terms – probably portrayed in this way to emphasize its strength and resilience in the face of the Italian aggression. Ghermandi attempts to validate Ethiopian heritage in the eyes of the Italian reader and dismantle Italy’s dominant discourse on African countries being “backward” and “primitive”. Yet the difference remains that, while Ethiopian writers constantly reflect about the ethnic/class/gender tensions in their communities, Ghermandi presents a society that is united and unanimous in defending tradition – a tradition that appears to mean the same for all.

One of the recurrent themes in Italoophone literature by Ethiopian, Somali and Eritrean writers is the representation of the female body as a vehicle of colonization. Women produce the children of a mixed nation, and (willingly or unwillingly) perpetuate the unity of the two countries through their bodies. The female body is the first witness to the colonization process, both in its positive aspects of cultural interchange (mixed couples) and in its negative aspects of violence (rape). The centrality of female body emphasizes the physicality not only of the colonial encounter, but also of colonial memory, since it permanently carries and reproduces the signs of that encounter²⁰. Italian-born writer of Somali origin Igiaba Scego described her 2008 novel *Oltre Babilonia* as having: «two main themes, womanhood and the relationship with the body. The novel is centred on the signs that history leaves on the bodies»²¹.

Ghermandi objects to the Western fear of miscegenation, claiming that, on the contrary, miscegenation is the prototypical condition of our world, where cultures and bodies mingle, pro-

²⁰ S. BRIONI, *Automutilazione e dermografia: Madre piccola di Cristina Ubax Ali Farah*, «Trickster. Rivista Del Master in Studi Interculturali», 4, 2010, pp. 34-47.

²¹ D. COMBERIATI, *La quarta sponda*, cit., pp. 82-83.

ducing a vibrant and rich heritage. One of the main impacts of Italian colonialism was, according to Ghermandi, the effects of the law on *madamato*. This law, in her view,

[...] broke the women's back, because for the first time they felt really powerless, as power was all in the hands of the whites. Before that, they were used to being the ones who could leave a man they did not like, not those chased away and repudiated. This law severely penalized that generation of women, but also the next one: for Ethiopian males it was obviously less violent, but for all the women from that period it had profound repercussions. I always say that colonialism damaged four generations of women in my family, and I am the last one²².

The impact of the Italian occupation on women was a central concern for Amharic-language writers as well, but from a very different perspective: women who had relationships with the Italians during the occupation were assumed to have done so in order to profit from their proximity to the new rulers, and were often condemned for their greed and treated as traitors. Amharic literature just after the war, remarks Molvaer, «often returns to the motif of women who lived with the conquerors in order to have an easy and luxurious life»²³. Mäkönnin İndalkaččāw's *Almotkum bīyye alwashīm* (1954-1955), for example, tells of Tsīgerāda, a woman who marries an Italian officer out of convenience, believing her Ethiopian husband to have died in battle. However, the husband, is not dead, and when he reappears and finds the invader with his wife in his home, he commits suicide, prompting the woman to kill her Italian husband in turn. After the murder, Tsīgerāda goes to the centre of the town and makes a patriotic speech encouraging Ethiopian people to fight against the invaders, and for her public act of dissent she is arrested and hanged by Italian authorities. *Almotkum bīyye alwashīm* is then a patriotic story of a woman who selfishly pursues her own advantage instead of her country's, and finally repents and atones for her sins. Other novels about the period treat the problem of female prostitution, whose existence the authors perceive to have been triggered by the Ital-

²² *Ibid.*, p. 157.

²³ R.K. MOLVAER, *Tradition and change*, cit., p. 125.

ian aggression. In the 1952-1953 novel *Īndāwāt 't'ačč k'ārrāčč* (*She went out and didn't come back*) by Asāffa Gābrā-Maryam (set during the occupation) and in *Setāñña addari* (*Prostitute*) by Asāffa's brother Nāgaš (set straight after the occupation), the women who are forced by the war to earn a living through prostitution are often represented rather sympathetically, especially in Nāgaš's book, where the woman protagonist is represented so vividly and has such a rounded personality that readers have suspected the book to have been actually written by a woman prostitute herself. These novels discuss in an animated fashion the possible remedies to this social problem. Nāgaš Gābrā-Maryam's characters, for example, suggest that the condition of prostitutes can be improved if the state pays for their education so that they can find better jobs – thus «implying that the roots of prostitution are to be found in the Ethiopian social system with its failure to provide for female education, its early marriage and early divorce»²⁴. Despite the sympathetic portrayal, prostitutes are viewed as engaging in an immoral activity, and the authors adhere to the didacticism common to all Amharic literature by having their protagonists suffer a harsh fate as atonement for their sins, as in the case of *Almotkum biyye al-washim*.

There is a sense, in some Amharic-language literary works, that the Italian occupation disrupted the Ethiopian social order and threatened family values. The chaos of the Italian conquest suspended Ethiopian social norms, also from the point of view of gender relationships. In the post-liberation period, Amharic writers, all of them male, perceived the occupation as a moment in which women became out of control, and wondered how the state could absorb them back into the social structure. In Ethiopian historiography, women's participation in the resistance movement has been greatly underplayed; or, alternatively, the account has been domesticated and co-opted within the nationalistic discourse depicting all Ethiopians as united against the invaders regardless of age, class, ethnic and religious background and gender. The unease with the new social roles women played

²⁴ T.L. KANE, *Ethiopian Literature in Amharic*, Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1975, p. 53.

during the Italian years manifested itself in the condemnation of their alleged “greed”. Greed is repeatedly seen to underpin attempts at moving up the social ladder, thus upsetting the social order – and even the most progressive intellectuals «seem on the whole to accept the class structure of their society»²⁵. Women’s attempts at carving new social roles for themselves were thus interpreted as a particularly distressing and destructive form of greed. Most Amharic writers in the first half of the twentieth century were part of a restricted educated male elite, and their social conception, even in terms of gender, was informed by an «Everyone stay in his place!» principle. Abuses in the system were condemned, but the system itself was rarely attacked.

In the same way as Ghermandi rewrites Flaiano from a feminist perspective, she also overturns the dominant condemnation, in Amharic literature, of those women who had relationships with Italian soldiers. In *Regina*, indeed, the perspective could not be more different from *Almotkum bëyye alwashim*: Yacob tells Mahlet about his sister’s love for an Italian soldier. Initially furious, Yacob eventually changes his mind when he realizes that the two deeply love each other. The Italian boy is himself a victim of Mussolini’s imperialist plan, is disgusted by the war and even decides to join the Ethiopian resistance. Yacob’s sister, far from being described a prostitute marrying a conqueror for personal gain, emerges as powerful character, devoted to her country and her family as much as to her Italian husband. Ghermandi’s celebration of intercultural love and relationships is unsurprising, considering she comes from a mixed family herself, and the memory of the Italo-Ethiopian encounter is thus inscribed in her body.

The emphasis in *Regina* is on the physical consequences of colonialism – the military aspect of the occupation and the resistance, the violence and massacres by Italian soldiers, the signs that colonialism left on women’s bodies. The ideological aspects of imperialism do not surface in *Regina*: the characters never question the validity of their culture vis-à-vis the Italian propaganda efforts, and no one buys into the narrative of the superiority of European culture. The result of this focus on the ma-

²⁵ R.K. MOLVAER, *Tradition and change*, cit., p. 28.

terial (and bodily) aspects of the colonial encounter is that questions of cultural hybridity and exchanges are left on the background. This holds true for Amharic novels as well: the Italian conquest is not seen as threatening Ethiopian cultural integrity. On the contrary, it triggers such a broad patriotic response that it is represented as the highest historical manifestation of Ethiopian national values and spirit. Ethiopian reformist writers' Europhilia never goes as far as celebrating, or encouraging, forms of cultural hybridity – it is rather an attempt to borrow selected elements of Western technology, economics and politics and implant them into Ethiopian tradition. But there is, in Amharic literature, a constant cultural dialogue and exchange with Europe, an openness about European culture and history that is not to be found in *Regina's* characters. No Ethiopian character in Ghermandi's novel steps out of the orthodoxy of his/her cultural heritage to embrace (or to consider embracing) selected aspects of European culture – which is exactly the process of critical assessment most characters in Amharic novels go through. In *Regina*, it is mostly the Italian characters who abandon their cultural baggage and adopt Ethiopian tradition in its entirety – to the point of deciding to fight for the Ethiopian resistance (Daniel) or becoming completely fluent in Amharic (Antonio).

But Ghermandi's broader conception of gender in Ethiopia is far from that emerging from Amharic novels. In her novel, women are presented as emancipated, facing no significant social constraints. No gender tension is hinted at in *Regina*. Again, Ghermandi cherishes a tradition that is presented as completely valid the way it is. In an interview, the author declared:

In Italy there is the idea that African women are submissive. [...] This vision is partial and simplistic. [...]. On one side it is true that in Ethiopia gender roles are much more rigid (the man does manly jobs and the woman womanly jobs), on the other side within these roles [Ethiopian] women have an immensely broader degree of freedom than in Italy²⁶.

This statement is contradicted by recent policy reports concerning the status of women in Ethiopia by the writings of feminist activists such as Billene Seyom and by recent academic re-

²⁶ D. COMBERIATI, *La quarta sponda*, cit., pp. 154-155.

search – describing in Ethiopia a persistent system of patriarchal domination. These diverse sources all underline that, even if it may be held true that Ethiopian women have a broader degree of freedom than their Italian counterparts within their traditional roles as mothers and wives, the problem is precisely that they are not free to take up different social roles if they want to. The traditional roles Ghermandi talks about were in fact established and defined by the dominant patriarchal ideology²⁷. In history, they did not have the privilege of receiving education, were prevented from participating in the political and economic affairs and from making decisions in important matters, etc. And even if their domestic identities remain freer than in Italy, their overall position in society was still determined by the male authorities in their family. The elders Mahlet obeys and who significantly direct her life, quite tellingly, are all male, despite her mother playing an important (but more limited) role in the family too.

There were, of course, exceptions, and certainly the figures of Ethiopian empresses (like Mentewab, Zewditu, Taytu and, of course, the Queen of Sheba) have indeed attracted a lot of historiographical attention and gained a mythical role in the country's imaginary. One of the narrators, the lady of the turtle, tells of her mother that she «nurtured my femininity by telling me the stories of our country's great women» (Ghermandi, 203), starting, of course, with Empress Taytu. But these were wealthy women belonging to the aristocracy – their success was determined by their class. For women deprived of the same social standing and economic prosperity, the possibilities of success and emancipation were a completely different story.

Ever since the 1920s Ethiopian intellectuals have debated the themes of women's emancipation and campaigned against arranged marriages, against early marriages and for women's education. *Addis Alām*, for example, takes a strong stance against arranged marriages and *Setännña addari* for universal education for boys and girls – and these themes continued to be debated in

²⁷ I. BISESWAR, *The Role of Educated/Intellectual Women in Ethiopia in the Process of Change and Transformation towards Gender Equality 1974-2005*. PhD Dissertation. Faculty of Humanities, University of South Africa, 2011, p. 98.

Amharic literary works. Once again, however, the progressivism of early reformers only went so far, and in Amharic literature women were mostly portrayed as sex objects (prostitutes), or according to their relationship with a male character – wives of, mothers of, sisters of, daughters of:

The impression we get from much Amharic literature is that Ethiopian women are often confronted with situations and choices that force them into denigration and humiliation, and abuse by men, especially by men with wealth²⁸.

Rarely were they represented as independent figures in charge of their own destiny, or as having public roles, or accomplished in society in their own way.

Even within such a framework of patriarchal representation, writers described women's social standing very differently from Ghermandi's rather charmed picture. In Amharic novels, as summarized by Molvaer, the birth of a girl is welcomed much less than the birth of a boy. Girls are not expected to have an education, but rather to marry when they are quite young (as young as 10 years old), and have very little decisional power over the choice of husband. A woman can divorce her husband, or flee from her family, but she has very few choices: living alone is not a socially acceptable option, and without an education and without financial resources, she can either end up as a nun, a concubine or a prostitute. Although Ghermandi depicts a society that is fairly liberated from a sexual point of view, Amharic literature represents Ethiopian customs as much more rigid: losing one's virginity means no one will want to marry you – and once again, prostitution is at times the only option. In terms of social possibilities for women, the situation represented by Amharic writers is rather bleak.

In terms of the representation of female characters, things have started to change since the 1990s, when more female writers took it upon themselves to introduce a different gender perspective into the Amharic literary tradition. Women's position in society, as it was portrayed in their novels, has not changed

²⁸ R.K. MOLVAER, *Tradition and change*, cit., p. 158.

much from how it was described by previous literary works, but this time their female characters fight for their rights: the heroines of *Nibut* by Muluwork' Asrat and *Yederasiwa File* by Yezena Worku both refuse to be married off and have children before they complete their education²⁹. The two protagonists, Helina and Tsion, are as young as Mahlet in *Regina*, but, while Ghermandi has Mahlet stress the need for generational continuity, Muluwork' and Yezena entrust their heroines with fighting for women's rights and claiming a new role in society against the conservative attitude of their parents and grandparents. When her aunt encourages her to marry a wealthy suitor as soon as possible, Helina replies that

there is something that you do not understand. [...] Before I finish my education, I will not marry a husband to serve him. Even if I do, I will marry one whom I love, not a wealthy one. Once you were rich. Your wealth was enough for many people, but when you got sick and needed help, it diminished through time. Finally, you are left only with this. Aunty, everybody's wealth is like this. The real wealth that will not be stolen, will not diminish and that you can have forever is education³⁰.

The girls fight against the old-fashioned beliefs of the older generations in their families. Tsion's mother, Wayzaro Yetemegn, for example,

does not like the idea that Tsion leaves aside household chores that she is supposed to do and focuses only on reading and writing after school like her father. Wayzaro Yetemegn would be very happy if her son read and wrote with his father, while Tsion helps her with household chores, but is not like the way Tsion wants it³¹.

The writers list all the forms of discrimination that the girls need to fight against, from the sense of inferiority inculcated by their society, to the lack of independence, sexual harassment, domestic violence, abduction and rape.

²⁹ M. ASRAT, *Nibut*, Addis Ababa 2001; Y. WORKU, *Yederasiwa File*, Addis Ababa 2010.

³⁰ D. NAHOM, *The Images of Women in Nibut and Yederasiwa File*, MA Dissertation, College of Language Studies, Addis Ababa University 2012, p. 49.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

In conclusion, in Amharic literature the representation of gender points to a persistent marginalization of women in society. Amharic literature was and still is dominated by male writers – many of whom perpetuate a stereotypical portrayal of women as submissive, dependant, frivolous, and irrational – either devout mothers and spouses or seductive objects of male desire and temptation. Some writers like Nāgaš Gābrā-Maryam have proved more sensitive to the cause of women, portraying the social hardships they have to go through from a mildly reformist position. Female writers have tended to portray strong and determined female characters and to denounce openly the oppression and marginalization of women in society. More recently, an explicitly feminist type of discourse has been taken up in literary works and literary criticism and has taken it upon itself to negotiate forms of aesthetic and social gender empowerment.

Ghermandi represents her female characters in a very progressive way: they are independent, wise, charismatic, able to fend for themselves, and willing to fight for their country and their families. From this point of view, Ghermandi's work is very close to that of Amharic female writers, who also aim to offer role models of determined women in charge of their own destinies. But Ghermandi opts for this type of representation in order to counteract the Italian stereotype of oppressed African women, while Amharic women writers want precisely to challenge the oppression whose existence Ghermandi denies. Amharic writers conceive their texts as part of a militant effort to reverse discrimination against women in their society, while Ghermandi disagrees that this discrimination exists in the first place. Certainly the readership is different for these works – Ghermandi writes in Italy for an Italian public, while Amharic women writers are much more closely engaged with civil rights struggles in their country. The discourse Ghermandi is attacking is the racist Italian discourse on the backwardness of non-European cultures, but the result is that, in order to validate her tradition in the eye of her Italian reader, Ghermandi romanticizes Ethiopian culture – and the Ethiopian women within it.

In my analysis, *Regina* is built on a constitutive ambiguity between a realistic representation and an idealistic one, between temporal and spatial distance and emotional closeness to the

homeland, between nostalgia for a long-gone past and a long-gone Ethiopian childhood and social commitment for a better future in Italy, between cultural purity and multicultural hybridity, and finally between static memories and histories of movement and migration. This tension infuses the text with a fascinating instability, an open-ended irresoluteness. Yet, to some extent this is also a liability: the novel seems to eschew crucial questions and simplify key cultural and historical issues. Controversial issues that an Ethiopian reader would deem central but unfamiliar to the Italian public, such as the historical role of Haile Selassie, ethnic animosity, class struggle, internal power rivalries, and gender tension are all passed over in silence. Similarly, in order to achieve a more immediate and effective communication with the Italian reader, the complexity of Ethiopian culture and society gets simplified and romanticized.

Ghermandi re-writes Italian historiography, substituting Flaiano's doubts and existential questions with a confident and proud culture, unaffected by the cultural colonization the Italians attempted to implement. Ethiopian culture arrives in Italy significantly idealized in order to dismantle the assumption that African cultures are backward. While the Amharic writer does not shy away from denouncing the elements he deems backward in his culture, Ghermandi is careful not to let any element of perceived backwardness slip through the pages of her text. Although Ghermandi's representation of Ethiopia can strike the Ethiopian reader as simplistic, it serves however the author's purpose: to reach the widest possible audience and establish an effective communication with the Italian reader. However, the effect is an idealistic representation of Ethiopian culture as harmonious, peaceful and timeless, which stands in great contrast with the constant calls for change in all Amharic literature. Amharic writers overall display a progressive attitude towards cultural change and are strongly engaged in the struggle to improve their society via literature.

Amharic writers appear determined to change their culture for the better and are at times profoundly critical of their country's customs. They are all committed to modernizing and developing their country via the writing of literature. Ghermandi firmly rejects modernization and cultural change, and depicts

Ethiopian culture in essentialist terms, upholding what she sees as Ethiopian tradition in its entirety.

Throughout, she engages with gender as one of her strongest interests. Her book is a history of Ethiopia written by a woman, which underlines women's historical agency. Gender, too, suffers the same idealization process discussed above, and underscores an emphasis on the materiality of the colonial and post-colonial experience, where the female body becomes a protagonist and bearer of history. At the same time, Ghermandi objects to an "us vs. them" antagonistic rhetoric with a celebration of hybridity, diversity, intercultural love and relationships.

Ghermandi writes for an Italian public but her work engages (consciously or unconsciously) with the heritage of Amharic literature as well. The comparison highlights how the diaspora affected the way Ethiopian culture was perceived, remembered and represented, showing the process of progressive simplification that accompanied its migration to Italian literature. Alongside depicting the resilience of Ethiopian culture when confronted with the cultural colonization Italy attempted to pursue, Ghermandi's writings show the resilience of Ethiopian literary identity when confronted with the potentially alienating experience of the diaspora.

“Somalia is a Caribbean Island”

Reflections on Transnationalism and Failed-State Fiction in Somali and Haitian Postcolonial Literatures

LORENZO MARI¹

Somalia is not a Caribbean Island is the English translation of the title of a book written in Italian and published in 2010 by the Somali-born author Mohamed Aden Sheikh². The ironic title can be considered as a classic case of postcolonial talking back³ as it underlines the lack of interest in the Italian public debate about Italian colonial domination in the Horn of Africa (despite the publication of several books in Italian on the issue, at least since the early Eighties), eventually resulting in a widespread ignorance about the correct geographical location of Somalia on the world map. Therefore, Mohamed Aden Sheikh’s memoir constitutes an attempt to fill this cultural and political gap, as it recounts the life story of a man who was a politician both in Somalia, during Siyad Barre’s regime (1969-1991), and, afterwards, in Italy. It shows, thus, that the political and cultural histories of the former metropolitan centre and its former colony⁴ were and still are deeply intertwined.

The aim of this article, however, is to reverse Aden Sheikh’s formula: whereas *Somalia is not a Caribbean Island* focuses on both Somali and Italian histories – sticking to the “centre-periphery” system which marks the traditional postcolonial focus on the history of

¹ Lorenzo Mari has a Fellowship at the University of Insubria (Italy).

² M.A. SHEIKH, *La Somalia non è un’isola dei Caraibi. Memorie di un pastore somalo in Italia*, Diabasis, Reggio Emilia 2012. As the book has not been translated into English so far, translations are all mine.

³ B. ASHCROFT, G. GRIFFITHS, H. TIFFIN, *The Empire Writes Back*, Routledge, New York 1989.

⁴ Italian colonialism in Somalia lasted from 1889 to 1941, with a comeback from 1950 to 1960, under UN mandate. Officially, the latter period was paternalistically intended to “prepare” Somalia for decolonization, but the Italian administration of the UN Trust Territory was not different in any way from the former colonial rule.

European empires – the goal of stating that “Somalia *is*,” indeed, “a Caribbean island” is to enlarge the focus on the same history, by placing it on a wider, transnational scale.

However, the attempt to enable a transnational comparison between Somalia and the Caribbean islands, with a particular focus on Somalia and Haiti and their respective cultural and literary histories, is not an easy task. Materialist approaches to world literature,⁵ for example, cannot be straightforwardly applied to this peculiar case study, due to the historical, political and economic differences⁶ between Somali and Haitian cultural and material histories. There are, however, other transnational frameworks which closely deal with the so-called “South-South” relationship which might be effectively established between Somalia and Haiti.

First of all, the “South-South” axis might be well described by the locution «minor transnationalism» which was popularized by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shi’s 2005 eponymous anthology of essays⁷. The theoretical framework of «minor transnationalism» includes those rhizomatic cultural practices binding two or more post-colonial cultures without making reference to the culture of their former metropolitan centers. This critical move is set in opposition to the traditional methodology of postcolonial studies, which «have been overly concerned with a vertical analysis confined to one nation-state, such as the effect of British colonialism in India, where the vertical power relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is the

⁵ Materialist approaches to world literature – such as Franco Moretti’s *Conjectures on World Literature* (2000) or Neil Lazarus’s *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011) – are based on the theory of the global expansion of capitalism, as it was firstly suggested by Immanuel Wallerstein in his groundbreaking work *The Modern World-System* (1974, 1980, 1989). Within this perspective, the global diffusion of the capitalist system was accompanied by similar developments in the history of world literature, which followed, thus, similar patterns of expansion on a global level.

⁶ Whereas a huge bibliography is available about the transatlantic connections between the Caribbean and West Africa, starting from the Middle Passage, references to analogous relationships between the Caribbean and East Africa are very poor. From the perspective of cultural history, for instance, such references might be found in the histories of Pan-Africanism and Rastafarianism, but they mainly refer to the role of Ethiopia as a symbol of independence from European colonialism – excluding, in this regard, the five-year occupation of Ethiopia by the Italian colonial army (1936-1941) – and as a symbolical connection to African ancestral roots, rather than to the history and culture of Somalia, which had been split into Italian and British colonies since the end of the XIX century.

⁷ F. LIONNET, S. SHIH, *Minor Transnationalism*, Duke University Press, Durham 2005.

main object of analysis»⁸. The traditional postcolonial approach *ipso facto* excludes a «horizontal approach that brings postcolonial minor cultural formations across national boundaries into productive comparisons, and engages with multiple linguistic formations»⁹, which is what Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, on the other hand, aim to emphasize. According to them, in fact, the production of «minority cultural workers» can be considered as «transnational not because they transcend the national, but because their cultural orientations are by definition creolized in Glissant's sense»¹⁰. Drawing on Glissant's cultural theory, as it is expressed in *Poétique de la relation* ("Poetics of Relation", 1990)¹¹, and to Jean-Loup Amselle's anthropology of globalization, as sketched in *Branchements*¹², Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih do not present cultural creolization as a consequence of present-day globalization; they assume, instead, that this is a phenomenon which precedes and outlives the era of European colonialism, resurfacing and acquiring new configurations in the present.

A similar approach might also be retraced in Emily Apter's theory of translation, starting from her *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (2005). As summarized in a subsequent article, Apter's critical attention in *The Translation Zone* was focused on the «"trans to trans" comparatism that bypasses the metropole while privileging translation between "minor" or micro-minority languages and literatures»¹³. Emphasis is placed here, again, on those translating practices which sidestep the formerly established centre, which, in the case of a transnational approach to translation, is constituted by the literary system described by Jonathan Arac as the one of «Anglo-Globalism», where «English [...], like the dollar in economics, serves as the medium through which knowledge may be translated from the local to the global»¹⁴. Like Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, Apter analyzes those cultural encounters, enabled by translation, which might produce a certain degree of hybridization among different postcolonial

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9

¹¹ É. GLISSANT, *Poétique de la relation*, Gallimard, Paris 1990.

¹² J.-L. AMSELLE, *Branchements. Anthropologie de l'universalité des cultures*, Flammarion, Paris 2001.

¹³ E. APTER, *On Oneworldedness: On Paranoia as a World System*, «American Literary History», 18, 2006, p. 366.

¹⁴ J. ARAC, *Anglo-Globalism?*, «New Left Review», 16, 2002, p. 40.

cultures without forcibly resorting to the relationship between the periphery and the centre, that is, to translations into and from English. Both approaches, therefore, seem to privilege a Deleuzian, rhizomatic concept of transnationalism over the individual profiles of nation-states, as «the transnational is our language to designate this originary multiplicity or creolization, which foregrounds the formative experiences of minorities within and beyond nation-states»¹⁵. Both these positions might be also compared to the conventional conception of the «postnational» as the latter «assumes that nations have discreet boundaries in order to go beyond them»¹⁶, while both «minor transnationalism» and the transnational focus on translation do not need to assume boundaries in order to make the processes of cultural creolization effective.

However, the relationship between transnational and postnational approaches remains fraught, with many additional difficulties to those suggested by the binary opposition set forth by Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih. As a matter of fact, whereas processes of cultural creolization can be widely established, without the need to assume and transcend national boundaries, the latter cannot be easily dismissed as a matter of scant relevance. In this regard, even Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih argue that «[n]ation-states are alive as mechanisms of control and domination even when transnational corporations are supposed to have dissolved their boundaries»¹⁷: the ghostly persistence of the nation-state seems to be, thus, a necessary premise for the elaboration of any transnational framework.

In the case of Somali and Haitian cultural histories, processes of reciprocal cultural creolization are not immediately tangible due to the geographical and historical distance between the two nations. However, a reflection on the livelihood of nation-states still seems to be relevant in both cases, as it might help in the establishment of those theoretical grounds which any further elaboration in the field of transnational criticism might be built upon. This issue has become especially pressing in the last decade, when postcolonial nations such as Somalia or Haiti have been constantly conflated into a unique and complex imaginary of “national failure”, questioning, thus, their efficiency as

¹⁵ F. LIONNET, S. SHIH, Lionnet, *Minor Transnationalism*, cit., p. 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

institutional mechanisms of control and domination. This postnational perspective must be balanced by the evidence that the debate concerning the death of nations, especially of postcolonial nations, constitutes a homogenizing critical move which indirectly reinstates the monolithic notion of "Third World". On the other hand, a transnational effort to establish a South-South axis, by retracing similarities and differences between different postcolonial entities, might help to deconstruct and further elaborate on this perspective.

As it specifically concerns the debate over failed nations, this label has been circulating since the early Nineties¹⁸, but it was definitively consecrated in 2005, with the release of the first annual *Failed States Index* on the columns of the US journal *Foreign Policy*. By tabulating data from 178 countries all over the world, the *Failed States Index* is a collection of statistics which works on an almost global scale. The methodological elaboration of the index is based on a statistical approach called CAST (Conflict Assessment System Tool), which mixes economic data with a list of benchmarks offered by other research in the field of social sciences, ranging from the assessment of the effects of civil war to crime rates. This methodology implies that radically different phenomena such as the riots in the French *banlieues* in 2005, the 2008 implosion of the US subprime market, the 2010 earthquake in Port-au-Prince and the ongoing Somali civil war are considered as equally important factors in determining national gains and losses across the board.

However, the impact of some benchmarks of "failure" on the status of world powers like France or the United States has been marginal and episodic, being restricted to oscillations which did not last more than one or two years, whereas postcolonial entities across Africa, Asia and Latin America, which are always ranked at the top of the list, are conflated in a homogeneous neocolonial imaginary of state failure. This evidence clearly represents the fulfillment of a normative teleology, in which the fairness of the civilizing mission of European colonial powers fully displays itself after decolonization, when most of the former colonies are unable to achieve autonomy and self-determination on their own. Homi Bhabha was one of the first scholars ever to establish a direct link between colonial fantasies, colonial

¹⁸ G. HELMAN, S. RATNER, *Saving Failed States*, «Foreign Policy», 89, 1992, pp. 3-20.

discourse and normative teleology, revealing also the inherent contradictions of such an entanglement:

Despite the structural similarities with the play of need and desire in primal fantasies, the colonial fantasy (...) is more ambivalent. On the one hand, it proposes a teleology – under certain conditions of colonial domination and control the native is progressively reformable. On the other, however, it effectively displays the “separation”, makes it more visible. It is the visibility of this separation which, in denying the colonized capacities of self-government, independence, Western modes of civility, lends authority to the official version and mission of colonial power. Colonial fantasy is the continual dramatization of emergence – of difference, freedom – as the beginning of a history which is repeatedly denied.

In addition to this, the “failed nation” jargon also disguises a general attack on the concept of sovereignty, which two of the scholars who are most engaged with the analysis of “failed nations”, Gerald Helman and Steven Rantner, have defined as

an ill-defined and amorphous notion of international law [that] has been used to denote everything from a state’s political independence — its separate existence as a political unit on the world scene — to the more extreme view that all the internal affairs of a state are beyond the scrutiny of the international community¹⁹.

Once again, the nearly panoptical emphasis on the «scrutiny of the international community» is principally aimed at the postcolonial *koinè*. As a matter of fact, the status of sovereignty, due to its own history and conceptualization²⁰, remains in a state of rapid evolution today for all nations, because of the social and political changes taking place across the world²¹. On the other hand, the intervention of the international community, in the forms either of political analysis or of actual interference in local affairs, exclusively focuses on postcolonial political entities, without affecting those world powers, like the United States, which, according to scholars such as Peter Hitchcock, have constantly «played with sovereignty’s strategic ambivalence»²².

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁰ J. DERRIDA, *Voyous: Deux Essais sur la Raison*, Galilée, Paris 2003.

²¹ W. BROWN, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, Zone Books, Cambridge 2010.

²² P. HITCHCOCK, *The Failed State and the State of Failure*, «Mediations», 23, 2008, p.

Given this imbalance in the appreciation of "state failure" as it concerns the former colonial nations and, on the other hand, postcolonial political entities, the expression itself of "state failure" turns out to be ideologically inflected. The ideological charge of this debate has been underlined also by John Marx, who has suggested that if the term "state failure" was stripped off its normative and comparative discourse, it could be aptly replaced by the «competing legalistic definition of political crisis»²³. In addition to this, Marx argues that literary texts, by deconstructing the high normativity and comparativeness of the approach to "failed nations" in political science, can trace a path which brings "political crisis" to be hypostatized within the normative framework of "state failure". Coining the phrase "failed-state fiction", Marx has sought to give a critical framework to all fictional accounts which reproduce and challenge the neocolonial imaginary about "failed nations". Marx argues that

contemporary fiction [...] retools an identifiably novelistic approach to representing subjectivity as the means for introducing new sorts of local, and often unaccredited, expert participants in the project of administration²⁴.

In view of this analysis, Marx reads Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) as a paradigmatic case of a novel in which the political subjectivity of the child protagonist, Ugwu, is constructed both according and in opposition to the discourse on "failed states". Ugwu's *Bildung* cannot be framed neither in the tradition of the European and colonial nor in the postcolonial version of the *Bildungsroman*, as it is not meant to provide education and competences to a national citizen, helping, instead, the individual to become a manager of a situation of crisis²⁵. The crucial reference is to the expertise that such figures, although unaccredited, might have: «These heroes are unaccredited analysts, unwilling participants in civil wars, and flawed government flacks. Fiction strives to make their expertise intelligible as specialized knowledge every bit as consequential as that of development economists and political theorists»²⁶.

²³ J. MARX, *Failed-State Fiction*, «Contemporary Literature», 49, 2008, p. 599.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 611.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 597.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 628.

This description fully corresponds to Ugwu's fictional characterization as a toy soldier during the Biafran War (1967-1970), but Marx considers also the characters of Adolph Ng, in Timothy Mo's novel *The Redundancy of Courage* (1991) and Constantine, in Rebecca West's travelogue *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon: A Journey through Yugoslavia* (1941), to be «unaccredited analysts» of civil wars²⁷. Whereas Adolph Ng becomes, at a certain point, a toy soldier, like Ugwu, Constantine is the protagonist of a different story, as this is the nickname of a historical figure which has been identified as the Serbian poet Stanislav Vinaver (1891-1955)²⁸. This implies that the figure of the unaccredited analyst of “state failure” might be associated not only with toy soldiers, or other definitely subaltern characters, but also with fictional and real writers who witness political crises. In the latter case, the deconstructive take on the framework of “failed nations” is not related to the peculiar *Bildung* of fictional characters who grow as managers of situation of political crisis, rather than as citizens. Instead, it focuses on the possibility of intellectuals and writers to give an account of failure which is peculiar to the history and culture of one country, without subsequently transforming themselves into «native informants». This figure, originally belonging to the field of colonial ethnography, has been applied also to philosophy, culture, literature and history by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999).

According to Spivak, postcolonial authors might be deemed as «native informants» whenever they trade postcolonial knowledge into a theoretical framework which is still heavily influenced by colonialism. In this regard, Spivak's reading of the placement of the «native informant» in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) is exemplary, in that the native informant «is needed as the example for the heteronomy of the determinant, to set off autonomy of the reflexive judgment, which allows freedom for the rational will»²⁹. On the contrary, those postcolonial authors who witness “state failure” generally claim for themselves both the right of self-determination for their people (against the attack on sovereignty which is disguised by the

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 628.

²⁸ Z. MILUTINOVIĆ, *Getting Over Europe: The Construction of Europe in Serbian Culture*, Rodopi, Amsterdam 2011, p. 61.

²⁹ G.C. SPIVAK, *A Critique of the Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1999, p. 6.

discourse on "failed nations") and the autonomy of reflexive judgment. The latter is clearly exemplified by the literary genres that they choose to elaborate their position on "state failure", resorting to semi-fictional or non-fictional accounts, such as the travelogue, in the case of Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*, the personal essay or the journal. This also calls for broadening the categories used by John Marx, replacing the label of "failed-state fiction" with the more extensive definition of "failed-state literature".

The two texts that I will analyze, indeed, might be described as belonging to "failed-state literature", as they are one personal essay: *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (2000), written in English by the Somali-born author Nuruddin Farah³⁰; and one diary: *Tout bouge autour de moi* (2010), written in French by the Haitian writer Dany Laferrière and translated into English as *The World Is Moving Around Me* (2013)³¹. Although apparently unrelated, these texts do portray and deconstruct the same idea of "state failure": Laferrière deals with the consequences of a natural disaster, such as the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, while Farah deals with the exclusively human-made catastrophe of the Somali civil war. They both avoid any fictional engagement with these events, which have been widely dealt with in both Haitian and Somali literature³². Instead, both texts resort to the figure of the writer as an unaccredited analyst of "state failure", mainly focusing on their own authorial relationship with situations of political crisis.

Starting with the most recent book, Dany Laferrière's *Tout bouge autour de moi* is a journal which focuses on the days immediately before and after the earthquake which hit Port-au-Prince and Haiti on the 12 January 2010. On that day, Laferrière, who now lives in Canada, was in Port-au-Prince in order to attend a literary festival, and he per-

³⁰ N. FARAH, *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora*, Cassell, New York 2000.

³¹ D. LAFERRIÈRE, *Tout bouge autour de moi*, Mémorial d'encrier, Montréal 2010.

³² The 2010 earthquake is widely represented in Haitian recent literature, including, amongst the others, Yanick Lahens' *Failles* (Faultlines, 2011), Gary Victor's *Soro* (2011) and Makenzy Orce's *Les Immortelles* (The Immortals, 2012). Somali civil war, on the other hand, has been depicted by several novels published by authors belonging to the Somali diaspora, such as Shirin Ramzanali Fazel's *Lontano da Mogadiscio* (1994), reissued in a bilingual Italian-English edition as *Lontano da Mogadiscio/Far from Mogadishu* in 2013, Cristina Ubax Ali Farah's *Madre piccola* (Little Mother, 2007) or Nadifa Mohamed's *The Orchard of Lost Souls* (2013).

sonally witnessed the dramatic event. He immediately felt prompted to write about it; however, as the author explicitly recounts, reporting a conversation with his nephew, he did not want to either publish a kneejerk account – exploiting, thus, the emotional impact of the event – nor write the “Great Haitian Novel” of the earthquake:

“I’d like to write something about this...”

“Nothing is stopping you”.

His head was lowered, but I could tell he hadn’t finished.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’d like you not to write about it”.

The boy certainly knew what he wanted.

“It doesn’t work like that, you know”. I showed him my black notebook. “As you can see, I have been taking notes non-stop”.

“No,” he said, laughing. “That’s not what I mean. You can write your journal, but not a novel”.

Completely taken aback, I listened as he explained in great detail that this is the event of his generation, not mine. His is the earthquake. And his sensitivity will speak of it.

“I can’t promise you that. No one book takes the place of another”.

I gave him my point of view. In any case, that sort of novel isn’t up my alley. It would take a kind of power I don’t possess. Besides, nature has already written it. A grandiose novel in the classical style that features a time (4:53 in the afternoon), a place (Haiti), and more than two million characters. You’d have to be Tolstoy to take up a challenge like that. I watched his determined expression. Homer believed the gods send us misfortune so we might make poetry of it. Tolstoy, Homer: we picture ourselves like them before we start writing. But what if this young man has what it takes?³³

Laferrière partially follows his nephew’s suggestion. Avoiding any sensationalism – which would be the result of writing an emotional account of the earthquake – the author deals with the narration of the catastrophe by resorting to the crucial disaster of his own generation, as recommended by his nephew. Laferrière, thus, often makes explicit reference to the authoritarian government of Haiti under François Duvalier (1957-1971), «Papa Doc» and, afterwards, under his son, Jean-Claude, «Bébé Doc» (1971-1986). Laferrière’s life was directly affected by the repressive power of Bébé Doc, as he decided to leave Haiti in 1976, after the murder of a close friend, the journalist Gasner Raymond, and has lived in exile ever since.

³³ D. LAFERRIÈRE, *The World is Moving Around Me*, Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver 2013, pp. 50-51.

Also, Laferrière's deconstructive take on the notion of "state failure" includes both historical events, placing them within a broader temporality, as is made explicit in a previous passage, where the author states: «I don't know whether dictatorship should be included among natural disasters. It might be at the root of these misfortunes, or just their logical extension»³⁴. This equation might seem in line with the comparative take of the *Failed States Index*; however, by putting Papa Doc's and Bèbé Doc's authoritarian rule and a natural disaster such as the 2010 earthquake together, Laferrière plays with the normativity of the discourse on "failed nations" showing that although natural and human catastrophes seem to be interchangeable, they are in fact not. This does not mean that they are completely unrelated; on the contrary, they might be placed as causes or consequences within the same "logical extension".

The involvement of the US government in providing material aid to post-earthquake Haiti, for instance, immediately recalls the occupation of the country implemented by President Woodrow Wilson³⁵ in 1915, and the subsequent US support to Duvalier's rule³⁶: «Loads of American planes on the runway, as if the country were occupied». The author also notices that a similar attack on Haitian sovereignty is conducted through the media coverage of the quake and of its consequences, as it is metaphorically anticipated, during the quake itself, by the physical danger which is supposed from a total reliance on TV:

A 7.3 magnitude earthquake is not so bad. You still have a chance. Concrete was the killer. [...] The wood and sheet-metal houses, more flexible, stood the test. In narrow hotel rooms, the TV set was the enemy. People sit facing it. It came right down on them. Many got hit in the head³⁷.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³⁵ As Erez Manela aptly shows in his book *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (2007), the US occupation of Haiti, which lasted from 1915 to 1934, was in a clear contradiction with the Wilsonian doctrine about self-determination, as it is expressed in his well-known "Fourteen Points", firstly issued in a public statement on the 8th of January 1918. This constitutes a further evidence of the deep imbrications existing among the discourses of colonialism, self-determination, national sovereignty and "state failure".

³⁶ E. ABBOTT, *Haiti: An Insider's History of the Rise and Fall of the Duvaliers*, Simon & Schuster, New York 1988. A. VON TUNZELMANN, *Red Heat: Conspiracy, Murder, and the Cold War in the Caribbean*, Henry Holt & Co., New York 2011.

³⁷ D. LAFERRIÈRE, *The World Is Moving Around Me*, cit., p. 16.

As for the mediatization of the earthquake, in fact, what European and American media generally reported was a situation of widespread social and political anarchy, immediately calling for the definition of “state failure”. Laferrière criticizes this discourse with specific arguments:

In the end, there never were those chaotic scenes that some journalists (but not all) no doubt wanted to see. I could just picture the front page of a major daily paper if looting really had broken out. And the televised commentaries from the instant experts about this barbarous country. Instead, people saw a dignified nation whose nerves were steady enough to resist the most terrible deprivations. When you understand that people were hungry long before the earthquake, you have to wonder how they managed to wait so calmly for help to show up. What did they live on during the month that preceded the distribution of food? And the sick who wandered the streets of the city without treatment? Despite all that, Port-au-Prince never lost its cool. We saw people standing in line, waiting for bottled water in the slums, the same districts that a few months earlier were considered danger zones where the government’s law had no effect³⁸.

Laferrière looks for a possible explanation to this seemingly contradictory scene; he finds it in a sort of historical *longue durée*:

So what happened? What can these changes be attributed to? Was this the shock the country was waiting for to wake up and halt its dizzying descent? We’ll have to wait a while longer to understand the true impact of such a tremendous event on the nation’s destiny. In the meantime, let’s enjoy the calm. Especially since we know that explosion of another kind (social, this time) are on the horizon³⁹.

Both excerpts fully testify to the inaccuracy of the label of “failed nation” given to Haiti after the earthquake, as the «danger zones where the government’s laws had no effect» are the places where acts of solidarity after the catastrophic event are deemed to have been more substantial and effective. Laferrière’s emphasis on the nation is also of capital importance, as Haiti’s “destiny” is placed within a horizon of sequential explosions, of both natural and social origin. By positively reappraising the previous statement on the equation between dictatorship and natural disasters, the earthquake is deemed to be a possibility for social explosion, that is, for a new revolution after

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

the one led by Toussaint L'Ouverture at the beginning of the 19th century:

The radio announced that the Presidential Palace has been destroyed. The taxation and pension office, destroyed. The courthouse, destroyed. Stores, crumbled. The communication network, destroyed. Prisoners on the streets. For one night, the revolution had come⁴⁰.

Whereas the dream of a new revolution dissolves overnight – showing, contrary to any debate on “state failure”, that the Haitian government still holds power firmly in its own hands – the experience of a “pivotal moment” seems to connect 2010 and 1804, as the author is convinced that the earthquake «will have repercussions as important as those caused by the declaration of Haitian independence on January 1, 1804»⁴¹. The “nation’s destiny”, which is significantly also evoked on this page, seems to change precisely after the quake:

During the last two weeks of January 2010, Haiti was seen more often than during the previous two centuries. And it wasn't because of a coup or one of these bloody stories mixing voodoo and cannibalism – it was because of an earthquake. An event over which no one has any control. For once, our misfortune wasn't exotic. What happened to us could have happened anywhere⁴².

The author's take on the media coverage of the event acquires, thus, a contradictory profile, including both positive and negative nuances. The idea that the emotional impact of the media coverage of the quake could balance the other distortions of the reality of Haiti which are channeled through European and US media resurfaces, indeed, in the last entry of Laferrière's diary⁴³: «Journalists can go prospecting». Although perhaps an example of wishful thinking in itself, the reliance on the emotional impact of the event on a global scale counterbalances the awareness that this can be used as to demonstrate and implement the hypothesis of “state failure”. Laferrière, however,

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁴³ This is the last entry in the original edition of *Tout bouge autour de moi*, but it is not the last page in its English translation, as in the latter book the entry precedes the “How It Came To Be” section (pp. 176-183), where the author recounts how he came to the ideation and realization of the book. In the original edition, the same section was placed at the very beginning of the book, as a sort of prologue.

argues that, if such events as dictatorships or natural disasters happen in Haiti, this is not due to the fact that Haiti is a “failed” or a “cursed” country:

And now here comes a label that is going to bury us completely: Haiti is a cursed country. Some Haitians, at the end of their rope, are even starting to believe it. You have to be really desperate to accept the contempt that others have for you. The only place to fight that label is where it germinated: in Western opinion. My sole argument: what did this country do to deserve its curse? I know a country that started two world wars in one century and proposed a final solution, and no one says it’s cursed. I know a country insensitive to human suffering, that continues to starve the planet from its powerful financial centers, and no one says it’s cursed. On the contrary: it claims to be a nation blessed by the gods – by God, more like it. So why would Haiti be cursed? I suppose some people use that label in good faith, finding no other words to name this stream of misfortune. But it’s not the right word, especially when you see the energy and dignity displayed by the nation as it faces one of the most difficult tests of our time. But each passing day makes the fight harder. All some commentator has to do is say the word “curse” on the airwaves and it spreads like a cancer. Before they can move on to voodoo, wild men, cannibalism, and a nation of blood-drinkers, they’ll see that I have enough energy to fight them⁴⁴.

The references to other equally “cursed” countries – Germany and the United States, respectively – seem to be quite harsh and lacks further elaboration, but the goal of mentioning them is mainly to show that Haiti is not any more cursed, nor failed, than First World, neocolonial powers. By indirectly recalling how the United States, as a world power, continuously «played with sovereignty’s strategic ambivalence», Laferrière aims to show that the differences between neocolonial and postcolonial nations regarding state failure are purely ideological. It is only in the case of Haiti, indeed, that such a discourse immediately resorts to old colonial stereotypes, like voodoo, wild men, cannibalism, and a nation of blood-drinkers. Reacting against such a biased representation of his own country, the author places himself as the unaccredited analyst who might be able to deconstruct such a neocolonial ideological scheme: «They’ll see that *I have enough energy* to fight them» (emphasis added).

The author’s confidence in his own creative potential seems to be contradicted only by the foreword of the English translation of the book, issued in 2013, written by Michaëlle Jaen, who is, as we learn

⁴⁴ D. LAFERRIÈRE, *The World Is Moving Around Me*, cit., p. 76.

from the book, «Special Envoy for Haiti for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and former Governor General of Canada»⁴⁵:

I read *The World is Moving Around Me* with this premise in mind – that this is a story that's not his to tell. In the way he follows the stream of events, and renders impressions, images, scenes, and conversations in the midst of tragedy or on its periphery, on the path of nostalgia for places that have been destroyed, for those people who have vanished, for memories wounded and devastated, we fell his restraint, something akin to prudishness. There are no special effects. Nothing literary⁴⁶.

Michaëlle Jaen and Dany Laferrière might agree on the necessity to avoid a straightforward fictionalization of the events, but Jean's commentary on the fact that the earthquake «is a story that it's not his to tell» could be deemed to be ambivalent, as it might be interpreted not just as a reflection on the ethical attitude of the author towards the tragic event, but also as a weakening *tout court* of Laferrière's authorial position. Significantly, in fact, it is included only in the foreword to the English translation of the book, which also epitomizes the circulation of the text in the system of Anglo-Globalism, frustrating any possibility of «minor transnationalism» in favor of the dominant system of circulation of texts. Furthermore, the foreword is written by one of those UN "Special Envoys" whose action, after the earthquake, was likely to be considered as an international interference in Haitian national affairs, as Mark Schuller has reported in two books issued in 2012⁴⁷.

Even if Laferrière does not openly criticize this particular form of "humanitarian aid", led by the United Nations, such a criticism might be inferred by his representation of the "humanitarian aid" coming from the United States, creating a contradiction between some political aspects of the foreword and of the text. The commentary by Jaen, however, does not manage to completely undermine Laferrière's authorial position, which emerges, throughout the text, as one of the few possibilities for unaccredited analysts to provide readers with a decon-

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴⁷ M. SCHULLER, P. MORALES, *Tectonic Shifts: Haiti after the Earthquake*, West Hartford: Kumarian Press, West Hartford 2012; M. SCHULLER, *Killing with Kindness: Haiti, International Aid and NGOs*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 2012.

structive take on “state failure”, describing it in the more legalistic terms of a political crisis, where many more actors than the Haitian government are involved.

Although it deals with a completely different situation, such as the condition of Somali refugees fleeing from civil war, Nuruddin Farah’s *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices from the Somali Diaspora* (2000) highlights a similar authorial approach. The text includes both Farah’s personal and essayistic considerations about the Somali civil war and subsequent diaspora, as well as interviews held by the author with Somali refugees across five countries in the world (Kenya, Italy, United Kingdom, Sweden and Switzerland). *Yesterday, Tomorrow* provides readers with vivid descriptions and analyses of this phenomenon, such as the one given by Nuruddin Farah’s father, who was refugee in Mombasa: «...he said, “We were like a horde of ants, blind with fear, and fleeing ahead of a hurricane”. Then, after a pause, “Alas, we had no idea we were fleeing in the direction of the storm, not away from it”»⁴⁸.

The comparison between civil war and hurricanes is an equation of human and natural disasters that directly recalls the rhetorical strategy adopted by Laferrière in his book, which leads to a similar deconstructive take on the the discourse surrounding “failed states”. This move becomes clear when Farah establishes a direct link between the series of hurricanes affecting the Somali population and the world order imposed by successive colonial and neocolonial powers:

Whenever or wherever new empires are created in place of the old ones, a mass of humanity necessarily are made refugees. The Kurd, the Somali, the Cambodian, the Vietnamese, the Tamil-speaking Sri Lankan and the Palestinian share a common condition: their peoples have all been coerced into becoming part of an empire, and then cast off, and recast again as a new empire is constructed in place of the one that has been dismantled⁴⁹.

Within this context, Farah clearly aims to strengthen his authorial position, in order to acquire the status of unaccredited analyst of the civil war and the subsequent diaspora. By doing so, he sets a clear symbolic boundary between himself as an author and other migrants:

⁴⁸ D. LAFERRIÈRE, *The World Is Moving Around Me*, cit., p. 3.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

Still, I must ask what becomes of a man or a woman upon whom sense of imaginative being, upon whose night, no moths tap at the window to the universe of his or her creativity. What if, at the portal of one's cosmos, no imagined fruit is given a crystalline form and no butterfly pays a visit? What becomes of any man or woman whose economic and professional position does not afford the privilege to create another country out of his or her sense of displacement? In other words, what happens to a people who cannot go back to the hypothetical reality of their homes, nor to their actual residences? Is this the clay out of which refugees are moulded?⁵⁰

In contrast to other people in the diaspora, Farah clearly affords himself «the privilege to create another country out of his sense of displacement», as clearly emerges from his narration of his own experience of migration and exile. As already recounted a few lines previously, in fact, Farah started his own experience of exile from Somalia in the early 1970s: while he was in Rome, he was informed by his brother that he would be in danger if he were ever to return to Mogadishu, due to his opposition to the regime of Siyad Barre. Farah remembers how he immediately acknowledged his condition of exile and «in that moment another country was fired into existence, a new country with its own logic and realities»⁵¹, which the author also describes as the «country of [his] imagination»⁵². It is this distinction which sets Farah apart from his fellows in the Somali diaspora, enhancing his individual position as an author able to comment both on Somali civil war and, retroactively, on Barre's regime.

Farah's seemingly self-aggrandizing comment is not driven by any elitism, as he also clearly states that he does not want to be mistaken for a spokesman on behalf of the various communities of the Somali diaspora⁵³. On the contrary, he exploits the creative potential which is related to his personal condition of writer to achieve wider goals, such as the deconstruction of the ideological order dividing the world into First World, democratic and "efficient" countries and Third World, "failed" nations.

As a matter of fact, he immediately adds that the process of dematerialization of Somalia, recast by Farah as a «country of imagination», also affects the former metropolitan centre: «It occurred to me

⁵⁰ N. FARAH, *Yesterday, Tomorrow*, cit., p. 49.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

that I was not living in Italy *as much as I was dwelling in the country of my imagination*, an ideal land with no correlation between it and any land mass known to me»⁵⁴. This is not just a reversal of the former centre-periphery relationship, as it is not limited to the disillusion of the postcolonial subject who eventually discovers that the reality of the former metropolitan centre is utterly different from the idealized version of it that was brought about by the colonial ideology. More interestingly, Farah's commentary implies that the idea of "state failure" might be applied also to Italy, as well as to other "First World" countries. One reason for this change of perspective might be identified in the constitutive relationship of any modern nation-state with the Hobbesian conception of the State as Leviathan, which Farah recalls in the very first pages of his book:

I thought that in the throes of dying, the body-politic that was Somalia displaced as a leviathan. The leviathan in turn begat a monster with unsavory character traits, and the monster begat numerous unsightly gnomonic figures with a gangster's mindset, a gangster carrying out miscarriages of justice. In the evil creatures begotten in this manner, wickedness began to find cause to celebrate, reproducing itself in worrying numbers, multiplying as fungi. The contagion spread, corrupting civil society, which in turn caused the death of the body-politic. A virus begotten out of violence infected the land with a madness⁵⁵.

It might easily be argued that the body-politic of Somalia was displaced as a Leviathan by the «numerous unsightly gnomonic figures with a gangster's mindset, a gangster carrying out miscarriages of justice», which can be identified with the various warlords taking part in the conflict. The civil war, in fact, realized the condition of *bellum omnium contra omnes* which Hobbes had devised as the preliminary condition which the growth of the State as Leviathan, by centralizing power in the hands of the sovereign, sought to build upon. Such a perspective also implies that the failure of the Somali state lurked beneath the surface of the monstrous Leviathan constituted by Siyad Barre's regime, getting back right after its demise in the form of civil war. Much more interestingly, however, the reference to the Hobbesian conception of the State also shows that the possibility of "state

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60 (emphasis added).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

failure" is at least as old as the European philosophical doctrine of the State and the post-Westphalian European nation-state:

the failed state actually begins with the concept of state sovereignty read to be ratified by the Peace of Westphalia (1648), whose treaties (Münster and Osnabrück) still *remarkably* inflect the *ratio* of the nation-state today. [...] Unfortunately, participants like France, Sweden, and the Holy Roman Empire assumed sovereignty and felt no particular urge to sanctify it for the benefit of others in either treaty. France and Sweden, in particular, were accorded the right of intervention, especially where the Holy Roman Empire was concerned. [...] A sensitive dependence to initial conditions also serves to remind us that [...] the model of the international order was definitively a European solution to a European problem, namely, the Holy Roman Empire as a failed or failing state⁵⁶.

The deep connection which was established since the very beginning between "state failure", sovereignty, international world order and armed intervention shows a clear power imbalance between nation-states and Empires which might be replicated, in the present, by the material and ideological divide between neocolonial and postcolonial nations. The neocolonial intervention in the Somali internal affairs produced by the "Restore Hope" operation, for instance, disguises the intention to promote a new world order which the United States, after the end of the Cold War, would have unilaterally guided.

It may seem, then, that one of the most important traits shared by Laferrière's and Farah's writing is a criticism of the contemporary world order, which disguises the interference of world powers in situations of national political crisis by ideologically transforming them into situations of "state failure". The similarities between the two texts, however, are not limited to this evidence: as it has been argued, *Tout bouge autour de moi* and *Yesterday, Tomorrow* are nonfiction texts whose deconstructive take on the idea of "state failure" is much more extensive, calling for further comparisons.

In both texts, the author is one of the few figures who might become an unaccredited analyst of "state failure" and thus also deconstruct neocolonial political analyses by means of narrative and reflection. This focus on the individual «energy», in Laferrière's words⁵⁷, and «sense of imaginative being», according to the expression used by

⁵⁶ P. HITCHCOCK, *The Failed State and the State of Failure*, cit., pp. 73-74.

⁵⁷ D. LAFERRIÈRE, *The World Is Moving Around Me*, cit. p. 76.

Farah⁵⁸, produces, however, a problematic differentiation within the community to which the author is supposed to belong: whereas Farah seems to deplore his fellows in the Somali diaspora «who cannot go back to the hypothetical reality of their homes»⁵⁹ by resorting to their imagination, Laferrière roughly comments on the term diaspora by defining it as a «horrible label»⁶⁰.

As it has been discussed in the case of Farah, this distance from one's supposed community is not a symptom of elitism, as for both authors the focus on the individual primarily aims at the deconstruction of broader ideological discourses. This becomes even clearer in the case of Laferrière's text, where the rejection of the label "diaspora" by the author is presented as less despicable than the same denial by other people from the Haitian diaspora:

Another man I met in Tallahassee would have liked to have been in Port-au-Prince for historical reasons. He believed something important happened there. The breath of history. And he missed it. A historical moment that, in his personal mythology, was as major as January 1, 1804. A founding moment that should produce a new Haitian discourse. People are going to examine that issue from every angle in the decades to come. Politicians, intellectuals, and demagogues won't miss an opportunity to drop an "I was there" into the conversation. But being there did not make a better citizen out of anyone. Some guy who had always lived overseas and who happened to be in Port-au-Prince that afternoon will escape that horrible label of "diaspora"; suddenly he will achieve nobility. He becomes an "I was there"⁶¹.

In particular, Laferrière deplores those who felt that the 2010 earthquake was «a historical moment [...] as major as January 1, 1804», but failed to link this consideration to its possible consequences in terms of political and social change, in favor of the pure narcissism of being there when it happened. Laferrière, on the other hand, repeatedly emphasizes the possibility of making a connection between the two events: according to him, the quake offered a chance to renew the revolutionary action of Toussaint "L'Ouverture" and, although such a dream dissolved overnight, it might still open up the possibil-

⁵⁸ N. FARAH, *Yesterday, Tomorrow*, cit., p. 49.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁶⁰ D. LAFERRIÈRE, *The World Is Moving Around Me*, cit., p. 151.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 151-152.

ity, in the present, to consider Haitian history from a different perspective.

Moreover, by distinguishing themselves from the communities that they are supposed to belong to, both authors also manage to avoid becoming trapped in the label of «native informants». Their role as writers and unaccredited analysts, therefore, is not a pure reflection of their biographies; rather, it is exclusively related to their deconstructive take on the whole discourse on Somalia and Haiti as “failed nations”. This does not mean either that these authors are not sympathetic at all with the destiny of their fellows in the Haitian and Somali diasporas.

They stigmatize, however, the attitude of their fellow compatriots which do introduce individualist distinctions within their communities, without resorting to the creative potential that authors, as unaccredited analysts of “state failure”, might deploy. As a matter of fact, if Laferrière criticizes the narcissism of those who claim that «they were there», Farah repeatedly censures as “blamocracy” the attitude of those Somali refugees who refuse any involvement and responsibility in the dynamics of Somali civil war:

Being blamocrats for excellence, Somalis do not place themselves, as individuals, in the geography of collapse, but outside of it. It is as if they did not inhabit the territory in which the disaster occurred, many ascribing the collapse to Barre’s dictatorship, or more recently to the warlords and their politics. The collapse in and of itself, some of them explain, was a consequence of an inherent failure of the nature of the post-colonial state, to which the idea of democracy was anathema. But the generality of them attribute the failure to the workings of a clan structure. In short, the self is not to blame⁶².

⁶² N. FARAH, *Yesterday, Tomorrow*, cit., p. 188.

Ethiopian cinema and the politics of migration

The work of Tewodros Teshome and Dagmawi Yimer

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Up until less than ten years ago, it was hard to find traces of anything called “Ethiopian cinema” in newspapers and academic journals outside of Ethiopia. Little was known about the state of the film industry in this country of the Horn beyond the work of a few renowned Ethiopian filmmakers and critics based in the United States such as Haile Gerima, Salem Mekuria, Yemane Demissie, and Teshome Gabriel. However, as a few recent research and a growing number of newspaper and blog articles have indicated², since the early 2000s a new wave of digital film production has emerged in Ethiopia, helping to revive a filmmaking tradition that has produced important works, such as Michael Papatakis’s *ጉማ/Guma* (1974) and Solomon Bekele Weya’s *አስቴር/Aster* (1992). Beyond this home-grown phenomenon, mainly commercial in its intentions and still in its infancy in terms of its economy, training infrastructures and the average production value of the films it produces, a new wave of diasporic Ethiopian films has also emerged. Zeresenay Berhane Mehari’s internationally acclaimed *ጅፍረት/Difret* (2014) and Yared Zeleke’s *Lamb* (2015) are probably the best known among them, but other examples could be mentioned, such as the works of Rachel Samuel in the United States, Mikael Ayele in Sweden, and Dagmawi Yimer in Italy.

¹ Pots-doc at the University of Liège, Belgium

² See A. JEDLOWSKI, *Screening Ethiopia: A preliminary study of Ethiopian film production’s history and contemporary developments*, «Journal of African Cinemas», 7, 2015, pp. 169-185; A. JEDLOWSKI, A. MARZI, *Addywood: Ciak si gira!*, «Popoli», 1, 2014, pp. 37-39; B. MEKONNEN, *Led by the market: How the market-oriented Ethiopian infant film “industry” staggers to stand on its feet*, «Ethiopian Business Review» 4, 2013, pp. 11-15; M.W. THOMAS, *The local film sensation in Ethiopia: Aesthetic comparisons with African cinema and alternative experiences*, «Black Camera: An International Film Journal» 7, 2018, pp. 37-52; A. ZERBINI, *L’éveil du cinéma éthiopien*, «Le Courrier», 2 June 2013.

These two emerging film production trends, in Ethiopia and within the Ethiopian diaspora worldwide, are profoundly different in terms of both their production strategies, and their aesthetic and narrative choices. The most relevant difference is probably related to the target audience these different production trends have in mind: a local, wider and more “popular” audience for locally-produced, commercially-oriented Ethiopian films; a rather international, more politically and artistically sophisticated audience for the diasporic films. This difference can tempt the researcher to opt for interpreting these emerging trends separately, imagining the cultural, social, economic and political factors within each trend to be too different to be compared. And this is what most of the very little existing scholarship about Ethiopian cinema has done thus far. In this chapter, on the contrary, I will argue that a closer comparative analysis can produce interesting results, especially when it comes to the study of the way films from each of these trends discuss issues that are relevant for the understanding of contemporary Ethiopian politics and society. Youth emigration is indisputably one of them³. The works of the two film directors this article focuses on, the fiction film director, producer and actor based in Ethiopia Tewodros Teshome and the documentary filmmaker based in Italy Dagmawi Yimer, propose interesting as much as diverging ways to think about contemporary Ethiopian film-making.

In the first section, I will set the general background context for this analysis by providing some information about the phenomenon of outward migration from Ethiopia and about the representation of this issue in contemporary Ethiopian cinema. Then, in the second and third sections, I will focus on the analysis of Tewodros Teshome’s and Dagmawi Yimer’s life and works, highlighting the interrelations existing between their personal experiences and the content of their films. Their different takes on migration help us to understand the position that this issue occupies in present-day Ethiopian politics and to high-

³ See B. FERNANDEZ, *Cheap and disposable? The impact of the global economic crisis on the migration of Ethiopian women domestic workers to the Gulf*, «Gender and Development», 18, 2010, pp. 249-262; S. FRANSEN, K. KUSCHMINDER. *Migration in Ethiopia: History, current trends and future prospects*, in *Paper Series: Migration and Development Country Profiles*, Maastricht Graduate School of Governance, 2009; S. Hassan, M. Negash, *Explaining the Ethiopian outmigration: Incentives or constraints?* <http://www.ethiomediamedia.com/14store/5375.html> (Accessed December 20 2013).

light the role that cinema plays today in the discussion of this phenomenon, both in Ethiopia and throughout the diaspora.

Over the past few decades, waves of migration from Ethiopia toward other non-African countries have developed as a consequence of different factors, including «political instability, decline or stagnation in the agricultural sector, and the 1980s government resettlement program»⁴. These factors have transformed over time, and shifted from mainly political «to more economic motives»⁵. Nevertheless, recent reports underline how, particularly since the post-electoral violence that occurred after the 2005 elections⁶, political persecution, lack of freedom of expression, and ethnic discrimination have come to represent some of the most relevant factors driving people away from Ethiopia. Within this context, for a long time the most popular destinations were the United States, Germany, Sweden, Italy, and Israel (particularly for the Ethiopian Jews community, known as the “falashas”), but over the past few years the geography of preferred destinations progressively shifted to Middle Eastern and Gulf countries, such as Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates⁷. With the increase in the number of people willing to migrate from Ethiopia and the proportional decrease in the chances to achieve such a project legally, the itineraries travelling to most of these destinations have fallen under the control of criminal networks involved in human trafficking and smuggling, a phenomenon that has reached a phenomenal scale in Ethiopia and in the Horn region in the recent past⁸. Within this context, the Ethiopian government has played an ambiguous role. On the one hand, it tried to regulate and protect Ethiopian migrant

⁴ L. ANDERSSON, *Migration, remittances and household welfare in Ethiopia*, «Unu-Merit Working Paper Series», 4, 2014, p. 4.

⁵ S. FRANSEN, K. KUSCHMINDER. *Migration in Ethiopia*, cit., p. 10; A. BARIAGABER, *Political violence and the uprooted in the Horn of Africa: A study of refugee flows from Ethiopia*, «Journal of Black Studies», 28, 1997, pp. 26-42.

⁶ J. ABBINK, *Discomfiture of democracy? The 2005 election crisis in Ethiopia and its aftermath*, «African Affairs», 105, 2006, pp. 173-199.

⁷ See B. FERNANDEZ, *Cheap and disposable?*, cit., pp. 249-262; E. KEBEDE, *Ethiopia: An Assessment of the International Labour Migration Situation: The Case of Female Labour Migrants*, ILO, Geneva 2002.

⁸ See B. FERNANDEZ, *Cheap and disposable?*, cit., pp. 249-262; A. TRIULZI, ‘Like a plate of spaghetti’: *Migrant narratives from the Libya-Lampedusa route*, in *Long Journeys: African Migrants on the Road*, ed. by A. Triulzi, R.L. McKenzie, Brill, Leiden 2013, pp. 213-232; UNHCR, *Smuggling and Trafficking from the East and Horn of Africa: Executive Summary*, Geneva, UNHCR, Geneva 2013.

workers through a complex system of authorization and registration monitored by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (MOLSA)⁹. But, on the other hand, it also implicitly fostered the development of illegal human trafficking and smuggling networks by delegating the task of securing employment contracts abroad to «private employment agencies»¹⁰, whose lack of transparency provoked rumors about connections between government officials and criminal cartels. In addition, through the establishment of the Expatriate Affairs General Directorate at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2002, the government made an explicit attempt at attracting diasporic investment to the country. Critical reports suggest, however, that this attempt overlooked (and somehow participated in reigniting) the historical tensions existing among the different politically-affiliated groups within the diaspora, most of which do not support the action of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) and would prefer to boycott rather than promote its political and economic action¹¹. Beyond these controversies, the increase in outward migration has undoubtedly created concern among government officials, who are aware that the scale of this phenomenon contrasts with the official claims of double-digit economic growth. As a result, over the past few years, the Ethiopian government has implemented a number of actions to contain migration, which included the use of media to spread propaganda messages warning the population against the dangers of illegal migration and, in some cases, criticizing the life of Ethiopians abroad in order to demystify widespread Eldorado imagery about life in the diaspora.

As this brief summary emphasizes, issues connected to migration and the life of the Ethiopian diaspora catalyze tense political debates in Ethiopia. This reality is reflected by the growing number of films on the topic produced over the past few years. In Ethiopian cinema, films of this kind can almost be considered as a narrative genre on their own, with a number of subgenres proposing slightly different variations of the same basic plot structure. There are, for instance, lo-

⁹ Some have expressed fears that this system could be used also to prevent members of the political opposition to leave the country.

¹⁰ See B. FERNANDEZ, *Cheap and disposable?*, cit., pp. 249-262.

¹¹ T. LYONS, *Conflict-generated diasporas and transnational politics in Ethiopia*, «Analysis, Conflict, Security & Development», 7, 2007, pp. 529-549; S. FRANSEN, K. KUSCHMINDER, *Migration in Ethiopia*, cit.

cally made, commercially-oriented films such as Biniam Worku's *ቫኬሽን ፍሮም አሜሪካ/Vacation from America* (2010), whose plots somehow comply with the government's propaganda agenda for the containment of migration by focusing on the contrast between the life that Ethiopians conduct abroad and at home. In these films, diasporic Ethiopians are often portrayed as materialist, egoistic and hedonist, with little interest in Ethiopian culture and traditions, and with little or no respect for family hierarchies and moral principles. In opposition to them, local characters are often depicted as morally irreprehensible guardians of Ethiopian "traditions" (portrayed as homogenous and static entities, immune to both global processes of cultural hybridization, and dynamics of ethnic and political differentiation happening within Ethiopia). The moral objective of most of these films is to convince the audience that the apparent wealth and welfare of people living abroad is the result of wrong moral attitudes and behaviors, and ultimately provokes the radical alienation from local culture and traditions.

If this can be seen as the most common representation of migration and life in the diaspora in local commercial films, a different perspective is proposed by documentary and docu-fiction films produced by Ethiopian filmmakers, both locally and internationally. There are, for instance, films such as Daniel Worku's *Ethiopian Diaspora: Illusion and Reality* (2013) and Rahel Zegeye's *Beirut* (2006), which portray the harsh, often dramatic reality of Ethiopian migrants abroad in an attempt to inform the Ethiopian youth about the perils of migration. While in *Ethiopian Diaspora*, Daniel Worku, a filmmaker based in Addis Ababa, travels to Germany to collect the experiences of Ethiopian refugees living there, in *Beirut* the drama of human trafficking is discussed through a series of fictional portraits of Ethiopian female domestic workers in Lebanon, inspired by real stories collected by the film director during her own experience as a migrant in the Middle Eastern country. In both films, the directors' most explicit intention is to deconstruct rosy images about life in foreign countries. In opposition to these commercially produced films, however, this goal is not pursued by staging a radical opposition between local and diasporic cultural habits, life at home and life abroad, local "tradition" and foreign "modernity". Rather, it is achieved through the narration of dramatic stories (sometime, slightly overdramatized in an attempt to radicalize the film's message), which are presented as testimonies of the

“truth” about migration, the truth that the (often boastful) attitudes of many returnees hide behind tales of success and achievement abroad.

Finally, beyond the two trends that I just highlighted, a third, less developed tendency may be observed. It is communicated by commercially-oriented films about migration produced by members of the Ethiopian diaspora in the US, Australia and Europe. The most relevant example in this grouping is probably Yonie Solomon’s *An Ethiopian Love* (2012), a commercially-oriented romantic comedy film shot by a group of Ethiopian-Americans in LA, whose main objective is to show a different face of Ethiopia to white-American audiences and to produce an entertainment product specifically targeted toward American people of Ethiopian descent¹². Rather than showing any particular concern with contemporary migration from Ethiopia, films of this kind are focused on proposing a rigid as much as commoditized definition of cultural identity and belonging to people of Ethiopian descent who are born in the West, but feel attached to their cultural heritage, a heritage which they are proud of, despite often having only a limited knowledge of it.

A common feature of the films grouped in these three trends is the general lack of analysis of the political and economic causes behind migration. In most of these films the decision to migrate is seen as either an unpatriotic option, made by people in search of easy and rapid wealth, or as a risky adventure, which is often followed by violent and tragic consequences. As I will argue in the next sections, if the work of Tewodros Teshome can be seen as exemplifying this type of representation of migration in Ethiopian films, Dagmawi Yimer’s work proposes a different perspective. However, both film directors’ decisions are, in my view, a direct consequence of their biographical experiences and, particularly, a result of the position that these directors implicitly or explicitly decided to adopt in relation to the Ethiopian government and to the market. In each of the next two sections, after discussing the directors’ life experiences, I will develop these thoughts by analyzing two of their films which focus on the most iconic and dramatic moment of the migration itinerary: the trip across the Sahara desert and the Mediterranean sea.

¹² N. MCGLOSTER, *Vixen Exclusive: Director Yonie Solomon + Actress Helen Gedlu Talk “An Ethiopian Love”* <http://www.vibevixen.com/2012/01/vixen-exclusive-director-yonie-solomon-actress-helen-gedlu-talk-an-ethiopian-love/3/> (Accessed January 13 2012).

Tewodros Teshome occupies a particularly relevant position within the landscape of the emerging Ethiopian video film industry and can undoubtedly be considered as one of the best known and most powerful filmmakers and producers in the new wave of Ethiopian commercial film production emerged over the past few years. He was born and raised in a middle class family of coffee producers, in the South Western part of the country. After graduating in a local business college he began to work as a studio photographer in Addis Ababa, and later ventured into wedding film production. During this period, he began producing fiction films with local non professional actors and crew, and through this activity he got in touch with one of the biggest company in the country, MidRock Ethiopia (owned by the Saudi-Ethiopian billionaire Sheik Mohammed Al-Amoudi), which hired him to make corporate documentary films to advertize the company's achievements. While working at MidRock, he wrote and produced ቅዝቃዛ ወለፊን/*Cold Flame* (2003), a film project focused on HiV-related issues, which became one of the first video films to be screened in local cinemas and the first to achieve substantial commercial success, thus importantly participating to the emergence of the local digital film production phenomenon. With the profits of this and a few following successful releases (and with the money made through a few other business initiatives), Teshome built a multiplex cinema in Addis Ababa and began playing a major role in film distribution in the country. This happened at a time when the number of locally-produced films was rapidly increasing: venturing into theatre-halls development and film distribution thus resulted to be a commercially-profitable move. In the following years, Teshome went on to open eight cinema theatres and became the biggest theatre owner in the country.

Around the mid-2000s, just after the highly contested 2005 elections, which were marked by politically and ethnically motivated killings and violent repression of the opposition parties, he released ቅጂ ስህተት/*The Red Mistake* (2006), a historical film set during the Red Terror, the period of violent repression by the Derg regime against its opponents that happened in the late 1970s. This expensive film, whose plot focuses on a politically-sensitive topic, was produced thanks to the support of foreign crew and funding. It was premiered in one of the biggest and most expensive hotels in Addis Ababa in front of

many diplomatic representatives, with an introductory speech by the Ethiopian Minister of Foreign Affairs. According to Teshome, the reasons for this highly politicized film premiere are to be found, most of all, in the fact that the film had received the economic support of a foreign country, an exception in the landscape of contemporary Ethiopian film production. But local audiences saw this premiere as a confirmation of existing rumours about Teshome's complicity with the government and read the film as a celebration of the victory of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)-led rebellion against the Dergue regime¹³. Incidentally, during one of the interviews I had with the director in Addis Ababa, he underlined that his intentions were profoundly different from those the audience saw in the film (Teshome, Personal Communication, 2014), but despite the attempts he made to clear his reputation, it took him a long time to regain credibility as an independent artist. At the same time, the film release and the incidents that followed it¹⁴, somehow effectively pushed Teshome to develop closer relationships with government officials, who seemed to like the film and who, as a result of its diffusion, became better aware of the potential that the new boom in video film production might have for the circulation of propaganda messages.

After the controversies connected to the release of *The Red Mistake*, for a few years Teshome abandoned filmmaking and focused only on film distribution. He came back to film production in 2011 with the release of *አባይ ወይስ ቪጃስ/Abay vs Vegas* (2011), his first feature film to deal with migration and life abroad. Teshome states this was one of the highest budget local commercial films ever released in Ethiopia: it was partially shot in the US, with a Red One camera (one of the most expensive cameras on the market at the time), and included the participation of some international actors and crews. According

¹³ It is important to note that in the EPRDF's discourse, the Red Terror era is the most evident expression of the Dergue's regime political violence, in front of which the all episodes of violence committed afterwards to defeat the Dergue or to avoid its ancient members to return to power can be justified. While the political and scholarly debate around the re-elaboration of the memory of the Red Terror is complex and articulate, it is important to underline that, for audiences still traumatized by the way the EPRDF had hijacked the 2005 elections, Teshome's film sounded as a provocation, something like a propaganda message aimed at justifying post-electoral violence by remembering to the audience the violence that characterized the Dergue regime.

¹⁴ The audience reaction reached particularly violent levels in the days that followed the film's release, with Teshome's car being vandalized, and he feeling threatened to the point of deciding to leave the country with his family for a while.

to Teshome (Personal Communication, 2014), the light, romantic-comedy genre of *Abay vs Vegas* was intended to make audiences forget the controversies around *The Red Mistake*. The film follows the story of Salsawi (played by Teshome himself), an Ethiopian man who conducts a lavish life in the United States. He is unhappy because he cannot find the right woman to marry, so he decides to travel back to Ethiopia in order to find a wife from his homeland. In Addis Ababa he meets Mena, a girl who wants to migrate at all costs and is ready to follow the first man who would help her to leave the Horn of Africa. The two begin a love story and start planning their wedding, but things suddenly become complicated when Mena, during a trip to Bahar Dar, meets Nigus, a morally-incorruptible young farmer from the Blue Nile waterfalls region. Nigus is introduced to the audience as a proud nationalist who embodies the Ethiopian (or, more precisely, Amhara) cultural “traditions” in opposition to the hedonistic and corrupted attitudes of the “diasporic” Salsawi. From this point on, the film develops around Mena’s dilemma about who to choose as the love of her life: the straight but poor farmer from Abay (the Blue Nile), or the wicked but rich businessman from Vegas? The final choice, preceded by beautiful and nostalgic scenes of iconic Ethiopian landscapes and coupled with songs praising “motherland” Ethiopia and criticizing life in the diaspora, falls on the poor farmer. Mena finally decides to stay in Ethiopia and move with Nigus to the countryside.

The film, which is successful in keeping an entertaining, semi-comic style throughout, repeatedly touches upon themes that are central to the government’s agenda, such as rural development, the containment of rural-urban migration, and the economic exploitation of the Blue Nile water. Throughout the film, Nigus is represented as a positive figure, an Ethiopian countryman who is respectful of local moral traditions and shies away from the pleasures of “modern” life. Inspired by him, his cousin, who studied at Addis Ababa University, takes the decision to move back to the countryside to help uneducated farmers understand the benefits of the exploitation of the Blue Nile water through the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project (a project initiated by Meles Zenawi and central to the EPRDF’s develop-

mental policies)¹⁵. Explicit in its didacticism, the film ends with the following sentences, motionless on the screen:

50% of young Ethiopians would like to emigrate; 75% of the Ethiopians living abroad would like to come back; 85% of the Blue Nile water leaves Ethiopia without being exploited; if the Dam project will be completed only 5% of the Blue Nile water will be used: there is no reason for other countries to oppose this project¹⁶.

According to the data provided by Teshome's production company, Sebastopol Films, the theatrical release of *Abay vs Vegas* was highly successful with local audiences, and seemingly made (at least part of) them forget the controversies that followed the release of *The Red Mistake*. Reassured by this success, Teshome quickly ventured into a new film project also about migration: *ሶስት መዳዘን/Triangle* (2013). This film moves away from the romantic comedy genre adopted in the previous film to focus on the migration journey, and particularly on the drama of human trafficking and smuggling. The film's central characters are Mahamer, a young Ethiopian (played by the Ethiopian film star Solomon Bogale) who decides to migrate to the West by land, and Winta, a young Eritrean woman – played by Mahider Assefa, a rising celebrity within the landscape of contemporary Ethiopian cinema –, whom Mahamer meets while crossing the Sahara desert. The trip they embark upon, together with a group of young Ethiopians and Eritreans (many of whom die in dramatic conditions during the journey), metaphorically (but also unrealistically) conflates different itineraries of illegal migration as portrayed by both local and global media over the past few years¹⁷. After leaving Ethiopia, the group crosses Northern Sudan, Libya and the Mediterranean Sea, but once they reach Italy, the plot takes a turn that makes the film become less realistic: the few survivors end up in the hands of an Italian smuggler who sells them fake passports to go to Mexico and continue their

¹⁵ A. CARLSON, *Who owns the Nile? Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia's history-changing dam*, 2013 <http://origins.osu.edu/article/who-owns-nile-egypt-sudan-and-ethiopia-s-history-changing-dam/page/0/0> (Accessed July 14 2016).

¹⁶ The transcription is based on my notes, and thus respects the overall meaning, but not the precise formulation of the film's closing credits.

¹⁷ According to local media («Ethiopian Opinion», 2014), the Ethiopian writer Atenkut Mulugheta has recently sued Teshome for illegally using his novel about Ethiopian migration to Italy by land, *Fiker Sibekel* (2006) as source of inspiration for *Sost Maezen*'s script.

journey by road to the US¹⁸. The film focuses closely on the trip's difficulties (the heat, the lack of food and water, the absence of privacy, and the bad hygienic conditions), the violence of the intermediaries (the human smugglers in Libya and Sudan, the intermediary in Italy, the *latinos* smugglers in Mexico and the US), and the natural obstacles delaying the journey (a sand storm in the Sahara desert, a sea storm in the Mediterranean Sea, etc.), in an overt attempt at highlighting and dramatizing the experience of illegal migration. Interestingly enough, however, in order to give a more entertaining tone to the film and please local audiences (according to Teshome, avid of romances and thrills), throughout the plot the focus progressively shifts from the trip to the relationship between Mhamer and Winta, who end up promising each other love and a life together in the US. This promise is to be fulfilled, as the closing credits reveal, in part two of the film.

Less aligned with the government's agenda than the previous one, this film produces a representation of migration that is based more on nationalistic sentiments than on explicit attempts to criticize the economic and political reasons that push young Ethiopians to migrate. All throughout the film, the protagonists' resistance and rebellion to the smugglers (in the Saharan desert, in Italy, and above all in Mexico and the US) are emphasized and their heroic behaviour is celebrated¹⁹, with the film repeatedly moving from drama to action in an attempt to keep the audience's interest alive through the use of special and visual effects. In a similar nationalistic vein, the love story between Mhamer and Winta (an Ethiopian man and an Eritrean woman) glances at the ideal of reuniting Ethiopia and Eritrea in order to recreate the "Great Ethiopia" that, according to the Ethiopian nationalists' perspective, first Italian colonialism and more recently the EPRDF-implemented politics of ethnic federalism have divided²⁰. In this sense, the film highlights Teshome's political eclecticism and makes it

¹⁸ Some of the foreign locations were recreated in Ethiopia, while others (such as the scenes in Mexico and the US) were shot abroad.

¹⁹ In one of the last scenes of the film, when the group has finally reached the United States, before sacrificing himself to save the other Ethiopian migrants who traveled with him, one of the protagonists says to the smugglers: "Your uncles the Italians didn't scare me, let alone you. I'm an African, a warm blooded Ethiopian!" (the quote is a literal transcription from the film's subtitles in English).

²⁰ On the extremely complex issue of the political relations between Ethiopia and Eritrea, and of Ethiopian nationalists' dream of regaining access to the Red Sea, see, among others, Iyob (2000) and Abbink (2003).

harder to associate him directly to the government's agenda. Nevertheless, the films' particular take on migration equally shows the director's will to avoid direct political criticism in order to concentrate on nationalist sentiments which, by virtue of their populist appeal, can help the film obtain larger support from local audiences.

Dagmawi Yimer began his career as a filmmaker «per caso (by chance)»²¹. In fact, while he already had a few experiences as amateur filmmaker before migrating to Italy, he never really thought of making films for a living. Before the 2005 elections, he was studying law in Addis Ababa and had decided to become a lawyer, but after the post-electoral violence he felt threatened and decided to leave a country in which, in his words, «judges are put to prison for their judging» (Yimer in Triulzi 2012: 104)²². With a group of friends, he decided to migrate to Europe by land and undertook a very long and difficult journey, which profoundly marked his life²³. Once in Italy, he took part to a workshop on participatory video film production organized by the Italian language school he was attending. The workshop was mainly aimed at giving the asylum seekers who were attending it an instrument to better tell their stories and participate to the creation of an Archive of Migrant Memories²⁴. This experience pushed Yimer to develop a particular interest in filmmaking and, when the short-term workshop ended, he did his best to develop the relationship with the workshop instructors in order to consolidate his training and become a full-time filmmaker.

In this period he co-directed his first documentary film²⁵, *Come un uomo sulla terra/Like a Man on Earth* (2008, co-directed with Riccardo Biadene and Andrea Segre), which narrates the migration journey from Ethiopia to Italy through the prism of Yimer's and some of his friends' experiences, and denounces the Italian and European migration laws that provoked the tightening of border controls in the Medi-

²¹ See S. GUERINI, *Cinescape. Autorappresentazioni cinematografiche migranti*, MA Dissertation, University of Rome "La Sapienza", 2013. All translations from Italian are the author's except where otherwise noted.

²² S. GUERINI, *Cinescape*, cit. p. 114.

²³ Beyond the films that I will mention in the following pages, Yimer narrated the experience of his journey from Ethiopia to Italy in a number of articles and interviews.

²⁴ The Archive saw the light in the following years and Yimer is today its vice-president (<http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/en>).

²⁵ During the workshop he attended, Yimer had already directed a couple of short documentary films, but they had very little circulation.

terranean area. This film had a great local and international success and participated in transforming Yimer into one of the best known representatives of the emerging wave of African diasporic cinema produced in Italy. In the following years he directed other documentary films focused on issues of migration and racism in Italy, such as *C.A.R.A. Italia/Dear Italy* (2009), one of the first documentary films to be shot within a residential center for asylum seekers in the Peninsula; *Soltanto il mare/Nothing but the Sea* (2010, co-directed with Giulio Cederna and Fabrizio Barracco), in which Yimer documents his return to Lampedusa, the Island where he landed when he reached Italy from Libya; and *Va' Pensiero, storie ambulanti/Va' Pensiero, Walking Stories* (2013), a documentary film which narrates the experiences of three Senegalese men who were the victims of violent racist attacks in Milan and Florence between 2009 and 2012. Moving progressively from a focus on his own experience as a migrant to a wider interest on issues related to migration, politics and racism in Italy, Yimer made a conscious attempt at moving his public image from that of «someone who landed in Lampedusa and managed to make a few films» to that of a filmmaker «whose work comes before his biography»²⁶.

Among Yimer's films, *Like a Man on Earth* is probably the most relevant for the argument I intend to develop in this discussion. While, in fact, all of Yimer's documentary films look at migration issues, it is with *Like a Man on Earth* that Yimer tries explicitly to face the memories of his journey to Italy and the motivations that pushed him to leave Ethiopia. In the film, Yimer is the leading character, a first-person narrator who, by combining his own experiences to those of other people he met during the trip, initiates the viewer to the hidden tragedy of illegal migration. The film opens with him connecting his personal biography to the historical factors that influenced it, and explaining the political motivations that pushed him to leave his country²⁷. This initial sequence has an important role in the film: on the one hand, it inscribes the recent phenomenon of illegal migration from

²⁶ See A. TRIULZI, *Hidden faces, hidden histories: Contrasting voices of postcolonial Italy*, in *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, ed. by C. Lombardi-Diop, C. Romeo, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2012, pp. 102-114.

²⁷ The beginning of the film is very clear in this sense as we hear Dagmawi Yimer's voice saying: «I think that this story should begin one hundred years ago, when our grandfathers met each other. With the war, when Italy tried to invade Libya and later Ethiopia».

Ethiopia and Eritrea within the larger historical framework of the colonial relationships between Italy, Libya and the Horn of Africa – a relationship which has for a long time been erased from the Italian collective memory²⁸ – and, on the other hand, connects the migration phenomenon to the most recent manifestations of political authoritarianism in Ethiopia²⁹. The dramatic atmosphere of the film is underlined by the slow and dark sound-track that accompanies most of the film's sequences in which both Ethiopian and Eritrean people who migrated to Italy along with Yimer narrate the experiences of abuse, exploitation and violence they lived or witnessed throughout the trip. By making these witnesses public the film makes an explicit attempt at locating the political responsibilities for the situation in which migrants find themselves. In particular, the film explicitly refers to the authoritarian nature of the Ethiopian and Libyan governments, to the deals signed between the Italian and Libyan authorities for the control of migration fluxes in the Saharan desert and on the Libyan coast (at the time of Gaddafi's regime in Libya and Berlusconi's government in Italy), and to the role of the European Union and its border control agency, Frontex, in the perpetuation of this system of violent exploitation. As Yimer has emphasized in interviews, in this film he had the responsibility of selecting and collecting the stories while, at the same time, "canalizing" them toward a specific narrative structure that aimed at highlighting the drama of illegal migration and the political and economic factors determining it. These multiple responsibilities gave Yimer the chance to appear in the film not only as the object of the story, but also as its «active and responsible subject», a person who does not only want to tell the audience about his «suffering and difficulties», but who instead has «his own ideas» and personal standing on the causes of the experience he went through.

This attitude positions Yimer in the tradition of politically-engaged African diasporic cinema that has emerged in Europe since the early 1960s, a filmmaking tradition connected with the Third-Cinema movement that appeared around the same years in Africa and Latin

²⁸ A. TRIULZI, *Displacing the colonial event: Hybrid memories of postcolonial Italy*, «Interventions», 8, 2006, pp. 430-443.

²⁹ J. ABBINK, *Discomfiture of democracy?*, cit.

America³⁰. By doing this, Yimer clearly distances himself from locally-produced Ethiopian cinema: he does not only focus explicitly on controversial political issues; he also explicitly denounces the Ethiopian government. This attitude is evident in the conclusive lines of one of the written descriptions of his journey from Ethiopia to Italy, which are worth quoting at length:

If I could go back in time, I wouldn't set out on this journey again, at least I don't think so. At every step, I cursed my government for having thrown away the lives of so many young people and forced them into flight. I was ashamed of belonging to a generation with no other option but to flee from their country. This journey isn't comparable to the imprisonment one would suffer in my country for manifesting dissent against the present government. If I compare this journey to being in prison, I think that if you survive prison, people consider you as a witness to the history of your country. Whereas if you survive this journey, you're nothing except to yourself. You're just one of those who left. This journey is a worse punishment than prison. And yet we leave because there's nothing else to do. In Ethiopia there isn't even the privilege of sacrificing oneself or dying for one's country in the hope of real change. At present, the death of one of us in Ethiopia would be a useless sacrifice³¹.

As I underlined earlier, Yimer's political concerns have progressively shifted from issues directly related to migration fluxes from Ethiopia to topics connected to racism and migration policies in Italy, and this move has contributed in pushing Yimer's films to the forefront of the African diasporic film production scene in Italy. At the same time, this same move has also participated in progressively distancing Yimer from the Ethiopian audiences, who have hardly had any chance to access his work³². Yimer's films are barely known in Ethiopia and their political content would make it difficult for them to go through the tight censorship system that regulates film circulation in this country³³. Furthermore, because of his status as political refugee, Yimer cannot travel back to Ethiopia to promote his work, and

³⁰ M. BLACKWOOD, G. JUNE, *Black film-making in Europe*, «Screen», 29, 1988, pp. 114-119; *Rethinking Third Cinema*, ed. by A.R. Guneratne, W. Dissanayake, Routledge, New York 2003.

³¹ D. YIMER, «Our journey», in *Long Journeys*, cit., p. 252.

³² *Like a man on Earth* has been screened in Addis Ababa to a limited audience, thanks to the efforts of some of the people who collaborated to the realization of the film.

³³ A. JEDLOWSKI, *Screening Ethiopia: A preliminary study of Ethiopian film production's history and contemporary developments*, «Journal of African Cinemas», 7, 2015, pp. 169-185.

this situation inevitably pushes him to interact and dialogue more with other African and Ethiopian diasporic filmmakers than with the directors who are participating in the development of video film production in Ethiopia, such as Tewodros Teshome.

In this chapter I have discussed the way migration is represented in contemporary Ethiopian cinema, and particularly in the work of two, very different film directors, one living and working in Ethiopia, the other one based in Italy. The analysis of their biography and their work permits to point out a number of relevant differences in the way migration is discussed, and highlights the relevance that the specific cultural and political position from which a film is “enunciated” has on its contents and aesthetics. As Stuart Hall has emphasized,

the practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write – the positions of enunciation. What recent theories of enunciation suggest is that, though we speak, so to say “in our own name”, of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never exactly in the same place³⁴.

As highlighted through the brief discussion of Teshome’s and Yimer’s biographies, the two directors come from very different social and professional backgrounds. While throughout his career Teshome has cultivated a tight relationship with the Ethiopian political and economic elite in order to become one of the key players in the local media production and distribution industry, Yimer, because of his family background, his political orientation and his migration experience, has progressively positioned himself at the margins of (if not as an antagonist to) the Ethiopian elite that runs the country. At the same time, since his arrival in Europe he has acquired also an influential position as an intellectual and artistic spokesman for the minority of African migrants living in Italy.

As a result, Teshome’s position of enunciation is firmly inscribed within the cultural and political environment that defines the life of the Ethiopian ruling elite, and his films make a both implicit and explicit attempt to please these elite so as to reinforce the strategic position Teshome holds as key stakeholder in the local film industry. On

³⁴ S. HALL, *Cultural identity and cinematic representation*, in *British Cultural Studies: A reader*, ed. by H.A. Baker Jr., M. Diawara, R. H. Lindeborg, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1996, p. 220.

the contrary, Yimer's position of enunciation is the result of the double marginality that characterizes his position as an exilic, migrant filmmaker³⁵ and his films point the attention of the Italian and international audiences toward the social and political causes of this marginality.

These biographical aspects result in Teshome's and Yimer's films having profoundly different "addressivities", that is, profoundly different «ways of "turning to" an audience»³⁶. Teshome's films target (and by targeting make an attempt at creating) an Ethiopian, ethnically Amharic or Amharic-speaking audience and, in order to do so, they stage a nationalistic, Amharic-centric discourse about migration, in which the causes that push people to migrate are hardly mentioned. As a result, the complexity and difficulties of the migration experience and life abroad are moved to the background of his films' plots, while the emphasis is put on the courage of the Ethiopian protagonists who manage to achieve their objectives against all odds (*Triangle*), or who are able to show the values of "Ethiopian" traditions against the corruption of life in the diaspora (*Abay vs Vegas*).

Yimer's films, on the contrary, target international audiences (mainly Italian but also increasingly transnational) and in order to do so they focus on the analysis of issues related to migration and racism in Italy. This focus made Yimer's work become the vector for a wider political discourse on migration in Italy, but at the same time created the risk, underlined by Yimer in several interviews, of him being seen by both audiences and critics as a passive object rather than as an active subject, as a migrant who happens to make films rather than as a director who happens to make films on migration. Precisely in order to counter this risk, in recent years Yimer has made an explicit effort to develop the artistic qualities of his work, an effort which is clearly achieved in his last, widely acclaimed film *Va' pensiero*.

What, then, does the work of these two filmmakers tell us about the way migration is discussed and represented in Ethiopian cinema and, in more general terms, in the Ethiopian society today? No easy answer can be formulated. But it is evident that the profound differences between Teshome's and Yimer's works underline the unease surround-

³⁵ A. SAYAD, *La double absence: des illusions de l'émigré aux souffrances de l'immigré*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1999.

³⁶ K. BARBER, *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics: Oral and Written Culture in Africa and Beyond*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, p. 202.

ing the discussion of this topic in Ethiopia, where a frank debate about the political and economic causes of mass migration seems to have troubles in finding the necessary space to exist. This situation deeply influences the kind of cultural and cinematic production about this issue produced both in Ethiopia and in the diaspora, and makes, at least for now, the creation of an artistic dialogue about this topic between local and diasporic directors hard to imagine.

PART II

THE LITERATURES OF HORN OF AFRICA

“Relational” and “Translational”

Practices of Postcolonial Citizenship in Kaha Mohamed Aden’s *Fra-intendimenti*

MONICA JANSEN¹

The short stories collected in Kaha Mohamed Aden’s *Fra-intendimenti* (*Mis-understandings*, 2010) can be interpreted as «minority constructs within a major language», a definition taken from Deleuze and Guattari’s *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, which Graziella Parati has applied to migration literature in Italy as follows:

Italophone writings are the translation into practice of a concept of minor literature that supplies alternative models of expression. This minority of bilingual, or, more precisely, multilingual authors and practices, appropriates a space within Italian culture and language, which are consequently both deterritorialized. [...] This connection between the literary and the social extends the meaning of linguistic deterritorialization to tangible personifications of otherness, to the bodies of the immigrants themselves, and, consequently, to politics².

Parati’s positioning of Italophone writing as part of a minor literature that operates between culture, language and politics, is closely linked to the debate on how the literary production of migrant writers is defined within the context of the Italian postcolonial. As stated in the “Manifesto” by Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, transnational immigration plays a key role in Italy’s contemporary postcolonial condition³. The fact that transnational immigration to Italy started only in the 1980s, that is, not directly after decolonisation, helped to «corroborate Italy’s self-perception as a demographically and culturally homogeneous nation»⁴. This traditional understanding

¹Utrecht Universiteit, The Netherlands.

²G. PARATI, *Introduction*, in *Mediterranean Crossroads. Migration Literature in Italy*, Farleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison 1999, p. 18.

³C. LOMBARDI-DIOP, C. ROMEO, *The Italian Postcolonial: A Manifesto*, «Italian Studies» 69, 2014, p. 428.

⁴*Ibid.*

of *italianità* is now challenged by the cultural production of new migrants and second generations, which fosters «a notion of national identity and culture rooted in transnationalism and dis-homogeneity»⁵. The authors therefore plea for a «postcolonial approach, inclusive of the multiple processes of extraterritorial conquest, expansion, and migration» in order to «comprehend the complex, transnational history of Italy's cultural identity»⁶. Furthermore, with *jus sanguinis* at the basis of the right to citizenship, the «migrants' sense of belonging» is constructed through «shared postcolonial cultural practices that transcend the biologically determined idea of the nation»⁷. In this perspective, Kaha's⁸ writings may be viewed as “cultural practices” of a Somali Italian minor literature that can reveal a postcolonial critique of conditions of subalternity in Italy along the lines of race, gender and national identity.

Following up on Parati's use of the category of minor literature for Italoophone migration literature, Simone Brioni has observed that Somali Italian literature

shares common features, including that it has a minor status with respect to the culture and the language in which it has been produced, and it provides a representation of the minor condition of subjects who are discriminated in terms of race, class, religion, and gender⁹.

The binary “Somali Italian” should therefore be located, according to Brioni, in a transnational space that «transcends two supposedly unchangeable and dichotomic categories»¹⁰. To Deleuze and Guattari's model of minor literature – along with its three main issues, namely language, political immediacy and the creation of a collective discourse – Brioni adds the French philosophers' notion of “becoming”, «showing that the “minor” Somali Italian literature might signal

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 429.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 433.

⁸ I follow the practice in African Studies to mention Somali, Eritrean, Ethiopian and Arabic proper names by referring to the first name. S. BRIONI, *The Somali Within. Language, Race and Belonging in 'Minor' Italian Literature*, Oxford, Legenda, 2015.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

a major change in "Italian" literature towards a transnational dimension»¹¹.

Lombardi-Diop and Romeo's notion of a postcolonial critique, together with Brioni's attempt to situate the Somali Italian literature in the «in-between space» of transnational Italy¹², connects well with Graham Huggan's concept of «postcolonial Europe» as an «aspirational project»¹³. According to Huggan, the new reality of «Postcolonial Europe» is not centred «on the residual figure of the "postcolonial migrant"», but on emergent figures like Gilroy's "Black European", who is part of a larger process of transition that «may [eventually] take us beyond racialised and racialisable categories of all kinds»¹⁴.

The task of creating a discourse of intercultural "conviviality" in the making¹⁵, in which the past is interrogated about the social problems of contemporary society, is performed by postcolonial, or migrant, writing in the definition of Giuliana Benvenuti. The notion of «Italian postcolonial literature», Benvenuti argues, embraces a unity of two categories of texts that offer a double focus on colonial history,¹⁶ in which European modernity is represented as a modernity that is mutilated, also, and primarily, by colonialism¹⁷. The first category has the primary goal of redefining and restoring the broken line between experience and narration through the transmission of (direct) experience, thus problematising the nexus between the narrator and

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹² See on this topic E. BOND, *Towards a Trans-national Turn in Italian Studies?*, «Italian Studies», 69, 2014, p. 417: «Italy can be seen as representing a historical palimpsestic context of motion, and as occupying a peripheral status within Europe, which could conceivably contribute to its construction as a hyphenated "trans-" or in-between space, as well as its ability to "queer" fixed notions of a national time and space».

¹³ G. HUGGAN, *Perspectives on postcolonial Europe*, «Journal of Postcolonial Writing», 44, 2008, p. 248. See also Sandra Ponzanesi, who in her inaugural lecture speaks of the definition of postcolonialism as «aspirational, a discipline that challenges us to develop new tools to help us account for the increasing complexity of our ever more interconnected world». *Connecting Europe: Postcolonial Mediations*, Inaugural Lecture 15 April 2016, Utrecht University.

¹⁴ G. HUGGAN, *Perspectives on postcolonial Europe*, p. 248.

¹⁵ «Conviviality» is a concept introduced by Paul Gilroy in *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, Routledge, London 2004: «Conviviality, Gilroy implies, avoids the racialization of cultural difference that plagues state multiculturalism [...] instead, it amounts to an everyday practice of "radical openness" » (G. HUGGAN, *Perspectives on postcolonial Europe*, p. 248).

¹⁶ G. BENVENUTI, *Il romanzo neostorico italiano. Storia, memoria, narrazione*, Carocci, Roma 2012, p. 92.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

the community for which the author writes¹⁸; the second fosters narrations with a “performative” value, which stimulate the reader to assume an active part in it¹⁹.

The two categories of postcolonial writing are distinguished by the generational dimension of the transmission of – direct or indirect – experience with the Italian postcolonial. In the case of Kaha’s *Fra-intendimenti*, this experiential difference will be illustrated in relation to her father’s history.

The social and cultural dimension of Kaha’s collection of short stories is established not only through her specific minority use of the Italian language, but also in a dialogue with her father, Mohamed Sheikh Aden, to whom she is linked via the paratextual information in the blurb on the book jacket: «Nel 1986, quando suo padre – ministro di Siad Barre – era in carcere già da quattro anni, Kaha Aden ha abbandonato la Somalia per salvarsi dai venti anni di guerra che avrebbero sconvolto Mogadiscio e tutta la nazione»²⁰. Mohamed Sheikh Aden (1936-2010), author of *Arrivederci a Mogadiscio (Until we meet again, Mogadishu)* and *La Somalia non è un’isola dei Caraibi (Somalia is not a Caribbean Island)*, was an activist in the Somali Youth League and a former Minister of Health, Culture and Higher Education. He was a political prisoner during the Siad Barre regime (1982-89), and subsequently a political refugee when he arrived, in 1989, in Italy, where he lived in Rome and Turin. Two years earlier, Kaha had migrated to Pavia, where she graduated in economics and took her Master’s degree at the European School for Advanced Studies in Cooperation and Development – IUSS. Working in the field of cultural mediation, in 2002 she was awarded the San Siro prize by the Pavia city council, in recognition of her contribution to immigrant solidarity and integration activities. She obtained Italian citizenship in 2008²¹.

One of the stories in *Fra-intendimenti* gives an account of the night Sheikh Aden was arrested (“1982: fuga da casa”, “1982: escape from home”). In this story, the arrival of the first-person narrator’s dog, who has been wounded by a gunshot, anticipates the news – brutally brought to her by a soldier holding her at gunpoint – of her father’s ar-

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

²⁰ K.M. ADEN, *Fra-intendimenti*, Nottetempo, Roma 2010, blurb.

²¹ For a biography in English see Simone Brioni, «Kaha Mohamed Aden», in *Enciclopedia de Estudios Afroeuropeos*.

rest. The incomprehension and anger provoked by this act of arbitrary violence, regularly inflicted on the dictator's dissidents, makes her recall what she most admired in her father: the anti-cholera vaccination he introduced in Somalia while serving as Minister of Health²².

In an attentive cross-reading of Sheikh's *La Somalia non è un'isola dei Caraibi* and Kaha's collection of short stories, both published in 2010, a few months before Sheikh's death, Teresa Solis argues that these postcolonial writings belong to different generations, and are written with different aims – although they share common interests. First of all, both works narrate two life experiences, that of life in Somalia and the country's history of decolonisation, in which Italy is present as an intermediary in different ways²³.

While Sheikh's is a story of "direct experience" and participation in Somali politics as an activist, a politician and a medical doctor, Kaha's is (in part) constructed around an "indirect experience" of Somali history, based on her twenty-year experience of living in the capital Mogadishu, as well as on the testimonies of her relatives²⁴. The period before 1966 (her birth date) is thus represented by her grandparents, who figure in the first two stories of *Fra-intendimenti*: "Autoritratto" ("Selfportrait") narrates how each of her three grandmothers contributed to female emancipation in their own way; "Nonno Y. e il colore degli alleati" ("Grandpa Y. and the colour of the allies") recounts her grandfather's successful attempt at convincing an Italian (ex-Fascist) AFIS functionary to let his daughters attend the Italian

²² K.M. ADEN, *Fra-intendimenti*, cit., p. 100.

²³ Between 1941 and 1949 Italy tried to keep hold of its colony, urging the UN, after the 1947 peace treaties, to recognise the Italians as a civilising force in Somalia; the SYL (Somali Youth League), instead, pleaded with the UN to prevent Italy's return. Between 1950 and 1960, Italy was entrusted with the Amministrazione Fiduciaria Italiana in Somalia (AFIS), or the Italian Trust Administration of Somalia. Italy sought reconciliation with the militant and nationalist SYL, and built new institutions to eliminate clan-based power and tribalism. Until 1991, Italy supported dictator Mohamed Siad Barre, who came to power after a coup d'état in 1969; in 1992-93, Italy participated in the UN peace mission, after civil war broke out in 1991. The disintegration that followed has been interpreted as the revenge of segmentary clans over nationalism. See the Iris seminar on Italy's ex-colonies taught by Maria Laura Cornelli and Daniela Rosa, November 2011, http://www.storieinrete.org/storie_wp/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/iris_sem_28_11_2011_cornelli_rosa_rel.pdf; G. CALCHI NOVATI, "National" Identities as a By-Product of Italian Colonialism: A Comparison of Eritrea and Somalia, in *Italian Colonialism. Legacy and Memory*, ed. by J. Andall, D. Ducan, Peter Lang, Oxford 2005, pp. 65-67.

²⁴ T. SOLIS, *Due generazioni, due narrazioni. L'Italia postcoloniale in Mohamed Aden Sheikh e Kaha Mohamed Aden*, «Narrativa-nuova serie», 33-34, 2011-12, p. 230.

school in Mogadishu. For the post-1986 period, which saw the outbreak of a violent clan war²⁵, the narrator relies on the traumatic experience of her aunt Aisha, who – being based in London – also represents the Somali diaspora; thus, the third story narrates a family tragedy, namely the killing of Kaha’s uncle Magan (“La casa con l’albero: tra il Giusto e il Bene”, “The house with the tree: Between Good and Evil”).

Kaha’s own, direct experience is limited to her youth in Mogadishu and the Italian education she enjoyed thanks to her family’s insistence. According to Giampaolo Calchi Novati, the limits of Italian colonialism in Somalia – when compared with France and Great Britain – are reflected mainly in matters such as schooling and work, having provoked a high rate of illiteracy and the absence of an educated ruling class²⁶. One of the greatest cultural losses of the Somali civil war of 1991 has been the University of Mogadishu²⁷. Mario Sica, the last Italian ambassador in Mogadishu before repatriating to Italy in 1991, when looking back – in his memoirs – on Italy’s presence in Somalia in the 1950s, pointed out that Italian policies were particularly hostile toward any Somali participation in public office; even postmen were all Italian, and Somalis could not pursue education beyond the third class of elementary school²⁸.

A second common interest that father and daughter share is the importance of education as a crucial element for the formation of post-colonial citizenship²⁹. Kaha’s name summarises the ideal for the future her grandmothers had in mind for her, when she was born in

²⁵ According to Kaha, Somalia’s problems can be traced back to clannism. In an interview with Joseph Ngunjiri, she says: «In Somalia, we speak only one language. [...] Hence people like identifying themselves in terms of their different clans, which is also a source of all the differences». In J. NGUNJIRI, *Speaking out for the rights of women in war-torn Somalia*, «Saturday Nation», 13 November 2010.

²⁶ G. CALCHI NOVATI, *L’Africa d’Italia. Una storia coloniale e postcoloniale*, Carocci, Roma 2011, p. 113. Promoting a system of government that blended traditionalism, paternalism and modernisation, Italy hindered the creation of modern Somali nationalism by repressing any radical progress in the fields of economy and education.

²⁷ G. CALCHI NOVATI, *L’Italia in Africa*, in *L’impero fascista: Italia ed Etiopia (1935-1941)*, ed. by R. Bottoni, Il Mulino, Bologna 2008, p. 560.

²⁸ M. SICA, *Operazione Somalia. La dittatura, l’opposizione, la guerra civile nella testimonianza dell’ultimo ambasciatore d’Italia a Mogadiscio*, Marsilio, Venezia 1994, p. 235.

²⁹ S. Mezzadra, *How Many Histories of Labor? Towards a Theory of Postcolonial Capitalism*, «Transversal», 1, 2012, p. 52: «Needless to say, education is a strategic field for the investigation of the material effects of modernity as interpellation, especially since it is constitutively linked to the formation of citizenship».

1966, during the years of the independent Somali Republic and therefore under a civilian government: «Kaaha: la luce del sole. Il sole forse sono gli stati indipendenti dell’Africa che dovevano dare vita a una storia nuova. Per adesso stiamo sguazzando nelle guerre»³⁰. If Sheikh’s life story is written with the aim of transmitting a collective historical memory, thus corresponding to Benvenuti’s first category of postcolonial literature, Kaha’s stories therefore fit in the second category of performative narrations; these focus on the present and show how personal and historical, local memories are transplanted into, and faced with, the intercultural challenges of «Postcolonial Europe».

Finally, this generational difference between father and daughter, which finds common ground in the crucial question of cultural agency, is eloquently expressed in the following two quotes, highlighted also by Solis:

Sheikh: “I miei figli hanno affrontato il loro trasferimento in Italia armati della capacità di pensare con la propria testa e della libertà di esprimere il proprio pensiero” (“My children faced up to their move to Italy, armed with the capacity to think for themselves and with the freedom to express their own thought”)

Kaha: “La mia città e la mia patria sono dove si compie la mia vita di persona libera” (“My city and my fatherland are there where I conduct my life as a free person”)³¹.

Clearly father and daughter both position themselves differently toward cultural integration, a condition met with irony by Kaha who, in her collection of short stories, focuses on the treatment of cultural differences and on mutual incomprehension³². These different views on intercultural communication could both be linked to Edward Said’s notion of «integrative knowledge», which refers to the intersection of history, memory and literature in postcolonial writing. It thus fills the gaps, omissions and ignorance about a colonial past that has not yet been experienced in terms of a shared history. Rather than to seek «in-

³⁰ K.M. ADEN, *Fra-intendimenti*, cit., p. 10. Cf. Angelo Del Boca, who speaks of a bitter awakening after the radiant days and the exaltation of Somali independence in 1960 (*Gli italiani in Africa orientale – IV: Nostalgia delle colonie*, Mondadori, Milano 1992, p. 343).

³¹ Cit. in T. SOLIS, *Due generazioni*, cit., p. 236.

³² Solis suggests that, when Kaha arrived in Italy in 1986, the country was less prepared for the impact of immigration than in 1989. According to Benvenuti, a consistent Italian post-colonial or migrant literature becomes visible in 1990, in concomitance with the first organic immigration law (39/1990).

tegration», it is also possible to speak of the coexistence of conflicting notions of history which legitimises the category of «counter-narrations», or, in Parati's words, «acts of talking back to normative narratives»³³ which are set against the «positionality» of the «integrated» Italian writer³⁴.

Kaha's literary contribution to an «integrative», Somali Italian «counter-narration» should not only be viewed in the light of the generational transmission of collective memories that question Western hegemony; it must also be confronted with the social conflicts inherent to global capitalism. Sandro Mezzadra has shown how postcolonial theory not only questions modernity's unitary concept of history,³⁵ but also of capitalism, «pluralizing» it without however effacing

the moment of unity that pertains to the very concept and logic of capital, what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari called its "axiomatic": that is, the necessity of translating human activity into the language of value through the "hermeneutic grid" of abstract labor, as well as the ensemble of social relations that arise from this necessity³⁶.

Instead of global capitalism, Mezzadra claims that there are many capitalisms:

a critical theory of postcolonial capitalism must handle with care "universal" concepts. The very adjective "postcolonial" refers to the relevance of diverse scales, places and histories within the contemporary structure of capitalism, which is easily lost in theories of "global" capitalism³⁷.

What is more, labour should be conceived of as different kinds of "dependences", rather than being related to the Marxist notion of free wage labour as a capitalist standard or norm. Quoting Yann Moulier Boutang, Mezzadra argues that

³³ G. PARATI, *Migration Italy. The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture*, Toronto University Press, Toronto 2005, p. 12.

³⁴ G. BENVENUTI, *Il romanzo neostorico*, cit., p. 88.

³⁵ S. MEZZADRA, *How Many Histories of Labor?*, cit.: «The most important contribution of postcolonial studies to the understanding of modernity is usually considered to lie in the multiplication of modernities, in the discovery of alternative paths and experiences of modernization».

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

we should rather speak of a multiplicity of forms of "dependent labor", ranging from slavery to informal labor, from wage labor to formally independent labor. To the multiple ways in which labor power is commodified and subsumed under capital, the institution of a multiplicity of forms and social relations of dependence and "heteronomy" corresponds³⁸.

The multiple and "dependent", economic and social structures within postcolonial capitalism correspond to the notions of "exchange" and "relationality", which are crucial to understand Kaha's stories. Universal concepts alter their meaning at the "crossroads" of intercultural exchange. This, on one hand, opens new hopes for emancipation and yet, on the other, increases the risk of exclusion of minority acts from a major discourse. Alessandra Marino, in her review of *Fra-intendimenti*, suggests that Kaha's writing «may be looked at as an act of citizenship for it intervenes and tries to actively modify dominant discourses on nationality and belonging»³⁹. She highlights "relationality" as one of the key elements in the theorization of the act of citizenship. Therefore, «the performativity of literature can stimulate a desire to oppose the repetition of normative discourses and creating newness»⁴⁰. According to Marino, in this way Kaha's writing becomes an example of «affective citizenship»⁴¹.

The cultural practice of "affective citizenship" is illustrated in the story called "Apriti sesamo" ("Open Sesame"), which is related to the 2002 Law 189 (Bossi-Fini), although the text does not mention this reference explicitly⁴². The story opposes, through the use of irony, a normative interpretation of citizenship, sanctioned by the "hermeneutic grid" of economic value⁴³, and invites the reader to conceive, instead, a relational kind of citizenship. The consequences for immigrants of the law's obligation to fingerprint all non-EU citizens resident in Italy, that is, to treat them as outlaws or potential criminals, are narrated in the form of a dream that takes on the contours of the typi-

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ A. MARINO, *review of Kaha Mohamed Aden, Fra-intendimenti*, «Anglistica», 15, 2011, pp. 139-140.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

⁴¹ A. MARINO, *review of Kaha Mohamed Aden*, cit., p. 142.

⁴² S. Brioni, «Kaha Mohamed Aden». This entry also contains an English translation of "Apriti sesamo".

⁴³ The Bossi-Fini Law, which was approved on 30 July 2002, reduced immigration quotas and made it more difficult for immigrants to receive a residence permit, and in many cases to be reunited with their families.

cal nightmare of every immigrant without a community upon which to rely for protection. The first-person narrator wishes to make her dream part of the “integrative knowledge” of a community, though on the condition that it be “opened” – following Somali costume – by a person of the dreamer’s choice. The fact that the dreamer/narrator wishes to share her nightmare with the readers, implies that she (ideally) assigns to them an active role in the formation of a “postcolonial Europe”:

Io ho scelto di consegnare a voi l’incubo. Non è possibile discuterne con voi, né voi potete discuterne con me. La soluzione più facile è nascondere da qualche parte nella nostra mente. Insomma, tenerlo lontano dalla nostra portata. Semplice no? Nessuna risposta, silenzio. (I have decided to share the nightmare with you. It isn’t possible to discuss it with you, and neither can you discuss it with me. The easiest solution is to hide it in some part of our minds. In short, to keep it out of our reach. Simple, right? No answer, silence)⁴⁴.

According to Brioni, the collection *Fra-intendimenti* should be seen as a «text centred around common themes, including intercultural translation, which are developed in different stories». The practice of intercultural translation in Kaha’s case is expressed through her interest «in experimenting with the possibilities of the Italian language to reach her Italian audience». This includes addressing her readership through the employment of a colloquial style and the use of direct questions, and the creation of wordplays as an expression of her not being a native speaker in Italian⁴⁵.

This performative use of language as a tool to reach what Gilroy has termed intercultural “conviviality”, finds its unique expression in the documentary *La quarta via. Mogadiscio, Italia* (*The fourth road, Mogadishu, Italy*)⁴⁶, which Brioni describes as follows:

the result of a unique encounter between different cultures, experiences, and professional skills, which were joined by the common purpose of developing new communicative forms that could impact Italy’s collective amnesia of its colonial past and the negative representation of immigrants in the Italian media⁴⁷.

⁴⁴ K.M. ADEN, *Fra-intendimenti*, cit., 65-66.

⁴⁵ S. BRIONI, *The Somali Within*, cit., p. 39.

⁴⁶ S. BRIONI, G. CHISCUZZU, E. GUIDA, *La quarta via: Mogadiscio, Italia*, from an oral story by Kaha Mohamed Aden, Kimerafilm (2012).

⁴⁷ S. BRIONI, *The Somali Within*, cit., p. 9.

In this documentary, which Kaha conceived in collaboration with Brioni, she uses colours to translate universal concepts into emotional ones. "Translation", in Loredana Polezzi's definition of «a key antidote against essentialism of any kind», configures itself as a «non-binary model» that stresses «the open-ended nature of the process, its tendency to proliferate in multiple directions and to initiate further processes of translation, interpretation and transposition, rather than coming to a stable end»⁴⁸.

Kaha, filmed at home with paper and pencils at hand, draws up a city map of Mogadishu, using four colors to represent the different layers of her hometown. The first color she uses is green, for "white Mogadishu", as the old city center's historical memory – bound to Islam and facing the trade routes on the Indian Ocean, towards the Orient – is referred to. Next, black is used for its colonial, Fascist memory, a past which is not, however, judged in black and white; Kaha points out that in Somali tradition, you should not judge negative things, but experience them without destroying them. The third road is traced in red, which stands for the socialist revolution, though it could also suggest the bloodshed of civil war to come. The fourth road, reflected in the title of the documentary, is the only one that imposes itself on the others and does not allow for any crossroads or crossovers. The color is grey, which stands for civil war, ruins and humanitarian indifference. The fourth road, however, opens on to the fifth road, imaginary and therefore without color. Kaha declares – in an interview with Floriana Lipparini – that the fifth road is one of hope, of the ability to live together again, as it was before and has to be possible again⁴⁹. In the booklet that accompanies the DVD of *The fourth road*, other Somali voices stress this urge to not only stage a "resistance" against the disruption caused by the fourth road, but also to generate hope for future generations, born and raised in the diaspora. Somali writer Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, for example, recounts how she grew up in Mogadishu, «seeing all the colors of the rainbow,

⁴⁸ L. POLEZZI, *Disrupting Europe: Polylingual Models And Common Selves*, «Transversal», 6, 2013, pp. 37-51.

⁴⁹ F. LIPPARINI, *Le cinque vie di Kaha. La scrittura è il territorio della libertà, per Kaha Mohamed Aden. Da Mogadiscio a Pavia la storia di un esilio e di una speranza*, in *Storie migranti*. (<http://www.storiemigranti.org/spip.php?article873>).

which is why I never thought in watertight compartments, either black or white»⁵⁰. She concludes:

The hope for a better future is still alive in the diaspora. [...] our children want to explore the land where we came from. They want to familiarize themselves with the scents of the savannah and follow the tracks of a herd of camels ploughing through the red land of our ancestors⁵¹.

Writer and academic Ali Mumin Ahad links the fifth road to the memory of Kaha's father, «who, had he been given the freedom to, would have certainly been able to contribute more efficiently in this country during those tormented years of war»⁵².

These roads, which can be traced back to Somali roots, lay down the tracks on which to construct new forms of community; therefore, the colors do not transmit absolute values but are related, situated and negotiable. Loredana Polezzi's suggestion, to move away from «the rigidity of the center/periphery model» and adopt the «relational nature» of the «translational model»⁵³, are in line with Brioni's definition of the documentary as a work of translation, bringing the hermeneutic concept back to its original, etymological meaning of *translatio*, which means to transport, or to continue, the story of the destroyed city of Mogadishu in that of Kaha's second hometown, Pavia⁵⁴.

A parodic version of this relational model of translation through the use of colors can be found in the second story of *Fra-intendimenti*, «Nonno Y. e il colore degli alleati»; as mentioned earlier, the latter narrates the story of Grandpa Y. sending his daughters – with the help of his wife Xaliima – to the Italian school, notwithstanding the intolerance of both the Italian (ex-Fascist) AFIS functionary and the congregation of Somali elderly men. The story also recounts a case of racism – when the black, female first-person narrator is taken for a prostitute by the white driver of a green lorry (i.e. black = prostitute) –

⁵⁰ S.F. RAMZANALI, *The Interwoven Stories of the Somali Diaspora*, in *Somalitalia. Four Roads to Mogadishu*, ed. by S. Brioni, Kimerafilm, Roma 2012, pp. 23-24.

⁵¹ S.F. RAMZANALI, *The Interwoven Stories of the Somali Diaspora*, cit., p. 27.

⁵² A.M. AHAD, *Between Memories and Urban Geography*, in *Somalitalia*, cit., p. 37.

⁵³ L. POLEZZI, *Disrupting Europe*, cit.

⁵⁴ S. BRIONI, *Tradurre l'identità nell'Italia post-coloniale: La quarta via di Kaha Mohamed Aden*, «Altreitalie», 44, 2011, pp. 110-124.

which is subsequently inverted⁵⁵, becoming a negotiable value that turns prejudice into benefit: prostitute = freedom. This combination of an episode of colonial memory and the experience of present-day racism is transformed into a wordplay; the woman initially attributes the colour "verde-speranza-pisello" ("green-hope-pea") to the driver's lorry, then reduces it to "verde-speranza" and, immediately afterwards, changes it to "verde-pisello":

Bisogna scegliere tra pisello e speranza. È facile, non ci vuole tanta immaginazione: il pisello è salito sul camion e la speranza è rimasta a me. La speranza di avere sempre alleati al mio fianco. (You have to choose between pea/prick and hope. It's easy, you don't need a lot of imagination: the pea/prick got on his lorry and hope stayed with me. The hope to always have allies on my side)⁵⁶.

With the help of an equivocal, translational "counter-narration" ("pisello" in Italian has a double meaning), the narrating "other" succeeds in undermining the "positionality" of the "integrated" Italian. The first-person narrator thus adopts the same polysemic irony as her Grandpa Y. had used to revert the rejection of the Somali elderly men, by saying that he preferred for his daughters to behave like prostitutes for a whim, and not out of *necessity*⁵⁷. This means that the word "prostitute" can only have a positive meaning in a relational context, and has to be supported by the white male interlock

utor. The narrator's temporary victory is therefore followed by a question:

Di che colore sono gli alleati? E per favore, non datemi come risposta "di tutti i colori". Perché quando si dice così, sia voi che io sappiamo bene che si tratta del *bianco*. (Which color are the allies? And please don't answer "of all colors". Whenever one answers like that, both you and me know that the color is *white*)⁵⁸.

Within the margins of the rainbow myth of the multicultural hospitality that "white" Mogadishu represents (Fazel), the "Black European", as defined by Gilroy, can start to trade places with the "postcolo-

⁵⁵ Huggan, summarising the different meanings of colonialism, also mentions reverse colonialism, which might be considered as taking place when traditional (i.e. western European) processes of colonization are inverted.

⁵⁶ K.M. ADEN, *Fra-intendimenti*, cit., p. 25.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

nial immigrant”⁵⁹. Kaha, in her quality as cultural mediator⁶⁰, contributed to Cristina Morini’s volume on the new forces of domestic labour in Italy, entitled *La serva serve* (The servant serves). In “I sogni delle extrasignore e le loro padrone” (The dreams of the “extraladies” and their female bosses), she comments – again with a pun – on the testimonies of “extra-communitarian” female workers, arguing that the “extra” not only signals the negation of many rights, but that it also, and foremost, implies the absence of a community to identify with and to be recognised by as persons in all their dimensions⁶¹. The “extra” can, however, also be understood positively, namely when it offers the opportunity to create an identity, not so much in opposition to the dominant culture but in accordance with one’s own, personal preferences. Here she quotes one of the witnesses’ testimonies in the volume, by Zahra Abdulle from Somalia: «Io non voglio essere diversa da come sono, mi piace proprio essere così!» (I don’t want to be different from who I am, I am happy just like this!)⁶².

Zahra’s story has many similarities with Kaha’s fictional self-portraits in *Fra-intendimenti*, the only difference being that Zahra is a victim of postcolonial capitalist exploitation, and Kaha an example of intercultural emancipation. In other words, Zahra’s story corresponds to the stigma of the “postcolonial immigrant”: Kaha’s to the ideal of the “Black European” in the making. Another negative, or at least ambivalent, example of exploitation and emancipation is the last story of the *Fra-intendimenti* collection, entitled “Nadia”. The main character is a young Somali domestic worker who gained her Italian residence permit thanks to an act of betrayal, linked to the Somali civil war, and who frequently lies to her employer in order to go and visit her Somali friends. Her double-faced behaviour, on the one hand, and her need to belong to a community based on friendship and trust, on the other, show how “affective citizenship” should be achieved with-

⁵⁹ G. HUGGAN, *Perspectives on postcolonial Europe*, cit., p. 248.

⁶⁰ Benvenuti in *Il romanzo neostorico*, (p. 100) observes how “migrant” literature is commonly branded as a place for intercultural mediation. In Kaha’s case her work in the field of cultural mediation is mentioned in the blurb.

⁶¹ K.M. ADEN, *I sogni delle extrasignore e le loro padrone*, in C. MORINI, *La serva serve. Le nuove forze del lavoro domestico*, DeriveApprodi, Roma 2001, p. 31 («Ma il rapporto che si ha con le ‘extra’ è intrinsecamente un rapporto negato»); 27-28 («È soprattutto la mancanza di una comunità in cui poter essere riconosciuti come persone in tutte le dimensioni»).

⁶² K.M. ADEN, *I sogni delle extrasignore e le loro padrone*, cit., p. 32.

out the denial of a postcolonial citizenship (Mezzadra), and as the result of integrative knowledge.

Nadia is the name she chose in place of her real name (Nadifa), on her arrival in Italy, in order to be in some way "homogeneous" with the faces that interrogate her identity⁶³. This name change could be seen as an example of the "traduttore-traditore" paradigm, or what Polezzi calls the «culture-as(-translatable)-text fallacy», in which the original and the translation are «given, self-contained and possibly interchangeable sets of data, where one can be transposed into the terms of the other, and thereby substituted»⁶⁴. The challenge, however, to which Kaha's translational stories invite us is to conceive of multiple belongings in between nations, with narratives that «are not mutually exclusive but may well co-exist», and to finally «abandon the textual metaphor [...] and reflect on the fact that what we are talking about are cultures as embodied in living practices, in people and the communities they form, in individuals with their own subjectivities, and in the way all these dimensions overlap and intersect»⁶⁵.

Somali cultural identity in the diaspora can only be realised through the act of performance, which becomes evident in the documentary, when Kaha wears a traditional dress; this travesty makes her conscious of the gaze of the other who films her, creating at the same time an ironic distance between herself and her tradition. In this particular scene she expresses the hybrid position of a Somali-Italian mediator-translator-writer. As Kaha herself observes, in an interview with *Flash Giovani*: «Sto nella tradizione somala, anche se contemporaneamente ne sono fuori, dato che ho scritto i racconti in italiano» (I stand within the Somali tradition, even if at the same time I stand outside of it, because I write my stories in Italian). She adds that, by using Italian, though with a narrative style close to the Somali oral tradition, she escapes from those essentialist schemes that wish to divide her identity in two; writing thus becomes her stance of freedom⁶⁶. What is more, her freedom of expression also emphasizes the performative nature of her writing as a cultural practice. In fact, Brioni's analysis of Somali Italian literature through intercultural translation

⁶³ K.M. ADEN, *Fra-intendimenti*, cit., p. 135.

⁶⁴ L. POLEZZI, *Disrupting Europe*, cit.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ F. MIGLIOLI, *Intervista a Kaha Mohamed Aden*, flashgiovani.it (12 November 2010), <http://www.flashgiovani.it/libri/approfondimenti/pagina/17/585/>.

highlights the fact that migrant authors like Kaha «want not only to show that they are able to speak, but actually to demonstrate through linguistic inventiveness and colloquialisms that they are active within Italian society»⁶⁷.

In another interview, Kaha stated that a new future for Somalia and its citizens across the world depends on the incentive of a vital commerce, a sound legal system and credible institutions to support it.⁶⁸ At this point, with the help of Mezzadra, a connection can be made between the paradigms of capitalism and translation, in order to establish the political impact of Kaha's texts in the terms of what has been called a translational, or relational, "affective citizenship". The example of "Nadia", the Somali domestic worker who translates her name in the dominant language/culture for strategic purposes, can be analyzed in the terms of capital as translation. Mezzadra shows how capital fosters "homolingual" translation, addressing the multiplicity of languages «according to the imperative of making themselves conform to the language of value»⁶⁹. In this perspective Kaha's texts, being part of the capitalist mode of production of subjectivity, produce value on the level of "immaterial" goods, "such as culture, linguistic and symbolic structures, knowledge and imaginaries". However, this immaterial subjectivity can refuse to subordinate itself to the norm of abstract labour when it is conceived as «living labor in transition», or as an «ongoing process of translation». When the concepts of freedom and equality are conceived of as «"living in transition" and therefore in translation», translation can become the language of a «subject in transit» who belongs to a «non aggregate community of foreigners», and who can challenge, with its «heterolingual address», the «commensurable communities as conditions of the "homolingual address" and its transparent ideal of translation»⁷⁰. The result of this "heterolingual" translation, according to Mezzadra, is «that a new commonality is produced precisely while difference is produced out of incommensurability».

⁶⁷ S. BRIONI, *The Somali Within*, cit., p. 45.

⁶⁸ SIL - Società delle Letterate, "Lo stupore della parola nuova. Intervista a Kaha Mohamed Aden," *Società italiana delle letterate* (January 2013), <http://www.societadelleletterate.it/2013/01/intervista-a-kaha-mohamed-aden/>.

⁶⁹ S. MEZZADRA, *Living in Transition. Toward a Heterolingual Theory of the Multitude*, «Transversal», 6, 2007, pp. 46-61.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

To conclude, the relational, translational and capitalist approach to Kaha’s cultural practices has shown that their ambivalence at the level of language, collective expression and politics is essential for the formulation of a convivial, mobile, open and living conception of post-colonial citizenship. If the “Black European” envisioned by Gilroy is to assume another colour, in Kaha’s imaginary this is undoubtedly verde-speranza-pisello.

Writing as a ways of healing

Carla Macoggi's novels

TERESA SOLIS¹

At the very beginning of the 1990's Italian literature experienced the birth of migrant writers' texts. The first wave, labelled by critics as *exotic*, was followed by a second one called *carsic*. because of the decreasing interest of important publishers in these texts which thus continued to circulate in an underground way, like the rivers flowing in the Italian region of Carso². Then, a third phase started, which Ugo Fracassa has termed *selective re-emergence*, meaning a will to republish some selected authors. Several studies have been conducted on the various dimensions of this literary production³; I will focus on the significant presence of writers originating from the Horn of Africa, revealing a special link to Italy because of its former colonial presence there⁴.

Since the 1970s, the Horn of Africa has been one of the most troubled regions in the world. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the region was ruled by an Italian colonial regime and since their independence, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia – three of the four countries of the region along with Djibouti – have experienced permanent

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² A. GNISCI, *Creolizzare l'Europa*, Meltemi, Roma 2009; U. FRACASSA, *Patria e lettere. Per una critica della letteratura postcoloniale e migrante in Italia*, Perrone, Roma 2012.

³ D. COMBERIATI, *Scrivere nella lingua dell'altro. La letteratura degli immigrati in Italia 1989-2007*, Peter Lang, Bruxelles 2010; *Certi confini. Sulla letteratura italiana dell'immigrazione*, ed. by L. Quaquarelli, Morellini, Milano 2010. Concerning Gender features: C. BARBARULLI, *Scrittrici migranti. La lingua, il caos, una stella*, ETS, Pisa 2010; S. CONTARINI, *Narrazioni, migrazioni, genere*, in *Certi confini*, cit., pp. 119-159; S. CONTARINI, *Letteratura migrante femminile, dalla scrittura di sé alla riscrittura del mondo*, in *Finzione, cronaca, realtà. Scambi, intrecci e prospettive nella narrativa italiana contemporanea*, ed. by H. Serkowska, Transeuropa, Massa 2011, pp. 369-380.

⁴ D. COMBERIATI, *La quarta sponda*, Caravan, Roma 2009.

political tensions: dictatorships, civil wars⁵ and other conflicts due to national or territorial claims. Even if regional instability is largely due to ethnic or geopolitical tensions, contemporary historiography partly attributes the origins of these conflicts to colonial domination and the decolonization process⁶.

As Italian colonialism is «still a disavowed question in Italian history»⁷, it is important to notice that it emerges frequently in authors from the Horn of Africa writing in Italian, introducing original and interesting issues concerning Italian postcolonial literature and its characteristics⁸. In this chapter, I will examine the narrative output of Carla Macoggi, an Italo-Ethiopian writer representing a remarkable example of interaction between literature, contemporary history and the author's personal life.

In the preface to her second novel, Professor Fulvio Pezzarossa points out two interesting issues. First, he finds an analogy between Macoggi's and Louise De Salvo's texts, defined as «capolavori mnesici»⁹. If «mnèstico» ou «mnèsico» refers to memory in general, this

⁵ Two of these countries experienced strong dictatorships established after a military coup. In Somalia General Mohamed Siad Barre ruled the country from 1969 to 1991. In Ethiopia the *Derg*, the military junta led by Ethiopian Colonel Mengistu Hailé Mariam after the overthrow of the Negus Negest Hailé Selassié I in 1974, ruled the country with a heavy hand until 1987. Moreover, these three countries enter in conflict with one another at different moments of their histories. At the end of Italian colonization, the United Nations decided to establish a federation made up of Eritrea and Ethiopia. Even if the federation should have been temporary, Ethiopia did not respect agreements and annexed Eritrea in 1962. Eritrea represented indeed a direct access to the Red Sea for Ethiopia. In 1961 a war for independence was declared, involving Eritrea and Ethiopia and did not end until 1991. Ethiopia fought Somalia from 1963 to 1964, and again in 1978. War occurred after the Somalian invasion of Ogaden, an Ethiopian region predominantly inhabited by Somalis. A large number of conflicts succeeded in Ethiopia between 1974, the beginning of Derg's government, and 1991, when the Democratic Revolutionary Front of Ethiopian People took power.

⁶ M. GUGLIELMO, *La Somalie n'existe plus*, interview. Questioned about Somali independence after Italian Administration between 1949 and 1960, he claims «[...] this kind of independence [the Somali one] managed by external authorities has been an important element for destabilization, both at a nation and at a regional level». Also see A.M. MORONE in his article *Politica e istruzione nella Somalia sotto tutela italiana* (2011) deals with connections between former colonisation and the contemporary instability of the region.

⁷ C. CLÒ, *Africans Queens and Italian History: the Cultural Politics of Memory and Resistance in Teatro della Albe's Lunga Vita and Gabriella Ghermandi's Regina di fiori e di perle*, «Research in African Literatures», 4, 2010, pp. 26-42.

⁸ S. PONZANESI, *Figlie dell'Impero e letteratura meticcica*, «Quaderni del '900», 4, 2004, pp. 25-34.

⁹ F. PEZZAROSSA, *Prefazione*, in C. MACOGGI, *La nemesi della rossa*, Sensibili alle foglie, Roma 2013, p. 9.

term is frequently used in medical language indicating a disturbance affecting memory. How important is memory in Macoggi's works? How can writing be «a way of healing»¹⁰, play a therapeutic role both individually and collectively? A second issue raised by Pezzarossa concerns the challenge represented by Macoggi's writing regarding the possibility of defining postcolonial writing in some kind of definitive manner.

I will begin by introducing the author and two novels she wrote; then I will give some elements about *métissage* and *nemesis* in order to understand some aspects of Macoggi's poetics and finally I will comment on the therapeutic role played by writing and memory.

Carla Macoggi was born in Ethiopia in 1965, but she left her country at a very young age. She went to live in Bologna, where she grew up and studied in law school. She died in 2013. After publishing short novels in collective books¹¹, she published her first long novel in 2011 under the title *Kkweya. Storia di una bimba meticcica*¹² and in 2012 her second one, *La nemesi della rossa*¹³. Both texts reflect different stages of Macoggi's literary production. In fact, they can be read as a one novel, as the main character (whose name is Fiorella) is the same and they both deals with recent migrations and the Italian presence in the Horn of Africa before these countries became independent.

Carla Macoggi wrote in Italian and she is one of the leading literary figures of Italian Postcolonialism. However, her output shares some specific elements. As Fulvio Pezzarossa points out in his preface to *La nemesi della rossa*, Macoggi's narratives question the possibility of expressing a «definition of postcolonial literature established once and for all»¹⁴. Indeed, even if Macoggi's novels present some aspects that can be associated with a postcolonial approach, her narratives introduce new elements. First of all, she shows the direct impact on human questions of identity produced by an unequal system of power and relationships, such as the one introduced by colonialism. She thus explores the process of colonial *forma mentis* in action. Furthermore,

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹¹ C. MACOGGI, *A Tahaitu piaceva il Filowha*, in *Roma d'Abissinia*, ed. by D. Comberia-ti, Nerosubianco, Cuneo 2010, pp. 41-48. The novel was published using the pseudonym Amete G. Di Liberio: *Enea*, «Nigrizia», 10, 2010, pp. 21-23.

¹² C. MACOGGI, *Kkweya. Storia di una bimba meticcica*, Sensibili alle foglie, Roma 2011.

¹³ EAD., *La nemesi della rossa*, Sensibili alle foglie, Roma 2013.

¹⁴ F. PEZZAROSSA, *Prefazione*, cit., p. 12.

she points out that this kind of *forma mentis* did not stop with the end of colonialism, continuing not only in colonized countries but also in postcolonial ones. Anthropologist Paola Tabet has already underlined this point in the middle of the 1990's concerning Italy's reaction to waves of immigration. Finally, Macoggi's interest continues to focus on the psychological consequences produced by colonialism in the way it shapes people's perception of themselves.

Macoggi's first novel, *Kkweya. Storia di una bimba meticcica* is a re-edition of a text first published in 2004 under the title *La via per il paradiso*¹⁵. It tells the story of a young half-blood (*meticcica*) girl named Fiorella, but nicknamed by her mother Kkweya. Kkweya in Amharic means redness, a colour used to indicate half-blood children. Indeed, Fiorella's mother is Ethiopian and her father is a former colonel of the Italian army in the Horn of Africa. The narrative unfolds in Ethiopia during the 70's. At that time, the country is still undergoing revolutionary riots due to the heritage of colonial segregation and its system of injustice. Fiorella tells her own story, which can be divided in two parts: in the first one, Fiorella is a little child living peacefully with her mother and her mother's family; in the second, Fiorella's mother entrusts Fiorella to Romana, an Italian woman running a boarding house in Addis Abeba. The boarding house Romana owns is the place where Fiorella's father lived until his death. The reason why her mother makes this choice is hard to discover and it is not clearly explained in the text. It is possible that the growing of political tensions troubles her; she wants her daughter to leave the country and live elsewhere, in a place she can study and live in peace. From that moment on, she will never see her daughter again and, under the law of the colonial regime, she will not have any rights over her¹⁶. Romana ill-treats Fiorella and denies her everything: she prevents her from having any contact with her family and her schoolmates, from speaking her mother tongue, from dressing properly and developing her self-esteem. So Fiorella experiences a deep sense of dividedness. She has to deal with the impossibility of talking about her culture and her family, from whom she has been separated when she was a child. The

¹⁵ For a critical approach to this first edition see C. MENGOZZI, E. PIZZINAT, *Mito infranto. Il miraggio italiano e la prospettiva coloniale nel romanzo di una scrittrice etiopica*, «Zapruder. Storie in movimento», 23, 2010, pp. 116-123.

¹⁶ S. PONZANESI, *The Color of Love. Sexual relation: Madamismo and Interracial Relationships in the Italian Colonies*, «Research in African Literatures», 43, 2012, pp. 155-172.

first novel ends with the image of Fiorella with Romana on a plane flying to Italy. Fiorella is worried about her future, worried about the possibility of never seeing her mother again.

In her second novel, *La nemesi della rossa*, Fiorella is in Italy, living in Bologna. Almost abandoned by Romana who does not want to take care of her, Fiorella is on her own, without money, and forced to move from place to place without finding anywhere to stay, any person able to «become a family»¹⁷ for her. First, Romana asks her brother and his family to take care of Fiorella; then she leaves Fiorella with nuns who find her a family to stay with for a while. Because of the reference to redness (*la rossa*), the title of the second novel stands as reminder of the first. This second novel raises important issues. I will focus here on the notion of nemesis, whose importance is central both for Fiorella's story and also the world of Carla Macoggi. Indeed, Macoggi's life and her character Fiorella present several common points of interest.

In order to analyze and understand the therapeutic role played by writing in Macoggi's works, it is first necessary to explain the roles *métissage* and *nemesis* play in her texts. Even if her two novels should be read as one, the main character goes through an important shift from *métissage* as an uncomfortable condition (as it is described in the first novel) to *métissage* as a necessary stage of the redemption process.

Introduced during the period of the Spanish colonization of South America, the word *métissage* indicated children born from the union of men and women belonging to different races, and thus considered as not having the same value and the same right to cultural intervention. Since that time, *métissage* has been the fear of colonialisms. Italian colonialism is no exception. If initially the reasons for building an Italian empire seemed to be based on a civilizing mission, the aims of the colonial project soon became to subjugate and exploit the so-called inferior races. Official documents provide many examples of this attitude, such as the *Manifesto della razza*, an article published in *La difesa della razza*, a newspaper favourable to Mussolini's government. The *Manifesto* set out the fascist vision concerning racial hierarchy and classification. On several occasions, it defined *métissage* as a crime against God, against life and humanity; it was compared to

¹⁷ F. PEZZAROSSA, *Prefazione*, cit., p. 8.

murder with the difference that it did not destroy individuals but it contaminated the whole race. In the second half of the 1930's, unions between an Italian man and an indigenous woman, regarded as a member of an inferior race, were considered crimes. Eugenic theories supported by anthropologists and legislators of the time forbade mixed unions, for fear of the devastating effects generated by psychological and physical heritage mainly on the mothers' side. In 1937, law 880 was passed in order to regulate unions between Italian men and African women: *madamato* was a sort of temporary live-in partnership and it prohibited Italian men from giving their family name to children born to those unions¹⁸.

Recently, the term *métissage* has been rehabilitated, expressing plural identities. Gloria Anzaldúa¹⁹ encourages facing identity conflicts and contradictions with such terms in order to produce new forms of consciousness and new discourses. The concept of *métissage* is thus relevant both for Colonial period and Postcolonial one. As Ponzanesi pointed out quoting Lionnet²⁰, it expresses social, cultural, sexual, linguistic and historical crossings.

Nevertheless, some scholars have expressed their skepticism, such as Jean-Loup Amselle for whom *métissage* is a thorny concept because it always refers to an idea of humanity constituted by pure entities implying the existence of inferior cultures²¹. Indeed, even if for Anzaldúa it is a powerful link between cultures²², Macoggi's first novel shows the pain of standing between two cultures related to each other but of unequal status. Furthermore, her novel describes a process of awareness Fiorella, which is characterized by experiences of suffering and violence.

The second novel includes a possibility of redemption for Fiorella. In ancient Greek mythology, Némésis is the goddess of righteous anger and distributive justice. Her name derives from the ancient Greek

¹⁸ G. BARRERA, *Dangerous Liaisons. Colonial Concubinage in Eritrea, 1890-1941*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1997.

¹⁹ G. ANZALDÚA, *Borderlands/La Frontera: the New Mestiza*, Aunt lute books, San Francisco, 1987.

²⁰ S. PONZANESI, *Figlie dell'Impero e letteratura meticcica*, cit.

²¹ J.-L. AMSELLE, *Logiques métisses. Anthropologie de l'identité en Afrique et ailleurs*, Payot, Paris 1990.

²² S. EL MONCEF BIN KHALIFA, *Nomadismes et identités transfrontalières – Anzaldúa avec Nietzsche*, 2010. <http://amerika.revues.org/1122>; DOI: 10.4000/amerika.1122 (Accessed July 14 2016).

verb νέμω in its sense of “distributing”. The figure of Némésis was then transposed in Roman mythology in which the goddess became known as “Invidia”, that is Envy, who represented indignation when confronted with an enemy possessing an unequal advantage. Némésis thus punishes humans succumbing to *hybris*, that is their arrogance in challenging Gods. Nevertheless, Nemesis can also reward those who live modestly and she watches over general harmony of human society. French philosopher André Gorz took up the concept of nemesis introduced by Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich²³. As a social critic of the institutions of contemporary Western culture, Illich aimed at showing their effects on the origin and practice of education, work, economic development and medicine. In his *Medical Nemesis*²⁴, first published in 1975, also known as *Limits to Medicine*, Illich conducted an analysis on contemporary Western medicine: in these studies, nemesis thus symbolizes institutionalization and expropriation systems built up by contemporary societies. Modern individuals find themselves in the same condition as people of the ancient Greece, except for one thing: it is not God’s anger beating down on them, but «a rational and strong world organization»²⁵ and they seem to have no way of escaping from it.

The notion of nemesis also has a figurative meaning. It refers to facts in history that make up for previous injustices and reestablish order after wrongdoing.

We need now to return to Fiorella’s history and explain how the notion of nemesis comes to be intimately associated with her destiny to reestablish order in the aftermath of an unjust regime. Macoggi’s second novel is composed of chapters and the last one’s title is “La nemesi”. In this final chapter, nemesis is seen as a play in one act. In fact, it is a mix of drama and reverie. As was indicated above, this kind of play occupies the last chapter of *La nemesi della rossa*, the previous chapter ends with Fiorella’s hospitalization in mental unit. The play is set in a lawyer’s office. Inside it, we find the lawyer himself and all the characters introduced in both novels: they are all Italian except for Fiorella’s mother, but she remains silent. So does Fiorella, waiting outside the office. The lawyer asks everybody questions,

²³ I refer here to the book written by E. LESOURT, *André Gorz, portrait du philosophe en contrebandier ou l’écologie politique comme reconquête du sujet*, L’Harmattan, Paris 2011.

²⁴ I. ILLICH, *Medical Nemesis*, Calder & Boyars, London 1974.

²⁵ E. LESOURT, *André Gorz*, cit., p. 73.

one after the other: Romana (the owner of the boarding house Lombardia in Addis Abeba), her brother and her sister-in-law (who kept Fiorella with them for a while when she came to Italy from Ethiopia), the Bolognese couple (chosen by the nuns to take care of Fiorella), the social worker in charge of her and two nuns of the convent where Fiorella also lived. He asks them questions in order to point out the nature of their actions. His aim is to show their complete lack of interest and love for Fiorella. All the persons questioned try to show how good their intentions were, but their declarations prove they just intended to draw benefits from Fiorella's isolated condition. Romana forced her to work in her boarding house without pay and declared Fiorella's mother was dead; the nuns, the social worker and the Bolognese couple stole her money. The problem is that all these characters had acted the part of Fiorella's parents and had a deep impact on her own emerging sense of self and upon her subsequent development.

If we consider the Greek meaning of the myth of nemesis, Kkweya's nemesis refers to the intervention of justice, significantly represented by a lawyer, giving everybody what they deserve as a consequence of their behaviour towards her. Indeed, Fiorella seems to be the prisoner of a strong system without any possibility of redemption. People around her, who should have looked after her while she was growing up, did not help her in any way and even deceived her. She needs some kind of external intervention to sort everything out.

How can writing become "a way of healing" in Macoggi's literary works and play a therapeutic role both on an individual and a collective level? Both novels she wrote open with a reference to separation. The first page of *Kkweya*, is a poem dedicated to «children forced to grew up quickly by wars [...] and leave their families»²⁶. The 'incipit' of *La nemesi della rossa* recalls a quotation by the English writer David Urquhart, also recalled by Karl Marx in the sixth chapter of the *Capital*. Urquhart wrote: «Dividing a man means executing him if he deserved a death sentence; it means killing him if he did not»²⁷. Both examples refer to a fragmentation and a violent division imposed by someone else: wars in the first case, an unfair judgement in the second one. Macoggi's examples concern both a separation from a group – the family – and from a part of one's own sense of self.

²⁶ C. MACOGGI, *Kkweya*, cit., p. 7.

²⁷ EAD., *La Nemesi della rossa*, cit., p. 15.

In *Les damnés de la terre*, Franz Fanon retraces his work as a psychiatrist in Algeria in the 1960's. In a chapter dedicated to pathogenic links between mental disorders and war, he considers the case of colonialism and explains: «Because it is a systematic negation of the Other, a frenzied decision to deny any human sign to the Other, the colonialism pushes dominated people to constantly ask themselves: Who are we really?»²⁸. In this passage, Fanon underlines the impact of colonialism on people's mental health and their internal life. For Fanon, the question is generated by the negation of the Other. He adds that colonized people are not just dominated. Colonization inevitably keeps people out of their territory and prevents them from managing their own resources. In that way, their past existence is denied – because colonial power does not recognize any validity to their history – or the possibility of existing in the future.

One of the essential factors for identity group construction is memory, past images that a community preserves and cares for²⁹. The chapter about *nemesis* at the end of Macoggi's second novel is a necessary stage of recomposing memory in the right order. The characters questioned by the lawyer give a wrong vision of Fiorella's history. Their lies influenced Fiorella's identity construction process. By her works Macoggi makes a point of showing that although colonial rules can be abolished once independence is obtained, the *forma mentis*, shaped by and resulting from these rules, persists.

Literary works are influenced by the culture that produced them. However, what is the culture and what are the contexts that Macoggi seeks to interrogate in her works? If it is true that her novels enrich and introduce new elements in the debate on Italian postcolonial issues, her novels mainly depict a psychological split generated by a colonial *forma mentis*. As half-blood child, Fiorella is the symbol of

²⁸ F. FANON, *Les damnés de la terre*, La découverte, Paris 2002, p. 240: «Parce qu'il est une négation systématisée de l'autre, une décision forcenée de refuser à l'autre tout attribut d'humanité, le colonialisme accule le peuple dominé à se poser constamment: Qui suis-je en réalité?».

²⁹ A. CATTUNAR, *Raccontare, commemorare, dimenticare. Memorie di confine tra modernità e nuova Europa*, 2010. <http://www.home.castellodiduinopoesia.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/Cattunar.pdf>. (Accessed July 21 2016); Cattunar also referred to Jedlowsky's theories, in particular to P. JEDLOWSKY, *Memoria, esperienza, modernità. Memorie e società nel XX secolo*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2002.

transgression in a negative sense³⁰. *La nemesi della rossa* refers to a possible redemption of the heroine, who finally finds a fair and reasonable interlocutor.

Through her novels, Macoggi also revealed the impact of colonial mechanisms that persist even after the official end of a colonial Empire. She emphasizes the diachronic permanence of colonial-rooted rules, both in colonized countries and in colonizing ones. Through her two novels and her literary project, Macoggi considers the possibility for a form of self-appropriation, a self formerly shaped by painful events which comes to make itself anew.

Art therapist Stephen Levine claims that illness results from wounds and serves to subjugate imaginative capacity; he also underlines that the etymology of the word “suffering” is «to hold up from underneath»³¹. In this sense, Macoggi’s writing works can be a way of healing. The last reply of the lawyer in her narrative also refers to the therapeutic role played by words: «No offensive arms in my cabinet, no violence, words only. Words are enough and you, you are finally free, you understand? You are free»³².

³⁰ S. LAVIGNE, *La migritude: une errance identitaire et littéraire?*, 2010. http://www.brown.edu/Research/Equinoxes/journal/Issue%2010/eqx10_lavigne.html (Accessed July 14 2016).

³¹ S. LEVINE, *The language of psychology and the Speech of the soul*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London 1992.

³² C. MACOGGI, *La nemesi della rossa*, cit., p. 96: «[...] niente armi offensive nel mio studio, niente violenza, bastano le parole. Bastano le parole, e tu, tu sei finalmente libera, hai capito, sei libera».

Beyond the nation and the clock

Mapping “double threads” of resistance and
solidarity in the work of Claude McKay and
Dinaw Mengestu

EMMA BOND¹

When Nikos Papatakis, charismatic film director and owner of the legendary *La Rose Rouge* nightclub on Paris’s left bank, died in 2011, much was made of his relationships with celebrities and intellectuals during the 1950s such as Jean Genet, Anouk Aimée and Christa Päffgen (whose stage name, Nico, was taken from Papatakis and predated her involvement with the Velvet Underground). But Papatakis’ own life tells an equally captivating story, and is underpinned by a striking interconnection of transnational pathways: born in Addis Ababa in 1918 to a Greek father and Ethiopian mother, he joined Haile Selassie’s troops to fight against the fascist Italian invasion of his country in 1935. After Mussolini’s victory, and subsequent occupation of Abyssinia, Papatakis fled into exile, moving first to Libya, and then to Greece, before arriving penniless in Paris in 1939. But the threads of his anti-colonial resistance and his solidarity with colonized African nations persisted both in his own life story (he left Paris temporarily for New York in protest against France’s war with Algeria), as well as characterizing his film work. In *Les Abysses* (1963), for example, he uses the famous case of the Papin sisters’ double murder of their employer’s wife and daughter to illustrate the dynamic of power between colonizer and colonized in allegorical form. Although more visibly emblematic of a class struggle than a colonial one, *Les Abysses* was nonetheless intended to trace connections between Papatakis’ own experience of colonial conflict in Ethiopia in the 1930s and the Franco-Algerian war that had drawn to a close in the year preceding its release.

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What intrigues me is the double transposition that Papatakis enacts in *Les Abysses*, not only through the metaphorical vision that allows his film to avoid any direct reference to colonialism, but also through the transfer of anti-colonial focus from the Ethiopian context that was so familiar to him, to that of Algeria. Of course, this has a temporal inflection, since his concern at the time was with contemporary injustice, but it also provides an interesting insight into transnational modes of reception and the potential reconfigurations of colonial resistances and solidarities in cultural production. In the present article, I want to use the example of Papatakis' Ethiopian-Algerian transposition of resistance and solidarity to explore how the knowledge of one site of historical conflict might spin outward to form a multidirectional web of reference across different cultural circles and artistic genres². I will explore the mechanics of this multidirectional fashioning through the lens of American fiction, particularly in the work of Jamaican born writer and poet Claude McKay, active in Harlem in the 1920s and 30s, and the contemporary Ethiopian-American writer, Dinaw Mengestu, whose first novel was published in 2007. Two separate layers of historical conflict in Ethiopia are significant here: the Italian Fascist occupation (Second Italo-Ethiopian war) in the mid-1930s, and the reign of the Derg (Provisional Military Government of Socialist Ethiopia) between 1974-1987. In the works analysed here, both conflicts intertwine with the budding civil rights movement in the United States, as well as with revolutions and resistances in other African countries and beyond (Cuba, Argentina, China), to form a series of compelling narrative entanglements.

My interest is not so much in unpacking why Ethiopia in particular functions in such a powerful emblematic way, since the historical and cultural reasons behind this are well known. Ethiopia has always held particular transnational value for diasporic African communities abroad, thanks primarily to the movement of Ethiopianism, which takes Ethiopia to be the «ancient lamp of Africa»³, and emphasizes the ancient roots of the Christian religion there⁴. Ethiopia's rich and com-

² My use of the "multidirectional" label here is in reference to M. ROTHBERG, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2009.

³ C. MCKAY, *Amiable with Big Teeth. A Novel of the Love Affair Between the Communists and the Poor Black Sheep of Harlem*, Penguin, New York 2017, p. 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

plex history and civilization served as inspiration to movements such as pan-Africanism and the work of Marcus Garvey, which sought to bolster a common sense of destiny and identification between African peoples worldwide. Indeed, the editors of *Amiable with Big Teeth* cite eminent historian John Hope Franklin to explain how the very word “Ethiopia” came to seem “confluent” with the notion of Africa: it «became a most ancient point of reference – a term signifying historicity and racial dignity»⁵. In particular, the 1896 defeat of invading Italian troops at Adwa served to further elevate the mythic status of Ethiopia abroad, and support for Ethiopianism peaked in the 1930s, prior to and during the second Italian invasion (the time of narrative action in *Amiable with Big Teeth*). Moving beyond these concrete cultural reasons, I want to explore how the representation of different layers of conflict and resistance in Ethiopia and of the resulting networks of solidarity abroad functions in texts by both McKay and Mengestu in order to make wider statements about possible narrative mappings of transnational time and space. I will conclude, with Wai-chee Dimock, that such mappings hold significant justifications in support of recasting American fiction beyond the confines of the nation and the clock⁶.

Claude McKay is famous for his self-styled nomadism – born in Jamaica in 1889, he moved to the United States in 1912 and his interest in black diasporas and communities saw him go on to spend time in Marseilles, Morocco, Spain and Moscow. His work unpicks and lays bare the tensions between black nationalism and communist internationalism: conflicts that he reframes through multiple ideological lenses. McKay uses the widespread African American support for the Ethiopian resistance to Italian Fascist occupation as the backdrop to his posthumous Harlem novel *Amiable with Big Teeth*. Written in the 1940s, just prior to McKay’s death, the novel was only discovered by researcher Jean-Christophe Cloutier in 2009, and published in 2017. In the narrative, McKay is primarily interested in the global dimen-

⁵ J.-C. CLOUTIER, B.H. EDWARDS, *Introduction*, in C. MCKAY, *Amiable with Big Teeth*, cit., p. xv.

⁶ See W. DIMOCK, *Through other continents: American literature across deep time*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2006, p. 2. Dimock uses the image of the “clock” and the “nation” here to signify modern modes of standardizing, unifying and “dis-embedding” time, «removing it from local contexts, local irregularities». Her project, instead, aims to trace a «nonstandard space and time» of (American) literature that exceeds borders and forges new chronological connections (p. 2; p. 4).

sions of the Italo-Ethiopian war, and how it spoke to contemporary issues facing people of African descent worldwide (for example also in Haiti, and Liberia), thus encouraging «solidarity-building across racial identities and national borders»⁷.

The Italian invasion of Ethiopia [...] was arguably the single event in the period that most powerfully inflamed the imagination of blacks throughout the world, as an attack on the very principle of black sovereignty at a time when the great majority of peoples of the African diaspora lived under colonial domination⁸.

Dinaw Mengestu's life story similarly spans multiple continents: born in Addis Ababa in 1978, he and his family left in 1980 and he grew up in Illinois. He lived for many years in Paris, and is now resident in New York. In an interview, he refers to the narrator of his second novel in terms that almost perfectly reflect and map out his own relationship with memory and the past: «The narrator is having a real conversation with history that allows him to reform it and reshape it. It keeps the past from being a static, sealed-off event»⁹. Mengestu casts the focus of his fiction ever further outward from the central event of the Ethiopian revolution of the 1970s – his first novel, *Children of the Revolution* depicts the American afterlife of an Ethiopian refugee in Washington, which is narrated alongside the stories of migrants from other African nations such as the Congo and Kenya¹⁰. His second, *How to read the air*, is the partial reconstruction of the narrator's parents' move from Ethiopia to America by a troubled second generation migrant from the mid-west. And his third, most recent work – *All our names* – transposes the scene of revolution and resistance from Ethiopia to Uganda, juxtaposed with the interpersonal tensions experienced by a mixed race couple in the United States¹¹.

⁷ J. WILSON, *A Forgotten Novel Reveals a Forgotten Harlem*, «The Atlantic», 9 March 2017. Web.

⁸ J.-C. CLOUTIER, B.H. EDWARDS, *Introduction*, in C. MCKAY, *Amiable with Big Teeth*, cit., p. xv

⁹ A. SHULOCK, *The Rumpus Interview with Dinaw Mengestu*, «The Rumpus», 19 October 2010. Web.

¹⁰ D. MENGESTU, *Children of the Revolution*, Vintage, London 2008. The novel was first published in the United States as *All the beautiful things that heaven bears* (Riverhead Books, New York 2007), the title bearing reference to a citation from Dante's *Inferno* (see D. MENGESTU, *Children of the Revolution*, cit., p. 99).

¹¹ D. MENGESTU, *How to read the air*, Vintage, London 2012; *All our names*, Sceptre, London 2014.

In the case of both authors, the networks of transnational solidarity and memorialization embodied within responses to Ethiopian resistances are emblematic of Wai-chee Dimock's concept of "deep time" and cast the work of Mengestu and McKay as part of the «complex tangle of relations» that she sees as characteristic of American literature, and that take it beyond the confines of the nation, both in geographical and cultural terms.

Rather than being a discrete entity, (American literature) is better seen as a criss-crossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures. These are input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment – connective tissues binding America to the rest of the world¹².

This double threading enacts processes of thickening, lengthening, and *deepening* time until it becomes a «set of longitudinal frames, at once projective and recessional, with input going both ways, and binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations, a densely interactive frame»¹³. In the novels analyzed here, networks of resistance and solidarity function through these deep relationalities of time and space: relationalities that allow them to problematize narrow notions of national belongings and affective alignments, and in turn characterize them as being particularly emblematic works of American fiction.

Dimock's interactive framework of relations, as stated above, functions on a micro-scale within the narrative of *Amiable with Big Teeth*, in which McKay weaves the complexities of rival groups in Harlem and their political tensions through the various active drives for fundraising to aid the Ethiopian resistance. The "input channel" of inspiration here is the arrival in Harlem of Ethiopian emissaries and (fake, so it turns out) figures of royalty – models of resistance staged and offered up to their starstruck African American brethren. Such input is felt as a force of nature, an inspiration: «The tides of Italy's war in Ethiopia had swept up out of Africa and across the Atlantic to beat against the shores of America and strangely to agitate the unheroic existence of Aframericans»¹⁴. Yet tensions arise between the rival

¹² W. DIMOCK, *Through other continents*, cit. p. 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, cit., pp. 3-4.

¹⁴ C. MCKAY, *Amiable with Big Teeth*, cit., p. 27.

groups that sprout up in the city to assist the Ethiopian cause, exposing faultlines of race, politics and religion, and the competing expressions of resistance and solidarity become increasingly fraught and unproductive throughout the narrative. Here I will focus on the thirteenth chapter of the novel, which is set in the streets outside the *Merry-Go-Round* nightclub during anti-Italian protests in New York – the descriptions of which are «remarkably reminiscent of actual events, such as the demonstration that erupted in violence in July 1936 in front of the Bella restaurant at 329 Lenox Avenue between 126th and 127th Streets»¹⁵. The narrative asks us to unpick the globally transferable label of “fascism” and its easy elision with Italian nationhood *tout court* at the time – with some fundraising groups arguing that:

The Aframericans should not be encouraged to manifest animus against the Italian people, for it was the Fascists who were warring against Ethiopians and not the Italian people. But the Sufi broadside was using the Fascist war to attack the Italians in Harlem and incite the Aframericans to boycott Italian businesses¹⁶.

But this resistance to the use of “Italian” in the campaign banners is ultimately unsuccessful, since:

“Fascist” to them was like an unfamiliar word that one had to look up in the dictionary and even then not quite grasping its clear meaning. But “Italian” was as real and obvious as spaghetti and tomato sauce and as full of meaning for Aframericans as it was fraught with danger for the Ethiopians¹⁷.

The over-facile, metonymic alignment of an immigrant community with cultural commonplaces takes concrete form in the image of spaghetti and tomato sauce employed here. As a consequence, the demonstration takes place with signs that decry *Italian* atrocities and

¹⁵ J.-C. CLOUTIER, B.H. EDWARDS, *Introduction*, in C. MCKAY, *Amiable with Big Teeth*, cit., p. xiii.

¹⁶ C. MCKAY, *Amiable with Big Teeth*, cit., p. 139. This issue is anticipated in chapter six, when Dorsey Flagg is repeatedly called a Fascist in rival Communist circles because he voices his support of Trotsky – Fascism here seems to denote any kind of presumed betrayal of the Soviet cause. See *Ibid.*, p. 52. This becomes quasi-parodic when Lij Alamaya is forced to publically comment on the accusations of Flagg’s “fascism”: «I need not say that I am anti-Fascist – all Ethiopia is anti-Fascist, for we are fighting against Fascist Italy. I came to America to enlist your support in the fight against the Fascists. [...] There are no Fascists among the Ethiopians. And I don’t believe that there are any Fascists among the Aframericans». *Ibid.*, p. 96.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

violence, with no mention of fascist specificities within the Italian case, or any space for potential resistances either within Italy, or in the sizeable Italian American community that would witness the protests. The slogans on the banners used in the demonstrations are reproduced individually in the novel, as we read:

ITALIANS EXTERMINATING ETHIOPIANS IN AFRICA; ITALIANS DEBAUCHING AFRERICANS IN HARLEM; ITALIANS DECLARE AFRICANS ARE SAVAGES UNFIT TO LIVE; ITALIANS SAY THERE SHALL BE NO ACTIVE AFRICAN STATE; ITALIANS SPRAY ETHIOPIANS WITH POISON GAS; ITALIANS BOMBING ETHIOPIAN WOMEN AND CHILDREN; AFRO-AMERICANS – HELP YOUR ETHIOPIAN BROTHERS; PEOPLE OF HARLEM – DON’T PATRONIZE ITALIAN BUSINESS 18.

We witness how the solidarity expressed here towards the Ethiopian resistance is collapsed into an over-zealous perception of multiple Italian aggressions: toward Ethiopians, Africans, and African Americans. This then manifests in a hostility towards Italian Americans in Harlem that is as concrete (economically), as the figuration of the community through a metonymic image of stereotypical food consumption is literal. The misplaced nature of the hostility towards the Italian American community is revealed through a lone voice of resistance to this narrative: an Italian American worker who stands up to voice his own solidarity with Ethiopia and the support shown by the Aframerican community, and yet is mercilessly mocked and riled by the crowd.

The man was an Italian of average height and appeared to be an ordinary workingman. Said he: “My friends, I wanta you see yourself one Italian no wanta war against Etiopia and there are a lotta more like me. Mussolini and Fascisti notta real Italy. Mussolini hema big bandit kidnappa our King. But our King no wanta Etiopian Empire and Pope no hate Etiopian people, for all people white and colored in the church.”

“We Italians alla good Americans and we believe in liberty for oda people. Me no like a Fascists. Fascists badder for my country, but America my country now”¹⁹.

Even more significantly, his is the first and only voice in the narrative to be explicitly *accented*, and as he voices his multiples belongings – to Italy, to America, to the Catholic Church (though noticeably

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 143-144.

¹⁹ C. MCKAY, *Amiable with Big Teeth*, cit., p. 150.

not to Mussolini's regime in power) – we can perhaps see his accent as an audible mark of vernacular resistance to simplifying narratives that have hitherto collided the labels of Italian and Fascist. As Dimock states, the kind of «deviation from standard English» that the Italian voice highlights here functions as «one of the arcs of alternate geographies, alternate histories» that make up American culture itself²⁰. Indeed, the speaker insists on his own American-ness, whilst his accent simultaneously persists as a residue or remainder that challenges national homogenizations, resists assimilation, and signals «how newness enters a language or culture»²¹. Such sonic marks of difference are, significantly, figured in contrast with other voice descriptors in the text, such as Ethiopian Lij Alamaya's «quaint English which sounded as if he had learned most of it in school in a foreign country»²². The Italian man's accent is even marked *visually* in the text as a sign of his apartness from the other characters and communities featured therein. For the intrusion of an Italian American voice in the narrative is a sign of an unwelcome resistance to the scriptural authority of the Harlemites, and the accented expression of an uninvited solidarity with their cause. As such, it stretches hitherto linear and causal notions of resistance beyond their temporal and national confines, and might perhaps allow us to point to the potential for new multidirectional pathways of.

Loops of relations between migrant lives in the United States and revolutions abroad abound too in Mengestu's 2007 novel *Children of the Revolution*, which tells the story of three refugee friends, Sepha, Joseph and Kenneth, who are long-term residents in Washington in the 1990s. The title of the work makes reference to the eponymous song by British glam rock band T-Rex from 1972, and speaks to their common framework of relationality: «We all had stories of families we missed and would never see again. We spoke in our broken English of Africa's tyrannies, which had yet to grow tedious. And we had our own stories of death and violence to match»²³. In Sepha's corner

²⁰ W. DIMOCK, *Through other continents*, cit., p. 164.

²¹ M. VALI, *Searching for the Voice of Difference*, «Nafas Art Magazine», April 2015. Web.

²² C. MCKAY, *Amiable with Big Teeth*, cit., p. 8. Similarly in *Children of the Revolution*, Sepha describes his own English accent as having an «exalted Cambridge-touched tone» (p. 208).

²³ D. MENGESTU, *Children of the Revolution*, cit., p. 48.

shop in Logan Circle, a run-down, predominantly black district of D.C., the three meet to drink and talk about Africa, using a map they pin on the wall and use to repeatedly test each others' knowledge of the various coups and revolutions which demarcate, rupture and scar the smooth paper of the represented continent in their minds.

So far we've named more than thirty different coups in Africa. It's become a game with us. Name a dictator and then guess the year and country. We've been playing the game for over a year now. We've expanded our playing field to include failed coups, rebellions, insurrections, guerrilla leaders, and the acronyms of as many rebel groups as we can find – the SPLA, TPLF, LRA, UNITA – anyone who has picked up a gun in the name of revolution. No matter how many we name, there are always more, the names, dates, and years multiplying as fast as we can memorize them so that at times we wonder, half-jokingly, if perhaps we ourselves aren't somewhat responsible²⁴.

Their projective re-evocations of the numerous revolutions and resistances of Africa are subsequently transplanted through their diasporic memory onto American life itself. Time falters and becomes inherently unreliable in such a recessional, forward and backward framework: «An hour had sixty minutes and a minute had sixty seconds and the hour could be broken into halves and quarters and tenths and even fifths, and yet none of these parcels of time could be counted on to hold their weight at these moments»²⁵. The identity and authority of chronology is challenged through such memorial constructs and re-evocations – and as Dimock says: time functions as a continuum that can be cut up and measured in any way, since events resonate in the past and draw it into orbit of the present²⁶.

And just as time can be refashioned into multiple relations in the novel, so there is an awareness that acknowledged units of space can be carved up and redistributed at will.

A history teacher at my northern Virginia community college said once that there had only been three real revolutions in the past two hundred years: the French, Chinese, and Russian. Everything else was merely a rebellion, insurrection, uprising, protest, strike. Tsk. He didn't know how easily an entire society could be made and remade. More than just having garish billboards painted on

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²⁶ W. DIMOCK, *Through other continents*, cit., p. 126.

the sides of buildings and multiple-story statues in city squares, Africa's dictators were busy reshaping their countries to their own liking²⁷.

This functions not only in the multiple African realities that the three friends dwell on, but is also projected by them onto their American present. «There was hardly a single thing in Joseph's life, though, that hadn't become a metaphor for Africa»²⁸. Similarly, as Harrison points out, Sepha's «frequent memories of Ethiopia not only interrupt, but largely mediate his experiences in America»²⁹. This leads him to re-map his home city of Addis Ababa onto Washington, both through physically walking the city streets and by imaginatively superimposing the very spatiality of the former onto the latter:

Its familiarity to Addis, if not always in substance, then at least in form, has always been striking to me. As a city, Addis wasn't much larger. [...] The two cities share a penchant for circular parks and long diagonal roads that meander and wind up in confusion along the edges. Even the late-afternoon light seems to hit D.C. the same way³⁰.

The violence that characterizes his memories means that such re-mappings inevitably turn back to the disarray of revolution, and Sepha's American imaginings start to play out the scenes of terror that marked his final period in Addis.

I picture my store burned to the ground, its contents looted. I imagine a crowd gathered around the charred remains of the building, shaking their heads silently in sympathy, in pity. Cans of Campbell's soup are rolling down the sidewalk and street. The air smells of melted plastic, and no one can do anything [...] ³¹.

Similarly, the Colonial Grill restaurant, where Joseph works, becomes the known as simply the "Colony" in their conversations, aligning the power dynamic of the Washington political elite who dine there with the violence that afflicts previously colonized nations. «It was terrible at the Colony today. Absolutely terrible. The natives went crazy. We ran out of risotto. The women were tearing off their pearls.

²⁷ D. MENGESTU, *Children of the Revolution*, cit., pp. 100-101.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

²⁹ S.K. HARRISON, *Waste Matters. Urban Margins in Contemporary Literature*. London; Routledge, New York 2017, p. 75.

³⁰ D. MENGESTU, *Children of the Revolution*, cit., pp. 173-74.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

The men were spitting in their wine. We almost had to teargas the place»³².

These imaginings of violence find concrete expression in the Logan Circle insurrection that takes place in response to a spate of illegal evictions and processes of gentrification that are affecting Sepha's neighborhood at the time of narrative action, and the community resistance turns against a recently arrived white woman, Judith. In a community association meeting, members rail against an unspecified "them", and it soon becomes apparent that «these people» are the more recently arrived «white people» in the area³³. In fact, Sepha and Judith are both outsiders that have moved into Logan Circle in order to take advantage of the cheap rents or house prices there, and could both conceivably be characterized as members of the problematic «them». But, as Harrison points out, Sepha is «tolerated on the basis of a superficial racial identification»³⁴, whereas Judith is roundly rejected, «implicated in every recrimination»³⁵, and becomes the victim of growing number of acts of physical aggression – bricks are thrown through the window of her car, and her beautifully restored house is destroyed by an arson attack on her house that ultimately drives her and her daughter to leave the neighborhood.

Much as in the over-simplified connection between Italian and fascist in *Amiable with Big Teeth*, the accusations against "them" are also unspecific and spill into parody.

I don't know who used the word "they" first. [...] Once the word entered the meeting, it seemed to trail onto the end of nearly every sentence. [...] I was convinced that if given enough space and time, a conclusion would have been drawn that held "them" responsible not only for the evictions in the neighborhood, but for every slight and injury each person in that room had suffered³⁶.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 188; p. 24.

³⁴ S.K. HARRISON, *Waste Matters*, p. 89. This is evidenced in some startling displays of racism by African American neighbour Mrs. Davis to Sepha – «What do you know about free countries? You didn't even know what that was till you came here last week, and now you're telling me people can live where they like. This isn't like living in a hut, you know. People around here can't just put their houses on their backs and move on». (D. MENGESTU, *Children of the Revolution*, cit., p. 23).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

³⁶ D. MENGESTU, *Children of the Revolution*, cit., pp. 199-200.

In *Children of the Revolution*, though, a parallel sign of lexical difference to that witnessed in *Amiable with Big Teeth* is highlighted in the graphic slip on Mrs. Davis' handwritten signs: «PROTECT OUR NEIGHBORHOOD. NO MORE EVICTIONS»³⁷, and it is significant that Sepha then throws all these misspelt flyers away. Their “accented” message of resistance is thus lost, and – in a similar fashion to the treatment of the anonymous Italian voice of dissent in *Amiable with Big Teeth*, Judith herself is then cast as another figure of unwanted, uninvited solidarity, who is ultimately and forcibly removed from the narrative.

Another female figure who displays a doomed solidarity to those engaged with practices of resistance, Helen, features as one of the two narrating protagonists in *All our names*. A care worker assigned to help the narrator, Isaac, integrate into the small mid-west community he has arrived in as a refugee from Uganda, Helen actively helps him to engage with the sort of re-arranging of narratives, times and spaces that underpins the very project of the novel itself. Mengestu has spoken in interviews about how *All our names* continues to interrogate the ruptures and losses encountered through migration and mobility that characterized his earlier novels, but that it also seeks to explore the unexpected convergences of individual lives and political forces in new ways: «I think part of it is this idea that we tend to think of the stories that happen in Africa as being so radically distinct from our narratives here in America, and I wanted to find ways of making those narratives rub up against one another», he says³⁸. This is a multidirectional project that allows adjacent histories to co-exist and inform one another, rendering both more visible rather than erasing the specificities of either.

The larger ideas of the novel have to do with the way our histories mirror one another. For example, how the post-colonial era in Africa and the post-civil rights era in America grew out of two similar forms of liberation movements, which, although I wouldn't say they were crushed, were disturbed by the events that followed³⁹.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

³⁸ L. NEARY, *From Uganda to the Midwest, All Our Names draws portraits of love*, *National Public Radio*, 8 March 2014. Web.

³⁹ J. PAULICK, *Dinaw Mengestu: “Immigrant is a very political term”*, «DW», 15 September 2014. Web. This ties back into the idea of Mengestu (like Papatakis) drawing on an ‘adjacent’ African history of violent resistance – as is Uganda, in *All our names* – in or-

Isaac himself is originally from Ethiopia, and has left Uganda following the outbreak of civil war there – a state of unrest that he became directly involved with through his friendship with a fellow university student in Kampala (himself called Isaac; it eventually emerges that the protagonist of the novel has assumed Isaac's name in the migration process). From the start of their friendship, the two young men play with notions of truth and fiction in order to create the best narrative to fit their needs: the protagonist refers to them as «both liars and frauds», stating also that «Isaac's main intention was to amuse. Whether or not I believed him didn't matter, as long as I was seduced»⁴⁰. Later in the narrative Helen also engages with flights of invention: when she and Isaac have begun a romantic relationship and experience racial prejudice in the small town of Laurel she re-creates new, more satisfying stories that displace the uncomfortable truth of their situation – «In this story, Isaac and I were still heroes»⁴¹.

Such narrative displacements do not only disturb and re-order the stories that the characters tell themselves and one another, but work to re-fashion space in captivating ways that alter scale and open up new possibilities of geography. When Isaac disappears for a period of time and returns to Laurel, he brings Helen the present of a series of «cheap plastic souvenirs, each individually wrapped in a thin sheet of white paper. There was a palm-sized Statue of Liberty and Empire State Building, along with even smaller replicas of the White House, Lincoln Memorial, and Golden Gate Bridge»⁴². Helen's reaction is to perform a creative re-ordering of the symbolic monuments, playing with juxtapositions and adjacences in ways that illustrate Mengestu's multidirectional project in miniature:

I lined the monuments along the edge of my desk. I wasn't sure how to read them. [...] The farthest I had ever traveled was to St. Louis with my parents. I rearranged the order of the monuments, moving the White House to the center and placing the Golden Gate Bridge right next to it, then trying other combina-

der to illustrate wider mechanisms of revolution that apply to his own more familiar context of Ethiopia. The protagonist of *All our names* reveals that his father was a soldier in the emperor's army when the Italians attacked, thus directly aligning a personal history with his subsequent desire to leave for Uganda and become involved with the resistance there. See Mengestu, *All our names*, p. 107.

⁴⁰ D. MENGESTU, *All our names*, cit., p. 7; p. 9.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 96.

tions: New York and San Francisco; D.C. and New York. I became so absorbed in my made-up geography that I didn't notice David watching me⁴³.

This project of the imaginative re-mapping and re-ordering of space is replicated in other instances in the novel: in Uganda, the protagonist reads *Great Expectations* and in his mind makes London into Kampala, Pip, «a poor African orphan wandering the streets of the capital»⁴⁴. His creative skills are called upon in a more serious mode, when he becomes involved with the resistance movement, and is asked to memorize maps in order to assist in missions. He does so by engaging in a much more complex process of adding personal stories and details to the imagined cityscape: first he imagines himself walking through the streets of the map, then, that he actually lives there.

There was a street where my girlfriend lived, another that I walked down ever Friday afternoon on my way home from work. [...] By the time Isaac came to tell me Joseph was waiting downstairs, I could close my eyes and see not only the map but the faces and the interiors of the lives and homes that I had made up⁴⁵.

The protagonist's awareness of the ability to re-map actual spaces takes on a more sinister twist once it is aligned with the parable story that he recalls his father telling him in his childhood, of a city that would disappear each night once the last inhabitant fell asleep, and had to be dreamed of in its entirety in order to survive. The people of the city eventually grew tired of having to always dream the same spaces, and entrusted the memory and heritage of their city to an unknown, newly arrived young man, who promised them freedom and independence from their burden of responsibility. Then, they were «free to dream of foreign lands, countries they had read about or that had never existed [...] People dreamed of living on the moon and the sun»⁴⁶. As they enjoyed their new freedom, and dreams, by entrusting them to the stranger, the man that they had unwittingly made their king and leader erased a new part of their city one by one. Soon:

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

No one could remember what the city had looked like. It was years since anyone had looked at the city closely – at first because they were free to forget it, and later because they were embarrassed and then too afraid to see what they had let it become. Those who tried to dream of the city again could see only their house or their street as it looked years ago, but that wasn't dreaming, only remembering, and in a world where seeing was power, nostalgia meant nothing⁴⁷.

Reconfigurations of space can therefore lead to memorial erasures if they are disconnected from processes of social solidarity within communities and do not pose any resistance to authoritarian rule as a consequence. This mechanism also illustrates Mengestu's parallel concern with the losses and erasures that occur through processes of migration and transnational movement. In Susan Sontag's words, «resistance has no value in itself. It is the content of the resistance that determines its merit, its moral necessity»⁴⁸. Yet it is in America that the ultimate juxtaposition of elsewhere occurs, and the country comes to encapsulate a global refashioning of its own. As the couple embark on their final journey together, Helen asks Isaac to take the atlas in the car, and choose their route. «He placed it on his lap and began to survey the country. He was delighted when he found a Cairo, an Athens, a Paris, and a Rome in America. [...] “This country”, he said. “What don't you have?”»⁴⁹.

The arrival of migrants into American culture, with their own histories and geographies from elsewhere, thus allows Mengestu to explore the multidirectional force of a creative, diverse community of stories and memories that pull together and apart in various ways. Yet the carefully drawn threads of human connection that his fiction showcases, the displays of both solidarity and resistance, rarely succeed within the narratives themselves. Isaac and Helen part ways in Chicago in *All our names*, and Judith moves away from Sepha's neighborhood in *Children of the Revolution*, as he himself faces eviction from his store and livelihood.

I have shown how authors such as McKay and Mengestu take a complex tangle of memories from elsewhere, creatively reimagine and transpose them onto other contexts, and juxtapose them with analogous features of American life in order to form new, dynamic net-

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁴⁸ S. SONTAG, *Of Courage and Resistance*, «The Nation», April 17th 2003. Web.

⁴⁹ D. MENGESTU, *All our names*, cit., p. 24.

works of solidarity and resistance. In this way, they demonstrate how American literature itself operates beyond the linear confines of the nation and the clock, how it requires input channels from other countries in order to reflect the complexity of its own cultural panorama. In conclusion, I want to cite another contemporary Ethiopian-American writer, Maaza Mengiste, who has also reflected on the impossibility of writing a personal account of post-revolutionary Ethiopia, since she herself left the country at the age of four, in 1978. In order to incorporate the period of the Red Terror in her own fiction work⁵⁰, Mengiste explains how she turns to other revolutionary contexts, including Cuba, Iran, and China, as well as the repressive violence carried out by other political juntas such as Argentina, in order to imagine and recreate a history that is unavailable to her. Speaking about *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, Mengiste states:

I realized, early on, that as much as I was telling a story set in Ethiopia, it's really a story about human beings in conflict. The research that I was doing involved looking at, and talking to, people who had memories of the Cuban revolution. I did a lot of research in the dirty wars in Argentina. I was looking at what happened in the Cultural Revolution in China. I was looking at people who were prison guards and interrogators in Cambodia. All of these things informed this book because I realized that I can write about human beings⁵¹.

It is the longitudinal frames of memory, and complex loops of relations between human beings worldwide that allow for historical contexts and geographical mappings to fracture and be re-modelled in different, nonstandard times and spaces within Mengiste's fiction. As Dimock confirms: «Nonadjacency is the unexpected ground for kinship. Cross-fertilizing takes place when far-flung arcs meet at distant points⁵²». This both illustrates and justifies Dinaw Mengestu's own resistance to calls for him to move beyond describing the African immigrant experience in his fiction:

If I wrote 40 more novels, I will not have done justice to the diversity and range that's possible. All I'm doing is adding small additions to what will be a grow-

⁵⁰ M. MENGISTE, *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, Vintage, London 2011.

⁵¹ A. BADY, *Interview: Maaza Mengiste*, «Post45», 17 October 2014. Web.

⁵² W. DIMOCK, *Through other continents*, cit., p. 145.

ing, much larger, much more diverse sense of what it means to write American literature. Because it is American literature, it's not immigrant literature⁵³.

In this definition of his works, as well as in the fiction writing of Claude McKay and Maaza Mengiste, the wider field of American literature is itself woven of the threads of multidirectional narratives of both resistance and solidarity that originate and persist in multiple locations and offer us new model networks of dynamic cross-fertilization across time and space.

⁵³ A. SHULOCK, *The Rumpus Interview with Dinaw Mengestu*, «The Rumpus», 19 October 2010. Web.

The Transnational Writers of the Somali Diaspora in the Netherlands

LINDE LUIJENBURG¹

Om haar te paaien zei ik vaak dat Italianen en Russen wit waren, maar zij natuurlijk niet. “Een Somaliër is zwart, dat weet ik ook wel”, zei ik een andere keer. “Voor het kleurverschil tussen twee zwarten hebben wij een zee aan woorden, maar wie iets lichter is dan de rest, is al gauw wit. Witter dan wit, of zwarter dan wit kennen we niet”. “Misschien moeten we haar als rood omschrijven”, probeerde Sucaad. “Rood is geen mens”, antwoordde Najaat bits. Vrouwen, kleurtjes... ik zou er nooit iets van begrijpen².

In this quote of the novel *Verloren vader* (Lost Father), author Sayadin Hersi illustrates with a comedic undertone the complexity of the postcolonial context Bille, the protagonist of the book, finds himself in³. While in Somalia, at that time recently liberated from its Italian colonizers, Bille attempts to please a girl by assuring her she is not white. Towards the end of the book he lives in the Netherlands, after having fled away from his country of origin because of the civil war, where he is discriminated for not being white. Commenting on the binary notions of blackness and whiteness, he moreover underlines the arbitrariness of belonging and difference, emphasizing that this depends on such particulars as the shade of one's skin, and the geographical and sociopolitical position one finds her/himself in.

Below, I offer an analysis of the academic and critical context surrounding the problematic notion of migrant literature (“migrantenliteratuur”) used by Dutch publicists and critics to describe writers in the

¹ University of Warwick (UK).

² «In order to please her, I would often tell her that Italians and Russians were white, while she, obviously, was not. “A Somali is black, that I know for sure”, I told her another time. “We have a sea of words to describe the color nuances between two black people, but we often consider white those who are a little bit lighter than the rest. We don't know whiter than white, or blacker than white”. “Maybe we should describe her as red”, Sucaad tried. “No person is red”, Najaat responded snappishly. Women, colors... I would never learn to understand them». All translations in this article are mine, unless stated otherwise.

³ I would like to thank the three authors presented in this article for their cooperation: Sayadin Hersi, Zeinab Jumale and Yasmine Allas.

Dutch language with a cultural background from outside of not simply the Netherlands, but, more specifically, outside of the borders of the “Western World”, thus commenting on similar notions of belonging and difference⁴. Given the context of this volume, my intention was to illustrate this supposition here by focusing on the specific case of literature written in Dutch by authors who were born (and raised) in the Horn of Africa. But I learned that, even though there have been more attempts, merely three authors from the Horn of Africa had been able to publish in the Dutch language with a Dutch publisher, and that these were exclusively Somali people. This is partly explained by the fact that, compared to Ethiopians and Eritreans, many Somalis live(d) in the Netherlands, since it was one of the first countries to welcome Somalian refugees after the beginning of the Somali Civil War in the late 1980s: Between 1989 and 1998, the Netherlands was the second-most common European destination for Somali asylum-seekers, only slightly behind the UK⁵. A second hypothetical reason for this lack of literary diversity might be the reluctance with which Dutch publishers welcome authors with “accents”, which I intend to develop below through an analysis of the Somali-Dutch literature.

A large community of people originating from Somalia and now living in the Netherlands has produced thus far relatively few professional novelists⁶. I underline my usage of the word professional, as the roots of the Somali literary tradition are to be found in oral culture; if one were to take this into account while listing Somali-Dutch authors in the broader interpretation of the word, the list would be endless⁷.

⁴ I put “Western World” in quotation marks, since Western Europe, the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand are often referred to as such. However, this geographical positioning is a matter of perspective. Describing the notion of eurocentrism, for instance, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam argue that, when they refer to European, and Europeans, this includes the United States, Australia, ‘and elsewhere’, since they consider those places “neo-European”. E. SHOCHAT, R. STAM, *Unthinking Eurocentrism. Multiculturalism and the Media*, Routledge, New York 2014, p. 1.

⁵ See I. VAN LIEMPT, *From Dutch Dispersal to Ethnic Enclaves in the UK: The Relationship between Segregation and Integration Examined through the Eyes of Somalis*, «Urban Studies», 1, 2011, pp. 1-14.

⁶ In December 2017, forty thousand people with a Somali background lived in the Netherlands.

⁷ See I.M. LEWIS, *Understanding Somalia and Somaliland: Culture, History, Society*, Columbia University Press, New York 2008. As an illustration of this, I refer to the documentary *Africa is You* (2016), released and produced by me and colleagues Ahmed Magare, Dennis Mulder, and Anna van Winden. It is a portrayal in the shape of a short story cycle of Somali-

Up to date (and this situation has not changed in over five years, see below), there are three writers of Somali origin publishing in Dutch and living in the Netherlands. Two Ethiopians have worked with Dutch publishers, while having written in the English language. My research thus resulted in a focus on authors from the Horn of Africa who published in Dutch with Somali origins: Sayadin Hersi, Yasmine Allas, and Zeinab Jumale.

After discussing the generally accepted division into several categories of migrants in the Netherlands, which results in a similar division surrounding the notion of “migrant literature”, I discuss below the content, and the stylistic and contextual elements of the Dutch diasporic literature from the Horn of Africa, with a focus on the Somali-Dutch authors Hersi, Allas, and Jumale. Including themes such as gender, class, race, and culture allows me to intersectionally place the Somali-Dutch literature in the context of literature written in Dutch, in literary criticism, and in the socio-political developments in the Netherlands. Not only do I state that the term “migrantenliteratuur” is at least unfortunate, if not inapplicable in general, and in the case of the Somali diasporic literature in particular; I conclude below with a problematization of the focal point of this very chapter, since considering the literature of the three Somali authors writing in Dutch as a whole once again potentially confines the writers in question. Moreover, my findings bring me to question whether the Dutch literary context might not be inclusive towards written literature of authors whose voices strongly developed in oral culture. This would impact negatively the development of the Dutch language, and its literary culture.

The situation of migrant and/or diasporic literatures is increasingly «regarded as representative, if not iconic, of postcolonial writing in general»⁸. One could simply argue that this counts for the Netherlands as well, but the specificity of the Dutch context requires an elucidation. According to a subdivision into three categories, suggested by Martijn Arnoldus, Thea Dukes, and Sako Musterd, the Somali-Dutch authors are categorizable in a third type of Dutch “migrant literature”, unlike their Somali colleagues now living and publishing in various

Dutch who now live in Birminham, UK, and the strong and lively presentations of the interviewees attest to a highly developed oral culture. See <https://africaisyou.com>.

⁸ E. BOEHMER, *Postcolonialism*, in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature. Migrant Metaphors*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005, pp. 214-15.

other European nation states⁹. The first category is indeed defined by migrants who came from the former colonies of the Netherlands of Indonesia, Suriname, Aruba, Curacao, Saba, Bonaire, Saint Martin and Saint Eustatius, and arrived in the Netherlands predominantly after the Second World War. Specifying Elleke Boehmer's observation mentioned above, Ulbe Bosma describes this particular group as «post-colonial migrants»¹⁰. A lot of writers have emerged out of this category of authors in various periods: While Indonesians started arriving immediately after the Second World War, Moluccans arrived in the Netherlands from 1951 onwards, Surinamese started moving to the Netherlands halfway the 1970s, and Antilleans migrated to the Netherlands from the 1990s onwards¹¹. Specifically Indo-European novels have a relatively large area of distribution; Esther Captain goes as far as to argue that predominantly in the «realm of literature [...] Indo-Europeanness is used to increase the sales of a product»¹². Since it is estimated that more than 90 percent of these migrants were already Dutch citizens before their arrival in the Netherlands, most of them spoke the Dutch language prior to their arrival¹³. Their familiarity with what one could describe as the common imaginary of “Dutch culture”, or the Dutch cultural archive, further explains the vastly growing amount of novelists emerging out of this category of migrating people. The consideration of this group as a whole, or the framing of particular characters inside of this “group” with the scope to increase sales, certainly calls to mind the notions “postcolonial melancholia”

⁹ M. ARNOLDUS, T. DUKES, S. MUSTERD, *Dispersal policies in the Netherlands*, in *Spreading the 'Burden'? A Review of Policies to Disperse Asylum Seekers and Refugees*, ed. by V. Robinson, R. Andersson, S. Musterd, The Policy Press, Bristol 2003, pp. 25-64.

¹⁰ U. BOSMA, *Post-colonial immigrants and identity formations in the Netherlands*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2012, pp. 7-26.

¹¹ Examples of Indo writers are J.E. Jasper, Noto Soeroto, Tjalie Robinson or Vincent Mahieu, and Alfred Birney. Examples of Surinamese writers are Albert Helman, Hugo Pos, Rudie van Lier, Astrid Roemer, Ellen Ombre, Clark Accord, and Anil Ramdas. Antillian writers include Frank Martinus Arion, Cola Debrot, Sonia Garmers, Elis Juliana, Diana Lebac and Boeli van Leeuwen.

¹² E. CAPTAIN, *Harmless Identities: Representation of Racial Consciousness among Three Generations Indo-Europeans*, in *Dutch Racism*, ed. by P. Essed, I. Hoving, Rodopi, Amsterdam 2014, pp. 53-70 (59).

¹³ U. BOSMA, *Post-colonial immigrants and identity formations in the Netherlands*, cit., p. 7.

and “colonial nostalgia”¹⁴. But let it be clear that I do not intend to disregard the quality of the authors’ products by suggesting that these writers have success as a consequence of a possible projection of a colonial desire – as I argue below, and following the voices of the authors in question, the contrary is more accurate.

From the 1960s onwards, the Dutch government recruited “labor migrants” from Southern Europe, mostly from Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Yugoslavia¹⁵. Whereas few people of this group have stayed in the Netherlands, in the 1970s, mostly Turks and Moroccans moved to the Netherlands as “migrant workers”, and 70 percent of this group became permanent residents. As a consequence, many Dutch writers with Turkish and Moroccan origins emerged, mostly of the second generation, forming the second category of “migrant writers”¹⁶.

The third category, to which the Somali Dutch authors belong, consists of people who asked for political asylum in the Netherlands, coming from many different countries in various periods. This makes this group even more problematic to define¹⁷.

Next to the Somali-Dutch writers, there are two authors from Ethiopia who have a connection with the Netherlands, while no Eritrean novelists have thus far published in Dutch. Daniël Hoek, a self-proclaimed «forgotten Dutchman from Ethiopia», has written down his complicated life story in *Bastaardkind*¹⁸. The book was published

¹⁴ See P. GILROY, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Columbia University Press, New York 2005; P.M.E. LORCIN, *Historicizing Colonial Nostalgia. European Women’s Narratives of Algeria and Kenya 1900-Present*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York 2012.

¹⁵ In her documentary *De Spaghettiflat* (2007), Daniela Tasca portrays Italians who moved to the Netherlands in the 1960s to work at the *Amsterdamsche Droogdok-Maatschappij*. They still live together in one flat in Zaandam.

¹⁶ Examples of Turkish-Dutch writers include Halil Gür, Ebru Umar, Sevtap Baycılı and Nilgün Yerli, and Moroccan-Dutch writers include Said El Haji, Naima El Bezaz, Fouad Laroui, Hassan Bahara, Hafid Bouazza, and Abdelkader Benali.

¹⁷ Writers that belong to this group include Kader Abdolah and Afshin Ellian coming from Iran, Rodaan al Galidi, coming from Iraq, Moses Isegawa who comes from Uganda (writing in English, even though he speaks Dutch) and Yasmine Allas, Sayadin Hersi and Zeinab Jumale, coming from Somalia. Cfr. I. VAN DER POEL, *Literatuur-met-een-accent. Migrantenschrijvers halen het denken in stereotypes onderuit*, «De Academische Boekengids», 77, 2009, pp. 13-18; J. GOEDEGEBUURE, *Allemaal allochtonen, ja gezellig*, «Trouw», 28 March 2009.

¹⁸ In *Bastaardkind* (Uitgeverij Free Musketeers, Amsterdam 2010), Hoek describes how his Dutch father came to Metahara in Ethiopia in the 1970s to work for the sugar factory of the Handelsvereniging Amsterdam (Trade Company Amsterdam) and met Daniël’s future mother. After the closure of the factory Daniël’s father moved back to the Netherlands, leaving his girlfriend and their child behind. As a “mixed race” child, Daniël was never accepted

in Dutch by a Dutch publisher, while it was originally written in English. However, the book is impossible to find even in public libraries. The publisher's statement is that the book «is unavailable in whatever format», because the author has «denounced the agreement» with the publishing house¹⁹.

The second Ethiopian writer who resided in the Netherlands is Maresha Mammo, a journalist from Addis Abeba, and cofounder of the independent Ethiopian newspaper *Addis Neger* (New Thing). Since its foundation in 2007, *Addis Neger* published articles critical towards the government. As a consequence, the Ethiopian government decided in 2009 to prosecute all six co-founders of the paper. Since then, Maresha has lived in exile in Uganda. In May 2013, he arrived in the Netherlands, after having been invited by the city and the Dutch Foundation for Literature to take residence in Amsterdam as the city's new International Cities of Refuge Network (ICORN) guest writer²⁰. There, he was working on what were going to be his first two books: a non-fiction publication about the political situation in Ethiopia, and a novel²¹. The language in which he would publish his books was unclear, but thus far, he has not published in Dutch²².

Yasmine Allas (Mogadishu, 1967) has been the most active publisher of the Somali-Dutch novelists²³. In 1998, she made her Dutch writing debut with the novel *Idil, een meisje (Idil, A Girl)*. Since then, she has written four more novels and one essay collection. Daughter of a high military who died when she was ten years old, Allas wanted

in Ethiopia. He became a criminal and was eventually sentenced to death but managed to escape.

¹⁹ This was stated in a personal email correspondence I had with the editor on 5 August, 2013.

²⁰ ICORN presents itself on its network as an «independent organisation of cities and regions offering shelter to writers and artists at risk, advancing freedom of expression, defending democratic values and promoting international solidarity». <https://www.icorn.org/about-icorn> (last visited on 13 July 2018).

²¹ In his novel, he would demonstrate «the current life in Ethiopia through a love affair between two civil servants and civil society workers, passing through despotism, nepotism, ambiguity and decay of values in the capital Addis Abeba» [sic]. This I found on a webpage of ICORN, which has since been removed. <https://www.icorn.org/writer/masresha-mammo> (last visited on 13 July 2018).

²² During a debate organized by the cultural organization Spui25 in Amsterdam in June 2013, Maresha was asked whether he would be writing in Dutch. He replied that he would try to learn the language, thus not directly responding to the question.

²³ Ayaan Hirsi Ali will not be discussed in this article, since she has not written herself, has only published in English, and has never published fiction.

to become an actress, but this was an unacceptable profession to her family. When she was fourteen years old, she therefore fled from home, first to Saudi-Arabia, and then to Belgium²⁴. She arrived in the Netherlands in 1987, attended drama school, acted with various companies, and performed her own solo show. Eleven years afterwards, she published her first novel in Dutch, written as a monologue. The book was published *Uitgeverij De Geus*, a publishing company which was founded in 1983 and became one of the leading “multi-cultural” publishers in the mid 1980s²⁵. Besides being a well-known author, Allas frequently appears on television in talk shows, and has been the subject or leading figure of several documentaries and TV-shows²⁶. As a public figure in the Netherlands, she has a platform that exceeds her books, and she often tackles current issues during her television performances and public appearances.

In her first three novels, Allas physically and aesthetically gradually distances herself from her country of origin, choosing in each following book stylistic elements and geographical settings that more closely approach the culture and language of her new country of residence, the Netherlands. However, this tendency changes in her last two novels, the reasons for which include an altering political climate in the Netherlands, and Allas’ personal growing dissatisfaction with what she considers the stigma of “migrant writer”, and more generally an increasing fear of, and hatred against, Islam among Dutch citizens.

The plot of her first novel is set in Africa, while her second book, *De generaal met de zes vingers* starts in Africa but ends in the Netherlands²⁷. Her third novel, *De blauwe*, is set completely in the Netherlands, and contains flashbacks to an “Africa” that seems far away and long ago. *Idil, een meisje* (1998) is set in an undefined African country, and is told from a first-person perspective by the girl – later in the book she becomes a young woman – Idil, who lives in troubling cir-

²⁴ M. BREEDT BRUYN, *Yasmine Allas schrijft door een vergrootglas*, «Vrij Nederland», 16 May 1998 (<http://www.vn.nl/Artikel-Literatuur/Yasmine-Allas-schrijft-door-een-vergrootglas.htm>, last visited on 26 June 2018).

²⁵ *Transcultural Modernities: Narrating Africa in Europe*, ed. by E. Bekers, Rodopi, Amsterdam 2009, p. 60.

²⁶ For instance, *Nomaden & Piraten*, a documentary divided into four episodes about the Dutch Somali community by the Dutch broadcast company NTR, can be found here: <https://www.ntr.nl/Nomaden-en-Piraten/150> (last visited on 26 June 2018).

²⁷ Y. ALLAS, *De generaal met de zes vingers*, De Geus, Amsterdam 2001; *De blauwe kamer*, De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam 2004.

cumstances, suffers oppression from her family, and undergoes genital mutilation, the latter being described in detail²⁸. Idil's never explicitly mentioned African home country is unequivocally presented as a misogynist prison, and her hope for a better future is symbolized by her white male neighbor who listens to her and who offers her new life in twofold: he tells her that he will flee with her to Belgium, and they have a child together. The young girl nevertheless fails to escape her destiny, and stays in her country, locked-up by her parents in a madhouse. Throughout the monologue, the language is dry, as though the story were presented as a newspaper article: the protagonist sums up the facts in historical order, with no flash backs or flash-forwards, and without any elaborate descriptions of personal thoughts. Given the frank, colloquial style, the monologue is presented as a short story, relating to the oral culture:

Mijn moeder wekte me elke morgen met dezelfde woorden. "Er is weer een nieuwe dag geboren. Dat we weer wakker en gezond zijn, hebben we allemaal aan God te danken". En ik haastte me dan om me te wassen en aan te kleden. Maar op een dag hield ze me tegen²⁹.

This, together with poetry, has a flourishing tradition in Somalia, and therefore refers back to the culture Allas was brought up in³⁰.

De generaal met de zes vingers describes a wealthy Somali family with a military father who have to flee to the Netherlands after a regime change; their culture shock and the procedures of asking for asylum are vividly described. On the one hand, the process of "inburgeren", translatable with "acculturating", is at times presented as comic³¹: for instance, the family are taught how to sit on the toilet,

²⁸ See E. BEKERS, *Rising Anthills. African and African American Writing on Female Genital Excision, 1960-2000*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 2010, particularly chapter 3, Bekers mentions *Idil, een meisje* in chapter 3, note 3, p. 223.

²⁹ «Every morning my mother would wake me up with the same words. "A new day is born. We owe God our gratefulness for being awake and healthy once again". And I would hurry to wash myself and get dressed. But one day, she stopped me».

³⁰ I. LEWIS, *Understanding Somalia and Somaliland. Culture, History, Society*, Columbia University Press, New York 2008.

³¹ The Dutch word "inburgeren" signifies the process of "getting to know and understand the Dutch culture". It is obligatory for all foreigners moving to the Netherlands, ever since the politician Rita Verdonk introduced this concept, and a following law known as *Wet Inburgering*, in 2006. I thank Monica Jansen for her translating suggestion. See G. WEKKER, *White Innocence. Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2016, pp. 115-120.

whereas they probably had five bathrooms in their former house:

“Voordat ik wegga, laat ik jullie zien hoe de wc werkt”. Mevrouw Janssen stond op. We keken elkaar aan. “Ja, hoe moeten we de wc gebruiken?”, spotte Zami. Zelfs mevrouw Samater schoot in de lach. Inmiddels was mevrouw Janssen al in het kleine vertrek. “Laat je kunstjes maar eens zien”, zei Zami³².

On the other hand, the novel unravels the shortcomings of the Dutch political system in terms of welcoming refugees. The family gets in trouble with the police every time someone raises their voice, as their Dutch neighbors think they are hurting each other, and the former general and father of protagonist Nasiib commits suicide because he cannot stand receiving money from the government on a monthly basis without having to work for it, while he is unable – and most importantly, not allowed – to work³³.

The story starts in an undefined African country, and is written in third-person narrative mode, but halfway through the book the perspective and the setting change. The eldest daughter and protagonist Nassiib, who, unlike her father, is considered able to adapt to the Dutch culture, takes over as a narrator, and the rest of the story is set in the Netherlands and written in a first-person narrative mode. The plot of this book thus illustrates both the transition from one country to another, and the transition from one generation to the next: Nassiib attempts to get acquainted with the culture of the Netherlands, starts a relationship with a Dutch man, and on a meta level, by presenting the story from her perspective, she relatively gains in agency. Different chapters divide the plot line into separate fragments of past and present, while the focal point is not so much on the psychological developments of the characters themselves, but on the description of their context. Taking this into account, the book recalls storytelling and the oral tradition, similarly to Allas’ first novel. Indeed, the chapter in the book that describes the process of “inburgeren” was published separately in a short story collection entitled *Wat is Nederlands nog in dit land?* which brings together short stories of «different migrant writers

³² «“Before I leave you, I will demonstrate how the toilet works”. Misses Janssen stood up. We looked at each other. “Yes, how should we use the toilet?”, Zami mockingly wondered. This amused even Misses Samater. But misses Janssen already found herself in the small room. “Please show us your tricks”, Zami said».

³³ In the Netherlands, asylum seekers go through a long bureaucratic process, during which they are prohibited from working. They receive a monthly fee during this period.

in the Netherlands».

Allas' third novel, *De blauwe kamer*, describes a friendship between two women, Hedwig and Nikki, and is set primarily in the Netherlands, at an even larger distance from Africa both in terms of their geographical position, and their cultural expression. However, fragments of Hedwig's turbulent youth in an African country enrich this Dutch story with an African nuance. Hedwig's complicated life story only partly gets unraveled as unresolved excerpts of her youth are exposed all throughout the book. The African narrations are depicted as an incomprehensible past in a country far away, a past which Hedwig – who is called Medina in these stories – needs to understand in order to continue (or start?) her life in the Netherlands; the African continent is presented as an unresolvable obstacle. The book again consists of many fragments of stories, and has a complex structure with interrelating and seemingly separate stories. Relating to the oral culture as well, these fragments have a fable-like quality. The language consists of dialogues and short phrases and is descriptive, focusing once more on the context of the characters:

“Wat valt je zo zwaar, Medina”, vroeg ik. “Hier kan ik enigszins troost vinden, hier zijn biedt mijn schouders enige verlichting, begrijp je?” “Eerlijk gezegd niet”, antwoordde ik. “Heb geduld, want die dag zal vanzelf komen, Dhiban”, verzuchtte ze. “Welke dag dan, Medina?” “De dag dat jij alles begrijpen kunt, maar ook de dag dat alles voorbij zal zijn”, antwoordde ze ernstig³⁴.

While Africa seems to disappear gradually more in the background of the plot and context in these first three books, we can recognize both a temporal hiatus, and a thematic and stylistic gap between Allas' third and fourth novel. After the publication of her first three books, Allas produced a bundle of essays, *Ontheemd en toch*. It collects her newspaper articles published earlier that year, which discuss the changing political and social climate in the Netherlands and the shifting attitude of its inhabitants towards their others³⁵.

³⁴ «“What is it that seems to weigh so heavily on you, Medina”, I asked. “Here I can find some sense of comfort, being here, my shoulders are offered some sense of relief, do you understand?” “Honestly, I do not”, I replied. “Be patient, because that day will come, Dhiban”, she sighed. “What day, Medina?” “The day in which you will be able to understand everything, but also the day that everything will be over”, she replied gravely».

³⁵ With the notion of the other, I refer to postcolonial theory's implementation of Lacan's usage of the term: «the colonized others who are marginalized by imperial discourse, identi-

This explicit positioning of herself within the Dutch culture as a public figure coming from outside of the Netherlands, is increasingly sensed throughout her later books. Allas' next novel, *Een nagelaten verhaal* (A Handed-Down History, De Bezige Bij, 2010) describes a Somali woman who lives in Amsterdam and goes back to Somalia for the first time after twenty years³⁶. A television presenter and a cameraman travel with her to document this trip in order to make it into a TV documentary³⁷. By making this journey, the protagonist is forced to relive her family's history, to recognize the problems of the Somali civil war, and to acknowledge the feeling of estrangement from both the Netherlands and her country of origin, the latter being unrecognizable to her. Both the Dutchmen traveling with her and her husband back in the Netherlands are unable to fully comprehend her struggles:

Na een korte stilte vroeg Rob naar mijn jeugd. "Ik heb mijn jeugd ervaren als een onbezorgde periode in mijn leven, een periode waarin ik het gevoel had dat het leven onveranderd kon blijven, dat veiligheid voor eeuwig was, en dat geborgenheid voor iedereen op de wereld vanzelfsprekend was". Ik had dit al zo vaak verteld, het was me al zo vaak gevraagd, door mijn man, door mijn vrienden, door iedereen die er nieuwsgierig naar was, dat ik het antwoord opdreunde als een kinderrimpje. Ik draaide mijn hoofd weg, weg van Jetze. Weg van zijn camera. "Niet vluchten", zei Rob. "Emotie hoort erbij. Het gaat hier om oprechte emotie. Toch?"³⁸.

The person who she is closest with is her aunt, who lives in Canada, and with whom she discusses from an outsider perspective the differences between the culture of their Somalia and the countries they now live in.

fied by their difference from the centre and, perhaps crucially, become the focus of anticipated mastery by the imperial "ego": *Post-Colonial Studies. The Key Concepts*, ed. by B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin, Routledge, London-New York 2000, p. 155.

³⁶ Y. ALLAS, *Een nagelaten verhaal*, De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam 2010.

³⁷ Allas made a trip to Somalia herself with a television crew to make it into a documentary, which can be watched here: http://www.npo.nl/paul-rosenmoller-en-schrijfster-yasmine-allas/27-05-2006/POW_00051694 (Last visited on 8 January 2016).

³⁸ «After a short silence, Rob asked me about my childhood. "I have experienced my childhood as a carefree period in my life, a period during which I felt that life could remain unchanged, that safety was forever, and that security was a matter of course for everybody in this world". I had told this story so many times, I was asked this question so many times, by my husband, by my friends, by anybody who was curious about it, that I replied as though reciting a nursery rhyme. I turned my head away, away from Jetze. Away from his camera. "Don't flee", Rob said. "Emotions are part of it. Here, we are dealing with real emotions. Am I right?"».

Both style and content differ from Allas' former novels. The plot is told from a more intimate perspective, while the language is more poignant. Similar to her earlier publications, the book contains stories of the past and present that are intermingled and brought to the reader as loose fragments. The stories of the protagonist's parents are described as oral stories handed down to the protagonist. More than in her other books, there is a focus on the psychology of the characters, mostly on those of the protagonist and her aunt. The perspective is clearly from that of someone who is forced to feel like an outsider both in the Netherlands and in Somalia. Even though the story is set almost completely in Somalia, the Somali protagonist observes her country from a Dutch perspective. She does not have the same extorting view on Somalia as her fellow travelers or her husband, but fails to experience her country as «one of the Somali»; her aunt is the only one with whom she shares this feeling of estrangement. In fact, it turns out to be impossible for the protagonist to link the two cultures:

“Mijn lieve, onrustige schat, laten we het in hemelsnaam over de liefde hebben, over onze liefde. En om je de waarheid te zeggen heb ik er niet zo veel zin in om het steeds over dat gedoe in de samenleving te hebben. Ik kan de krant niet openslaan of daar staat het weer, hoe Nederland is veranderd, hoe de mensen hier zijn veranderd. Wij, jij en ik dus, hebben daar eigenlijk niets mee te maken”. “Mijn lieve struisvogel. Ik ben er niet zo gerust op, althans niet zoals jij het doet voorkomen. Jouw onverschilligheid is verontrustend en misplaatst arrogant. Ja, ik ben misschien gevoeliger voor onrust dan jij, omdat ik in een oorlogsland ben geboren”³⁹.

Allas' most recent book, *De onvoltooide* has a timespan of twenty-four hours, and a third-person perspective. It is set in a room in the Netherlands, where a Dutch man looks back on his relationship with an African woman who, during the whole book, lies silently on his bed and feels cold. Fragments of the six years in which they have known each other flash by, and occasionally bits of her past in Africa are revealed – again, referring to the oral tradition. The plot is far re-

³⁹ «“My dear, restless darling, for God's sake, let us talk about love, about our love. And to tell you the truth, I don't feel like discussing that hassle in our society all the time. I can't open a newspaper without reading about how the Netherlands are changed, how the people here have changed. In the end, we, you and me I mean, have nothing to do with that”. “My dear ostrich. I am not so sure about that, or at least, about your perception of it. Your indifference is alarming and misguidedly arrogant. Yes, I might be more sensitive to agitation than you are, because I was born in a country in war”».

moved from Allas' personal perspective: not only does the book for the first time have a male protagonist, but he is also a white, Dutch dentist, who fails to understand the African woman he has tried to conquer over the past six years and has managed to get into his bed for the first time on this particular night. It is very unlikely that their relationship will work out – even if we were to ignore the fact that the suggestion is being made that the woman is no longer alive. The male protagonist has an almost grotesque Orientalist gaze towards his bed partner. Africa seems to be further away than ever before, but exactly because of this disassociating attitude towards the Southern continent, the Dutch protagonist is presented as narrow-minded, and ignorant.

Allas' last two books confirm her attitude towards the political and social climate in the Netherlands as expressed in her columns: she presents the Dutch male characters in her books as either failing to understand the struggles of the female African characters, or as exotifying and stereotyping the latter. The strong binary opposition of two cultures that were already present in her earlier books, gains a sense of urgency in her last two books, exactly because it is presented as a one-way street, where the Dutch male characters fail to engage with the struggles the African female characters go through.

The Orientalist gaze of male characters towards female African characters is a recurring theme in Allas' prose. With the exception of her last book, all of Allas' books are written from a female perspective. Allas, in fact, presents herself in the Dutch media explicitly as a feminist, often explicitly celebrating the freedom of sexual expression and pleasure for women in her books. Together with a number of other Muslim women, she is considered one of the main figures of the Dutch Third Wave Feminism⁴⁰. However, in her last two books Allas focuses less on gender identity, and more on the concept of cultural identity, since she describes in both novels predominantly the tensions between the Somali and the Dutch cultures, portraying the Dutch as narrow-minded and uninterested in the African characters. She favors discussing the issues of Orientalism and othering in the Dutch context over her feminism.

As mentioned by Boehmer, some literary critics are offended by the fact that diasporic writers «developed what was anyway a cosmopolitan tendency, often picked up as part of élite upbringing in their

⁴⁰ D. VERHOFSTADT, *De derde feministische golf*, Houtekiet, Antwerp 2006.

home countries», and that they essentially «have been able, by migrating, to secure for themselves a different, more comfortable location in the wider neo-colonial world». She argues that, «because of that very success at bridging, the cosmopolitan work can appear far removed from the material and political devastation in many cases associated with its author's nation of origin»⁴¹. Considering Allas' upper-class upbringing in Somalia, and the fact that the perspective in her books becomes further removed from her country of origin in every book, she could be critiqued from this angle. However, she has considered the “migrant-writer” frame a burden from the beginning of her career, which nuances her upper-class position.

Sayadin Hersi, a writer in Dutch coming from Somalia as well, published his novel debut *Verloren vader* (Lost Father, Nieuw Amsterdam, Amsterdam) in 2010⁴². Hersi (1972) was born and raised in Guba, close to the border with Ethiopia, in a family of nomads – a very different context than that of Allas. He went to Mogadishu to attend school, and afterwards, because of the war and because he wanted to study, he fled to Europe. In 1992 he reached the Netherlands, where he then studied medicine. He now works as a school doctor in Amsterdam.

Verloren vader tells the story of a Somali man Bille who lives in the Netherlands, going through the ordeal of asking for political asylum, getting caught in the net of bureaucracy, and having to get to know the Dutch culture. In flash backs written in the past tense the reader gets to know what happened in Somalia, since Bille's past still haunts him in the Netherlands⁴³. He decides to go back to Somalia, where he is confronted with the present harrowing situation of his country of origin.

The novel touches upon many subjects: it discusses the tribal war in Somalia, and the increasing interest in fundamentalist Islam on the part of Bille's Somali friends and relatives both in Somalia and in the Netherlands. Moreover, the problematic concept of race and skin color is analyzed in detail, as are the Dutch bureaucracy, and the living situation of Somali people asking for asylum in the Netherlands. *Ver-*

⁴¹ E. BOEHMER, *Colonial & Postcolonial Literature. Migrant Metaphors*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1995, pp. 231-232.

⁴² S. HERSI, *Verloren vader*, Nieuw Amsterdam, Amsterdam 2010.

⁴³ The motto of the book could be a phrase found on page 56: «My past floods in my head, but in this country I have been unable to find a mill that can mill it dry».

loren vader also considers the necessity of giving up cultural habits in order to make a life in the Netherlands, and adapt to the Dutch culture. In the last chapter of the book Bille accuses his Dutch boss of being a racist, after having understood that their “miscommunication” is not just a language problem, but in fact a much deeper rooted problem in the boss’ psyche.

As opposed to Allas, who uses only the Dutch language and does not infer Somali expressions or words other than names, Hersi considers himself to be schizophrenic, writing not in Dutch, but in “Allochtoons”, in an immigrant language⁴⁴. As Gloria Wekker argues, «in the binary pair allochtoon-autochtoon/autochthones-allochthones, race is firmly present, as well as in the further official distinction in the category of allochtoon: Western and non-Western»⁴⁵. In between his Dutch phrases, he uses Somali expressions, as well as English, Italian, and French. He writes in short sentences and in a colloquial style, and he uses many metaphors:

Ina Magan, de man met de O-benen, de man met wie vader een afspraak had op de laatste dag dat ik hem zag. De man van de verboden radio, waar elke avond bijna heel Mogadishu naar luisterde. En nu kijk ik hier, in Amsterdam, naar de verbeterde lippen van zijn dochter, die ook gif spuwen⁴⁶.

The protagonist takes distance from the terrible episodes of his past by presenting his Somali history in the past tense, as opposed to the Dutch chapter of his life, which is presented in the present tense. Again, the African parts of the narration remind of the oral culture, as narrations deriving from far away, and from the past.

In an interview about his book, Sayadin Hersi argued that his initial manuscript had been quite different from his final book: «Sometimes I

⁴⁴ Hersi told me this in an interview. *Allochtoon* is a Dutch word, coming from Greek and literally meaning originating from another country. In the Netherlands and Flanders the term *allochtoon* is widely used to refer to immigrants and their descendants. On 12 February 2013 the Amsterdam council decided not to use the word any more in official documents and statements, since it creates an opposition between “allochtonen” and “autochtonen” (autochthones).

⁴⁵ G. WEKKER, *White Innocence. Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*, Duke University Press, Durham and London 2016, p. 23.

⁴⁶ «Ina Magan, the man with the O-shaped legs, the man with whom father had an appointment on the last day I saw him. The man of the forbidden radio, to which the whole city of Mogadishu listened. And now, here in Amsterdam, I find myself looking to the restrained lips of his daughter, who also spits bile».

used a certain formulation and the editor said: “that word does not fit here, that’s not Dutch”, while I was actually very satisfied with [it] and it fitted exactly in the rhythm of the text⁴⁷. While authors have to make concessions if they want to publish their books, I would argue that the argument that something is «not Dutch» paralyzes the author whose first language is not Dutch, and stops him from playing with the language in his own unique way.

Zeinab Jumale, the third Dutch writer who was born and raised in Somalia, arrived in the Netherlands as a young mother at the beginning of the 1980s, and has so far published one short story, *Een gevoelige glimlach* in the anthology *Grenzeloos. Verhalen over vele culturen* – again a book with exclusively «multi-cultural stories». The twelve-page short story tells the friendship between a Somali woman and a Chilean woman is portrayed in past tense and first-person narrative. Both women entered the Netherlands to ask for asylum, as they underwent the whole process as described by Allas and Hersi as well. The Chilean woman has passed away, but she has left behind a half-Somali, half-Chilean daughter, who one day, the protagonist hopes, will become a best-selling author herself. The protagonist hopes that this girl will become «the first female Somali writer who does not write as if she tells an oral story, but one who actually writes». It is a story of friendship, but it touches upon issues of being a foreigner in the Netherlands, of the process of asking for asylum, and of the Somali culture. It is written in a clear Dutch language, with short phrases, in a spoken language style. Jumale has also written a novel, which she has sent to her publisher, who has responded by stating that her language is «not good enough», and that she still has to change a lot in her book in order for them to even consider publishing it. She is now revising it, and in the meantime she is working on her second novel⁴⁸.

Thematic and stylistic similarities connect the literature of the discussed novelists. The themes of unreachable fathers and children who long for their fathers and/or lose them, are discussed by Hersi and Allas. Referring to the unique and unfortunate situation of Somalia and its diaspora, since many fathers died during the war, while second generation children are unable to go back to the Somalia of their fa-

⁴⁷ <http://nairobiboekblog.wordpress.com/2013/01/15/de-schrijver-en-de-woestijn/#more-675> (last visited on 27 January 2014).

⁴⁸ The author told me this in an interview in May, 2013.

thers, or their youths, since it has been destroyed by the war. All three authors write about the culture shock of coming from Somalia to the Netherlands, and all three mention (living in) an “asielzoekerscentrum” (a centre for people who ask for political asylum), referring to the specific case of the Dutch politics. The authors write about the Dutch bureaucracy, the misunderstandings of Dutch citizens, and the problems Somali people encounter when they enter the Netherlands. Cultural identity is a key concept for Hersi, as it is for Allas in her last two books, and in Jumale’s narration. Short stories, divided into separate chapters, are at the core of the literature of all three of these three writers, which refers to the oral tradition typical for the Somali culture. While Jumale’s literature consists up till now only of a short story, it has been published separately in an anthology about Dutch multi-culturalism, just as a chapter of a book by Allas. Hersi and Allas present the experiences of the protagonists in Africa, sometimes specifically in Somalia, as flash backs of a completely different world, separated from the one they now live in, and specifically referring to the writing style of short stories in those parts of their narrations⁴⁹. Even though the western world – symbolized by the Belgian neighbor – is presented as a utopia in Allas’ first novel, but this perspective changes in every book; in her last two novels the Dutch are presented as narrow-minded, and in some cases, racist, people, similar to Hersi’s description of the protagonists’ boss in his novel.

The Somali language being the three authors’ native language could. This could have resulted into a hybrid form of expression, enriching the Dutch language, just as happened in many books in, for instance, the English language – Amitav Ghosh beautifully describes such an example in *The Circle of Reason*: «Hindi swallowing Bengali, English doing a dance; tongues unraveled and woven together»⁵⁰. As argued above, references to the rich Somali oral culture can in fact be found in the literature described above. However, Allas, who has been publishing in Dutch for almost two decades, has introduced merely one new word: the verb “ululeren”, an onomatopoeia referring to the sound Somali women make when they either celebrate or mourn. The

⁴⁹ The short story could be described as the ‘genre that is not one’, as suggested by Peter Donahue in F. IFTEKHARUDDIN, *The Postmodern Short Story: Forms and Issues*, Westport, Praeger 2003, pp. 161-172. This is why I describe it here as a “style”.

⁵⁰ Boehmer quotes this “infectious speech” of the wanderer Alu in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Circle of Reason*, Boehmer 1995: 227.

response Hersi got on his manuscript, stating that often his language «was not the correct Dutch language» prevents the writer from «dancing with the Dutch language», as described by Ghosh. When I asked Hersi about the use of symbolism, metaphors, poetic descriptions, etc., he agreed that many of this narrative strategies had been deleted by his editor too, because they were considered un-Dutch, cliché, or irrelevant. Jumale describes a lack of “real” writers coming from Somalia, as if a colloquial language style were in some way inferior. Her novel has been refused publication for the same reasons, and Allas has confirmed that in her literature, too, a lot had to be changed in order for it to be published⁵¹. As I illustrate below, these authors have been restricted in their language, and framed by editors, critics, and scholars as “Dutch migrant writer”, instead of simply “writers”, possibly specifying this by adding the word “transnational”. This adjective, which indeed could be used for any author depending on one’s family history or travel experience, can be specified if need be, but is less restrictive than the narrowing description of “migrant writer”.

Alfred Birney, a Dutch writer with an Indonesian father and a Dutch mother has cogently described how what he describes as Apartheid in literary criticism forces him into the corner of the Indo writer/foreign writer. For this group of writers, he states, literary critics are much milder, because they expect a different kind of literature from these Indo’s/foreigners: «We get magic, they [the Dutch, LL] get love»⁵². Birney’s statement is part of a long tradition of so-called “migrant writers” complaining about this limiting frame. Hafid Bouazza, a very well-known writer in Dutch who was born and partly raised in Morocco, stated something similar in 2001, disagreeing with any stigmatizing description he has been given by critics – be they Moroccan writer, Moroccan-Dutch writer, or «Dutch writer of Moroccan descent with the Dutch nationality»⁵³. As a reaction on the theme of the

⁵¹ When I interviewed her, in August, 2013, Allas has asked me not to quote her in any way, and she did not want to be more specific.

⁵² A. BIRNEY, *Apartheid in Literary Criticism*, in *Writers on Writing: The Art of the Short Story*, ed. by M.A. Lee, Greenwood Publishing Group, Westport 2005, pp. 91-98. An exemplary illustration of this distinction between love and magic is the review by the Amsterdam student journal *Propria Cures* of *Een nagelaten verhaal* by Allas: <http://www.propracures.nl/2010/02/allas-is-liefde/> (last visited on 15 July 2018). The author mocks Allas for her exotic looks and suggests that real love is nowhere to be found in her book.

⁵³ H. BOUAZZA, *Een beer in bontjas*, CPNB, Amsterdam 2001.

Dutch Book Week of that same year, “writers in-between”, Yasmine Allas stated that writing cannot be connected to any culture⁵⁴. Naima El Bezaz stated angrily that «[t]here is no immigrant literature. It’s nonsense. I come from Morocco and my book’s about a Moroccan, but I’m a Dutch writer, I write in Dutch. I represent the peak of integration and so don’t want to be pushed back into the immigrant corner»⁵⁵. Recently, Birney has written an passionate blog post on his website, in which he complained that nothing has changed in this perspective, referring to a recent performance of several Dutch “migrant authors” who all stated the same thing⁵⁶.

Many authors in Dutch but coming from a large variety of backgrounds continue to address this problem and the case of the writers mentioned in this article is no exception. All short stories by Somali-Dutch writers that have been published, indeed appeared in anthologies about the Dutch multi-cultural society, and/or the publishers were alternative, “multi-cultural” publishers, who framed the authors as “multi-cultural writers”. When I interviewed Allas in 2013 for this project, she repeatedly stated how tired she was of the term “migrant literature”, warning me that if my research had anything to do with that term, she did not want to cooperate with me. Allas and Hersi seem to have treated the label of the “migrant writer” in an opposite manner, but they both address the problem quite clearly. Hersi seemingly embraces his hybrid identity, using various languages, calling his language *Allochtoon*, yet criticizing the protagonist’s Dutch boss for his severe lack of empathy. Up until fairly recently, Allas identified more with her gender identity than with her Somali background, possibly trying to avoid the label of “migrant writer”, but in her last two books she refers to her Somali background, or addresses the Dutch criticizing them for their «narrow-mindedness».

The changing political ambiance in The Netherlands of the last two decades, in many aspects mirroring the changing political climate in Europe and the United States, is vividly described in the edited vol-

⁵⁴ C. SCHULZ, *Interview met Yasmine Allas en Kader Abdolah*: Boven de culturen, in *De Geuzenkrant VI*, published in the Boekenweek 2001, distributed with «Vrij Nederland», March 2011.

⁵⁵ NAIMA EL BEZAZ, *Women’s Writing from the Low Countries 1880-2010: An Anthology*, ed. by J. Bel, T. Vaessens, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam 2010, p. 242.

⁵⁶ <http://www.alfredbirney.com/> (Last visited in on 27 January 2014).

ume *Dutch Racism*⁵⁷. The country, originally (and some would argue, questionably)⁵⁸ known for its open mindedness, has known increasing xenophobia and islamophobia since the attacks on the World Trade Centre in 2001, and the murder of the Dutch television maker Theo van Gogh by a fundamentalist Muslim in 2004. Van Gogh had made a critical film about Islam together with the Somali Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Yasmine Allas, who spoke at his memorial service, has explicitly mentioned this episode in contemporary Dutch history in several interviews and articles as a crucial watershed⁵⁹. Afterwards, she stated, she felt the pressure more than ever of defining herself as either Dutch or Somali, either Christian or Muslim. In 2004, the nationalist and anti-islamist politician Geert Wilders appeared in the Dutch political spectrum and he has been able to count upon a lot of support from Dutch voters even since.

In the literature of the Dutch-Somali writers this shift in attitude of the Dutch is mirrored. Whereas Allas and Jumale mention their Somaliness in their literature before Van Gogh's death, they do so in a less urgent manner than in the literature written after this historical turnpoint. Hersi's book finishes with an accusation of racism against his boss, just as Allas' last two books describe the Dutch as uninterested in other cultures, unwilling to understand the Other, and inward looking. She has taken part in television documentaries about Somalia, and has returned to her country of origin after twenty years of living in the Netherlands with a television crew. Jumale's book has not been accepted despite an interest in her story by the publisher, because of the fact that her language is not "Dutch" enough. To liberate these writers from this kind of othering, we will need to reconsider the concept of "migrant writer". If the strict distinctions between "autochtone" and "allochtone" authors were to fade away, authors might be more willing to «dance with the Dutch language», which would be a positive influence on the otherwise stagnating Dutch language. This is why I would suggest the usage of the adjective "transnational" to the authors

⁵⁷ *Dutch Racism*, cit.

⁵⁸ See P. ESSED, *Understanding Everyday Racism. An Interdisciplinary Theory*, SAGE, Newbury Park, 1991.

⁵⁹ See, for instance, this interview with Yasmine Allas: <http://www.novatv.nl/page/detail/uitzendingen/3815/Yasmine%20Allas%20herdenkt%20Theo%20van%20Gogh#> (8.09'- 16.17', last visited on 27 January 2014), and her *Ontheemd en toch thuis* (2006), mentioned above.

in question, whenever this proves relevant for the study or the article, with an addition of the specific biographies of the authors.

The literature from writers in Dutch and coming from the Horn of Africa limits itself thus far to writers with a Somali background. While they tackle various themes and each have a distinctive style, there are overall similarities, specific for the culture they come from, often also related to the Dutch culture and politics. Their literature is individually unique, but it can be useful to trace overall similarities, which possibly echo the culture(s) they were born and raised in. Since the Netherlands has no specific (colonial or economic) history or bonds with Somalia, the country is presented in their literature as a culturally and geographically separate country from Somalia. While Jumale, Hersi and Allas have had to adapt to a high extent their language to the Dutch one, they nevertheless succeed in raising questions and describing the Netherlands from both an outsider and an insider perspective, from both positive and more critical angles.

On the other hand, I struggle with the validity of treating the literature of Allas, Hersi and Jumale as a specific group in the first place. By doing so, we look through the lens of the Western and imperial notion of national boundaries. On the other hand, we have taken into account the specificities of these three authors, who differ from each other in terms of gender, class, and background. Using it as a case-study in this particular context can be interesting, but I wonder if the authors in question would be particularly keen on this new distinction. In fact, the three Somali-Dutch authors have not published anything new in over five years, and there are no new Somali-Dutch writers who “join the club”. The changing political climate in the Netherlands might have influenced this, but the reality also points out alternative routes through which Somali voices are possibly more easily expressed. Many online platforms deal with specifically Somali Dutch issues and questions, and young Somali-Dutch filmmakers, stand-up poets, and musicians, flourish online⁶⁰. This brings me to John Miles Foley’s observations on the resemblances between the Oral Tradition and the Internet (OT and IT):

Both media depend not on static products but on continuous processes, not on stationary points but on vectors with direction and magnitude, not on “What?”

⁶⁰ For more information, see <https://africaisyou.com>.

but on “How do I get there?” In contrast to the fixed, spatial linearity of the conventional page and the book, the twin technologies of OT and IT mime the way we think—by navigating along pathways within an interactive network. They invite and require active participation and support a rich diversity of individual, one-time-only experiences. In place of the single, predetermined route typical of texts, they offer myriad different routes for exploration by engaging each user in nothing less than cocreating his or her own contingent reality⁶¹.

Although I am certain that more Dutch-Somali authors will emerge in the Dutch literary domain, and publish in book forms their narrations, IT has without a doubt brought to the fore an interesting, and less restrictive, platform for OT voices.

⁶¹ J.M. FOLEY, *Oral Tradition and the Internet*, University of Illinois Press, Illinois 2012.



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della storia letteraria italiana

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