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Black Italianità: Citizenship and Belonging in the Black Mediterranean

SA Smythe

“Io dico sempre che il colonialismo nella mia famiglia ha creato danni a quattro generazioni di donne, e io sono quella che chiude.” — Gabriella Ghermandi¹

“Un bel problema l’identità, e se l’abolissimo? E le impronte?
Da abolire anche quelle!” — Igiaba Scego²

Reading Black Lives in the Mediterranean with Migrant and Postcolonial Literature

The emergence of Italian migration literature can be traced back to August 1989, when South African refugee Jerry Masslo was killed in Villa Literno (about twenty miles northwest of Naples). Shortly after this murder—February 1990—Italy enacted one of its first laws regulating immigration: Law no. 39 or the “Martelli Law,” which aimed to stabilize and assimilate the migrant population by establishing quotas for migrants in relation to the nation’s need for temporary labor. This law was in part a response to Masslo’s killing, and also a reaction to union-led protests happening at the same time against immigrants’ unfettered access to the labor market. The Martelli Law in effect made exploitative economic conditions the only recourse for many people. Several autobiographical accounts detailing the lives of migrants in Italy were published subsequent to these major sociopolitical upheavals, many of which were written *a quattro mani*. This phrase—books written “with four hands”—denotes a collaborative work, in this case an immigrant writing with the assistance of a native Italian-speaker in the form of translation, editorial direction, and/or co-authorship. Such assistance often included significant editorial and stylistic changes to the texts, which were subsequently publicized and read as autobiographies.³ Some of the earlier texts to have ushered in the genre include Pap Khouma’s *Io, venditore di elefanti: Una vita per forza fra Dakar, Parigi e Milano*; Saidou Moussa Ba and Alessandro Micheletti’s *La promessa di Hamadi*, Mario Fortunato and Salah Methnani’s

¹ “I always say that colonialism has harmed four generations of women in my family, but that the cycle ends with me.” Daniele Combierati and Gabriela Ghermandi, “‘Siamo storie di storie’: L’Etiopia di Gabriela Ghermandi,” in *La quarta sponda. Scrittrici in viaggio dall’Africa coloniale all’Italia di oggi*, ed. Daniele Combierati (Rome: Caravan, 2009), 157. All translations within this article are mine, unless otherwise stated.

² “Identity’s such a big problem. So, what if we were to get rid of it? And fingerprints? Let’s do away with them, too!” Igiaba Scego, “Salsicce,” in *Pecore nere*, ed. Flavia Capitani and Emanuele Coen (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2005), 30.

³ For a useful discussion of the immigrant writer’s relationship to authorship and the status of these works as literature or literary, see Jennifer Burns, “Borders within the Text: Authorship, Collaboration and Mediation in Writing in Italian by Immigrants,” in *Borderlines: Migrant Writing and Italian Identities (1870-2000)*, ed. Loredana Polezzi and Jennifer Burns (Isernia: Iannone, 2003), 387-94.

Immigrato; and Mohamed Bouchane's *Chiamatemi Ali*.⁴ Such narratives were largely read by a (white) Italian audience for their pedagogical value about African life and experiences.

Throughout this article, I will be focusing primarily on later phases of this genre, foregrounding Black writers with various historical attachments to Italy and to the Italian language. I am focusing on these authors in order to explore how they speak back to the violence of Italy's (and by extension Europe's) contemporary immigration policies and attendant xenophobic sentiments, and how they respond to histories of colonialism and occupation.⁵ Notably, many scholars of *letteratura migrante*, Italian postcolonial literature, and/or Black Italian literature have discussed the politics of nomenclature and genre categorization for these works.⁶ These scholars would all likely note that reading migrant narratives as either Italian or African would be to misread them as one-dimensional narratives of assimilation, education, or progress, narratives that neither resist hegemonic nationalism nor combat mass erasure from cultural memory.⁷ My intent, then, is not to re-essentialize a subgroup of writers into a corpus nominally bound by Italian national and cultural belonging. Rather, by holding up writers like Igiaba Scego—born in Italy—and Carla Macoggi—who migrated to Italy as a child carrying the legacy of colonial occupation—I will explore the question of what constitutes Black Italian-ness, or *afroitalianità*. These authors illustrate how human desires and political demands for belonging

⁴ Pap Kouma (in collaboration with Oreste Pivetta), *Io, venditore di elefanti. Una vita per forza tra Dakar, Parigi e Milano* (Milan: Garzanti, 1990); Saidou Moussa Ba and Alessandro Micheletti, *La promessa di Hamadi* (Novara: De Agostini, 1991); Mario Fortunato and Salah Methnani, *Immigrato* (Rome: Theoria, 1990); Mohamed Bouchane (in collaboration with Carla De Girolamo and Daniele Miccione), *Chiamatemi Ali. Un anno a Milano nella vita di un clandestino venuto dal Marocco* (Milan: Leonardo, 1990).

⁵ Caterina Romeo is one of the key scholars of Italian postcolonial literary criticism who has also focused specifically on race and Blackness in the Italian literary and sociocultural spheres. Romeo has carefully and extensively surveyed what she identifies as the “phases” and developing features of Italian migration and postcolonial literature. See Caterina Romeo, “Italian Postcolonial Literature,” trans. SA Smythe, *California Italian Studies* 7, no. 2 (2017): 1-43.

⁶ For further detailed accounts of *letteratura migrante* or *letteratura della migrazione* and its development from 1990 to the present, see (among many others) Daniele Comberiati, ed., *La quarta sponda. Scrittrici in viaggio dall’Africa coloniale all’Italia di oggi* (Rome: Caravan, 2009); Roberto Derobertis, ed., *Fuori centro. Percorsi postcoloniali nella letteratura italiana* (Rome: Aracne, 2010); Graziella Parati, ed., *Mediterranean Crossroads, Migration Literature in Italy* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999); Graziella Parati, *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005); Fulvio Pezzarossa and Ilaria Rossini, eds., *Leggere il testo e il mondo. Vent’anni di scritture della migrazione in Italia* (Bologna: CLUEB, 2011).

⁷ See Romeo, “Italian Postcolonial Literature,” 2. In this essay, Romeo assesses the rationale behind labeling these writings as “migration literature” versus “postcolonial literature” or some other configuration, relating the genres to deeper questions of assimilation and circulation: “On the one hand, to continue to regard this corpus as a separate body of work over twenty-five years after it first emerged, rather than allowing it to be considered ‘simply’ a part of Italian literature, may be deemed problematic. It could be identified as a kind of neocolonial maneuver wherein subjects coming from different histories, geographies, languages, and cultures are homogenized on the basis of their difference from mainstream culture, with this difference becoming the lowest common denominator of what is actually a profoundly heterogeneous literature. On the other hand, the label ‘migration literature’ initially offered these writers a decisive edge in the publishing market, bringing their desire to tell their stories into alignment with the curiosity of the host society, and enabling their writings to emerge as part of a new cultural movement. Being grouped under one label and sacrificing internal differences has allowed migrant and second-generation writers a position *from which* to exercise a degree of cultural and political resistance, as they have been able to sensitize Italian readers to the kinds of marginalization migrants often endure and to affirm their right to migrate and settle legally in Italy.”

exceed the project of citizenship.⁸ As a result, their works open the reader to broader possibilities and conditions for Black belonging beyond the framework of legal citizenship, which claims to comfort and protect even as it necessitates exclusion and violence. Authors like Scego and Macoggi, who have obtained citizenship or are eligible for it, are perhaps best suited to making this violence inherent in citizenship painstakingly clear.

From early on, works placed under the rubric of Italian migration literature and then Italian postcolonial literature, written by authors of African descent, have offered anticolonial and postcolonial responses to racist and xenophobic violence as well as efforts to depict Black and migrant experiences with aesthetic and literary value. They were not writing purely for the sociological-pedagogical purposes that have historically been foisted upon them.⁹ In these texts, there is a persistent exploration of themes of arrival, belonging, intercultural difference, cultural memory and collective recollection, economic survival, and—especially for the writers from North Africa and the Horn—the ongoing sociopolitical and psychological ramifications of Italy’s colonial history. These narratives, often set in scenes of transit—be it the protagonist’s arrival in Italy, or the return to their African country of origin, or somewhere mid-journey—reveal the difficulties of social integration for migrants, the multiple levels of economic exploitation they face, the disregard and open hostility from some Italian citizens, and the psychological crises produced by their often degrading encounters with European officials, their colonial logics regarding border laws and their often overt white-supremacist beliefs. More recent works have also explored contemporary social and political struggles for asylum seekers, migrant family experiences across the diaspora, and the parallels between fascist Italian colonialism and the contemporary moment. These narratives reveal and add “thickness”—in the sense employed by Sara Ahmed¹⁰—to the intersecting strands of race, gender, and ethnicity that help constitute the Italian national discourse. The flourishing array of current Black Italian writers complicates entrenched either/or binaries regarding the national labeling of literatures and individuals. These narratives thus contribute not only to contemporary and postcolonial literature, but also to the

⁸ I am particularly interested in aspects of the discursive political project of citizenship in Italy that directly impact the lives and well-being of people of African descent. This is not to downplay the racialization and ethnicization historically or presently experienced by other (non-Black) migrants or communities such as the Roma and/or ethnicized Italians (such as Sicilians), or other groups minoritized on the basis of racialized class formations and facing ongoing discrimination steeped in colonial logics. Here, I am tracking the forms of Blackness that exclude people of African descent from being recognized as part of the imagined citizenry and from both legal and affective belonging. For example, would a Sicilian ever be classified under migrant literature, given the extent to which they have been othered in the Italian context? Similarly, to what extent do today’s white Italian Americans have an affective tie to Italy, a sense of national belonging, and even facilitated modes of legal recognition that are not available in the same ways to people of African descent who are born and raised in Italy, speak the Italian language, and may even have (or be eligible for) Italian citizenship?

⁹ An early example of this trend is that Selah Methnani wrote *Immigrato* as a novel, but publishers only accepted it as an autobiography, thereby collapsing the “immigrant’s” experience with the writer’s capacity for imagination and literary skill.

¹⁰ See Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 14. When describing certain methods of understanding affect in the (Western, modern) world, Ahmed notes that “[w]e will also need other kinds of critical and creative writing that offer thick descriptions of the kinds of worlds that might take shape when happiness does not provide a horizon for experience.” She goes on to describe the “thickness in the air” perceived to be brought about by feminist sociality (70). I’m using this dual articulation of “thick” to describe the shifting atmospheric complexity that Black Italian writers offer readers interested in understanding a world not delimited by the kind of “horizon of experience” that equates Italian identity with whiteness.

study and appreciation of Black aesthetic life, Black experiences, and Black resistance to colonial logics and violent racial regimes across the diaspora.¹¹

The power of Black literature in Italy—its capacity for truth-telling, historical imagination, and political resistance—is now more necessary than ever, given the current resurgence of fascist populism across Europe and the West. It is equally important in that it bears witness to the deadliness of migrations across the Mediterranean Sea, with each year more devastating than the last.¹² The sea’s carnage has deeply impacted the social and legal climate around Italian migration, rights to asylum, and Italian citizenship, the changing forms of which continue to shape postcolonial literary works in Italy. Books in Italian from authors of Ethiopian descent, for example, could be excluded from the category of “postcolonial” on technical grounds: while Abyssinia was occupied by Italy from 1936-41, the territory now known as Ethiopia was, strictly speaking, never colonized by any European power.¹³ However, writers like Gabriella Ghermandi, who is of Italian and Ethiopian descent, reckon directly with the memory and the effects of Italian colonialism and occupation. In an interview with Italian studies scholar Daniele Comberati, Ghermandi touches on the impact of representational regimes of sexuality, gender, and race by marking herself as an active rupture and resistance to the Italian imperial and colonial endeavors that impacted her genealogy, saying: “Io dico sempre che il colonialismo nella mia famiglia ha creato danni a quattro generazioni di donne, e io sono quella che chiude” (“I always say that colonialism has harmed four generations of women in my family, but that the cycle ends with me”).¹⁴ I would like to suggest that postcolonial Italian works from Black writers, as well as engaged literary criticism from scholars of Black and postcolonial studies, offer a powerful lens through which the heterogeneity inherent in modes of Black belonging and the racial difference central to our understandings of citizenship and identity become far clearer. This anticolonial and Afro-diasporic mode of reading is marked by a close engagement with Black Italy and Black Italians, all while recognizing that those categories are not coterminous. Put another way, Black life in Italy is not solely bound to the concerns of the Italian citizen-subject or the citizen-in-waiting (the latter term referring to those who must endure the purgatory of being bestowed limited rights and freedoms despite having been born in Italy).¹⁵ When I speak of Black Italy, I am speaking more broadly of the lives, histories, cultural productions, and politics of Black Italians, Black migrants, Black undocumented people, Black domestic workers, Black students or visitors, Black asylum seekers, and other configurations of Black people of African descent in their relation to Italy. My understanding of the Black Mediterranean is

¹¹ See Cedric Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), xii. In this case, the “diaspora” that I repeatedly reference is that of the Black or African diaspora. Although (as I mentioned in n. 6 and again later in this article) the interrelated histories of Italy’s diasporas (via Italian emigration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and also the wave of recent emigration of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, commonly referred to as the *fuga dei cervelli*, or “brain drain”) have also added thickness to transnational questions of citizenship and ethnoracial belonging.

¹² On Italy’s and Europe’s border regimes in relation to the Mediterranean, see Maurizio Albahari, *Crimes of Peace: Mediterranean Migrations at the World’s Deadliest Border* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

¹³ Alberto Sbacchi, *Legacies of Bitterness: Ethiopia and Fascist Italy, 1935-1941* (Asmara: The Red Sea Press, 1997).

¹⁴ See n. 1.

¹⁵ For more on “citizens-in-waiting”—those who are waiting to be incorporated into the national citizenry and whose waiting periods (either historically or individually defined) are in part based on ethnic and racial considerations—see Hiroshi Motomura, *Americans-in-Waiting: The Lost Story of Immigration and Citizenship in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

situated in capacious relation to the African diaspora, while my literary criticism is anchored in readings of Black Italian literary texts (written in Italian or its dialects by people of African descent, either born in or migrated to Italy) that are concerned with Italy, *italianità*, and Black belonging. As a category of analysis, the study of the Black Mediterranean interrogates “the history of racial subordination in the Mediterranean”¹⁶ through the work of activists, academics, writers, and artists invested in that region. This accounts for Italy as a geopolitical space but focuses on certain aspects of the nation (i.e., its policies, borders, and cultural productions), and looks for political insights regarding modes of collective action in response to ongoing racial violence and migration crises. Looming questions of ethnocultural identification mark Italy as an important modern case study for thinking about Black liberation, the future of migration, and belonging as a phenomenon that transcends state formations.

Though still often referred to as “migrant” or “second-generation” writers in mainstream Italian media and popular culture, Italy’s post-migrant/postcolonial writers increasingly include multi-ethnic Italians, such as Italians of East African descent. Such “second-generation” figures challenge the confines of the earlier phases of Italian migration literature by demanding recognition of the transcultural and colonial exchanges that lie at the heart of the republic. One such example is Italian Ethiopian writer Carla Macoggi’s *Kkeywa. Storia di una bimba meticcica*, a narrative that shuttles between multiple grids of intelligibility, upsetting the binary notions of “origin” and “destination.” As with Ghermandi and other Italian writers of Ethiopian descent, Macoggi manages to reject the legacy of colonialism even as she speaks to the material effects of both colonization and occupation. This is part of why *Kkeywa* has been cited as one of the first postcolonial novels in Italian.¹⁷ Another work, Igiaba Scego’s short story “Salsicce,” grapples with colonial history in the wake of antiblack, anti-Muslim, and antimigrant sentiment throughout contemporary Italy and Europe. The postcolonial and Black Italian writings exemplified by Scego’s and Macoggi’s narratives allow us to explore what an explicitly Black Italian literary corpus offers in terms of new and resurgent ways to imagine Black belonging beyond the nation-state and/or ethnonationalist modes of citizenship. In looking at these texts, this article explores how Black Italian women writers have challenged Italy’s ahistorical self-perception as a white European space, while providing a literary account of Italian colonialism that speaks back to entrenched migration and citizenship policies as well as the contemporary sociopolitics that both implicitly and explicitly demand the assimilation or erasure of citizens racialized as nonwhite.

¹⁶ Ida Danewid, “White Innocence in the Black Mediterranean: Hospitality and the Erasure of History,” *Third World Quarterly* 38, no. 7 (2017): 1671. For more recent scholarship on the Black Mediterranean, see Robin D.G. Kelley’s “Foreword” to Cedric Robinson’s *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2nd edn. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), xi-xxvi; Esther Sánchez-Pardo, “Adrift on the Black Mediterranean Diaspora: African Migrant Writing in Spain,” *Social Identities* 17, no. 1 (2011): 105-20; Khalil Saucier and Tryon Woods, “Slavery’s Afterlife in the Euro-Mediterranean Basin,” *Open Democracy* (June 19, 2015); Camilla Hawthorne, “In Search of Black Italia: Notes on Race, Belonging, and Activism in the Black Mediterranean,” *Transition* 123 (2017): 152-74; SA Smythe, “The Black Mediterranean and the Politics of Imagination,” *Middle East Report: “Suffering and the Limits of Relief”* 48, no. 286 (2018): 3-9; and Gabriele Proglia, “Geography of Emotions across the Black Mediterranean: Oral Memories and Dissonant Heritages of Slavery and the Colonial Past,” in *Dissonant Heritages and Memories in Contemporary Europe*, ed. Tuuli Lähdesmäki et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 249-72.

¹⁷ Fulvio Pezzarossa, “Migrant writers? Tell them to stop! An overview of recent Italian migrant works,” *Reading Italy* (blog), last modified July 29, 2013, readingitaly.wordpress.com/2013/07/29/boundaries-academia/.

“Salsicce”

In “Salsicce,” Scego undertakes a narrative where self-searching and self-definition are achieved through an attempt at cultural integration—an attempt that is ultimately rejected at both a linguistic and an embodied level. A Black Italian of Somali descent born in Rome in 1974 to upper-middle class parents fleeing the regime of Somali dictator Siad Barre, Scego is a journalist, activist, radio programmer, and novelist. She has published several novels and attained a relatively mainstream following in Italy. Recently, Scego published an edited collection entitled *Future. Il domani narrato dalle voci di oggi*, featuring creative and non-fiction writing from both emerging and established Black Italian women writers who discuss roots, legacies, generations, and the future.¹⁸ In “Salsicce,” Scego uses an ironic and humorous narrative style to illustrate the violent seductions of cultural belonging, depicting a protagonist during different stages of identity formation: from self-uncertainty, to recognition of racial and cultural differences, to attempts at assimilation, to resistance, to defiance, and finally to a celebration of cultural difference and her own identity. What’s more, Scego’s narrative has proven timely given contemporary cases of racist and xenophobic leadership using state power and legal mechanisms to dehumanize and hyper-regulate not only the migrant and refugee populations, but the more general population of non-white people in Italy, with or without legal citizenship.

The story takes place in Rome on the eve of *Ferragosto* and the Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, where the unnamed speaker suddenly feels compelled to purchase sausages. This decision comes to her spontaneously and is striking when we discover that she is an observant Sunni Muslim to whom pork is, of course, forbidden. Both *Ferragosto* and the Assumption are iconic Italian holidays, one secular and the other Catholic. When the woman selling the sausages inquires, “Ma che cara, ti sei convertita? Non era peccato per te mangiare salsicce?” (“What’s this, love, have you converted? Wasn’t it a sin for you to eat sausages?”), the speaker feels interpellated as a sinner and opts for another sin, lying, to deflect further questions.¹⁹ In its first few lines, “Salsicce” demonstrates how questions of religion and religious difference are deeply in tension with any citizenship project grounded in cultural belonging. Given the global rise of Islamophobia, as well as the historical relationship between the Catholic Church and the Italian State, questions of Muslim religious identity can appear marginal or irrelevant to questions of Italian identity. Indeed, the codification and banalization of Italian cultural values associated with citizenship in reality serves the continued dispossession and displacement of those who remain outside of its framework of possibility, outside of the project known as “Europe” writ large. We are made witnesses to the personal toll this takes when Scego’s speaker places the sausages on her kitchen counter and feels torn between her religious principles and her desire for cultural belonging. She asks herself, “Guardo l’impudico pacco e mi chiedo se ne vale veramente la pena, se mi ingoio queste salsicce una per una, la gente lo capirà che sono italiana come loro? Identica a loro, o sarà stata una bravata inutile?” (“I look at the shameful parcel and I ask myself: Is it worth it? If I swallow these sausages one by one, will people understand that I am Italian just like them? Exactly the same as them? Or will it all have been a useless act of bravado?”).²⁰

¹⁸ Igiaba Scego, ed., *Future. Il domani narrato dalle voci di oggi* (Rome: Effequ, 2019).

¹⁹ Scego, “Salsicce,” 25.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

The reader soon discovers that the speaker's out-of-character behavior has been provoked by a civil service exam she recently took, one open only to Italian citizens. The exam has brought out deep insecurities about her status and ability to be considered a "true" Italian. In the context of the story, this insecurity is a response to the passing of the Bossi-Fini law, whose announcement she reads: "A tutti gli extracomunitari che vorranno rinnovare il soggiorno saranno prese preventivamente le impronte digitali" ("All non-EEC immigrants who wish to renew their residency permits must be fingerprinted as a preventive measure").²¹ The law—which was passed in Italy in 2002 and has more recently been followed by similar laws throughout the European Union—tightened restrictions on immigrant workers and asylum seekers by mandating the fingerprinting of all *extracomunitari* (foreigners) requesting or renewing a *permesso di soggiorno* ("residency permit" or "visa"). The law was a tightening of the regulatory measures begun with the Martelli Law, and both laws have led to vast fingerprinting and surveillance operations in the nation's contemporary detention centers, as well as generally inhospitable conditions for refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants. The Bossi-Fini Law was initially promoted by the right-wing government as a "preventive" measure against crime. It was overtly xenophobic in that it did nothing to remedy the structural conditions that led to most actual crime, including those where foreigners were more likely to be victims rather than perpetrators. The law's capacity to enable racial profiling of those who may have had the legal right to settle in Italy, as well as those who were citizens, is reflected in the anxiety of Scego's speaker. She knows on an intellectual level that her "bel passaporto era bordeaux e sottolineava a tutti gli effetti la [sua] nazionalità italiana" ("beautiful passport is burgundy red, and it proclaims, for all intents and purposes, [her] Italian nationality").²² Still, the fact of having appropriate papers does not quell her doubts, and in fact reveals the false promise that citizenship extends via the document's acknowledgment of conditional legal rights. She wonders, "quel passaporto era veritiero? Ero davvero un'italiana nell'intimo? O piuttosto dovevo fare la fila e dare come tanti le mie impronte?" ("does that passport speak the truth? Deep down, was I truly Italian? Or was I supposed to line up to be fingerprinted like so many others?").²³

At the time "Salsicce" was written, a request for fingerprints by the Carabinieri (Italy's national paramilitary police force) was akin to racist "show me your papers" laws in U.S. states like Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, as well as the impetus for immigration raids in Britain—which have intensified in the Brexit era—where the government has chosen to phenotypically identify and implicate "the racialized Other" without due process. So ultimately, whether she was a citizen or not, the speaker's fears were valid for those perceived as different from what an Italian citizen should look like on racial grounds or by ethnoreligious markers. Biopolitical belonging on the state's own terms will always be fraught, and the dilemma of Scego's speaker provokes the question of what else is possible: even if citizenship in Italy *were* available to those who seek it, citizenship proves to not be enough to guarantee basic rights and social support. "Salsicce" foreshadowed by a decade the citizenship debates (on *ius soli*, *ius sanguinis*, and *ius culturae*) that have taken place in recent years, using irony and hyperbole to illustrate the violence of the cultural option.

Scego highlights the personal impact of such policies when her speaker recounts the litany of questions she and others like her must face. In one exchange, the speaker recalls the woman who oversaw her civil service exam, who was emboldened enough (either by the security of her

²¹ Ibid., 26.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

ethnoracial attachment, or by her bureaucratically superior position as the examiner) to ask: “Piu somala, più italiana? Forse è per tre quarti somala e un quarto italiana? O forse è vero tutto il contrario?” (“Are you more Somali or more Italian? Maybe you’re three-quarters Somali and a quarter Italian? Or maybe the opposite is true?”).²⁴ The exchange leads the speaker to a self-questioning inventory of her Italian and Somali attributes, all of them sensual and aesthetic characteristics or personal habits. She starts by saying, “Credo di essere una donna senza identità. O meglio con più identità...” (“I feel like I’m a woman without an identity. Or better yet, one with several identities...”),²⁵ and then presents an ironic list of national-cum-cultural attributes:

Vediamo un po’, mi sento somala quando (1) bevo il te con il cardamomo, i chiodi di garofano e la cannella; (2) recito le cinque preghiere quotidiane verso la Mecca; (3) mi metto il *dirah* (abito somalo); (4) profumo la casa con l’incenso e l’*unsi*; (5) vado ai matrimoni in cui gli uomini si siedono da una parte ad annoiarsi e le donne dall’altra a ballare, divertirsi, mangiare, insomma a godersi la vita; (6) mangio la banana insieme al riso, nello stesso piatto, intendo; (7) cuciniamo tutta quella carne con il riso o *l’angeelo* (una specie di focaccia); (8) ci vengono a trovare parenti dal Canada, dagli Stati Uniti, dalla Gran Bretagna, dall’Olanda, dalla Svezia, dalla Germania...tutti sradicati come noi dalla madrepatria; (9) parlo in somalo e mi inserisco con toni acutissimi in una conversazione concitata; (10) guardo il mio naso allo specchio e lo trovo perfetto; (11) soffro per amore; (12) piango per la mia terra straziata dalla guerra civile; più altre 100 cose, e chi se le ricorda tutte!

[...]

Mi sento italiana quando: (1) faccio una colazione dolce; (2) vado a visitare mostre, musei e monumenti; (3) parlo di sesso, uomini e depressione con le mie amiche; (4) vedo i film di Alberto Sordi, Vittorio Gassman, Marcello Mastroianni, Totò, Roberto Benigni; (5) mangio un gelato con stracciatella, pistacchio e cocco; (6) mi ricordo a memoria le parole del “Cinque maggio” di Alessandro Manzoni; (7) sento per radio e Tv le canzoni di Gianni Morandi; (8) mi commuovo quando guardo il mio ragazzo negli occhi; (9) critico come una iena il governo, il sindaco, l’assessore; (10) gesticolo; (11) piango per i partigiani troppo spesso dimenticati; (12) canticchio sotto la doccia; più altre cento cose, e chi se le ricorda tutte! [...] Io mi sento tutto, ma a volte non mi sento niente. Per esempio, sono niente quando sento la frase: “Questi stranieri sono la rovina dell’Italia” e mi sento gli occhi della gente appiccicati addosso tipo Big Bubble.²⁶

(Let’s see. I feel Somali when: (1) I drink tea with cardamom, cloves, and cinnamon in it; (2) I pray towards Mecca five times a day; (3) I wear my *dirah* (a Somali garment); (4) I burn incense and *unsi* at home; (5) I go to weddings where men sit over to one side, bored, while on the opposite side women dance, have fun, eat...in short, enjoy life; (6) I eat bananas with rice (in the same dish, that is); (7) we cook up all that meat with rice or *angeelo* (a kind of focaccia bread); (8)

²⁴ Ibid., 28.

²⁵ Ibid., 29.

²⁶ Ibid., 29-30.

relatives come to visit from Canada, the United States, Britain, Holland, Sweden, Germany, the Arab Emirates...all uprooted, like we are, from our country of origin; (9) I speak Somali and add my two cents in loud, shrill tones whenever there's an animated conversation; (10) I look at my nose in the mirror and I think it's perfect; (11) I suffer for love; (12) I cry for my country that's been ravaged by civil war; plus a hundred other things I just can't remember right now!

[...]

I feel Italian when: (1) I prepare a sugary breakfast; (2) I visit exhibitions, museums, and monuments; (3) I talk about sex, men, and depression with my friends; (4) I watch films with Alberto Sordi, Vittorio Gassman, Marcello Mastroianni, Totò, and Roberto Benigni; (5) I eat gelato with stracciatella, pistachio and coconut; (6) I remember by heart the words to Alessandro Manzoni's "The 5th of May;" (7) I hear Gianni Morandi's songs on TV and on the radio; (8) I feel moved when I look at my boyfriend in the eyes; (9) I'm hypercritical of the government, the mayor, and the councilmembers; (10) I gesticulate; (11) I cry for the partisans, who are forgotten too often; (12) I hum in the shower; plus more than a hundred other things, and who remembers them all! [...] I feel like everything, but sometimes I feel like nothing. For example, I feel like nothing when I hear the phrase, "These foreigners are ruining Italy" and I feel people's eyes stuck on me, like a piece of Big Bubble gum.)

The coexistence and interplay of what are often described as "multiple" identities—as though individuals were formed by neatly quantifiable percentages of different cultural practices fused together—ironically challenges any reductive attempt to essentialize what it means to be Italian and/or Somali: as Scego's speaker hesitates to compartmentalize or "fraction" herself, her mind goes to a list of cultural identifying qualities that are steeped in shifting moods, actions, and temporalities.

However, the speaker's inner debate and her attempt to capture a secure feeling of belonging via the acts that she lists is violently neutralized by the totalizing term assigned to migrants in the public sphere, by the people that stare at her to subsume her identity into otherness. The word *straniero* ("foreigner") amalgamates and crushes all perceived and material difference into a reductive, knowable homogeneity that is as incriminating to her as it is inescapable. Thus, the speaker, despite her Italian passport and Italian habits, sees her heterogeneous identity swallowed into nothingness by the epistemic violence of essentializing language. On the one hand, scholars such as Maurizio Ambrosini write optimistically about the harmonious possibilities of cultural difference, suggesting that, "l'invenzione di inedite forme di identificazione, nel nostro caso di italiani 'col trattino' (marocchino-italiani, cino-italiani, ecc.) individua come risorsa la possibilità di riferirsi contemporaneamente a due mondi percepiti come distinti, di essere membri di un gruppo senza rinunciare ad altre possibili appartenenze" ("The invention of unprecedented forms of identification, in this case "hyphenated Italians" (e.g., Moroccan-Italians, Chinese-Italians, etc.), affords the possibility to simultaneously refer to two worlds perceived as distinct and the ability to be members of a group without giving up other possible affinities").²⁷ Scego, on the

²⁷ Maurizio Ambrosini, *Richiesti e respinti. L'immigrazione in Italia: come e perché* (Milan: il Saggiatore, 2010), 210-11. The invention of unprecedented forms of identification, in our case of "hyphenated Italians" (e.g., Moroccan-Italian, Chinese-Italian, etc.), provides the opportunity to refer simultaneously to two worlds perceived as distinct, to be members of a group without giving up other possible memberships.

other hand, illustrates how this harmonious cultural ideal can be swiftly undermined by a hostile political landscape that breeds insecurity and “migratizes” (that is, renders people “migrant” regardless of legal status) Black citizens along perceived ethnocultural and national lines.²⁸ Wondering about what to do with her sausages, Scego’s speaker remarks, “Allora che devo fare? Devo mangiarmi la salsiccia con il vomito per dimostrare di non avere la coda di paglia? Per dimostrare che sono anch’io una sorella d’Italia con tutti i crismi? Di avere impronte *made in Italy* a denominazione di origine controllata?” (“So what should I do? Should I eat the sausage and vomit to prove that I am not oversensitive? To prove that I, too, am a fully anointed Italian citizen? That my fingerprints are “Made in Italy” with documented denomination of origin?”).²⁹

Rather than producing a list of characteristics that mirror one another complementarily, the speaker illustrates the degree of incommensurability and perhaps even opacity in this endeavor. As she tries to be *come loro* (“like them”) with an act that transgresses her Muslim Somali identity, the speaker recognizes that the very desire to be *come loro* is ultimately what marks her as Other, as quite literally not “one of them.” The question that remains is whether she could ever be accepted as the same even when denying a core aspect of herself—renouncing her religion—or whether that would amount to self-abnegation or denial. The reality of her dilemma is as conspicuous as the stench of the inadequately cooked sausages sitting repulsively on the blue plate, its delicate design of a clear ethnic Somali and Muslim origin, chosen to commemorate the event. Her ignorance of the prescribed cooking methods, her indecisiveness, her disgust before swallowing, are deeply emblematic of her cultural difference. As she describes their foulness, colorlessness, and stench, the sausages come to represent an act of self-erasure perpetrated in the name of a fierce desire to belong, in the name of coercive social and cultural assimilation: “Certo, se mi mangio questa pseudosalsiccia coperta di squame di vomito color canarino sarò forse italiana? Ma la Somalia? Che ci faccio con la Somalia, me la fotto?” (“Surely, if I eat this pseudo-sausage covered with canary yellow vomit, then I might be Italian? But then, what about Somalia? What am I going to do with Somalia, do I just say to hell with it?”).³⁰

In addition to being symbolic of the violence inherent in the project of cultural integration, the sausages also become a cipher for the speaker’s ultimate rejection and resistance to a modality of belonging that demands her own erasure. As she literally regurgitates the citizenship project, the sausages are subverted into something offensive and unwholesome. What is commonly understood to be desirable for a stereotypical Italian has revealed itself to be nauseating and even horrifying to the speaker. Figuratively, what was supposed to bring comforting assimilation, belonging, and identity is now recognized as aggressive and dehumanizing, something that marks her further as an outsider in her inability to consume, an act that confirms the invisibility that the word *straniero* has already semantically decreed. Scego politicizes this rejection by connecting it to the violence taking place throughout Italy and around the world. After vomiting up the sausage, the protagonist reads the newspaper, finding accounts of global poverty, local political scandals, and the routine assaults on Black people in the city streets—all phenomena that have not abated in the decade since Scego’s story was first published. Her glosses of a scene of police brutality are particularly prescient in the context of today’s Black Lives Matter movement. The speaker cynically remarks that to be born and hailed as “Black” means to have no respite on a global scale, no escape from pervasive antiblackness.

²⁸ Alyosxa Tudor, “Cross-Fadings of Racialisation and Migratisation: The Postcolonial Turn in Western European Gender and Migration Studies,” *Gender, Place & Culture* 25, no. 7 (2018): 1057-72.

²⁹ Scego, “Salsicce,” 24.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

She recoils at the fact that, given the social and economic realities through the ages and across the diaspora, Black people like her are still consistently gaslit and accused of being “hyper-sensitive” to issues of racial difference, most of which are downplayed—if not fully unacknowledged—on a daily basis. Ultimately, however, Scego’s speaker arrives at a place of peace and self-respect. Purging the seduction of cultural assimilation, she wonders why she would ever think of eating the sausages, throwing them away to the eventual news that she has passed her civil service exam. “Salsicce” is a story about how even those of us who are convinced of our (right to) belonging can still experience moments of deep insecurity when confronted with the consequences of an illusory citizenship project that never really imagined us as part of it.

The (A)Historical Perceptions of White Italia

In addition to offering meaningful theorizations and responses to the debates around citizenship, Black narratives contain another layer pertaining to the anti-Black racism that emerges from Italy’s ahistorical self-narration as white. Most nation states (in Europe and beyond) cling in some sense to a set of myths and assumptions about their origin stories or national characters, and Italy is no exception in such practices of geo-cultural self-positioning. However, those nations with a history of colonization tend to reckon with and absolve that bleak history by differing means. For instance, Italy has had to account for the colonial occupation of its Southern territories, which upsets the ideological narrative of the nation as a racially pure place.³¹ This problem was further complicated by the contemporary and historical experiences of Italian emigrants, who, migrating the United States and other countries from the nineteenth century onward, encountered violent processes of assimilation, discrimination, exclusion from the workplace, border detention, and even lynching or other racialized harm known to be common forms of anti-Black violence.³²

Where people of African descent are concerned, Italy has often cast them as perpetual “newcomers,” a false belief still present at the nation’s core. This rendering of Italy as a fundamentally white Euro-Mediterranean place is indicative of the kind of racism that British historian Paul Gilroy has said “rests on the ability to contain blacks in the present, to repress and to deny the past.”³³ One literary example of this would be the fact that Scego received the Eks & Tra prize for “migrant writers” in 2003 despite not being a migrant to Italy at all, and despite the fact that her parents moved to Italy in 1969, over three decades after Somalia was colonized by Italy. In selectively repressing its own history, Italy’s current sociopolitical establishment often blames increasing waves of xenophobia and anti-Black sentiment solely on the unprecedented rise of immigration into Italy and the tremendous cultural change it portends, never mentioning colonialism and its aftermath. The narrative surrounding Italy’s racialized others as perpetual newcomers spans seemingly divergent political ideologies. A conservative interpretation of this narrative suggests that immigration has so overwhelmed and altered the face of the nation that it is no longer possible to point to Italy’s monoracial or monocultural character—as though it were ever thus. For the liberal or progressive wanting to believe in the moral arc of sociopolitical

³¹ See Stuart Hall, “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 5 (1986): 5-27.

³² See Laura E. Ruberto and Joseph Sciorra, eds., *New Italian Migrations to the United States*, 2 vols. (Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

³³ Paul Gilroy, *“There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack”: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 12.

progress, Italy should be embraced as an emergent multicultural nation despite vehement right-wing insistence to the contrary and generalized assumptions of racial and ethnocultural homogeneity. Regardless of these racialized assumptions, it is worth noting that the literature produced by Black people and other racialized groups in the last few decades has not only reflected these changes but has also historicized what was previously held to be a purely contemporary shift.³⁴

It is not my intent to interrogate the nuanced social changes linked to contemporary immigration, which have been well documented in recent years.³⁵ While the recent boom of migration into Italy has coincided with and contributed to many sociopolitical changes in popular Italian society and culture, it is inaccurate to see the legal response, media attention, and public sentiment against immigration as resulting only from this recent phenomenon. It is necessary, instead, to unravel how legal response, media attention, and anti-immigrant sentiment all function to obscure how deeply the logics of colonialism are embedded in contemporary Italian national identity. Black Italian literary productions have not only underscored the historical dimensions of Black African presence in Italy, but also the varied ways in which alienation can be structurally produced through narratives of racialized groups as threats to Europeanness.³⁶

Although a hierarchizing of race and racialization is often cast as a recent phenomenon in Italy, it in fact has developed over centuries, as demonstrated by Cedric Robinson's scholarship in *Black Marxism* and several other historiographies of racial laws and ethnonationalism during the periods of fascism and Risorgimento.³⁷ Intra-Mediterranean mobility (including North African) and Italy's North and East African occupations heavily impacted those racial hierarchies before and during the colonial period. As Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller contend in the introduction to their edited volume, *Italian Colonialism*, "although Italian colonialism was more restricted in geographical scope and duration than the French and British empires, it had no less an impact on the development of metropolitan conceptions of race, national identity, and geopolitical imaginaries."³⁸ In Italy, colonial policies and the postcolonial aftermath continue to influence a national identity reinforced by imperialism and racial capitalism. But while race and racism have fundamentally shaped the establishment, ideologies, and practices of the Italian Republic, race is not named for the explicit category of social, political, and economic subordination that it is in this ideological and constitutional context.

³⁴ Caterina Romeo, "Racial Evaporations: Representing Blackness in African Italian Postcolonial Literature," in *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, ed. Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (London: Palgrave, 2012), 221-36.

³⁵ For a discussion of immigration's variegated impact on life and sociopolitics in Italy, on migrants, citizens, and asylum seekers, with special attention to gender and racialization, see: Alessandro Dal Lago, *Non-Persons: The Exclusion of Migrants in a Global Society*, trans. Marie Orton (Milan: IPOC di Pietro Condemi, 2009); Gaia Giuliani, *Race, Nation, and Gender in Modern Italy: Intersectional Representations in Visual Culture* (London: Palgrave, 2019); Daniela Merolla and Sandra Ponzanesi, eds., *Migrant Cartographies: New Cultural and Literary Spaces in Post-Colonial Europe* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2005); Graziella Parati, "Looking through Non-Western Eyes: Immigrant Women's Autobiographical Narratives in Italian," in *Writing New Identities: Gender, Nationalism and Immigration in the New European Subjects*, ed. Gisella Brinker-Gabler and Sidonie Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 118-42; and Aliza Wong, *Race and the Nation in Liberal Italy, 1861-1911: Meridionalism, Empire, and Diaspora* (London: Palgrave, 2006).

³⁶ Rhiannon Welch, "Race and Colonial (Re)productivity," *Annali d'italianistica* 32 (2014): 197-213.

³⁷ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

³⁸ Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, eds., *Italian Colonialism* (London: Palgrave, 2005).

A postcolonial perspective as the framework for an analysis of Italian culture and the literature of Black Italians can thus create a vital sense of both temporal and spatial continuity regarding the ongoing afterlives of colonization.³⁹ That continuity undermines the discontinuity and erasure fomented by the European racial regime—the racial monologues that the Italian state has tried to adapt and maintain since its Unification. These racial monologues claim that the individuals and ethnicities that are “originary” to the land known as Europe should be ahistorically understood as white and Mediterranean, and thus that anyone categorized as non-white ultimately and epistemically belongs outside of the European frame. This belief system obscures the consolidations and internal migrations of various groups and ethnicities that are in fact categorized as white, all while omitting the centuries-long European histories of Black people and other racialized people, such as the Romani. In *Forgeries of Memory*, Black radical philosopher Robinson explains:

racial regimes are constructed social systems in which race is proposed as a justification for the relations of power. While necessarily articulated with accruals of power, the covering conceit of a racial regime is a makeshift patchwork masquerading as memory and the immutable. Nevertheless, racial regimes do possess history, that is, discernible origins and mechanisms of assembly. But racial regimes are unrelentingly hostile to their exhibition. This antipathy exists because a discoverable history is incompatible with a racial regime and from the realization that, paradoxically, so are its social relations.⁴⁰

This is not merely a restatement of the truism that “race is a construct,” but goes further by asserting that built into the “construct” are measures to prevent its own revelation as such. This is arguably the very idea of “Europe”—that is, the ideology behind Europe, the way it aims to represent and reproduce itself in the global imagination, how it has come to be interpreted on spatial and discursive terrains.⁴¹ Robinson’s analysis underscores the connection between the present and the past—including the history of colonialism, emigration, and intranational migration—thereby illustrating how Italians have occupied both positions of hegemony and subalternity in different historical periods and geographical locations, and exploring how these shifts in position can be caused by migration events. Such a perspective is crucial to understanding how Italian national identity was constructed largely in response to such events and why there is such a strong resistance in Italy to extending the privilege of *italianità* to migrants and subsequent generations.

Moreover, a postcolonial understanding of Black life in Italy creates a spatial transnational continuity with other European countries which also have colonial histories, reinforcing the idea of diasporic communities that share a colonial legacy. Black Italian women writers, through their cultural productions, are unearthing and opening colonial archives, denouncing contemporary racism as the legacy of colonialism, and identifying processes of racialization at the heart of national identity formation. Many of these writers have also shed light on the existing power relations between Italians, migrants, asylum seekers, indigenous and other peoples, and have underscored the Italian population’s resistance to acknowledging the intersection of *italianità*

³⁹ Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, eds., *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* (London: Palgrave, 2012).

⁴⁰ Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory*, xii.

⁴¹ See V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

and Blackness, part of a continuing self-perception as ahistorical, as uniformly Catholic, as based around the primacy of white heterosexual men.

Kkeywa

Whereas Scego speaks to and ironizes the flawed project of cultural integration from the point of view of an Italian-born Muslim speaker, Macoggi underscores the colonial violence that echoes through the national project, focusing on processes of forced Italianization and the inability of those coerced into the process to fully cohere or assimilate. Macoggi's *Kkeywa. Storia di una bimba meticcica* reveals the painful and racist underbelly of projects of national assimilation through stark depictions of the multiple traumas endured by the young protagonist. With her poly-modal writing style and insistence on speaking back to Italy's colonial legacy, Macoggi offers us another means of resistance to the white supremacist project/path that Italy seems intent on pursuing. Macoggi grew up in Addis Abeba, Ethiopia, before being moved to Bologna as a young girl and eventually studying law at the University of Bologna. Where Scego asks whether she is more Italian or Somali and how to negotiate that perceived duality, Macoggi's narrative offers "il legame tra migrazione e meticciano" ("the link between migration and miscegenation").⁴² Her protagonist asks "Non ero forse diventata una vera italiana?" ("Hadn't I become a real Italian?"), ultimately lamenting the failed project of becoming and portraying a different orientation than Scego's to Italy's colonial/occupational project in the Horn of Africa.⁴³

Macoggi writes in a style that can be described as part memoir, part theatrical script, and part self-reflexive manifesto. Thus, *Kkeywa* represents multiple instances of hybridity on the levels of both form and content. The title itself is from the Ethiopian language of Amharic and means *la rossa* or "the red one," a name that evokes the epithets—"källəswa" ("half-breed" or "mixed blood"), "di carnagione chiara" ("light-skinned")⁴⁴—that are directed at the twelve-year-old Ethiopian-born protagonist, Fiorella. In the novel, Fiorella must endure a series of traumas and resignifications in gender and racial identity as she journeys from Ethiopia to Italy. As the narrative progresses, we learn that Fiorella's father is presumed dead and that her mother was coercively separated from her at age six. While interned at a "boarding school" similar to those indigenous children have been forced to attend in the U.S., Canada, and Australia, she is effectively kidnapped, taken to Italy, and made to assimilate into her father's culture in the continuation of the narrative.⁴⁵ He had been a soldier in the Italian colonial army in Ethiopia, garrisoned with her mother, an Ethiopian woman. *Kkeywa* narrates not only Fiorella's physical travels, but also the internal psychological conflicts she experiences because of her parents' asymmetrical origins. Her relationships with the different adults that populate the text are largely encounters of failed assimilation, which she perceives as a lacking on her part—as though identity were experienced quantitatively and hers is bound to be forever "incomplete."

We see a similar quantification in "Salsicce," as Scego's speaker muses ironically about the respective percentages of her Italian and Somali identities based on the reductive and aggressive questions she gets from strangers. The theme of learning (and indeed "un-learning") reveals the difficulties of living an unyielding "in-betweenness," and the hardships of constantly failing to meet the colonial and white-supremacist standards of Italian acculturation. It also illustrates the

⁴² Carla Macoggi, *Kkeywa. Storia di una bimba meticcica* (Rome: Sensibili alle Foglie, 2011), 12.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

⁴⁵ Carla Macoggi, *La nemesi della rossa* (Rome: Sensibili alle foglie, 2012).

damage left by coercive hetero-assimilationist practices, such as the anti-homosexuality laws that were compounded by the penalization of *madamismo* during the fascist occupation of Ethiopia and Eritrea (where it became illegal to have sex or produce offspring with Black Africans or other colonized subjects).⁴⁶

Kkeywa's narrative intriguingly collapses the adult protagonist's memory and the twelve-year-old's lived experience, blurring the line between "then" and "now" as Fiorella shares her diasporic experiences of forced Italianization. As the reader experiences the memoiristic novel through a series of flashbacks, the phenotypical features that denote Fiorella's mixed racial identity mark her as Other in each regimented space—and time—that she inhabits. The narrative traces how the often coercive project of assimilation has impacted Fiorella through both the imposition of being raised as an Italian Catholic and through her internalized alienation from Italian and Ethiopian culture. The book recounts how her voice and agency are plundered by various forces (occupation, religion, personal tragedy) that have as a common denominator the lack of respect for those who are more likely to experience social death. In one moment of particularly abject alienation, Fiorella does not see herself anywhere and she tells us that she cannot identify a narrative or a space wherein the senselessness of her loss, displacement, and psychic harm can be made clear:

No, no. Ho vissuto una vita non mia. Nulla di quel che è stato scritto parla di me. Nulla di quel che è scritto è mai stato attraversato dal moto del mio cuore e dal fluire del mio sangue... Venti anni sono passati da quel primo volo. Tempo di libri proibiti e di segreti. Che nessuno mai raccontò... Fiorella non smetteva di frugare nel suo passato che la lacerava. Gli anni trascorsi da quel primo volo erano stati pieni di giorni di dolore.

Layšə Aləcələm. Malinconia e tristezza. Voleva capire perché.

Non trovava nessuno che le spiegasse.⁴⁷

(No, no. I've lived a life that isn't mine. None of what has been written speaks about me. None of what's been written has ever come across my heartbeat or the flow of my blood... Twenty years have passed since that first flight. The time of banned books and secrets. That no one ever told her... Fiorella could not stop rummaging around in the past that tore through her. The years that passed since that first flight had been days filled with of pain.

Layšə Aləcələm. Melancholy and sadness. She wanted to understand why.

She couldn't find anyone to explain it to her.)

Fiorella struggles through the memories of her solitary childhood as she tries to compose her own origin story, one in which her true voice can finally be embodied: "Voglio mettere ordine in questa confusione. Scrivere per eliminare l'imprecisione. Ripensare a tutto per cancellare lo

⁴⁶ Ruth Iyob, "Madamismo and Beyond: The Construction of Eritrean Women," *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 22, no. 2 (2000), 217-38.

⁴⁷ Macoggi, *La nemesi della rossa*, 16.

scompiglio. Rimuovere l'incoerenza della vita con le parole. Nuove parole in sostituzione di quelle mai dette, mai pronunciate, diventate silenzio doloroso. Silenzio così intenso da diventare un dolore incontenibile" ("I want to bring order to this confusion. Write to eliminate the imprecision. Rethink everything to clear the confusion. Remove the inconsistency of life with words. New words to replace those never said, never uttered, have become painful silence. Silence so intense as to become an uncontrollable pain").⁴⁸

Kkeywa addresses problems of ambivalence, isolation, and living in duality. The book draws the reader into a vortex of flashbacks that show Fiorella trying to reconcile her existence as she searches for her own past and portrays her humanity in the aftermath of a dehumanizing Italianization process. Although heavily autobiographical, Macoggi's narrative remains intentionally categorized as fiction. She notes that, "Quando scrissi questo racconto desideravo che il 'prologo' fosse fiction allo 'stato puro,' nonostante avessi utilizzato un documento originale del periodo relativo alla guerra dichiarata dall'Italia all'Etiopia e la conseguente occupazione del Paese del Corno d'Africa" ("When I wrote this story I wanted the 'prologue' to be 'pure' fiction, even though I had used an original document of the period of the war declared by Italy unto Ethiopia and the country's subsequent occupation in the Horn of Africa").⁴⁹ In this instance, *nonostante* means "despite" or "even though," and it could be that Macoggi is narrating her desire to produce a purely fictional prologue, as though her inclusion of "an original document of the period" risks thwarting that classification. Or perhaps the "document" too is fictionalized, even if it speaks to real historical occurrences. What this highlights is how Macoggi disorients the reader as to the verisimilitude of the narrative, and thus reveals a greater fiction—that there is always a clear-cut distinction between history and fiction.⁵⁰ Macoggi's prologue alludes to the construction of a "metahistorical narrative," one that employs the historical imagination to write a more capacious, literary form of historical testimony. Having studied law, she is also familiar with such things as precedent and verifiability. Not only is she flouting the maxims of traditional historiography, but also those of legal writing. Macoggi's writing is an articulation of Black resistance that speaks back to any refusal to recognize the contemporary ramifications of Italy's colonial history. In *Kkeywa*, the colonial past is rendered inescapable in the literary and legal realms, and its impact is laid bare by replacing colonizer narratives with the gripping intimacy of Macoggi's writing and Fiorella's remembering.

As a literary writer, Macoggi is of course familiar with the imaginative blurring of fact and fiction. She writes under several pseudonyms, which (unlike the migrant writers of the 1990s) she uses to distance herself from the characters she creates. She makes a statement about her motivations for writing through her rejection of gendered naming (all of the pseudonyms she employs as an author are intentionally gender-neutral). Names, naming, and the politics of recognition are among the deepest concerns in her writing. The act of addressing and responding, mediated as it may be by the performative forces of language, exceeds the formal structures of mere naming and bearing witness: "language always fails us."⁵¹ Thus, I would like to suggest that the literary productions of Black Italian writers such as Macoggi engage in a kind of oppositional onomastics, a political allegory that mobilizes a shuttling self-recognition and self-naming that does not fit within normal racial, cultural, or national paradigms. These oppositional

⁴⁸ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁹ Macoggi, *Kkeywa*, 11.

⁵⁰ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

⁵¹ Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015).

onomastics run counter to colonial onomastics, which I would call the possessive imperative. Colonial onomastics involve a politics of naming places that have already been named—places like Mumbai, India, or Baraawe, Somalia—to mark them as sites of imperial or colonial possession. A prime example of the possessive imperative is the Roman Empire’s name for the Mediterranean Sea: *Mare nostrum* (“Our Sea”), re-purposed in 2013 by the Italian government’s coastal immigration monitoring program, *Operazione Mare nostrum*.

The negotiations of oppositional onomastics can be found in Ubah Cristina Ali Farah’s *Madre piccola* (*Little Mother*), where the Italo-Somali protagonist Domenica Axad wears her intercultural and interreligious duality on her sleeve, oscillating between the two names that both mean “Sunday”—the former in Italian and the latter in Somali—based on affect and circumstance. Fiorella bears the marker “*kkeywa*” in Ethiopia after she cannot shake the mark of being “fereng” (a foreigner), just as she is seen as a half-breed once in Italy: Macoggi reclaims her protagonist’s name in the book’s title. And Scego, in the preface to her story “Identity,” contextualizes her own name:

Igiaba Scego cerca risposte. Quasi un destino naturale il suo. È scritto sia nel Dna sia nel nome. Infatti Igiaba in arabo ha la stessa radice della parola risposta. Lei lo ha scoperto a Tunisi un paio di anni fa, in una scuola di arabo. “Ora ho capito tutto!” si è detta. “Elementare Watson” ha aggiunto, nonostante Watson non fosse nei pariggi.⁵²

(Igiaba Scego is looking for answers. Hers is an almost natural destiny. It’s written both in her DNA and in her name. In fact, “Igiaba” in Arabic has the same root as the word “answer.” She found this out a couple of years ago at an Arabic school in Tunis. “Now I’ve understood it all!” she told herself. “Elementary, my dear Watson,” she added, even though Watson wasn’t in the neighborhood.)

The pseudonym that Macoggi often used, Amete G. Netza, exemplifies what she ironically referred to as her *italopiche* or *etioliane* origins, as well as her desire to reconcile those two sides. This pseudonym, like the lives of the author and her protagonists, contains an embedded micro-narrative of Italy and Ethiopia’s shared history. The first and middle names, “Amete Ghebriel,” mean “male servant of Saint Gabriel” in Ge’ez, the liturgical language of the Ethiopian Church. Macoggi claims the last name “Netza,” on the other hand, from the Medieval Latin for “free woman.” The combination of these names reflects both an imposition and a choice: both masculine subservience and feminine liberation in relation to hegemonic Christianity. It thus has a chiasmic structure that makes visible an ironic mirroring between opposites and recalls the duality that her protagonist Fiorella is too young to resist. Through such strategies of literary resistance, Macoggi resists racial binaries by ironizing national and linguistic borders, thus offering an alternative to the heteronationalist practice of reading intercultural individuals in opposing racial extremes. “Amete G. Netza” is a translingual wordplay that mediates the historico-cultural modes of both names, making it an instrument of colonial reckoning and a recognition of the paradoxes at the heart of Macoggi’s own voice and Fiorella’s story, all without resigning either to the kind of neat hybridities that do not account for asymmetrical power relations.

⁵² Igiaba Scego, “Identità,” in *Amori bicolari. Racconti*, eds. Igiaba Scego, Ingy Mubiayi, Muin Masri, and Zhu Qifeng (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2008), 6-32 (6).

Black Belonging: Beyond the Burgundy

While Macoggi tells a painful and engrossing story of colonial occupation and its afterlives, Scego uses humor to articulate what is at stake for thousands of people in the conversation about citizenship and belonging. Both writers demonstrate the violent and dehumanizing aspects of cultural assimilation and European colonial logics, even as the two narratives end on different notes of possible growth and self-acceptance. Scego's unnamed speaker, with her burgundy Italian passport, is afforded more privileges and rights than a migrant or refugee, but her narrative speaks to the ways that her Somali and Muslim identity makes those privileges and rights seem fundamentally provisional and fraught. Macoggi's protagonist has explicitly biological claims to Italian identity but finds these claims to be viciously regulated and devalued as a result of her Ethiopian roots.

Scego and Macoggi are not the only Black Italian writers to bring the literary imagination to bear on these political issues. The personal and political debates about national Italian identification (as well as an increasingly globalized understanding of Blackness in terms of ethnic cultural formation and radical political identity) are also reflected in "Due cittadinanze, un'unica appartenenza" by Ghanaian Italian writer and cultural critic Theophilus Imani. Imani writes about navigating the world "col trattino": with a "hyphenated" national identity, with the feeling of being Italian in a way that is constantly mediated by Blackness and by an association with radical African politics:

Questo graduale processo di rivelazione e disvelamento—epifania, o meglio chiamarla "afrofanìa" (*phàinein*, dell'identità afro)—è il risultato di una continua ricerca da parte del soggetto, messa in moto (e qui prendo in prestito alcune parole di Fanon) dalla speranza di (ri)scoprire quella parte di sé che "ci riabilita, al tempo stesso, di fronte a noi stessi e di fronte agli altri."⁵³

(This gradual process of revelation and disclosure—of epiphany, or better yet, "afrophany" [meaning the manifestation—*phainein*—of "Afro" identity]—is the result of an ongoing investigation by the subject, set in motion [and here, I borrow from Fanon] by the hope to [re-]discover that part of himself that 'rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others.)

Imani recounts a continuing process of self-discovery and self-actualization on the path to viewing his Black Italian identity as complete and commensurate. His own story is thus "afrophanic" in the same way as the narrative arc of "Salsicce," which begins with the speaker's sudden, drastic desire to go against her moral and religious compass—her Black Sunni Muslim identity—only to spiral out of control and end with a visceral rejection of the conformity she had first desired. At the story's end, she reconnects to her own sense of agency and quells her anxiety over her ethnoreligious difference. She is ultimately not doomed to betray her principles and consume pork to feel socially or legally acceptable. She chooses to be satisfied with "lo stesso mix" ("the same

⁵³ Theophilus Imani, "Due cittadinanze, un'unica appartenenza," *FuturaAfrika*. Un nuovo volto dell'Africa e della Diaspora africana (2015), last accessed November 2019, <https://futuraafrika.tumblr.com/post/107060872358/due-cittadinanze-ununica-appartenenza>.

mix”),⁵⁴ that amalgamation of Somali and Italian habits and cultural attachments, leaving the reader to consider what it ultimately means to belong.

The uprooting and undoing of normative narrative frames of understanding Blackness and/or Africanness in relation to Italy constitutes a key feature of Black Italian literature. Scego and Macoggi show us that Black people and African history are inextricably linked to the production of Italian identity and its aesthetic categories. These authors respond creatively to the homogenization of Black people and of the manufactured crisis of migration in the Italian popular imagination, where an undifferentiated and ill-considered category of “Other” is maintained in order for terms like “European” or “whiteness” to describe Italian culture uncritically. Further, they illustrate how Black and Muslim people and those with colonial attachments to Italy live permanently on the margins of the category of Italian citizen-subject and live dramatically different ethnocultural and racial experiences. Macoggi and Scego occasion us, in distinct ways, to recognize Black belonging in/to Italy as relationally produced rather than a matter of essence. They do this largely by merging cultural and aesthetic elements such as the literary and historical, as well as other representations of cultural memory. Their portrayals of the dynamic historical aspect of colonization and occupation, on the one hand, and their prescient clarion calls about contemporary biopolitics and anti-immigration legislation, on the other, point us toward a politics of resistance and affirmation by continuing to challenge hetero-nationalist assumptions of a stable, unified Italian identity or national origin story. These authors emphasize the histories and ideologies of a postcolonial Italy from the perspective of the Black Mediterranean—which I consider to be both a historically “transnational site of globalization” and a generative site of critical thinking and activism about the political economy of race, about aesthetic forms of political resistance, and about radical claims to racial autonomy.⁵⁵ Through their narratives we are able to see how the forces that drive national projects and genocidal border regimes are fundamentally anti-Black, carceral, colonial, and xenophobic. By highlighting Black Italian literary production, we also bring awareness to different ways that anti-Black citizenship and assimilation projects can be creatively and imaginatively resisted.

The writings of these Black Italian women writers prompt us to consider how the citizenship project has, for many, brought only dispossession, disregard, and disunity. Rather than provide us with solutions, their work allows us to ask what non-coercive or regulatory forces might be mobilized, and how the study of Black creative works (in this case in Italian, but also prevalent across global Black literatures) might get us there. Under the ironic veneer of a story like “Salsicce” is the tacit understanding that Black belonging is always contingent. As long as asymmetrical and oppressive citizenship and immigration policies are maintained, there will lurk in the background another law, another intrusive interrogation, another compulsion to succumb to the desire of national belonging. And yet the matter of Black life, its survival and its aesthetic possibilities in Italy, demands that we attend to the conditions that proliferate doubt and excess, the conditions that uphold the machinery of racial marginalization and dispossession.

⁵⁴ Scego, “Salsicce,” 32.

⁵⁵ Alessandra Di Maio, “The Mediterranean, or Where Africa Does (Not) Meet Italy: Andrea Segre’s *A sud di Lampedusa* (2006),” in *The Cinemas of Italian Migration: European and Transatlantic Narratives*, ed. Sabine Schrader and Daniel Winkler (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 43.