

BLACK EUROPE AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

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Black Italia: Contemporary Migrant Writers from Africa

ALESSANDRA DI MAIO

Convergent Boundaries, Shifting Landscapes: Africa Begins in the Alps

Although Italy lies on the European continent and politically belongs to Europe, from a geological point of view it is part of the African continent. Once, several million years ago, the Italian peninsula was part of Africa's continental plate, from which it gradually detached itself. The Alps were the result of its collision with the Eurasian continent. In fact, according to the theory of plate tectonics, the entire African plate is slowly converging towards Europe, so geologists hypothesize the possible formation of a Euro-Asian-African supercontinent in the far future (Mayer 1999). Italy and Africa have always been close, not only geographically or geologically, but also culturally, in times of both war and peace. Through the centuries, historical and fictional characters of African descent have been an integral part of Italian culture and imagery at large—Hannibal, Othello, Alessandro de' Medici (see Brackett 2005), and *Facetta nera*¹ are but some of them. Yet their presence in the national landscape has often been marginalized, considered episodic if not entirely overlooked by Italy's dominant discourse.

The recent arrival of a plethora of migrants from the four corners of the world, many from African countries, has lately urged Italians, or at least some of them, to recuperate their African past as a fundamental, knotty component of their national identity.² This phenomenon has inscribed Italy as a site of the African diaspora, offering new perspectives and directions to the field of Black diaspora studies, especially to its latest developments, Black European studies, which, if on the one hand sprout from analyses of diaspora at large and on the

African diaspora in particular, on the other hand borrow methods and instruments from European studies—this, too, an emerging multidisciplinary field, focusing on the economic, political, and cultural formation of a new European identity that simultaneously includes and transcends nation-state borders.

Among these African migrants are a number of emerging writers whose increasingly flourishing literary production has been reshaping Italy's contemporary letters, but whose voices, more often than not, have been excluded by the dominant literary discourse in ways that seem to reproduce the social marginalization to which the African Italian community has generally been subjected. However, these writers' narratives offer an original, multifaceted, and complex portrait of contemporary Italy, where the African community is becoming larger in number, while providing insights into the ways in which migrants express their feelings of belonging, loss, and possible aspirations towards the nations from which they or their parents come. Their stories provide more textured details about these issues than are usually provided by sociologists or anthropologists, and by the nation's dominant discourse on immigration, mostly led by the media and legal texts. They are new voices in the discourse on an Italian multicultural identity and point out that the nation's alleged homogenous identity is nothing but a deliberately constructed myth. Moreover, they demonstrate, and indeed highlight, that Italy, too, has multiple facets to offer to the African European community and a variety of artistic expressions to contribute.

Little has been written about the Black diaspora in Italy, especially from a literary or cultural studies perspective. In general, the African diaspora in Italy has not been the subject of attention in ways that it has been in many other European nations, such as Britain, France, and the Netherlands, which have come to be considered paradigmatic for Black European studies. Most of the ancient states and city-states that later formed Italy were not major players in the slave trade—Venice is the most notable exception—and the modern nation, in spite of its colonial past, did not attract larger numbers of former colonial immigrants after World War II. Yet there is a “postcolonial” community from the Horn of Africa that adds to the growing African Italian community. Indeed, some of the most powerful voices from the younger generation in Italian contemporary letters belong to Somali Italian women writers, whose spectrum of voices offers a choral representation of Italy's oldest and youngest connections with Africa—more specifically with East Africa. By lending an ear to these and other voices, I intend to offer a glimpse of Italy's contemporary literary production, see how it represents the nation's fast-changing social and cultural texture, reflect on how migration has marked national identity, and contribute from a divergent perspective and with little-known data to an assessment of a present-day Black Europe.

Emigration and the Construction of Italy's National Identity

Since Unification in 1861, Italy has struggled to define its own national identity in a way that takes into account what Pasquale Verdicchio concisely calls its “indigenous cultural diversity” (1997, 156). Italy resulted from the political union of a number of relatively small, contiguous states that, although connected by the semi-isolation of the geographic territory, similar histories, frequent inter-marriages, and the power of the Papacy, had developed autonomous cultural identities throughout the centuries. Their unification was challenging, and gave rise to a wide range of issues, the aftermath of which the contemporary Italian nation is still facing. An economic disparity exists between the *Mezzogiorno*—the Italian south and the two major islands, Sicily and Sardinia—and the rest of Italy, especially if one compares it to the wealthiest regions of northern Italy. This disparity was apparent at the time of Unification and became more pronounced afterwards when the north became increasingly industrialized and urban whereas the economy of the south remained largely agricultural. This vexed relationship between north and south Italy is generally referred to as the “Southern Question” and has shaped the nation’s political, social, and cultural life. Umberto Bossi’s *Lega Nord* (Northern League), for instance, which emerged in the 1990s and won unprecedented success in the 2008 national elections, is only one of the most recent aspects of the unresolved Southern Question, which last century Antonio Gramsci, among others, recognized as being one of the nation’s central concerns (see Gramsci 2006). However, the “Italianness” recognized throughout the world in the country’s arts, fashion, food, and so forth derives from this unique century-long, dynamic, often problematic, but extremely fertile syncretism.

The amalgam characterizing Italy’s national identity is not only endogenous, but also exogenous. For nearly a century after Unification, Italy was an emigrating country. Roughly from the 1860s until the 1960s, masses of Italians left their country in search of a better life. Most settled in the New World, some went as far as Australia and New Zealand, while many others traveled north to countries as close as Switzerland, France, and Germany. There also were smaller flows to other countries. Moreover, during Fascism’s expansionistic years, groups of colonists settled in Italy’s colonies in Africa—Libya, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia—and the Balkans—Albania, former Yugoslavia, and the Dodecanese.

Although the dominant discourse has long tended to remove from the national psyche Italy’s history of emigration, as well as its “weak” colonial era (Calchi Novati 1999), a “horde” of Italians indeed dispersed to the four corners of the world (Stella 2002), where their offspring in many cases still reside. Today

the time of the “great migrations” is well over and Italy is one of the G8 nations, but a different kind of exodus, smaller in proportion and concerning a specific target, persists and has, for that matter, regularly increased over the last few years: a brain drain has sent abroad younger and not-so-young professionals and researchers from virtually every field in search of the opportunities, support, and structures they cannot find in their native country. Emigration in all its forms, in other words, has been a constant for Italy, and “rethinking nationalism through the Italian diaspora” (Verdicchio 1997) seems to be imperative. Today the Italians in diaspora—people of Italian origin, not necessarily Italian by birth or citizenship, but also the children and grandchildren of Italian emigrants—are estimated to be a few million more than those living within the borders of the nation-state.³ A growing number of descendants of Italians worldwide are applying for Italian citizenship—which is regulated by *ius sanguinis*, namely, it is transmitted “by blood”—hoping thereby for an open door to Europe as well. Such “new Italians” have proliferated, if not always on the boot and its major islands, where birth rates have dropped, unquestionably throughout the world (Turco 2005; Richards 1994). Their hyphenated cultures add up to Italy’s distinctive syncretism.

Immigration, Europe, and Globalization

During the last decades a further, variegated layer has been added to Italy’s already multilayered society, contributing to redefining its migrant identity in new directions. Traditionally a source of emigrants, the country has recently become a hub for immigration. The Second National Conference on Emigration, held in Rome in 1988, reported that for the first time since Unification, the number of people entering the country exceeded that of those leaving. People have been arriving in great numbers, following different routes (see Corneli 2005) from various regions of the world: many, if not most, from Africa—the Maghreb as well as sub-Saharan Africa; but also from the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and South America.⁴

Initially considered transitory by both the newcomers and the host country, immigration to Italy soon tended to assume a permanent status. The “immigrant question” was immediately regarded by Italy as a European question, not only because some newcomers were arriving from adjacent countries—former Yugoslavia, for example—but especially because immigration inscribed itself within the broader context of a migratory trend that concerned the European Union as a whole. The increasing presence of immigrants from multiple sites of origins imposed a reconsideration of European community discourse, raising issues of borders, nationality, ethnicity, race, and civil tolerance. Umberto Eco has observed that this massive, diversified immigration toward Western Europe

was a far more significant phenomenon for the formation of a new European identity than the crisis of communism in the former Eastern bloc (1990). One might argue that the two phenomena are in fact closely related, if considered in a global frame.⁵

As Saskia Sassen suggests in her study *Guests and Aliens*, “Migrations do not simply happen. They are produced. And migrations do not involve just any possible combinations of countries. They are patterned. . . . Although it may seem that migrations are ever present, there are actually distinct phases and patterns over the last two centuries” (Sassen 1999, 155). Comparing the large transatlantic migrations in the second half of the nineteenth century to the contemporary mass movement to Europe, she explains that migratory waves are “bounded in space, time, and scale” and that the contemporary flows to Europe involve the entire world and its global market, and are characterized by new forms of economic, political, and cultural “transnationalization” (Sassen 1999, 133). Hence she emphasizes the necessity of a transnational migration policy, remarking, “National governments still have sovereignty over many matters, but they are increasingly part of a web of rights and regulations that are embedded in other entities—from EC institutions to courts defending the human rights of refugees” (133). Sassen’s words resonate with those of Jan Karlsson, cochair of the Global Commission on International Migration,⁶ who advocates the necessity of “multilateral, joint action,” by virtue of which nation-states would abdicate their autonomy in migratory matters in favor of international law in order to manage and regulate global migrations—the most complex case of which, according to the Commission, is presented by Europe—and in order to actively protect what can be considered one of the most unprotected groups of people worldwide—migrants (Karlsson 2005). Thus, if on the one hand migratory fluxes warrant considerations in a “global framework” (Karlsson 2005), on the other hand they must be studied in their peculiarity. Sassen concludes, “There is only one enlightened road to take for Europe today: that is to work with settled immigrants and refugees toward their full integration, and to do so through frameworks that ensure cultural and religious diversity will be part of civil society, that is, part of what binds us rather than what segregates us” (Sassen 1999, 133).

A New Nation: New Laws, New Language

Italy gradually discovered that it was playing a new role in the global picture and that it was far from prepared for this responsibility. Although an active participant in the frameworks outlined above—transnational entities, an international code of laws, a transversal civil society, the global market, and so forth—it nonetheless found itself unprepared to receive such a plethora of people

whose presence called for prompt regulation. As an emigrating nation, Italy had neither laws nor social policies nor yet a language in which to address its new immigrant reality. Everything had to be invented. Social and political controversy quickly arose. Concurrent with an attempt to promote a culture of acceptance and solidarity was a relapse of nationalism or, in the best case, bewilderment. Multiculturalism was countered by racism. Newcomers were more often than not forced to the margins by the “welcoming” Italian society. However, they have increasingly interacted with, and added to, the composite social, political, economic, religious, intellectual, and even aesthetic Italian texture. From an initial alleged invisibility, their presence has become progressively more apparent in major urban centers as well as in the countryside, in the north and in the south, in schools, factories, the media, sports, politics, and the arts. As a result, the Italian landscape has changed, in some cases, literally: along with St. Peter’s Basilica and the imposing synagogue on the opposite bank of the Tiber, Rome now boasts the largest mosque in Europe (see Richards 1994, 233–56).

The Italian language has undergone concomitant changes in view of the need to invent a new vocabulary. The media have promoted new terms and definitions, not infrequently revealing racialist overtones. Neologisms have flourished in newspapers and on TV, and are now used in everyday conversation. Many epithets have been invented to refer to the newcomers: *extracomunitari* (literally, people, individuals from outside the European Community), *vu cumprà* (literally, would you like to buy something?),⁷ *scafista* (refers to the people involved in human trafficking by sea, derived from *scafi*, boats), *badante* (home nurse, from *badare*, to look after), and many others.⁸ The semantic field of other terms has expanded. For instance, particular nationalities have become the repository of associated characteristics. *Marocchino* is not only somebody from Morocco, but every immigrant with a darker complexion. *Filippina* refers not only to a woman from the Philippines, but to any maid who is not a native Italian. Even the term *immigrato*—by far the most frequent appellative in the media—whose English translation “immigrant” I have often used so far, has been subjected to a semantic shift, referring to every newcomer, independent of their juridical status. Thus, refugees, asylum seekers, seasonal migrant workers, and naturalized citizens are frequently and indiscriminately referred to as *immigrati*. In fact, the immigrant is not a juridical figure in Italy, but rather a socially, and, one might say, mass-media-constructed *persona*—or, more accurately, what sociologist Alessandro Dal Lago refers to as a *non-persona* (1999). There are no immigration laws in Italy, strictly speaking. There are laws—relatively recent laws—concerning *stranieri* (foreigners, strangers) who reside in Italy. When I use the term “immigrant,” therefore, I do not intend to refer to a specific legal status, as yet absent; rather, my intent is to propose a re-semanticization of this word, favoring the idea of “migration” over that of “strangeness” implied by the

legal term *straniero*, and indicating with the prefix “im-” a patterned direction, a destination, and a sense of location in this discourse: namely, the convergence in Italy of newcomers from different parts of the world.

The first legal text that attempted to regularize the “immigrant question” in Italy—or “emergency immigration,” as media started to label it—dates back to 1986, and refers to *extracomunitari*.⁹ It regulates migrant work but does not deal with norms of residence. The second half of the 1980s, when entries to Italy—especially from North and West Africa—were increasing in number and becoming more visible to society, was a period of rapid transformation in the country. The economy was flourishing, anti-mafia movements seemed to be more successful than ever before, and *Tangentopoli*—a neologism, translated as “BribeGate” by the Anglophone media—appeared to be finally putting an end to corruption. Immigration, among other things, was a motor of change. It was both a cause and an effect of a new economic status. However, it was kept invisible and silent for years mainly by remaining an illegal phenomenon. The fact that “immigrants” were individuals with an autonomous power of expression, and the right to exercise it, seemed to be ignored. The narration of immigration, when it began to be articulated, was an exclusive prerogative of legislators and the media.

This was true until 1989, when a young South African, Jerry Masslo, was murdered by a group of thugs in Villa Literno, an agricultural town not far from Naples, in the Campania region, where he worked as a tomato picker. In the predominantly rural south, immigrants have been primarily employed in farms and greenhouses. The assassination of Jerry Masslo, who had fled the apartheid regime of South Africa for democratic Italy only to encounter a racially motivated death, made the headlines and stirred public opinion. Above all, it changed the narration of the Italian immigration, opening it up to different voices. Immigrants began to speak up, especially those coming from Africa like Masslo. The first major law legalizing the status of the many “strangers” residing in Italy was hastily promulgated in 1990. Granting *in situ* individuals (those who had entered the country prior to December 1989) a *permesso di soggiorno* (literally, a permit to stay), the Martelli Law, as is commonly called after the name of its proponent, was in fact an amnesty.¹⁰ A major step in the regularization of immigrant flows and living conditions was later provided by the Turco-Napolitano Law, in 1998, the first that tried to address systematically the issue of immigration to Italy.¹¹ A turning point—considered by many, especially by “immigrants,” a drawback—in this kind of legislation was the Bossi-Fini Law (2002), which has made fingerprinting compulsory for every non-Italian residing in Italy.¹² In August 2006, in a new political climate, Interior Minister Giuliano Amato’s bill proposing that citizenship be granted to those who have been legally resident in Italy for at least five years—not ten as is the case at present—was approved

by the government. Amato also proposed a long-term plan aimed at reconsidering other citizenship laws, including one that introduced the principle of *ius soli* (birthright citizenship), which would grant a right to Italian citizenship to all children born in Italy. However, when in April 2008 Italy's sixty-second government—and Silvio Berlusconi's third—was formed, the bill had not yet passed, and soon thereafter new Interior Minister Roberto Maroni introduced additional punitive measures against immigrants.

From Africa: The Birth of an Italian Multicultural Literature

In 1990, when for the first time foreigners were allowed to come out of illegality, Senegalese-born Pap Khouma, Moroccan-born Mohammed Bouchane, and Tunisian-born Salah Methnani published autobiographical fictions in which they recounted their experiences as African immigrants in Italy. As Khouma explained, “One can consider 1990 the year one of African legal immigration to Italy” (Khouma in Parati 1995, 116).

Methnani's novel, *Immigrato* (Immigrant), written in first person but coauthored by writer Mario Fortunato, narrates the experience of a young Tunisian who travels Italy from South to North, finding out that the country of his dreams more often than not is that of his nightmares. Bouchane's *Chiamatemi Ali* (Call me Ali), edited by Carla De Girolamo and Daniele Miccione, is a first-person narrative about a young Moroccan man who, after joining a group of migrant laborers, decides to change his name—Abdullah—to Ali, so that Italians can pronounce it without difficulty while he can retain his Muslim identity. Khouma's *Io, venditore di elefanti* (I, the elephant seller), also written in first person in collaboration with journalist Oreste Pivetta, tells the story of a Senegalese street vendor who, after having briefly resided in France, tries to make a life in Italy, where his expectations are met and proven wrong at one and the same time. Among these three book-length narratives, the latter has perhaps been the most successful: a best seller since its publication, it has been used as a textbook in many high schools nationwide and is now its eighth reprinting.¹³

It is worth noting that all three texts contain references to the 1986 laws. Moreover, one might argue that the narratives published by Khouma, Bouchane, and Methnani in 1990 indirectly responded to the Martelli Law promulgated the same year. This law was what in Italian legal jargon is referred to as a *sanatoria*—an amnesty, in this particular case aiming not only to regularize the position of the considerable number of clandestine immigrants but also possibly to prevent further illegal entry into the country. The word *sanatoria* derives from the verb *sanare*, meaning “to heal,” to restore one's health. Graziella Parati notes the negative connotations of this metaphor: this terminology, borrowed from the rhetoric of sickness, assumes that becoming a nation of immigration

involves a contamination of the body of the country, which in this legal text is narrated as diseased (Parati 1997a, 119). Parati suggests that the malady, according to the legislation, should be cured and further contagion prevented. Yet, she concludes, in “narrating the multiracial nation through the legal text, Italy has attempted, and failed, to ‘practice safe text’” (1997a, 119). Methnani, Bouchane, and Khouma offer their interpretation of the aching Italian sociopolitical, legal, and narrative body in their works. Claiming for themselves the right to speak with their own voices, to tell their stories from their own standpoints, and to write the history to which they have been contributing participants, these writers re-manipulate and revolt against the narratives created on and about them. With the force of their own creative imaginations, they portray their own experiences as African migrants to Italy, thereby appropriating the reins of the nation’s discourse on immigration. From narrative objects, they have made themselves narrative subjects. Asked what he intended to demonstrate with his book, Khouma answered, “I did not start writing because I wanted to demonstrate something. What I wanted to do was take the floor. Because Italians were talking about us, but they were asking questions and answering them, all by themselves. That’s why we took the floor: to interrupt their monologue and establish a dialogue. This was the goal of my book” (Khouma in Parati 1995, 115–16; my translation).¹⁴

The fact that the first extended Italian immigrant narratives are all written by Africans, who recount, through the prism of fiction, their personal experiences, is worth particular attention. Recently, millions of Africans have settled all over Europe, not only in the former colonial nations, fleeing civil wars, famine, and poverty. Italy, perhaps largely thanks to its geographic position, has been a prime destination, in the beginning especially for North Africans but soon also for those from the sub-Saharan regions. In the 1990s, in particular, migration from Africa was far larger than that from other continents.¹⁵ Together with Spain, Italy is the European country with the highest number of migrants from Africa, most entering the country illegally and becoming “regularized” only later (Karlsson 2005). Despite what is advocated by the recent, xenophobic, myopic discourses on the “defense of the West” by the former president of the Italian senate, Marcello Pera (2005), and, even more recently, by former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi—who claims to be in favor of economic migration but says, “although the Left envisions a pluri-ethnic, pluri-cultural country, Italy must *remain* Catholic and *belong* to Italians” (2006; my italics)—the nation is heading rapidly towards a multicultural future where borders and ethnicities will increasingly be crossed, and where Africa will be present more than ever before. Khouma, Methnani, and Bouchane are among those African diasporic writers who have contributed to telling the story—and the history—of their people’s recent migrations to Europe, as well as of Italy’s changing social land-

scape and cultural texture. As writers, they belong to a plurality of traditions: they are part, and constitute a turning point, of the Italian literary tradition, first and foremost because they write in Italian; they participate in and expand the literary traditions of their native countries and mother tongues, which are often more than one and are embedded in their Italian texts; they contribute to the development of a transnational literature of migration; and they are a new addition to the literature of the African diaspora, to which they contribute with their African Italian voices and offer specific, lesser known perspectives on contemporary Black Europe.

The example set by Khouma, Bouchane, and Methnani marked the beginning of a trend in Italian letters that has been flourishing ever since.¹⁶ Their texts were soon followed by others, different in form, genre, linguistic choice, style, and perspective, but sharing the same intent: narrating the experience of African migration to Italy, writing back, as it were, to the nation's dominant discourse about it, or, as Parati phrases it, "talking back in a destination culture" (2005). Among these, Saidou Moussa Ba's *La promessa di Hamadi* (Hamadi's promise), which chronicles the life of two Senegalese brothers in Italy, was published in 1991; in 1992, Mohsen Melliti's novel *Pantanella, canto lungo la strada* (Pantanella, a song along the road), about an abandoned pasta factory in Rome in which a heterogeneous group of immigrants settles but is eventually forced by police to leave; in 1993, *Volevo diventare bianca* (I wanted to become white), one of the first extended narratives by an African Italian woman, Nasserah Chohra, born in France of Algerian parents, who recounts in this loosely autobiographical text the various stages of her journey through Europe as a black woman; and in 1994, Fernanda Farias de Albuquerque's *Princesa* (Princess), the autobiographical story of a Brazilian transvestite who works the streets in Italy. The list becomes richer as years go by.

As is clear even in some of the above titles—*I, the elephant seller; I wanted to become white*—many of the earliest narratives by African Italian writers use a first-person narrator and protagonist. The autobiographical element has been essential to the development of the African Italian literature of migration. However, although several of the earliest works are written in the first person, they are the product of collaboration between the migrant authors and native Italian writers—journalists, authors, editors, transcribers, interviewers, and translators. The controversial question of authorship has been crucial to the birth of every ethnic literary tradition, especially to much literature from the African diaspora. In particular, as Alessandro Portelli remarks, "The complex structure of the authorial role is one of the most significant analogies between Afro-Italian and Afro-American literary productions, although authorial collaboration is stated much more explicitly in the former than in the latter" (Portelli 2004). In the earliest African American texts, Portelli continues, "The names of the white

editors appeared only in the paratextual materials, with the exclusive scope of authenticating the narrative. So the Black protagonist's discourse was kept separate from that of the white sponsor, in a pretense of authenticity." On the contrary, in the recent African Italian texts, collaboration is made explicit, becoming visible even on the cover, where multiple names appear, "with the intent of being both a procedure of authentication and a mechanism of composition of the text as a dialogic discourse" (Portelli 2004). However, Portelli concludes, these contemporary African Italian "migrant writers share with their African American forefathers a similar uncertainty towards their co-authors" (2004).

The literary collaboration between an African migrant and a native Italian fictionalizes and symbolizes the actual encounter between Africa and Italy, between the host society and the newcomers. In much the same way as social encounters, these artistic experiences have been extremely positive at times, laying the bases for professional relationships and personal friendships, while in other instances they have proven to be problematic and conflictual. For instance, whereas Nassera Chohra lamented that her editor pressed her to reforge her narrative materials, Saidou Moussa Ba, who wrote both *La promessa di Hamadi* and *La memoria di A.* (A.'s memory) with the collaboration of Micheletti, remarked, "Our books assume political meaning, because the immigrant and the native worked together, tried together. Therefore, these are books of encounter, dialogue, and culture" (quoted in Colace 1995, 87B).

Monuments or Documents? The Risk of Marginalization

Collaborative authorship, the autobiographical theme, the sociopolitical subject, and the plainspoken style and often explicit language shared by these books determined that many readers—including literary critics and writers—regarded these narratives as "pre-literary experiences with mere sociological value" (Fortunato in Polveroni 1995). My argument is that in order to fully appreciate the importance of these recent works, their profound anthropological, sociological, and historical implications, they should be read in the first place as conscious, individual pieces of literature, without thereby denying their valuable social testimony. These African migrant texts are literary pieces, written in Italian, produced by, and within, a society—the Italian, first of all, but also the European—in a process of rapid transformation. Reading these texts as mere "documents" rather than as "monuments" hides an otherwise clear attempt of marginalization.¹⁷ In the introduction to Tahar Ben Jelloun's collection of Italian stories *Dove lo stato non c'è* (State of absence)—a text that challenges national boundaries from multiple perspectives and occupies a special place in the contemporary African European literary production—Volterrani claims, "In this book, we recognized the fundamental status and essential function of

literature, which is to create fiction with the materials of reality” (1991, vi). Far from being an element of disruption, or of dishonoring the composite Italian literary tradition, the African migrants’ works add to it and offer alternative models and modes to its canon.

This point can be easily proven by looking more closely at Kouma’s *Io, venditore di elefanti* as an example. The metaphoric quality of the title is made explicit in the first of the book’s thirty-one chapters, “Vendere” (Selling). After an apology for the importance of resistance in order to survive street life, the first-person narrator clarifies that, however, “selling is not only a question of resistance. . . . You will understand what I mean, if you follow me while I tell my story. You will see that selling elephants, framed butterflies, or bone vultures is an *art*” (Khouma 1990, 12; my emphasis). The elephant in the title is first of all an artifact—one that comes from a region, West Africa, that boasts a major tradition in arts and crafts, especially sculpture. But in the Italian imagery the elephant also represents, and is a metaphor for, an entire continent: Africa. If selling in general requires conviction and endurance, selling artifacts in particular necessitates a special kind of competence in that it demands aesthetic skills. The elephant seller of the title is not only a migrant turned illegal merchant; he is also, and especially, an *African* and an *artist*. More specifically, he is primarily a storyteller in the tradition of his people, the Wolof, who have a saying which he reports in the conclusion of his narrative: “As we say in my country, if you can tell a story, it means it brought you good luck” (Khouma 1990, 143). The protagonist/narrator of *Io, venditore di elefanti* can tell his story because he has had the good fortune to survive it. Eventually, he can look back and recount it—in Italian, the chosen language of *invention*. “After some time and a number of adventures, I arrived in Milan, where I have been an *inventor*, because I was the first to put up mini-markets in the subway stations, together with three friends. . . . By *selling*, I have also learned *Italian*. Some people make an effort to change their job, hoping to live an easier life, to find a home, to put back together a family. And that is fine. But selling is a great trade. There is no reason to be ashamed of it” (Khouma 1990, 13; my emphasis). Art in this text—be it elephant selling or storytelling—constitutes the main form of resistance. Its possibilities of reinvention assure survival. The elephant seller’s story offers a counternarrative to that proposed by the legal narration of immigration and provides the possibility of a happy ending. It makes mediation possible and a dialogue plausible.

The African Italian literature of migration is the result of individual and social “acts of mediation” through various cultural, national, and linguistic planes (Parati 1997b, 174). These acts of mediation, which are also ultimately acts of translation from one culture into another, imply inclusion and connection among people and across a plurality of spaces and languages, which they

open and connect in an effort to establish a dialogue. Much of the postcolonial literary jargon, although it has the merit of challenging the binarism of Western discourse and reverting relationships of power, does not seem particularly relevant to these texts and their protagonists, eliciting its reconsideration from new perspectives. Upon being asked whether he felt that he occupied “spaces in-between cultures and literatures,” Moussa Ba explained, “First of all, I consider myself a man who has had the chance to transmit something. Then, I want to struggle to conquer *one* space in this world. But there are still obstacles to overcome. There are walls impeding the dialogue among subjects of different cultures. The common goal is speaking with one another without frontiers” (Moussa Ba in Parati 1995, 106; my italics). To the same question, Khouma replied, “I have never thought about it in this way. First of all, I am an African. I am more African than Senegalese. . . . I am not afraid of confronting myself with other cultures. If one is open-minded, one can give and take. In the process of exchanging cultures, people transform themselves. In Senegal, we live in a multicultural, or rather multi-ethnic society. In Dakar, for example, we speak Wolof, with some French, English, Portuguese, Spanish, and other local languages. If you speak with a man from Dakar who lives in Milan, he will throw in Italian too” (Khouma in Parati 1995, 118).

From Twoness to Plurality

The risk of marginalizing literary production deriving from the contact of two or more worlds is not new. In his interesting comparison between the beginnings of an emerging African Italian literary tradition and African American literature, Portelli exhorts Italians to be less myopic than Americans were in appreciating from the start their ethnic literature. He wonders, “It took us two centuries to recognize that Phillis Wheatley, the first African-American woman poet, was an artist and not a freak. Are we supposed to wait another two hundred years before acknowledging the embedded difference peculiar to the figures and creative processes of the Italian literature of migration?” (Portelli 2004).

In an analysis of some African Italian texts, Portelli remarks that, although the experience of slavery is obviously altogether different from that of migration, “twoness”—a concept that he borrows from W.E.B. Du Bois—constitutes the central organizing textual principle in both literary traditions. Twoness, Du Bois declared in 1903, is “double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” The history of the African American people, Du Bois explains, is based on this strife (Du Bois 1903, 5).

My argument is that the metaphor of twoness, masterfully used by Du Bois at the dawn of the twentieth century to describe a very specific historical context,

can be fragmented and amplified into one of plurality at the onset of the millennium, when concepts such as migration, multiculturalism, transnationalism, and globalization have become so pivotal not only to the literary but also to the historic and economic discourses of many traditions, challenging the conventional philosophical relationships self/other, host/guest, native/stranger, which now call for a reconsideration from a post-postmodern, global perspective. If at the core of American epics is a twoness primarily founded on the contrast black versus white, mirroring the process of essential racialization that was fundamental to the construction of an American national identity, then plurality constitutes the organizing textual principle, as well as one of the privileged themes, of the contemporary Italian literature of migration whether it is written by authors coming from Africa or the diaspora. In their own ways, the Italian migrant artists are exploring new ways of expressing their experience of plurality by inverting, revising, revaluing, and eventually expanding not only cultural binary oppositions but the ideologies that propose them. Khouma says, “I could have introduced the immigrant in a negative light, or vice versa; I could have said nice things about Italians, or I could have said nasty things about them. What I did, instead, was gather actual facts and let readers judge for themselves” (Khouma in Parati 1995, 115).

The poem “Prigione” (Prison), written by the Cameroonian Italian poet Ndjock Ngana, also known by the Italian name of Teodoro, clearly illustrates how plurality can become an organizing textual principle. This poem, which has become a sort of a manifesto of the Italian literature of migration, is included in the collection *NindôNero* (1994), where it appears, like the other pieces in the book, *en-face* in Baasa and Italian. Significantly, the title is made up of the words that mean “black” in each language, retaining an original African identity together with the possibility of translating it into different cultures and languages. Beside its Italian side, I here propose a third version of the poem—my English translation—confident that I will remain faithful to its spirit.

<i>Vivere</i>	Living
<i>Amare</i>	Loving
<i>Conoscere</i>	Knowing
<i>Avere</i>	Having
<i>una sola cosa</i>	one thing only
<i>è prigione.</i>	is prison.
<i>Vivere una sola vita,</i>	Living only one life,
<i>in una sola città,</i>	in one town only,
<i>in un solo paese,</i>	one country only,
<i>in un solo universo,</i>	one universe only,
<i>vivere in un solo mondo</i>	living only in one world
<i>è prigione.</i>	is prison.

<i>Amare un solo amico,</i>	Loving only one friend,
<i>un solo padre,</i>	one father only,
<i>una sola madre,</i>	one mother only,
<i>una sola famiglia,</i>	one family only,
<i>amare una sola persona</i>	loving only one person
<i>è prigioniera.</i>	is prison.
<i>Conoscere una sola lingua,</i>	Knowing only one language,
<i>un solo lavoro,</i>	one craft only,
<i>un solo costume,</i>	one custom only,
<i>una sola civiltà,</i>	one civilization only,
<i>conoscere una sola logica</i>	knowing only one logic
<i>è prigioniera.</i>	is prison.
<i>Avere un solo corpo,</i>	Having only one body,
<i>un solo pensiero,</i>	one thought only,
<i>una sola conoscenza,</i>	one knowledge only,
<i>una sola essenza,</i>	one essence only,
<i>avere un solo essere</i>	having only one being,
<i>è prigioniera.</i>	is prison.

One-ness, in Ngana/Teodoro's poem, is prison. Only plurality—of voices, places, bodies, thoughts—would then be equated with freedom. By celebrating multiplicity in his poem-manifesto, Teodoro/Ngana claims for himself and his peer African migrant artists a broad, unrestricted artistic space that includes and yet transcends the conventional boundaries imposed by national and cultural constructions. More generally, the migrant—at once immigrant and emigrant—can translate his/her African identity—*ñindô* and *nero*—and represent the free person par excellence, because s/he is the one who can freely move across names, spaces, languages, and traditions. Indeed, as one of the most eminent contemporary migrant writers, Salman Rushdie, suggests, in the era of multiculturalism and globalization the migrant becomes the ultimate metaphor for man/woman (Rushdie 1991, 277–78).

Multiplicity is not only the artistic principle of composition but also the central theme of Fernanda Farias de Albuquerque's autobiographical novel *Princesa* (1994), one of the most intense and superb stories of the new Italian literature of migration. *Princesa* is a trans-story. It is the account of how Fernandinho, born in the Brazilian Nordeste, one of the main destinations during the slave trade, becomes first Fernanda, a prostitute transvestite, and then Princesa, not quite a transsexual but no longer exactly a man. Young Princesa undertakes a transatlantic journey to Europe. After spending a short time in Spain, she reaches Italy, where she works the street with the other *viados*—Brazilian transvestite and transsexual streetwalkers—and develops an addiction to heroin, experiencing some of the most violent aspects of illegal immigration. Princesa is eventually

arrested and imprisoned in Rebibbia, Rome's all-male jail, where she finds out that she has contracted AIDS.

In *Princesa*, names, sexual identities, bodies, nationalities, and even languages are multiple. While in prison, Farias de Albuquerque—who after a period of probation was deported to Brazil where she died in 2000—told her story in a peculiar mixture of Portuguese and Italian to Giovanni, a Sardinian shepherd jailed for life. Giovanni, whose first language was Sardinian, translated, transcribed, and then passed the story on to Maurizio Jannelli, a former member of the Red Brigades,¹⁸ who ultimately wrote its final draft in Italian—an Italian which, as he states in his introduction to the novel, resulted from the chemistry of the three inmates' native tongues. This plurality of authorial voices, in Jannelli's words, "opened a space for an encounter, and for mutual knowledge" that "proved crucial to resist the devastating act of seclusion" (Jannelli in Farias de Albuquerque 1994). To the imprisonment enforced by the law, the three authors respond with their collective writing. Yet if the narration was made possible by a multiple act of translation, the protagonist experiences multiplicity—of bodies, genders, love affairs, streets, homes, and so on—as fragmentation, alienation, suffering, isolation, and, eventually, imprisonment. While providing textual organization, multiplicity appears as both a condemnation and an act of liberation in *Princesa*. By reading the novel against Teodoro/Ngana's poetry, one can discern two opposite faces of the same metaphor: the prison and the theme of migration. While the poem is an optimistic plea for inclusion and celebrates unity within plurality, *Princesa* denounces the irreconcilable yearning of a fragmented human being and of the pain of becoming in a Black body (in fact Farias de Albuquerque was mestizo).

Plurality is also at the center of Tahar Ben Jelloun's short story "Pietro il matto, Pietro il saggio" (Peter the fool, Peter the wise), included in the Moroccan French author's collection of Italian stories *Dove lo stato non c'è* (1991, 177–89), which also includes the tale "Villa Literno," a fictionalized reconstruction of the murder of South African immigrant Jerry Masslo. The protagonist of "Pietro il matto, Pietro il saggio" is a Sicilian *cantastorie* (literally, a story singer, a traditional popular figure whose function was to travel to towns and villages and spread the news of the day) with a peculiar disability: every time he is interrupted while he is speaking, he begins to stutter. Pietro travels through the squares of Italy to tell people "the truth," because, he suggests, "Truth is not what you see. Truth is not what it is; truth is what you tell. I tell my stories without interruption, so that the truth can come out."¹⁹ Nonetheless, he recommends, "If the truth is stuttering in my mouth, be ready to catch it, and hold on to it; put its pieces together." (Ben Jelloun 1994, 183). Only storytelling, which implies the active collaboration of both authors and audiences, can turn fragments into significant plurality. Only a storyteller can tell the truth in an area—southern Italy—where, as the title suggests, the state, its laws, and institutions are absent.

Plurality entails brotherhood in Ben Jelloun's story. Pietro has two brothers: Cicciu, his Sicilian maestro, who "proclaims the truth while singing" (Ben Jelloun 1994, 185), and Moha, his Moroccan double, a ventriloquist storyteller who can hear, understand, and repeat without hesitation the stories of all those people—women, children, young militants—whose voices history has tried to silence. Sometimes, Pietro imagines that his Moroccan brother—the protagonist of Ben Jelloun's celebrated novel *Moha le Fou, Moha le Sage* (1978), which opens a plurality of resonances and establishes a further dialogue among literary traditions—now lives in Italy; in Sicily, specifically, which is geographically, historically, and culturally the region closest to Africa, where immigration from the Maghreb has reached its peak; more precisely, in Mazara del Vallo, a major fishing port town facing the north coast of Africa, host of the largest Tunisian community in Europe. "Often, I think I may meet [Moha] in Sicily. I can't find him, but I imagine him. Once I even believed that I saw him in Mazara del Vallo's *Kasbah*, in a café full of Tunisian fishermen. They were all there, around him, listening to the latest stories from their country. The Tunisians were watching and listening to him. They were sturdy young men, who had long left their villages, and had recreated their original place in Mazara; but they still lived in sadness" (Ben Jelloun 1994, 184–85).

In Pietro, Moha, and Cicciu, migrant, wise, and mad storytellers of the Mediterranean, one may recognize a glimpse of their ventriloquist creator and his desire—akin to that of his fellow African Italian migrant writers—to break the transnational walls of silence by "telling the truth." The voices of the three storytellers merge into a chorus that can be heard all over the Mediterranean basin, offering itself as an alternative to the media.

It has been said that Ben Jelloun's text should not be considered within the frame of Italian migrant literature by virtue of the fact that its author was an established "francophone" writer well before his Italian book was published. I believe this is a moot point. First of all, a number of immigrant authors had already written in one or more languages before learning Italian; indeed, some were established writers before migrating to Italy.²⁰ Moreover, by choosing to set *Dove lo stato non c'è* in southern Italy ("Italian Stories" is the explicative subtitle of the book) and to write it directly in Italian, with the assistance of Egi Volterrani—a well-respected journalist who is his Italian translator but appears as a coauthor in this text—Ben Jelloun meant to make a precise statement: he wanted to offer his own vision of Italy, one of the countries that he often visits, for whose press he writes regularly. But the Italy he describes in his stories is often far from flattering. In his view, in spite of its beauty, Italy is a divided nation, corrupt and even diseased. One might hypothesize that this unflattering portrait of Italy may be one reason why *Dove lo stato non c'è* has been received negatively. Perhaps many Italian readers refuse to recognize themselves in Ben Jelloun's portrait, in which he argues that the perennial negligence of the state,

and certainly not the relatively recent presence of immigrants, has been the main cause of the socioeconomic and political problems of the south. Whatever the case, by writing his “Italian Stories,” Moroccan writer Ben Jelloun has established new connections among literary traditions from both Europe and Africa, further expanding and making ever more visible the “open” space of the African migrants’ literature.

Postcolonial Writing: Somali Italian Literature

A form of immigration that Italy has not much discussed, having tried to suppress it by assimilating it to the more general migratory trend involving the nation, is that from its former colonies and occupied territories in Africa. Since the 1960s, relatively large numbers have arrived in Italy from Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia, most fleeing brutal dictatorships or civil wars. In spite of the fact that it has a historical responsibility towards these people, after a first effort in 1981—when a law was promulgated granting them a temporary permit to stay²¹—Italy has offered them no form of asylum, whether legally or in terms of specific social policies. Somalis, for instance, as Nuruddin Farah points out in the Italian section of his book *Yesterday, Tomorrow*, should be considered refugees, having escaped either Siyad Barre’s wicked regime or the civil war that followed and precipitated the nation’s collapse (Farah 2000). But Italy has never fully enforced the 1951 Geneva Convention on refugees and asylum; the Italian media consider Somalis “immigrants,” and the laws treat them as regular “strangers.” Nevertheless, there is a large Somali community in Italy. Moreover, there is a group of Somali Italian writers, many of whom are women, who have used their powerful voices to tell their often inconvenient stories.

Among them are Uxax Cristina Ali Farah and Igiaba Scego. Although both were born in Italy in the 1970s, their relationship with Somalia, their personal stories, and their poetics differ from each other. Scego was born in Rome, where she was brought up and still resides, to Somali parents who fled their country after Barre’s coup d’état. She has visited Somalia but never lived there for any extended period of time. Ali Farah, born in Verona to an Italian mother and a Somali father, was raised in Mogadishu, where her family moved while she was still a baby, and returned to Italy as a young adult, via Hungary, to escape Somalia’s civil war. With Shirin Ramzanali Fazel and Sirad S. Hassan, also from Somalia, Maria Abbebù Viarengo and Gabriella Ghermandi from Ethiopia, Erminia Dell’Oro and Ribka Sibhatu from Eritrea, and several others, these women writers have created what can be considered an Italian postcolonial literary production. Their works are read mainly within the migratory literary context, but a more detailed analysis shows that although they share some of the preoccupations of other migrant writers, they also present some peculiari-

ties that connect them to the specificity of the Italian postcolonial experience and, by extension, to postcolonial texts in other languages. In fact, these texts suggest a reconsideration of the entire concept of postcoloniality by highlighting, first and foremost through their very existence, what Sandra Ponzanesi, in her comparative study on contemporary women's writing from the Indian and African Italian diasporas, describes as one of the most evident paradoxes of the postcolonial condition: the implicit assumption that most postcolonial literature is expressed in English, the global dominant language, which results in a marginalization of all other postcolonial traditions, such as those in Dutch, French, Portuguese, Italian, and other "minor" languages (Ponzanesi 2004). Ponzanesi suggests that the emerging literature by African Italian migrant women offers itself as a unique, largely unknown site to explore the contradictions and "dissymmetrical relationships" that inform postcolonialism, besides contributing to the revival of "an obscure chapter of Italian history: that of colonialism" (Ponzanesi 2004, xiv). The very existence of this literature prevents further reproduction of homogenizing and totalitarian theoretical discourses, on the contrary favoring the historical, political, and linguistic complexity of the postcolonial condition by bringing "to the fore a set of asymmetric relationships in which language, hegemony, and diaspora play a crucial role" (Ponzanesi 2004, 3).

One of the aspects that set the African Italian postcolonial texts as distinctive within the frame of a general migratory context is their use of language. For most, if not all, of these writers, Italian is a mother tongue—usually not the only one, but one nonetheless. In contrast to the Italian migrant writers' earliest works, the more recent works are written without the support of a native speaker—although now most authors have given up coauthorship and write their texts autonomously. As a consequence, the result is often more experimental. A specific example is, for instance, some Somali terms that are borrowings or calques from the Italian that are discernible in many of Ali Farah's narratives and poems, such as those in the short story "Madre piccola" (Little Mother),²² a poetic reflection of the Somali diaspora in Europe from an all-female perspective: *farmascio* (from the Italian *farmacia*, pharmacy), *restauranti* (from Italian *ristorante*, restaurant), *olio olivo* (from Italian *olio d'oliva*, olive oil), and *guersce* (from Italian *guercio*, blind in one eye).²³ But what all these texts have primarily in common is an artistic agenda. They portray a nation where Africa and Italy's colonial past and postcolonial present are central, proposing a dialogue that challenges those who are partial to monologue, historical revisionism, and persevere in believing in a monolithic national identity. The protagonists of these texts, as disparate as they are, all show major concern in the construction of an individual identity that takes into consideration the totality of their life's experience.

It is not unusual for these writers to shape the form of the monologue to their own ends. Ali Farah's short story "Madre piccola" was conceived as a monologue

and has been more than once performed as such by its author. Scego wrote the humorous short story “Salsicce” as an interior monologue in the aftermath of the promulgation of the Bossi-Fini Law. The story tells in first person of a fictional, young Somali Italian woman from Rome who, in spite of her Muslim religion and the mid-August heat in the city, goes to the closest butcher and buys “a large quantity of sausages” (Scego 2005, 214). The story is built on the suspense of whether the protagonist/narrator will eventually eat these sausages and whether eating them can help her feel more Italian. Feeling threatened by the new law, the protagonist believes that she must find new ways to assert her Italian self, which in fact she had not doubted until that point but rather negotiated with her Somali identity. She makes this point clear:

My worries all began with the announcement of the Bossi-Fini Law. “All non-ECC immigrants who wish to renew their permits must be fingerprinted as a preventive measure.” Where did I stand in all this? Would I be considered a non-ECC immigrant and therefore a potential criminal, to be fingerprinted by the government to prevent a crime that had not yet been committed (but which they supposed that I would sooner or later commit)? Or would I be considered a revered, cosseted Italian given the benefit of the doubt by the government even if it showed that I had a long police record?

Italy or Somalia?

Doubt.

Fingerprints or no fingerprints?

Horrendous doubt.

My beautiful passport was burgundy red and it proclaimed to all intents and purposes my Italian nationality, but did that passport speak the truth? Deep down was I truly Italian? Or was I supposed to be fingerprinted like so many others? (Scego 2005, 216; translation by Bellesia and Poletto)

The protagonist compiles an exhilarating list itemizing the moments when she feels Somali and when Italian (Scego 2005, 219–20). But she is not able to solve the puzzle of her double sense of national belonging. A further dimension adds to her already composite identity: the awareness of being Black and therefore connected to other diasporic Africans worldwide. Plurality is her way of living and feeling; it is part of her daily life. She is reading the newspaper when she says, “I go on reading and what do my eyes see? A short article, ‘African-American community in uproar over beating of Black youth by white policemen.’ I am fed up with news like this! Why the heck are they always beating us up? And besides, this is not helping me forget about the sausages! And most of all it isn’t helping me forget about the fingerprinting!” (Scego 2005, 222).

However, as her skin color constantly reminds her and everyone else of her Africanness, the protagonist’s main concern in this story is to affirm her Italianness

as well, as a constitutive and non-eliminable part of her multifaceted individuality. The all-Italian *concorso*—a state contest for a job in the civil service—for which she has sat and whose results she is still awaiting—which constitutes the other thread of the narrative—seems to serve this purpose. When the protagonist finally tries to eat the sausages, she vomits on them and throws them into the garbage—and then she receives a phone call from a friend announcing that she has indeed passed the exam and will be given the position she applied for. Obtaining this unexpected state job—the reasons she considers her chances slim are sarcastically outlined, providing a bittersweet social commentary (Scego 2005, 218)—helps her accept her Italianness as part of her complex identity. If earlier she complained about others’ desire to see her divided—“I had never ‘fractioned’ myself before, and besides in school I always hated fractions. They were unpleasant and inconclusive (at least for yours truly)” (Scego 2005, 219)—after the good news concerning the *concorso*, she admits to “starting to like fractions” (Scego 2005, 225). Tension is released when she concludes, “I roll up my sleeves. I must clean up the vomit in the kitchen” (Scego 2005, 225). The protagonist tidies up her home, enjoying its reestablished, albeit transformed, order.

Final Considerations

As noted at the beginning of this study, Italianness is the result of a long, complex, and fertile syncretistic process, to which Africa has offered its contribution in the past as well as in the present with the current phenomenon of mass migration. The emerging corpus of African Italian literature which I have presented inscribes Italy in the global mapping of the African diaspora while recounting how contemporary Italy is changing, how it is rewriting its national identity, and how it is contributing to a better understanding of the Black diaspora in Europe and elsewhere.

Notes

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1. *Faccetta nera* (literally, “little black face”) is the title of a fascist song whose lyrics were written by Giuseppe Micheli in 1935, referring to an episode during the war between Italy and Ethiopia (1935–1936). The occasion for the song was the discovery and adoption by the Italian troops—Mussolini’s “black shirts”—of a young Ethiopian girl whose mother had just been killed, to whom “freedom” (*libertà*) and “hope” (*aspetta e spera*, “wait and hope,” is the imperative invocation of the refrain) are promised, mainly

in the form of “other laws” (*un'altra legge*) and “an another king” (*un altro re*). One of the best-known songs of the fascist era, *Faccetta nera* has marked Italy's collective imagery (see Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes*, 56–58), and its title and refrain still resonate even among the youngest generations.

2. The recent, renovated interest in Italy's colonial past in East Africa by a number of scholars from Italy and abroad seems to prove this statement. Among the most recent publications, the following have particularly informed my work: Calchi Novati (1994; 1999); Labanca (2002); Palumbo (2003); Ben-Ghiat and Fuller (2005); Andall and Duncan (2005); Triulzi (2006); and, above all, Del Boca (1999; 2002; 2005).

3. According to the estimates of the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT), the population of Italy, as of July 2008, is well over 59 million people, while Italians and the people of Italian descent living in diaspora are estimated to be around 62,000 (see Italian National Institute of Statistics, http://demo.istat.it/index_e.html, last accessed January 29, 2009).

4. The 2008 report from ISTAT (Italian National Institute of Statistics) states that, as of January 2008, there are 3,432,651 foreigners resident in Italy, 1,701,817 men and 1,730,834 women (see <http://www.istat.it/popolazione/stranieri/>, last accessed January 29, 2009). This census does not take into consideration nonresident seasonal workers or illegal immigrants. The most reliable dossier on the state of immigration to Italy is provided yearly by Caritas. The data in this paper refer to Caritas/Migrantes 2008. Reliable data are also provided by ISMU (Initiatives and Studies on Multiethnicity Foundation, <http://www.ismu.org>, last accessed January 29, 2009).

5. During the past few years, many studies have been conducted on the causes, effects, and dynamics of immigration both in Italy and in the rest of Europe. The following have been particularly relevant to the development of my discourse: Calavita 1994; Bolaffi 1996; Papademetriou 1996; Papademetriou and Hamilton 1996; Bonifazi 1998; Sassen 1999; Dal Lago 1999; Pugliese 2002; Maciotti and Pugliese 2003; Corneli 2005; and Turco 2005.

6. The Global Commission on International Migration was launched by the United Nations secretary-general and a number of governments on Dec. 9, 2003, in Geneva, Switzerland, and closed on Dec. 31, 2005. Cochaired by Jan O. Karlsson and Mamphela Ramphele, it was composed of nineteen members from various regions of the world and was given the mandate to formulate a coherent, comprehensive, and global response to the issue of international migration. The final report is available at <http://www.gcim.org/en/finalreport.html>, last accessed May 16, 2008.

7. This expression is used as a noun, hypothetically deriving from a corruption of the French *vous* (second person plural pronoun, also used for the courtesy form) and the Italian *comprare* (to buy), referring to the line with which foreign street vendors, mainly francophone Senegalese, would call for the attention of eventual clients; by extension, the epithet refers to every immigrant, independent of their nationality or job.

8. A dictionary of terms concerning the Italian lexicon of immigration is Bolaffi, Gindro, and Tentori 1998.

9. Law n. 943, Dec. 30, 1986.

10. Law n. 39, Feb. 28, 1990, proposed by Claudio Martelli, a former member of the now defunct PSI (Italian Socialist Party).

11. Law n. 286 (1), July 25, 1998, proposed by Livia Turco and Giorgio Napolitano, both from the former PCI (Italian Communist Party), now DS (Democrats of the Left). Napolitano, who was then minister of the interior, became the president of the Italian republic in 2006.

12. Law n. 189, July 30, 2002, proposed by Umberto Bossi (founder of the Northern League) and Gianfranco Fini (of AN, National Alliance, Italy's principal right-wing party).

13. Kouma's latest novel, *Nonno Dio e gli spiriti danzanti* (Grandfather God and the Dancing Spirits), was published in 2005.

14. All translations from Italian in this chapter are mine, unless otherwise noted.

15. See the data provided by ISMU (Initiatives and Studies on Multiethnicity Foundation, <http://www.ismu.org>) and by the yearly Caritas dossiers.

16. Graziella Parati and Armando Gnisci have been the two pioneering scholars of Italian migrant literature, which they have analyzed following different approaches. For a list of their most representative titles in this field, see "References" below.

17. My perplexity concerning the dichotomy monuments vs. documents is explained in Esposito 2006, 303.

18. The Red Brigades (*Brigate Rosse* in Italian) were a militant left-wing terrorist organization active in Italy in the 1970s that gained notoriety for kidnappings, murders, and sabotage. Their self-proclaimed aim was to undermine the Italian state through armed struggle and pave the way for a Marxist upheaval led by a revolutionary proletariat.

19. The translation of this and the following passages from Ben Jelloun's *Pietro il Matto*, *Pietro il saggio* is mine. However, the book containing the short story "Dove lo Stato non c'è" is the title of the entire book, which has been translated into English by James Kirkup with the title "State of Absence" (London: Quartet 1994).

20. One of the most notable examples is provided by Gëzim Hajdari, a respected Albanian poet (winner, among other prizes, of the Montale Prize in 1997) who moved to Italy in 1992 and who writes in both Italian and Albanian.

21. Law n. 763, Dec. 26, 1981.

22. Cristina Ali Farah is also the author of a novel entitled *Madre Piccola* (2007), loosely based on the short story with the same title.

23. For a reflection on Uba Cristina Ali Farah's poetics, see Di Maio 2006.

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