BEYOND AMNESIA AND COLONIALISMS: RE / WRITING THE PAST TO FORGE NEW ITALIAN IDENTITIES AND LITERATURES

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ABSTRACT
In a sort of global national amnesia, Italy buried colonialism with the end of Fascism and subsequently World War Two, caught in the enthusiasm of Liberation and engaged in the difficult task of reconstruction. More recently, however, the brief history of Imperial Italy has surfaced in critical analyses to reveal that Italian colonialism was just as brutal as other colonialisms. Unlike older colonial powers, Italy has only recently begun to deal with its colonial legacies. This process - of acknowledgement and exploration of colonial memories – spurred by the waves of immigration into Italy, from the 1970s onwards, enacted also through the voices of second generation writers of migrant extraction, many born in Italy, has seen literary practice become a major site of remembrance and reclaim, individual, communitarian and societal. Through the writers considered, Italian Ethiopian Gabriella Ghermandi and Italian Somali Igiaba Scego and their characters, literature, and the cultural activities surrounding it, becomes a practice that denies oblivion. Driven by a desire of self-transformation, as well as decolonisation (Gnisci, 2004) of history and societal change, these postcolonial protagonists of Italian literature, work through traumatic experience critically, with oral and written narrations. Their trajectories beyond Babylon (Carroli, 2010) are analysed through Rosi Braidotti's 1994 figuration of nomadic subjectivity, with reference to Errl and Rigney (2006) cultural memory framework.

INTRODUCTION
Migrations are the salient topic of this century. Often they are depicted by the media as a problem, a plague, an invasion. Yet humans, from the dawn of existence, have survived on the move, even crossing continents on foot, in search of food or escaping droughts; and more recently, wars and oppressive regimes. Migration and nomadism are written in our African, Middle Eastern, Asian DNA, and in our atavic memories. Yet our short European and white Australian memory conveniently chooses to forget that migrations are recurrent and exclusion never worked (Ottone, 2015). Despite its demonstrated historical failure, exclusion is still the solution proposed by the right. "Chi ospita clandestini è un traditore", [Whoever gives hospitality to (illegal)

immigrants is a traitor] is the title of the extreme right wing Northern League magazine *Forza Nuova Brescia* (15 September 2015) [All translations are mine]. Clearly, the intent of this title is to create a wall between us and them; even worse, it is a threat against anyone pursuing 'accoglienza' [welcome], the policy currently supported by Italy and other European Union governments. Lately in fact, some EU leaders, shocked by the horrific consequences of ignoring the flow of desperate asylum seekers escaping trauma, violence and deprivation, have adopted a more humanitarian approach: inclusion, rather than exclusion. Re-writing history from the colonised perspective is not only crucial to redress old wrongs, but essential, to avoid repeating the errors of the past, for example, by creating new walls and disseminating xenophobia through media: "ieri i colonizzati, oggi i migranti" [yesterday the colonised, today the migrants] (Bianchi and Scego, 2014, p. 25). This is why it is imperative for these authors to tell their stories, and the histories of their parents and grandparents. Similarly, Italians must remember that Italy, not long ago, was an emigration country, with approximately thirteen million Italians emigrating from the end of the 19th century to the post-world war 2 period. Only recently, since the Seventies, Italy has become a country of im-migration.

At the recent Festival della Letteratura [Literary Festival] in Mantova (September 2015) many experts (economic, climate, medical, social political, literary) have taken a strong humanitarian stand in regard to refugees, reminding audiences that Italians have emigrated all over the word, as I did myself, to Australia, and are still leaving their country to find better jobs or research opportunities abroad. The post 2000 period especially, has seen a new wave of e-migration from Italy made up of Italians with degrees, the so called 'fuga dei cervelli' [brain escape] caused by 'precariato' [precariousness] unemployment or impossibility to find permanent positions. A positive upshot of this trend has been an increase in research into 'Italian' issues and topics, including Italian colonialism and migration literature, from abroad, a kind of fresh insider / outsider perspective, broadening further Italian studies research and curricula, by including authors such as Italian Somali Igiaba Scego and Italian Ethiopian Gabriella Ghermandi.

The process of acknowledgement and exploration of colonial memories has been enacted especially through the voices of these second generation writers of migrant extraction, often called G2, or new Italians. For these writers literature becomes the opportunity to promote practices aimed at denying oblivion, by way of writing "non-toxic" (Wu Ming) tales and hi/stories into their texts. As the Wu Ming (a collective of writers and musicians based in Bologna) explain, narration becomes toxic when it is only told by one point of view only. Typically this happens with hi/stories recounted by oppressors to oppressed to justify exploitation or injustice (Wu Ming, quoted in Bianchi and Scego, 2014, p. 128). Is it possible to offset this process? And avoid becoming an accomplice of those who deny the other perspective, in this case, the colonised? As Scego states: "in Somalia every nomad knows that the best antidote against ignorance, against *jahilia*, [a condition] that requires us to be deaf and dumb, is the tale, the story. Scego, whose ancestry partly derives from these ancient nomad and storytellers, strongly asserts that history must be recounted over and over. Most importantly, it needs to be told from the perspective of the colonised and their

descendants, in their own words, so it can become, through this process or re-appropriation, a cure against the toxic narrations who have poisoned their lives (Bianchi and Scego, 2014, p. 128). At a societal level, this narrative process involves the de-stabilisation of polished "memories by provocatively opening up cracks in the consensus" (Erll and Rigney, 2006, p. 114). In the case of Italian colonialism, the widespread belief, even today, that Italians were *brava gente* [good people] (Del Boca, 2005) good colonisers, who built road and bridges and were kind to the colonised populations.

Paradoxically, Italy itself was subjected to centuries of division and colonization. Modern Italy as we know it today, became a unified state only in 1861. Twenty year later, in the early 1880s, Italy began its colonial enterprise in Africa. By then, long-established European nations such as England and France had already carved out their empires. Italy's small and short-lived empire, expanded during Fascism, included Lybia, Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia and lasted from 1885 to 1943. It failed to fulfil Fascist dreams of grandeur, reinforcing instead Italy's political, economic, linguistic, and cultural marginality in Europe (Carroli, 2010). In its brief history nevertheless, Italian colonialism was as violent, cruel and murderous as other colonialisms, as African and Italian historians (e.g., Ahmida 2002, La Banca, 2002) thoroughly explain in their fact-based analysis often inclusive of oral histories. After Liberation however, Italy deceived itself with the self-absolution of Italiani *brava gente* (Del Boca, 2005, 1993).

«Non si parla più del colonialismo italiano, è un pezzo di storia scolorita sino a diventare invisibile. Di quel periodo restano due concetti. Il primo sostiene "noi italiani colonialisti? Ma va là..." e il secondo "siamo stati bestie, abbiamo usato i gas nervini". Ma questi concetti non sono la "storia" del colonialismo italiano perché quella storia è costituita dalle tante, infinite storie personali che l'hanno plasmata»

[Nobody talks anymore about Italian colonialism, it is a piece of history so bleached out that is has become invisible. Two concepts remain from that period. The first asserts "we Italians, colonialists? Really? Go 'way!" And the second "we were real brutes, we used nerve gas". But these concepts are not the "history" of Italian colonialism because that history is constituted by the many, infinite, personal stories which have shaped it» (Ghermandi, 2015b). Affirmed Gabriella Ghermandi, writer and musician, at a musical performance, on the 80th anniversary of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia (Saturday 3 October 2015, Piovà massaia (AT).

Gabriella Ghermandi

Ghermandi, an Italian Ethiopian performer, novelist and short-story writer, was born in Addis Ababa in 1965 to a mixed-race Ethiopian mother and an Italian father. A year after the death of her father in 1979 she moved permanently to Italy. She was brought up as a white person by her mother, who, herself, was educated by Italian nuns as white (Ali Farah, 2005). Once she was in Italy, however, Ghermandi felt a strong sense of solitude and estrangement therefore she began to nurture her Ethiopian identity (Fabris, 2015). With Pap Khouma (Carroli, 2006) and other writers, in 2003 she founded the first online publication solely focused on literature of migration, called *El Ghibli*. She has written several short stories, including "Il pranzo pasquale" (2006) [Easter Lunch], "Da un mondo all'altro" (2011) [From one World to Another] and "Il

telefono del quartiere" [District Phone] which won the first-prize in the Eks&Tra literary competition in 1999. Her major literary work, the novel *Regina di fiori e di perle,* published in 2007, is now available in translation with the title *Queen of Flowers and Pearls: A Novel* (2015a). Ghermandi's text, critically appraised in Italy and abroad, rotates around Mahlet, a young Ethiopian girl with a gift for storytelling. She has been given a mission by Yacob, the oldest wise figure in her household in the small town of Debre Zeit. Yacob has told Mahlet stories of resistance fighting against the Italian occupation of Ethiopia in which he and other men and women warriors participated, asking her to disseminate them overseas: "One day you will be our narrating voice. You will cross the sea [...] and bring our stories to the land of the Italians. You will be the voice of our history that does not want to be forgotten" (Ghermandi, 2015, p. 6). Mahlet promises Jacob to become the keeper and teller of her family's stories. When she eventually goes to Italy to study at the University of Bologna, she has no longer any memory of the promise made to Jacob. Following Jacob's death, she return to Ethiopia where some surviving elderly people remind her of that promise. Thus Mahlet becomes the recipient of stories from the time of Menelik to the present, linking the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, between 1935 and 1941, to post 2000 Italy. Ghermandi's protagonist Mahlet's long voyage through time and space constitutes "an enquiry into the identity of Italian colonial memory" (Lombardi-Diop, 2007 p. 259). In fact, Ghermandi spent many years interviewing both colonised and colonisers. Their voices emerge from this choral novel (Lombardi-Diopp, 2007, p. 259) preventing colonial oblivion and challenging notions of Italians as good colonisers. Furthermore, by translating oral culture into written form to make the tales of Ethiopian resistance unerasable, Mahlet, Ghermandi's 'cantora', reverses the self-absolving standpoint of Ennio Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere* (1947). In this novel, the only literary attempt to face up to Italy's despoiling of Africa, the protagonist, an Italian lieutenant, narrates his rape of an Ethiopian woman as natural, accidentally kills her, yet he goes home unscathed. Instead, in the tales passed on by the elders to Mahlet, a kind of poetic justice is enacted when a group of armed Ethiopian guerrilla women (*arbegnà*) when they see two Italian soldiers by the river, in order to save the son of their female leader, they shoot, killing two Italian soldiers. In another tale, the Italian soldier, Daniel, falls in love with Amarech, Mahlet's great-grandmother, and deserts the Italian army to join Amarech in her fight against the Fascist forces. By reversing the representation of the Ethiopian women as willing sexual prey, as well as victims of the colonising forces, and Italian soldiers as desertors to fight with the Ethiopian resistance, Ghermandi enacts two powerful processes. She inscribes into literature the Ethiopian woman as a resistance fighter, reviving the history of her strong and proud female lineage. She also writes a new Italian literature, inclusive of the tales told by the colonised of the past, with the added perspective of their descendendants living in Italy. Finally, she also foregrounds a literary reconciliation between coloniser and colonised with the joint resistance struggle of Amarech and Daniel against Italian forces and the friendship between Mahlet and her Italian neighbour.

Second generation novelists such as Ghermandi and Scego politicize the link between memory and writing, with an aggressive and political assessment of identity and subjectivity, relating contemporary Italy to the colonial past, a past that, to avoid

being repeated, must never be fogotten. With their hybrid tales of remembrance and resistance, they contribute to the construction of new parameters to counterpoint the denial of past atrocities as well as current racial discrimination - a necessary process towards forging new shades of Italian identity in literature and society. Mahlet, Ghermandi's *cantora* embodies Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept further developed by Glissant (1996), of rhizomes, identity as a plurality of interconnected aerial roots not tied to a particular territory or nation. Indeed, as Jacob auspicated, the memories and stories of their community, thanks to Ghermandi's cantora, have crossed seas and been read and heard worldwide. They have become public acts of remembrance (Errl and Rigney, 2006).

Igiaba Scego

"Dimenticare la storia che lega Africa e Italia è un'infamia. Perché dimenticandola si dimentica di essere stati infami, razzisti, colonialisti. Italiani brava gente, ti dicono i più autoassolvendosi, e si continua beatamente a rifare gli stessi errori. Ieri i colonizzati, oggi i migranti, vittime di un sistema che si autogenera e autoassolve. Ecco perché sono ossessionata dai luoghi. È da lì che dobbiamo ricominciare un percorso diverso, un'Italia diversa. Io sono figlia del Corno d'Africa e figlia dell'Italia. Se sono nata qui lo devo a questa storia di dolore, passaggio e contaminazione. Non la voglio dimenticare. Per questo forse, a modo mio, la racconto. Per questo forse cammino" (Bianchi and Scego, 2014, p. 25).

[To forget the history that links Africa to Italy is an infamy. Because, by forgetting it, one forgets one has been infamous, racist, and colonialist. Italians good people, tell you most Italians self-absolving themselves, thus blissfully continuing to make the same mistakes. Yesterday the colonised, today the migrants, victims of a self-regenerating and absolving system. This is why I am obsessed with places. It is from there that we need to begin again, a different path, a different Italy. I am the daughter of the Horn of Africa and I am the daughter of Italy. If I was born here I owe it to this history of suffering, transiting, and contamination. I do not want to forget it. Perhaps this is why, in my own way, I recount it. For this reason perhaps I am able to walk].

Igiaba Scego, a prominent Italian Somali writer and cultural figure, was born in Italy in 1974. Her Somali parents came to Italy to escape the dictatorial regime of Siad Barre. Her first book, *La nomade che amava Alfred Hitchcock* [*The Nomad who loved Alfred Hitchcock*] published in 2003, is an account of her mother's life in between countries and cultures. In the following novel, *Rhoda*, published in 2004, Scego narrates the trajectory of the eponymous young woman struggling with her difference, not just racial or cultural. Her short stories 'Dismatria' and 'Salsicce' [Sausages] published in 2005 in the anthology *Pecore nere* [Black sheep] received critical attention in Italy and abroad (e.g., Carroli, 2009a, 2009b), as did 'Identità' [Identity] published in the 2008 in the collection *Amori Bicolori* [Bicoloured Loves]. Her 2008 novel *Oltre Babilonia* [*Beyond Babylon*] is followed by the biographical novel *La mia casa è dove sono* [Home is wherever I am] which comes out in 2010. Subsequently, she has written with Bianchi *Roma negata,* a sort of reflective, at times angry, postcolonial trajectory across Rome, published in 2014. While her previous literary works assumed overall the point of view of young women, her latest novel, *Adua*, released in September 2015, is

narrated from the perspective of a mature woman called Adua. Once again, in this text as in most of Scego's narrative, memory plays a major role against oblivion and imperialism, as the title and protagonist name clearly highlight. Adua's father tells her: «Ti ho dato il nome della prima vittoria Africana contro l'imperialismo. Io, tuo padre, stavo dalla parte giusta. E non devi mai credere il contrario. Dentro il tuo nome c'è una battaglia, la mia…» (Scego, 2015, p. 49)

[I gave you the name of the first African victory against imperialism. I, your father, was on the right side. And you must never believe the contrary. Inside your name there is a battle, mine…].

Scego is one of the most vocal figures in Italy on migration and colonial issues. She collaborates with several newspapers and actively participates in conferences, festivals and contributes to several social networks and blogs. Scego's literary works deal with issues of identity and belonging, intergenerational and intragenerational, between past and present. *La mia casa è dove sono* (2010) is an explanation of why identity does not need to be fixed or monocultural, or attached to one territory alone. This dynamic concept of identity recalls Braidotti's (1994) figuration of nomadic subjectivity. Braidotti's intellectual nomadic subjects roam across space and time, yet they are not boundless. As such they defy both postmodern and fundamentalist conceptualisations of identity, cutting across gender, sexual, national, political, economic borders. To be sustainable Braidotti's nomadic subject however needs to construct multimple connections and networks of belonging. Similarly to Gloria Anzaldua (2012), like a turtle (Carroli and Gerrand, 2011), as the title of her novel underlines, Scego carries her home and her diverse belongings within her, wherever she goes, embodying both Braidotti's figuration of nomadic subjectivity (2006, 2010) and flexible citizenship (2002, 2007). Set in Rome, *La mia casa è dove sono* reveals Scego's passion as well as her anger towards a city that has insulted the memory of the victims of Augusto Graziani by building him a statue. Furthermore, as she point out in *Roma negata* (Bianchi and Scego, 2014, p. 16-25), the Axum stele, finally returned to Ethiopia, has been replaced with a memorial to the victims of September 11, which she indicates as first class memories, yet no plaque has been placed there to remember the many victims of Italian colonialism, in place of the stele returned to Africa.

Among such victims are the parents and grandparents of the protagonists of Scego's novel *Oltre Babilonia* (2008) Zhura and Mar, themselves carriers of traumatic experiences. Both black, both hybrid, Scego's protagonists counterpoint narrow depictions of Italianness, celebrating instead contamination: Zhura is Italian African and Mar is Italian African Argentinian. Zhura works in a music store and Mar is a university student. In the novel, set across three continents, Europe, Africa and Latin America, there is one male voice, "Il padre" [the father] and four female narrative voices, two daughters, Zhura and Mar, and two mothers, Maryam and Miranda. The father (Elias) is absent and the mothers are dysfunctional. The two protagonist daughters, Mar and Zhura, act as a connective tissue, between these initially disparate voices, places and stories, gradually re-composing the shreds of their past. Geographical, cultural, and gender dislocation can surface only after confronting and working through memories of trauma and difference, a painful process that enables most female characters in the novel, to reconcile with, and value their multilayered

embodied selves while also embarking on their trajectories towards existential and material sustainability, beyond the wounds and scars of three generations, beyond Bob Marley's Babylon. As Bhabha underlines, "Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 90).

At the beginning Zuhra and Mar do not know each other though they both live in Rome. Mar's mother, Miranda is Argentinian, and Maryam, Zhura's mother, is Somali. Both young women know that they have a Somali father but they have never known him. Both decide to go to Tunisi, the crossroads of African and Mediterranean cultures, to learn Arab, one of the languages or their origins. Scego aptly weaves a multi-voiced novel, a *mezcla* of epochs, languages, cultures, countries: Italy, Somalia and Argentina, from colonial, Independent and current Somalia, to Argentina under Videla's violent military regime in the Seventies, and post 2000 multicultural Rome. As in Ghermandi's novel, storytelling also plays a major role in Scego's novel, interlacing stories and characters, past and present. Stories here are transmitted from mouth to mouth, from Zhura to Mar, and also taped by Maryam in an old recorder that might not work. There are also chapters named 'the father' in which slowly emerges the violent history of the rape of both Elias' parents by Italian colonial forces and its tragic aftermath. Elias, the father, having left his past and family behind, has become a successful fashion designer who infuses African style and colour into his fabrics. Meanwhile, Zhura, one of his daughters, lost his colours when she was interfered with by the Italian janitor at her school in postcolonial Somalia. In the novel, colour acts as a strong signifier of identity, conversely, its absence as a sign of past abuse, as happened to Zhura. Instead, Mar emerges from more recent traumatic experiences: an abortion and the suicide of her partner, Patrizia. The two protagonists who belong to the third generation, work through the experiences of their parents and grandparents critically, with the exploration of the oral and written narrations and memories of their predecessors, slowly making their way towards a sort of nomadic subjectivity. Conversely, the character of Argentinian Italian Rosa Benassi, who escaped the Argentinian terror regime, illustrates the importance of externalising torturous memories to avoid self-implosion. Loss of dignity, whether through imprisonment, torture, abuse or rape, is explicitly described to denounce the devastating psychological and physical effects of such oppressive actions. While the mother generation succumb to suicide, addiction or obsessive disorders, the daughter generation, work through their pain more forcefully. While isolation is seen as damaging in the novel, creative memory through narration and re-imagination of events instead contributes to exorcising pain and trauma. The surfacing of alternative subjugated memories (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) through creative narration, deemed necessary on the path towards recovery and sustainability. According to this nomadic understanding (Braidotti, 2006, p. 65), memory is like "as a pattern, a map. […] one that is constantly changing and developing […] it's an act of the imagination" (Théâtre de Complicité 1999, p. 4, quoted in Braidotti 2006, p. 165).

Following patterns such nomadic patterns, narration assumes a circular agency as both narrators and narrates are nourished and restored. Mar and Zhura make sense of their histories by revisiting removed memories, of trauma and abuse, to which they, their parents or grandparents were subjected. This transgenerational memory

trajectory, first projected in the past, is a necessary stage that will enable them to go forward:

Io, Mar Ribeiro Martino, che senso ho? Sono frutto del Terzo mondo. Un padre negro, una madre figlia di terroni. Pigmentata da macchie di schiavitù e spoliazione. Sono terra di conquista. Terra da calpestare. Frutto ibrido senza colore.[…] Mio padre, una foto, il negro a cui devo questo colore. […] negro è bello. Forse non dovrei dire negro, ma nero. Ma non m'importa, me lo hai insegnato tu, Zhura Laamane abbayo, che non si deve aver paura delle parole (Scego, 2008, p. 388-89). [I, Mar Ribeiro Martino, how do I make any sense? I am a fruit of the third world. A negro father, a *terrone*, a dirty Southern Italian mother. Pigmented by slavery and dispossession spots. I am conquest territory. Land to be crushed. A hybrid fruit with no colour.[...] My father, a photo, the negro to whom I owe this colour. [...] negro is beautiful. Perhaps I should not say negro, but black. But I don't care, it was you Zhura Laamane abbayo [sister] who taught me that one must never be afraid of words]. Zhura's body, left colourless by male abuse resumes its colours and passions by reconnecting with her sister, as well as her mother, her language, her past.

This path towards overcoming trauma crosses three main stages in Scego's novel, first, the denounciation of abuses suffered and ensuing traumas; secondly, the processes, psychological and narrative, towards recovery; and thirdly, the projection of "horizons of hope" (Braidotti, 2006, p. 276) constructed collectively. As Braidotti assert (2006, p. 276), such horizons are necessary for self and societal sustainability. And hope is essential "to be up to the intensity of life, the challenge, the hurt" (p. 278). Ultimately, it is essential for change.

Open Conclusions

Gabriella Ghermandi and Igiaba Scego are prominent cultural figures and authors in Italy and beyond, who continuously engage with history, literature, amnesia and memory. In this article I have analysed how the writers and some of their characters retrieve and represent historical and personal memories in literature to counteract Italy's amnesia or toxic narration of colonialism in Africa. For Ghermandi and Scego, memory is the stepping stone towards writing a decolonised history through literature while also proudly affirming their diverse identity and multiple belongings. These hybrid daughters of the colonized, Italian citizens at all effects, portrayed in their autobiographical and imagined trajectories, offer hopeful paths for Italian society and literature, beyond the colonial imperialism as well as current racist attitudes. If migrant and postcolonial literature is crucial to the revision of the postmodern canon (De Vivo, 2011; Luperini, 1999 and 2005; Makaping, 2001; Wu Ming, 2009) and "human diversity is the raw material and the reason for existence of literature" (Sabelli, 2005, p. 13), is it not time for this literature to become part of a new nomad Italian literary canon (Carroli and Gerrand, 2014) and give shape to a "contrapuntal" and "nomadic" literary historiography? (Said, 1994).

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