

African “ghosts” and the myth of “Italianness”: the presence of migrant writers in Italian literature

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In this article, I analyze the cultural meaning of the emergence of an African migrant literature in Italy at the beginning of the 1990s and its presence today. I put this emergence in dialogue with the construction of Italian identity as white. Through a brief historical account of how this social construction came into being, I verify how African migrant literature contests this (de)racialized myth of “Italianness.” Using Gordon’s concept of “haunting,” I argue that African literature within Italian literature can be read as a manifestation of ghosts: the appearance of a presence that has always been there but was repressed by hegemonic discourses. African literature not only works against subalternity, but also reveals whiteness as imagined and acknowledges a colonial past that has been deleted from the public remembrance. Despite such work, African migrant authors today are still writing against the paradigm of the “arrival,” asking: who is Italian? Who can represent Italian citizens? **Keywords:** Italian migrant writers, Italian identity, black Italians, African migration to Italy.

Introduction

Given its geographical position at the center of the Mediterranean Sea, Italy is an unavoidable crossroads of peoples and cultures. Over the centuries, this locatedness has brought different influences to the peninsula. However, despite the creolizations of cultures and people, visible in every aspect of Italian life—from food to language, architecture to religious practices, and beliefs—official public discourse in Italy relies on the culturally constructed myth of a homogenous identity, recognized as white, heterosexual, and Catholic. After a long tradition of being a country of emigration, Italy became a destination for immigrants at the beginning of the 1990s. The unprecedented numbers of new immigrants from Africa and South America have forced Italian society to reconsider its own identity. On the one hand, migrants became increasingly visible over the years, especially within national cultural production, evidenced in the country’s flourishing literary production. On the other hand, Italian society at large responded to such visibility by reaffirming a closed and narrow

idea of an *italianità* (Italianness) based on whiteness and Catholicism.

Public debates have repeatedly reiterated the otherness of the black body even when that body is born and raised in Italy—notable examples include Mario Balotelli, a black Italian soccer star born in Palermo, who plays for the national team. In recent times, the definition of Italian citizenship has also attracted public attention. In a context of rising nationalism, a 2013 amendment—the “Dispositions on the Conferral of Citizenship” bill—proposed by the Italian political left was unsuccessful. This would have extended citizenship rights to the children of migrants born in Italy, whereas the current *jus sanguis* framework does not. Accordingly, citizenship can be only obtained if one is descendent of an Italian citizen who is born in Italy. Migrants and their descendants are subject to a law resembling “*homo sacer*,” described by Agamben (12) as:

An obscure figure of archaic Roman law, in which human life is included in the juridical order [ordinamento] solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed), has thus offered the key by which not only the sacred tests of sovereignty but also the very codes of political power will unveil their mysteries.

Homo sacer is therefore someone whose physical body is within the borders of society but whose juridical body is outside human and divine laws. In the case of migrants, they are subject to Italian laws without being fully recognized as part of society. In the case of undocumented immigrants, this condition is exacerbated by the fact that they do not have the rights to be within the borders of the country because their entry into the country was criminalized in 2009, under the Bossi-Fini Law. Undocumented immigrants are an extreme case which prompts physical removal from society and confinement to Temporary Detention Centers (CTP)—previously called Identification and Expulsion Centers (CIE)—before deportation. Whether documented or undocumented, the migrant condition continuously pushes against both the geographical and identitarian borders of a country attempting to expel the Other.

The ‘scandal’ of a black Italian is therefore the failure to conceive of an Italian person who might have a different racial identity and/or religious belief—the Other. Since the 1990s Italians have been increasingly confronted with the “evaporated” or lost possibilities of creating a racially inclusive *italianità*. While waves of migration move this Other towards the center of the Italian public imaginary, the Other also moves the society towards the border, bringing to light the inherent contradictions of a normalized white Italian identity. However, as Bouchard (45) states, “mainstream Italy remains trapped in discourses and practices of exclusions that reveal the resilience of nationalist and imperial agendas and the strength and power of the legal and political institutions over human life.” This tension can be seen in literary studies where works by black Italians are variously labeled migrant, postcolonial, second generation, italophone, transcultural, multicultural, creole, or Afro-Italian

literature (Mengozi). This paper explores how the myth of Italianness as whiteness is disrupted by the literary and cultural production of black subjects in Italy.

Italianità: whiteness and the myth of Italianness

After many centuries of being the exotic Other within Europe, Italy embarked on the project of constituting itself as a white European country, like France and Germany, upon becoming a unified country in 1861. In order to achieve this aspiration, it moved its political and cultural center to the North, erasing the South and the Mediterranean as part of its national identity. Such erasure was made possible because of the power of the Northern monarchy of the Savoy, based in Piedmont. As leader of the Unification, the Savoy annexed the independent Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, which occupied the southern regions of the peninsula from South Latium to Sicily. In the pursuit of a free-trade economy and to raise revenues to offset the hefty cost incurred during unification, the House of Savoy developed a colonial relationship with the newly-annexed territories through taxation, economic protectionism, and a compulsory military conscription that lasted five years (Finley, *et al*; Duggan; Riall). The process of unification was a process of internal colonization which gave rise to the development of racial discourses aimed at representing the Southern population of Italy as inferior (Cazzato).

Colonial practices ushered in by the modernizing liberal Savoyards went in tandem with a hegemonic national discourse that represented the South as an exotic and bizarre land, very often compared to Africa and Turkey and, more generally, described in a manner that reproduced the rhetoric of the European colonization of Africa, Asia, and the Americas. The South was a colony to be tamed and civilized, a place of barbarism, irrationality, and backwardness as opposed to the civilized and progressive North. At the end of the nineteenth century, intellectuals such as Cesare Lombroso and Alfredo Niceforo further reified Southern difference through resilient discourse of racial inferiority. Established within the framework of biology, phrenology, anthropology, and criminology, this discourse would turn Southern difference into an unredeemable ontology, an 'essence' impermeable to historical change. Lombroso, the founder of criminal anthropology, elaborated a theory according to which the Southerners were ethnically inferior, providing 'scientific proof' with the skull measurements of Southern 'brigands.' In his most famous work, *Luomo delinquente* (1896), Lombroso expressed his conviction that the delinquent is genetically atavistic and primitive and, therefore, inherently inclined to criminal behavior. In this way, he derived analogies between what he referred to as delinquents, savages, and prehistoric races, identifying African and Eastern elements that made Southern Italians more prone to commit crimes. Ultimately, Lombroso divided the Italian population into two races, Northern and Southern, while Niceforo elaborated the racial theory of the two civilizations—as a superior

Northern Italian one and an inferior Southern Italian one. The anthropologist makes a distinction between the two geographical areas of the peninsula with the intent of demonstrating the inferiority of the southern and island populations. Referring to the Italian South, he writes: "*Qui l'Italia moderna ha un'alta missione da compiere e una grande colonia da civilizzare*" (Here modern Italy has a high mission to fulfil and a great colony to civilize) (Niceforo 6; translation mine).

According to Pugliese (3), "The deployment of the loaded signifier 'Africa,' as the lens through which the South was rendered intelligible for Northerners, marks how the question of Italy was, from the very moment of unification, already racialized by a geopolitical fault line that split the peninsula and its islands along a black/white axis." In this way, Italy created an internal Other. Southern populations were depicted as darker than Northern populations, which represented the normatively white Italian citizen. Italy became 'white' and, hence, European. At the end of the nineteenth century, the country's colonial enterprise outside its national borders reinforced this racial discourse by shifting the Other from the Southern Mediterranean subject (within the national border) to the African 'native' (outside the border). As Giuliani (2) puts it, "the assignment of a precise color (from a darker nuance than white to black) to the internal/colonial Other implicitly produces the racial identity of the Self." This construction of the Self as white therefore depended on the 'negative' contrast with the non-white.

Fascism, which pursued a strong nationalistic project, moved blackness outside Italy's national borders. Even if the South of Italy still remained inferior, fascist propaganda operated in the direction of 'whitening' the South in order to create a sense of *italianità* defined in relation to the Other—now the colonial body—who was darker, less civilized, and ultimately inferior. It is important to recognize that racial discourses created during the colonial period and strengthened by fascism are still present and accepted in today's public discourse. Romeo (221) describes this 'whitening' as "racial evaporation"—"the presence of something that has momentarily become invisible but has not disappeared." What has been erased is a multiracial presence, an integral part of Italian identity since the birth of the new state. This "evaporation" enabled the construction of a white space that resembled and, therefore, could compete with northern Europe.

Whiteness has therefore become a normalized identity in Italy. Everything that is not white is viewed as different, as possessing the mark of differentiation. Whiteness is seen as non-ethnic. It is what O'Leary (100) defines as "banal whiteness"—"rendered as the unmarked racial identity and reproduced in mundane ways rather than in explicitly racist discourse." When an entire society views itself as white, it activates a white supremacist logic that validates its superiority over others and demands the expulsion of everything that threatens its own white image.

Migrant and Afro-Italian literature

The birth of Italian migrant literature is often related to an episode which occurred in the summer of 1989—the gang murder of a black South African migrant, Jerry Essan Masslo, who was a worker in the tomato fields in Villa Literno, in the Campania region (Parati, “Italophone voices”). This event shocked Italy into acknowledging the presence of migrants on its soil and the exploitation linked to them. This era correlates with the immigrants in the 1990s—and media images of undocumented migrants often crossing the Mediterranean Sea under very dangerous conditions.

While originally largely autobiographical, texts written by migrants or by descendants of migrants have come to be a force in the Italian literary tradition, challenging the definition of this national canon. Interestingly, most first-wave migrant authors in the 1990s came from non-Italian speaker contexts (mainly from the Francophone and Lusophone countries), making Italian an intermediate language which was not necessarily loaded with colonial references. Pap Kouma’s *Io, venditore di elefanti. Una vita per forza fra Dakar, Parigi e Milano* (1990) (*I was an Elephant Salesman: Adventures between Dakar, Paris and Milan*), co-written with Oreste Pivetta, and *La promessa di Hamadi* (1991) (*Hamadi’s Promise*) by Saidou Moussa Ba and Alessandro Micheletti are examples of this collaborative initial phase between a migrant author and an Italian author. These collaborative efforts illustrate the sense of urgency to tell the migrant story even when the Italian language was still not completely ‘mastered.’ However, the autobiographical nature of these narratives and the collaboration with an Italian author meant that critics underestimated their literary value. As Di Maio (129) argues, “Reading these texts as mere ‘documents’ rather than as ‘monuments’ hides an otherwise clear attempt of marginalization.” Indeed, considering these texts as purely documentary (or of ethnographic value) and denying their place in the realm of literature can be seen as a strategy of marginalization.

The so-called first generation of migrant authors focused on representing and speaking for themselves—albeit through the pen of an Italian co-writer. The work of Senegalese author, Pap Kouma, makes this intervention. *Io, venditore di elefanti*, written with Oreste Pivetta Kouma, became a best seller (Di Maio 125), allowing Kouma to carve out a career as an author. The book, which has become one of the reference points for Italian migrant literature, is a personal account of his first years in Italy as an undocumented migrant, selling crafts to Italians in the streets of cities during winter or on the beaches during summer. It opens:

Vengo dal Senegal. Ho fatto il venditore e vi racconterò che cosa mi è successo. È un mestiere difficile, per gente che ha costanza e una gran forza d’animo, perché bisogna usare le gambe e insistere, insistere anche se tutte le porte ti vengono sbattute in faccia. (Kouma, *Io, venditore di elefanti* 11)

I come from Senegal. I used to be a salesman. Let me tell you everything I’ve been

through. It's a hard job, selling, only for the toughest souls in this world. You can't be the type to give up easily. You have to use your legs and be insistent—even if they slam every door in your face. (Khouma, *I was an Elephant Salesman* 11)]

There is an urgency to narrate that emerges clearly from the plain but firm affirmation; "Let me tell you everything I've been through," followed by the listing of facts: "I come from Senegal," "I used to be a salesman," etc. Before any intellectualization on the condition of being an 'illegal' immigrant in Italy, Khouma needs to narrate what happened, the facts, the actions, what it is to be an African immigrant in Italy. I read this as the necessity to be seen, the necessity of the marginal Other to move towards the center of Italian society and have the possibility of speaking from there.

This movement to the center can be related to the "evaporated" presence that whiteness denies, a kind of ghost that is made invisible but whose presence can be felt. It is what Gordon (xvi) describes as "haunting:" "Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view." What I am arguing here is that the writing of Khouma during the 1990s operated as the "social ghosts" referred to by Gordon. It is the surfacing of something "repressed or blocked from view," but that has always been there.

Similarly, in *La promessa di Hamadi*, the author presents the need to narrate the plight of Senegalese brothers immigrating to Italy. Published in 1991, it centers the stories of two brothers, both undocumented migrants, who emerge as 'ghosts' within Italian society. Hamadi emigrates to Italy and Semba decides to follow him after dreaming that he is in danger. The story is narrated by Hamadi, but it is about Semba's quest to find his brother, which becomes a quest for his own identity.

The novel's introductory passage is an invitation and a poetic invocation to be listened to. The words are directed to Maali, a woman who Semba has asked to predict his future before leaving Senegal. However, in a performative way, it is directed to the Italian reader:

*Ascoltami, Maali, ascolta la mia voce.
Parla di noi a Mamadu, il più vecchio dei griots,
l'ultimo custode della memoria dei nostri popoli.*

[...]

*Anche la storia di mio fratello Semba
vorrei che non andasse perdura,
la storia del suo lungo viaggio per ritrovarmi,
la storia del nostro ultimo incontro.*

*Vorrei essere un griot per conservarla,
raccontarla, salvarla dall'oblio.
Ascoltami, Maali, ascolta la mia voce. (Micheletti 3)*

Listen to me, Maali, listen to my voice.
Speak of us to Mamadu, the eldest of the *griots*,
the last custodian of the memory of our people.

[...]

And I would also like the story
of my brother Semba not to be lost,
the story of his long voyage to find me,
the story of our last encounter.
I would like to be a *griot* to preserve it,
retell it, save it from oblivion.

Listen to me, Maali, listen to my voice. (Parati, *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back
in a Destination Culture* 79)

Privileging the oral/aural, the writer insists that this is not just a story, but it is a story that needs to be listened to. By introducing the presence of the *griot*, the writer also brings Senegalese oral tradition and collective identity into Italian literature. Returning to Gordon's notion of the "social ghost," we can say that this voice is a manifestation of repressed blackness in the Italian space.

Parati (*Migration Italy* 50) defines the emergence of migrant literature as a social and political act of "recolouring" the culture by talking back: "To recolour the Italian national identity in this context means to respond, by talking back, to an ideologically motivated attempt to homogenize Italian identity and defend it from the 'Other.'" Similarly, Di Maio (127) writes:

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.

For migrant writers to speak for themselves and to tell their own stories is not only an act of talking back or opposing mainstream discourse, but also represents 'ghosts' reappearing within Italian society. These narratives evoke repressed colonial pasts

and an Italian identity deeply entangled with both Africa and an internal racialized Other. Migrants who relate a racialized experience of Italy are not only representing themselves and their presence today, but also Italian memories and histories that have been intentionally forgotten and repressed.

Even if the first migrant writers were not necessarily from former Italian colonies, the experience and the past they were exposing on the Italian stage were a hint that Italy, too, not unrelated to a colonial past. This process of colonial remembrance becomes more evident in the works of the following generation of writers. A so-called second generation of African authors that emerged in the new millennium have moved away from the autobiographical form and no longer write with a collaborator. Written in Italian, these narratives imagine black characters who speak Italian and live in Italy or between Italy and other African countries. This growing literary universe includes authors such as Igiaba Scego (*Rhoda* (2004), *Oltre Babilonia* (2008), *La mia casa è dove sono* (2010), *Adua* (2015)); Cristina Uba Ali Farah (*Madre piccola* (2007) and *Il comandante del fiume* (2014)); Gabriella Ghermandi (*Regina di fiori e di perle* (2007)); and Amara Lakhous (*Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* (2006), *Divorzio all'islamica a viale Marconi* (2010), *Un pirata piccolo piccolo* (2011), *Contesa per un maialino italianissimo a San Salvario* (2013), and *La zingarata della verginella di Via Ormea*). Despite the growth of black Italian literature, for many Italians who view themselves as white, such black authors cannot be Italian. This refusal or failure to expand *italianità* to include black voices reveals the fear of “‘what if’ scenarios: namely, what happens to Europe if these people stay?” (El-Tayeb xii). By focusing on the moment of the arrival of migrants, normative discourses obscure the realization that migrants have been in Italy for generations and that the country has already changed. According to Lombardi-Diop (170), “for second-generation writers, who are now mastering the language, the issue is today more subtle and yet daunting: how to make their presence visible not only within Italian society, but also within the text, in order to escape the accusation of mimicry of Italianness.” In representing the daily lives and stories of black Italians, second generation migrant writers implicitly ask: who is Italian? Who is entitled to represent Italian citizens? The ‘invisible’ Other is now becoming visible and the repressed identities are making their appearance on the surface of the Italian one, to such an extent that black Italians can claim a place within the national canon of Italian literature. The initial marginality of the first-generation documented or undocumented migrant located at the border has evolved into a movement towards the center of the Italian literary canon by second-generation authors.

Afro-Italianness in popular culture

Black Italians have not only gained prominence and visibility in literature, but also in popular culture. For instance, in 2016, Ghali released his first single, *Ninna Nanna*,

through Spotify and immediately became a huge success, establishing a new record of streaming in Italy. In 2017, he published his first album, *Album*. Despite the playful tone, many of his songs contain serious references to being Italian but perceived as a foreigner. In *Cara Italia* (Dear Italy), released as a single at the beginning of 2018, he sings:

C'è chi ha la mente chiusa ed è rimasto indietro

Come al Medioevo

Il giornale ne abusa, parla dello straniero come fosse un alieno

Senza passaporto, in cerca di denaro

[...]

Oh eh oh, quando mi dicono: "Vai a casa!"

Oh eh oh, rispondo: "Sono già qua"

Oh eh oh, io t.v.b. cara Italia

Oh eh oh, sei la mia dolce metà.

Someone has a closed mind and has remained behind

As in the Middle Ages

The newspaper abuses it, it talks about the foreigner as an alien

Without a passport, looking for money

[...]

Oh eh oh, when they tell me: "Go home!"

Oh eh oh, I answer: "I'm already here"

Oh eh oh, I love you dear Italy

Oh eh oh, you're my sweetheart. (Ghali)

The focus shifts from the urgency of being heard to being recognized as Italian without negating difference. The Italian hip-hop artist Tommy Kuti deals with similar topics. In the 2018 song *Afroitaliano* (Afro-Italian), he demands to be recognized as both Italian and African without having to choose between the two and without establishing a hierarchy.

In the realm of cinema, Fred Kuwornu's work reflects on the representation of black people on Italian movie screens. His 2016 documentary, *Blaxploitalian. One hundred years of Afro-stories in Italian cinema*, analyzes the presence of black people on the Italian screen since the silent era. Kuwornu's documentary exposes the racial politics of blackness in Italian cinema. Indeed, on the official website the director states: "Modern-day Italy is racially diverse, yet, if you find it difficult to find noteworthy Black characters in American cinema [...] it is ten times worse in Italy and throughout

Europe" (Kuwornu). The documentary shows that black Italian actors are consistently offered stereotypical roles (i.e. the immigrant, the prostitute, the drug dealer). Despite being born and/or raised in Italy and speaking with an Italian regional accent, they are asked to imitate foreign accents and play non-Italian characters. Kuwornu does not represent black people as marginalized or seeking recognition, rather his work centers blackness and acknowledges black experiences as integral to Italian identity. Second generation migrant writers often craft their work in similar ways, creating black Italian characters who are fully immersed within popular culture. This normalization of blackness contests dominant racialized imaginaries and subverts the idea of *italianità* as white and European.

Kuwornu's forthcoming project is called "*Blaq Italiano*" (Black Italian), a title that plays with the pronunciation of the English word "black." A series of three-minute videoclips from this project has already been shared through Facebook. Each video contains an interview with a black Italian, either living in Italy or abroad. Interviewees present themselves and some aspects of their lives. The aim is to resemanticize black Italians within the Italian framework and to move away from the association between blackness and undocumented immigrant as threatening to society or in need of rescue. It is worth noting that popular culture is therefore moving along the same lines as second-generation literature in the representation of black Italians with, however, a much stronger impact on the everyday man.

Conclusion

As Lombardi-Diop and Romeo (428) affirm, "The social diversity that new migrants and second generations contribute to creating translates into a cultural production that simultaneously constitutes part of Italian culture and challenges traditional understanding of it, fostering a notion of national identity and culture rooted in transnationalism and dis-homogeneity." Italian society is haunted precisely because it is still failing to reach an understanding of itself as a transnational and dis-homogenous society. While repeated images of black immigrants on the sea reinforce the connection between blackness and foreignness, literary and cultural production by black Italians offers a different image, the one linked to the colonial past and the multiple identities that has always characterized Italians but has been repressed since the unification of the country. What has been haunting Italian identity since the foundation of the state in 1861 is now embodied by the black Italian, a real presence that is increasingly difficult to ignore in both literary and popular culture.

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